

SUP and at'em

Paddling away from the bustle of the Grand Canal we find peace again in the hidden canals, where jellyfish drift lazily in the milky green water. As we move through the shadows of weathered buildings battered by the salty air, we see a carpenter sawing timber in a dark workshop, and a few houses down, an old woman peers curiously at us from behind the bright yellow flowers on her windowsill.

After an hour-and-a-half floating through the city, Eliana steers us back towards the boatshed in the Camaragio neighborhood where we started – but there's one final test of skill ahead of us before we hang up our paddles. As we pull in, two speedboats whiz past and we bounce madly through the wash, trying our best not to crash-land into a parked boat. When the waves settle we make a quick dash to drag our boards back through the doorway, with wet feet but (thankfully) hair dry.

In a city of clichés and well-trodden tourist haunts, I walk away satisfied to have experienced the magic of Venice from a totally unique perspective. And given I've just done a decent afternoon's workout, I find my way to the nearest gelateria. Because it would be foolish not to make the most of a guilt-free gelato in Venice, right? ☺

to look after me, otherwise you'll have no chance of finding your way back," she grins, handing us each a paddle.

I wait for a boat to chug past before climbing out a doorway in the wall straight onto a board that's being gently pulled by the current. Eliana follows, closing the boatshed's iron gate behind her, and we set off towards the Jewish Ghetto – the oldest ghetto in the world, which is perched on the outskirts of the island. From there we criss-cross the canals to paddle past the house of famous Venetian painter Tintoretto and the elegant Church of Madonna dell'Orto, where two teenage girls are leaning against a wall slurping on fast-melting gelatos. At each intersection Eliana shouts "Oii!" to alert approaching traffic of our presence, and we give way to boats as their drivers plough past with a polite nod.

After weaving our way through a confusing maze of narrow laneways, we come to a long stretch of water and pick up speed, heading straight for the famed Grand Canal. When we approach the junction, we peek around the corner to see crowded water buses and taxis ferrying the masses from A to B, but (phew!) turn back to avoid being caught in the chaos of Venice's main artery.



Forget the gondola, the best way to see Italy's ancient floating city is from a stand-up paddleboard, says Emily McAuliffe

"BUONASERA!" shouts a tall, dark gondolier as he effortlessly guides his boat around the tight bend ahead of us. "Ciao!" replies my guide, Eliana, as we squeeze past, trying not to scrape our stand-up paddleboards on the rough brick wall of the canal. Ducking under one of Venice's 400-odd bridges, Eliana turns to quip that he's the most handsome gondolier in Venice. "Most are not like this, so take a good look," she laughs as the gondola disappears around another corner.

Exchanging pleasantries with gondoliers is all in a day's work for Eliana, who has been running Venice's only SUP tours for the past four years, allowing travellers to explore the intricate network of canals that serve as the city's backstreets.

Eliana admits that not everyone is impressed with her unique mode of

sightseeing (let's just say that not all the gondoliers are quite so charming!), but she feels SUPs are more in line with the city's tradition of traversing the waterways with paddlecraft than the more recently introduced motorboats that now infiltrate the canals, so she isn't about to let a few naysayers get her down.

As you might expect, SUPing in Venice isn't for the uninitiated (primarily due to said motorboats). Eliana requires her groups to have some paddling experience, so they'll feel comfortable making quick manoeuvres on the water to avoid bridge head-butts and inadvertent jousting matches with gondolas, where it's almost certain the SUP will come off second-best. And let's be honest, taking a dip in the famously dirty canals of Venice probably isn't high on your holiday bucket list!

Given I have a few years' experience SUPing the canals of the Gold Coast to draw on, I'm keen to put my skills to the test in the narrow, winding waterways. I've arranged to meet Eliana at 5pm on a warm Wednesday afternoon – two hours after the service boats have called it a day, so we're not battling peak hour traffic on our boards.

There are two of us on the tour (the max group size is four), and Eliana starts by explaining the rules of the canals. We're instructed to always keep a safe distance between us so we can stop to wait for passing boats without running into one another, and she gives us a quick lesson on the Venetian words for left, right and straight-on – premando, stagando and longo – which Eliana thankfully says she'll call out in English to prevent any language-fail collisions. "And don't forget, you have



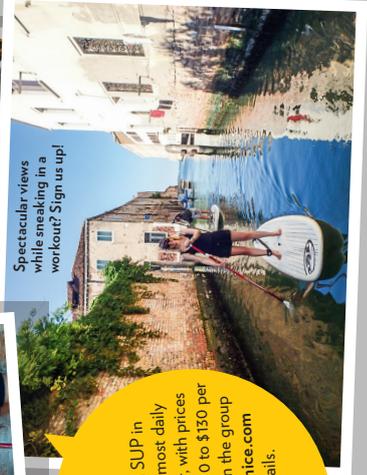
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Eliana (left) and Emily prepare to paddle the canals



Spectacular views while sneaking in a workout? Sign us up!

TRY IT!
Eliana Argine from SUP in Venice offers tours almost daily from April to October, with prices ranging from around \$80 to \$120 per person, depending on the group size. Visit supinvenice.com for more details.

PHOTOGRAPHY THINKSTOCK

Splash around

Keen to SUP your way through Europe? Dip your oar into the trend here...

SPAIN
Head to Barcelona to get the hang of SUPing on the calm (and scenic!) Mediterranean Sea. molokaisupcenter.com

PORTUGAL
Experience the beautiful Cascais coast with a guided two-hour SUP tour. surfnpaddle.com

CROATIA
Take in Dubrovnik's ancient city walls from your board, or sign up for a SUP fitness class. standup-paddleboarding-croatia.com