



GOING AWAY

**John Raby and his daughter Becky****Little Venice, Bologna****Duomo, Florence****Palazzo Vecchio, Bologna**

A tale of three cities

John Raby visits Bologna, Venice and Florence

The Italian city of Bologna is situated in a region known as Emilia Romagna, north of Tuscany. It is reckoned to be the nation's gastronomic beating heart, and for this reason alone, it is well worth a visit.

Yet despite that formidable reputation, I get the feeling that Bologna can often be passed over by would be travellers, for greater tourist honeypots like Rome, Naples and Pisa.

Undeterred and accompanied by my eldest daughter Becky, we arrived at our apartment right in the heart of the city, just off Via dell'Indipendenza. This is the main avenue

satisfied. And being the home of Bolognese sauce, you can of course try the real thing – known more accurately as Tagliatelle al Ragu.

The term Ragu is distilled from a French verb meaning to 'stimulate the appetite.' Or why not try another local favourite, Wild Boar and Polenta?

Situated in the neighbouring region known as the Veneto, Venice is a two hour train journey from Bologna. Emerging from the railway station you are immediately wowed by the impressive and beautiful Grand Canal.

With a 24 hour Vaporetto (water

tifully crafted gondolas, and their gondoliers, bobbing on the Adriatic. Truly, if romance is what you are looking for, then Venice has it by the bucket load!

Any visit here should include popping into the stunning Basilica di San Marco. The interior of this cavernous cathedral will have you literally reeling as you look inexorably up at the dazzling sight of the gold mosaic covered walls, arches and domes.

Hop on a train again at Bologna Centrale and this time head south for a mere 40 minutes, and you will arrive in the Tuscan capital of Florence (Firenze if you're local). A leisurely 10-15 minute walk will bring you into the beautiful Piazza del Duomo and face to face with the marbled façade of Cattedrale di Santa Maria del Fiore; known simply as, Duomo.

While entrance to the cathedral is free, you can purchase a combined ticket for 10 euros from automated ticket machines nearby, which will give you access to the dome, baptistry, bell tower, crypt and the museum. However, it is Filippo Brunelleschi's magnificent, red tiled dome that is the real draw here.

Once you have ascended the 463 stone steps (not for the faint-hearted), to the top of the cupola of Santa Maria del Fiore, you will be treated to unparalleled views across this historic city in every direction.

Food is never far away, and having exited the cathedral, we soon found ourselves in nearby Piazza della Signoria, tucking into pizza just across the way from the remarkable and imposing Palazzo Vecchio, which overlooks the square.

A further five minutes walk will bring you to the classic arches of the Ponte Vecchio which span the Arno River. Medieval in structure but Roman in origin, this eye-catching landmark will at once be immediately recognisable, and is a definite 'must see' whilst in Florence.

Famed for the many jewellery shops that inhabit both sides of this crowded and busy bridge, you will find plenty of gift ideas for your journey home.

bus) pass in hand, purchased from the tourism office on the platform (20 euros), we headed immediately for water bus stop number 1.

Vaporetto No.1 stops everywhere between the railway station and Lido de Venezia (Venice Lido). The Lido is one of the outlying islands, and has an altogether different feel to the main city itself.

Now the Vaporetto may not be the most comfortable option, as the boats are usually crowded, but it is cheap.

Cruising down the Grand Canal as it snakes its way through the heart of the city is an absolute must. One beautiful building after another slips out of sight as you glide down this main arterial waterway.

The front doors of these fine-looking and elegant buildings along the Grand Canal are perched precariously above the waterline, often with a boat tied up nearby just the way you would park your car on the drive or road.

As we stepped off the Vaporetto at the iconic Piazza San Marco (St Mark's Square), we were treated to that thoroughly unique and truly Venetian of sights: a flotilla of beau-

A flotilla of beautifully crafted gondolas, and their gondoliers

that will lead you inevitably up to the central Piazza Maggiore. This ancient square magnetically draws both tourists and locals alike.

In this wide open space, you can sit, relax and enjoy an espresso or a chilled beer whilst taking in the impressive sight of the beautiful, but unfinished 14th century Basilica di San Petronio.

Opposite, you will find some open topped tour buses that will whisk you around the city for about 13 euros.

If you have a got a head for heights, why not head for Le Due Torri (The Two Towers), situated in Piazza di Porta Ravegnana at the head of Via Rizzoli? It is the taller 'Torre degli Asinelli' that is open to the public, and from there you can enjoy commanding views over Bologna

This comes at a price though; you will need to climb an impressive 498 steps to reach the top, so a strong pair of lungs as well as a head for heights will be required.

Unsurprisingly, Bologna is replete with restaurants, trattorias (less formal than a restaurant – think Bistrot), café's and numerous gelateria. I guarantee that you will be more than

**Gondolas, Venice****Florence**

Trip details

Getting there: BA: from £228 dep. Heathrow (www.ba.com); Easyjet: from £126 dep. Gatwick (www.easyjet.com)

Train - Italy: Bologna - Venice €24.20; Bologna - Florence €28.00 (www.trenitalia.com)

Afloat in Venice: Gondola Hire - €80 for 40 minutes. On board opera singer extra!

Staying there: We used Airbnb (www.airbnb.co.uk): 4 nights stay in the Aposa Flat, Bologna city centre - £222