



# Venetian Gondola Ride in Channel Islands Marina

By Allan KISSAM

**W**e arrived at the public dock of Channel Islands Harbor Marina in Oxnard, California, and I stepped aboard my personal yacht. It was mine for about ninety minutes - a flat-bottomed, black Venetian rowing boat look-alike, complete with gondolier who wore a traditional blue-striped shirt. Shortly, a bottle of locally produced Ventura red wine appeared, and a box of pizza

from Fresco II on the wharf. Lunch while on a row around the canal to tour the rich abodes, and possibly famous ones of the area.

My gondolier was Mark Schooling, owner of Gondola Paradiso, and nearly a twenty-year veteran of the trade. He pushed away from the dock and commenced the rhythmic shuttle motion with his single oar. There is more to this than meets the eye. A

gondola is built with one side slightly longer than the other to offset one-sided rowing. Turning into a wind required getting up enough speed to complete the turn and allow for the natural set downwind.

The gondolier, Mark, stood in the rear, or stern, of the boat and used the single oar on the right side. He never changed to the left side. A common joke in the trade is about having to

tailor clothing for an overdeveloped right side. At the prow was a metal ornamentation to offset the weight at the stern of our gondolier. Make a mistake with the boat and this metal prow will puncture most fiberglass hulls around the marina.

Banter with my gondolier uncovered how one gets into the trade. Mark started out in Balboa, a waterway of Newport Harbor, California. He was a

PHOTOS BY ALLAN KISSAM



Gondola in Channel Islands Harbor, Oxnard, Ca., tours the homes and boats on the canals.

college student, looking for work on a job board; young and strong. This is a fee-and-tips business where only the strong survive, literally. After several weeks of just rowing around the harbor to practice in a borrowed boat, a candidate must demonstrate the strength and ability to conduct hours-long tours for tourists before allowed a hire for fare. Many prospective gondoliers fail for lack of stamina or drudgery of the qualification process. When adjudged qualified, the newly minted gondolier begins a trade going back to 17th century Venice. Even today in Venice, a person must pass an apprenticeship with comprehensive practical exam.

Our gondola, Teresa, was custom built in the USA in the 1980s before being acquired and reconditioned by our gondolier. Construction of a new and larger boat is underway in Seattle at a boatbuilding school. The new boat will seat six people and is 30 feet in length. It is a Batela, a coa de gambaro, one of only a handful not built in Venice, that will enter service this August.

Once well into my wine, I pounded out oar cadence like a Roman galley drummer in Ben-Hur. Changing the tempo from battle speed to attack speed, and announcing this to Mark, the friendly banter ceased but the boat speed never changed. Clearly, I was not Quintus Arrius, the Roman fleet admiral, and in command of the boat.

In spite of my attempts to redirect the planned voyage, our gondolier gave a pleasant rendition of several

Mandalay Bay Beach Resort, Oxnard, CA, is on the beach with fun walks or bicycling



**BELOW**  
La Dolce Vita Restaurant is affordable, white table cloth service at Heritage Square, Oxnard.

**BELOW**  
Order a lunch and wine for the Gondola ride at Channel Island Harbor



songs and sung in key. Although the songs were not barcaroles, written based on rhythmic strokes of the oar, this was California and contemporary music probably worked best. He said there are songs people request that are standards, and he has seen more than one marriage proposal while singing. Being the nugator that I am, I had to ask if he ever witnessed a refusal and he said no, it is usually obvious ahead of time.

Ninety minutes in the boat with a bottle of good wine was enough for anyone's bladder, and so the

adventure ended right on time at the originating dock. We then strolled the beach at our hotel, Mandalay Bay Beach Resort, and watched people fly fighting-kites at the nearby park. This hotel included breakfast with a custom omelette chef on duty, and affordable California surf cuisine. I enjoyed the Coastal Grill there and its serving of local craft beers.

One of the evenings dining out was at Heritage Square, where a collection of Victorian homes makes for a pleasant shopping walk. Superior dining at La Dolce Vita is white table cloth service,

affordable, and excellent. Featured are Ventura area wines that complement menu items. They also do cooking classes for children.

Keeping busy on this trip was easy, with whale watching cruises and island nature tours by Island Packers from the harbor and paddleboard lessons inside the marina at Channel Islands Kayak Center. The kayak business is owned and operated by famous surfer Mike Lamm (three-time US National Surfing Champion). Get a "cave map" from the Kayak Center and take your kayak to the islands aboard

an Island Packers boat, an unparalleled adventure vacation activity.

This was a pleasant place, easy to walk about, with a maritime museum display of original scrimshaw by mariners from the 1800s. Outside dining and beers on the marina wharf make a few hours here enjoyable.

The less adventurous, or those tired from adventuring, may find me at the Mandalay Bay pool with a tropical drink in hand, or on the sand touching the Pacific ocean.

If you haven't been to Atlanta in the last few years, you need to plan a trip there asap to see firsthand why Atlanta is now being referred to as the "Empire of the South", "Hotlanta" or simply "The A" by the locals. But if this is in reference to a grading system, I'd give it an A+.

Atlanta has always scored high as one of the South's most stylish cities; however, this year, Atlanta has really hit its stride. You'll need more than a weekend to explore the new museum openings, walk the Atlanta Beltline, max out your cards shopping at the ultra-luxe retailers and come hungry because the local farm-fresh food scene is exploding.

### Palate Pleasers

For some scrumptious locally inspired cuisine, head midtown to **Livingston Restaurant + Bar**, in the historic Georgian Terrace Hotel. Here, the premiere party for *Gone with the Wind* was held, but there's nothing old-fashioned about the food here since Chef Michael Semancik took over the kitchen. Standouts on the contemporary menu include the addictive Cauliflower Popcorn and Asparagus Frites, Free-range Chicken Liver "Gyoza", followed by Sorghum & Sea Salt Brick Chicken or the Seared Scallops served in a flavorful tasso and corn chowder.



**Pssst: Livingston's is located across the street from the exotic, Egyptian-inspired Fox Theater, built in 1928 for Atlanta's Shriner's organization before it was turned into a theater. For the perfect evening, start with dinner at Livingston's, then take in a show at the Fox (the national tour of Evita was there last week) followed by a return visit to Livingston's for dessert, perhaps their Carrot Cake "Twinkies" with cream cheese filling and ginger glaze.**

**Westside Provisions District**, formerly known as the meatpacking district, is THE place to go for really good stuff for food lovers in Atlanta and the reason I know this is because:

A. On either side of the footbridge connecting the two main buildings are signs pointing this way to "really good stuff" and

B. When I visited I was blown away by the high caliber of food available in the market, the award-winning restaurants, and the specialty food stores. Truth be told, I'd change the signs to "really great stuff". There are also some stellar clothing boutiques such as **Billy Reid**, **Calypso St. Barth** and **Sid Mashburn**, a modern haberdashery.

Culinary finds here include **Bacchanalia**, voted Atlanta's best by Zagat every year since 1996, **Abattoir**, an American chophouse, and **Jeni's Splendid Ice Creams** (Jeni's ice creams are made from the ground up with milk from grass-grazed cows and whole ingredients that they blend, bake, peel, chop, skin, pulverize, and blowtorch) which totally blew my taste buds away! In **Star Provisions**, a hybrid café/bakery/market with an Anthropology vibe, you can enjoy a delish lunch on the deck (I highly recommend the Fried Chicken Salad

### Fabulous Fox Theater

ABOVE  
Mandarin Oriental's  
Gorgeous English Garden



Center for Civil and Human Rights is a must see



with Buttermilk Dressing or the plump Shrimp Po' Boy sammie) and then it's one stop shopping for a farm-to-your-table dinner.

**Pssst: Newbie Preserving Place is tucked away in the corner of the bottom floor, but it is well worth the treasure hunt. Once you locate**

**this gem, you'll find DIY canning supplies, a seasonal selection of house-made preserved products such as ATL-1 Steak Sauce, Hot Peach & Ginger Jam, and Watermelon Rind Pickles. With fond memories of growing up on a farm that produced cotton and peaches, owner Martha McMillin**