

WHAT DID YOU LIKE MOST ABOUT VENICE, MY DEAR? NO CARS!

BY DAVID CHERNUSHENKO

VENICE

As a dutiful parent and temporary “home schooling” teacher, I just had to ask my daughter that pedagogical question: “What did you like most about Venice?”

This is the girl who, ever since reading Cornelia Funke’s *The Thief Lord*, was aching to visit Venice. We asked each child to name the place they would most like to see on this combined family sabbatical and documentary film research trip. My son, lover of all things gladiatorial, and inspired by a great teacher of classical history, chose Rome. My daughter, without hesitation, picked Venice.

I was expecting her to answer my question with one or all of the Venetian standards: the gondolas and canals, St. Mark’s square, the winding streets, even the gelato ice cream. But no, without hesitation or prompting from “eco dad,” she declared: “There are no cars!” “And what do you like about that?” I probed.

“It’s quiet. There are no exhaust fumes. It’s safe to walk anywhere. The streets are full of people.”

Honest, I did not coach her. This is the answer of a 12-year-old who has just spent five days in Rome, where every step made to be calculated to avoid

cars, scooters, motorbikes, trucks and buses. Motorized missiles.

She got me thinking. If “car-free” can work in Venice, and in the heart of other major European cities, without killing local business and scaring away shoppers, why can we not do it in North America? More precisely, why are we so scared of trying it in North America?

Sure we have “pedestrian malls” in some towns and cities. But most are very limited in length and dominated by shops and activities appealing to lunchtime shoppers, evening drinkers and a summer tourist clientele. They are not vibrant, mixed-use areas, planned to encourage the growth of a functional community.

I know, not every city has the history and appeal of a Venice. But is that really the issue here? I think what we are really missing is a belief that car-free is even possible in North America. Just look at Ottawa, my home town. We have one famous pedestrian street, the Sparks Street Mall; lively on a fine day from spring to fall, but near-dead in the evenings and from November to April.

Why? Nobody lives there. Nobody goes there outside of work hours. It does not have a sufficiently diverse selection of shops and “real life” activities to attract a regular crowd.

The Byward Market district, on the other hand, could be a vi-

brant “people place” like Venice, with a car-free zone of eight to 12 blocks. Most of the ingredients are there: art galleries, museums, the Château Laurier and Parliament Buildings, food vendors, clothing stores, furniture sellers, bars, restaurants, and the famous outdoor produce stalls that bring such colour and flavour. There’s even a canal nearby, and gelato.

Unlike Venice, we have winter. I know. But the area is already partially “winter-proof.” With the addition of a few more indoor halls, and a well-integrated public transit system and parking on the external fringes, this could be Ottawa’s version of the large pedestrian zone that

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makes another European city — Strasbourg, France — such an attraction to visit, and a great place to live, even in winter.

What did Strasbourg — a city of comparable size, geography and demographics to Ottawa — do to make its heart beat so strongly? First, there is the appeal of the old town centre, with the famous Strasbourg Cathedral as its focus. Second,

and perhaps most critical to being more than just a brief see-the-cathedral stop, is the city’s remarkable “tramway” light rapid transit system. Proposed by, and pushed through by a mayor with a backbone as strong as its steel tracks, the tramway brings people into the city centre from a series of satellite parking areas.

Park your car, pay for parking, and ride the tram for free in the city centre. It’s such a success that its users range from public servants and local shoppers to big-spending tourists. A well-conceived marketing scheme has even turned Strasbourg into “the” Christmas shopping destination for the whole region. Buses come in from Germany, northern France and beyond.

The inability of shoppers to park on the street has not deterred them from heading to the heart of Strasbourg, or Venice or Oslo or Brussels.

So what stands in the way of closing off the streets of the Byward Market, turning it into a Canadian version of the Strasbourg/Venice success story? Fear. Fear that shoppers will flee to the suburbs and the free parking of the shopping mall and the big box store. It is a fear that is partly well-founded, and partly misguided. For the truth is that a well-conceived pedestrian town centre can and will work, indeed thrive. Whereas a half-measure approach will fail.

Critical to success are several factors. First, a fully integrated public transit system that is frequent, affordable and comfortable to board and ride. Second, a “critical mass” in terms of the size of the precinct and the range of offerings. Third, a



HAMILTON SPECTATOR

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mixed-use zoning and city planning policy that encourages the development of a community that incorporates residential with commerce and retail, and that encourages housing for a diverse blend of income levels. Expensive condo precincts do not make for lively street interaction.

Finally, an idea of my own based on watching how Venice works. Drop the idea that deliveries need to be made by large trucks. How does Venice, the city of water and narrow streets get the goods to its restaurants, its clothing stores, tourist trinket shops and grocery stores (yes, real people live and shop there)? By hand cart. Step out of your hotel for an early morning run and you will find a city bustling with activity. Men and women of all ages, pushing and

pulling carts of all sizes. From boats laden with bags of flour or even washing machines, Venetian retailers take delivery of their goods.

Imagine the “delivery boy” bringing your purchases to your car, parked at a peripheral lot? Imagine using your own bicycle trailer equipped for this purpose, or using the ancient tool of choice of so many European shoppers: the rolling shopping cart?

Yes, imagine. It’s the key to growing a vibrant heart in Ottawa or any Canadian city. Putting the person above the car. It works for 12-year-olds.

Ottawa sustainability expert **DAVID CHERNUSHENKO** is travelling Europe in search of ideas for making communities greener, and better. Follow his journey at ottawacitizen.com/ecovoyager.