



# HOME & AWAY

ADAM EDWARDS  
finds himself in the  
drink on a short and  
blurry trip to Venice

**T**HE Ronald Reagan suite on the top floor of the Cipriani Hotel, which boasts a double Jacuzzi and a recent visit by Sarah Ferguson, is jolly big. So big, in fact, that when breakfast (homemade plum cakes, brioche, croissants and two lightly boiled eggs) rolled into the drawing room, the front desk rang the bedroom extension to announce its arrival.

It is a long haul, with or without a hangover, from the king-size bed, past the *trompe l'oeil* in the hall, past the walk-in wardrobe and the ormolu desk finally to sink into the antique Empire armchair in front of the 52-inch television with English-speaking satellite news. Unfortunately the vodka and tomato juice for a Bloody Mary were not on the damask-covered breakfast trolley, but in the mini bar. The ice tray was so cold my fingers stuck to it, and, after banging it hard several times on the counter, the lumps shot out as one and slithered every which way across the floor.

Finally, breathless, it was back to the armchair and CNN.

It was Geoffrey Humphries's party that had done the damage. The English society artist, who bears a remarkable resemblance to Orson Welles in *The Third Man*, invited us to dinner at his studio, a restored make-up factory on La Giudecca, the small island opposite Piazza San Marco. It was a mere half a mile by foot from the Cipriani. Geoffrey had said it was a small welcome so we wouldn't feel too lost.

However, the table was laid for 40 and guests included most of the Venetian expatriate community (who like expats worldwide would have crossed mountains for a free drink) and Dominic Nevill's Fine Art tour, a charabanc collection of Lords, Ladies and confirmed bachelors, who had arrived from Florence that evening eager to suck in as much culture and Prosecco vino as possible in a week.

Sadly the huge plate-glass windows of the studio that should have gazed across the Giudecca canal to the world's most reproduced Renaissance skyline actually looked out to the dull bowels of the halogen-lit Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service ship Argus. Twenty-eight thousand tonnes of grey steel capped with white United Nations lorries — a glistering iron coplanes into the red mouth of an elderly harlequin. It was waiting for Bosnia.

Dinner was bohemian. The spaghetti vongole, the only course, ran out — very early — and copious litres of red wine would have stripped the oils from Geoffrey's canvas, and a cabaret of drunken musicians

## Hair of the doge



Art of enjoyment: Geoffrey Humphries at large in Venice

combined with the loose-limbed dancing from the gin-soaked expats would have embarrassed an Eldorado talent contest. It was, in fact, a glorious night and we struggled home Andy Capp-like.

After the breakfast toing and froing between the mini bar, we took the vaporetto water bus to the Accademia. A dozen steps from the famous gallery Geoffrey, in *Third Man* mode, appeared from behind a magazine stall in his fedora, black suit and PVC mackintosh.

"Harry's Bar," he said mysteriously. "Off to London this afternoon. Buy us a drink and you can have my invitation." A raft of Bellinis (13,200 lire each) and Screwdrivers (11,000 lire) followed in the well-lit art deco bar, while sun glinted outside on the Ray-Bans and fluorescent rucksacks of the sightseers.

I was finally handed the embossed invitation for drinks with the Captain of the Argus. It was passed to the Ray-Bans and fluorescent stage whisperers that the barman at Harry's stopped polishing his glasses and raised both eyeballs with more



than an optic of Venetian sarcasm.

Some hours later we were piped aboard the Argus. Antipasti and Campari gave way to sausage rolls and whiskey. Behind the braided captain and his taffeta wife were white-tied sailors pouring large ones for the exclusive guests — they included Geoffrey Humphries' party guests.

How did the Royal Fleet Auxiliary Service find this eccentric and transitory group of squiffy Englishmen to invite to its do? How did

they know where to send the embossed invitation?

The farewell on the deck with our new best friends was long and complicated and could only be achieved by accepting a lunch invitation with Thomas, an expat jockey living with the manageress of a Venetian bistro.

The next day (after more toing and froing at breakfast) we walked the hidden maze of narrow back streets. There, only yards from the tourist walks, the alleys of rendered buildings were empty except for the washing flapping three floors up and the inevitable stray cats.

Thomas gave us soup with bits in and a bottle of whisky. His bare one-room flat, with its stark steel and glass bookcase and stereo system on the floor, could have been the bolt-hole of any wasted Englishman in any major city in the world.

We planned a quiet last night at the Cipriani. Then the phone rang. It was a Geoffrey Humphries party-goer. Apparently we had said, in that casual way one does, you must drop in and see our suite.

They did. Twenty or 30 of

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