



Shades of Venice

Fancy circumnavigating Noosa Sound in Venetian style? Gondolas of Noosa make this unlikely scenario possible, Nicole Bittar writes

My charming coxswain Richard Wilschke, the founder of this 20-year-old luxury riverside enterprise, greets me with a flourish at the Sofitel Jetty as I step on board his customised gondola for my solo cruise. Some famous faces also to have set sail include Hugh Jackman, Avril Lavigne, golfer Stuart Appleby, Alex Dimitriades and TV celebrities Catriona Rowntree, Glenn Robbins and newsman George Negus, to name a few.

It's little wonder the stars come out to play here. Operatic strains are piped inside the black leather and dark timber interior of the elegant cabin. With a ceiling that is cerulean-blue in hue, the sky is the limit as we embark on a breezy afternoon. Palatial mansions bedecked with jetties extend their reach to the wind-whipped, yet sun-dappled, blue-green waters, and pelicans chirp, hungry for their catch of the day.

To my left, towering trees provide shelter from the wind and any impending storm, but it's smooth sailing on board today, with ice buckets and slotted champagne flutes at the ready. Distant hills, draped in silver-lined clouds, create an artistic backdrop as Richard steers his craft effortlessly and in style.

Palms sway in the breeze and as we head deeper into the river's canals, native birds call out, piercing the blissful quietude of this salubrious neighbourhood. Gentle waters lap the sandy banks as the winter sun peeps through a blanket of clouds, and Luciano croons across the lagoon – close your eyes and you could be in Venice. But the native flora to my left and uninhabited opulence to my right as we snake our way around the labyrinthine canals of Noosa Sound are unmistakably Australian.

As the sun dominates the wide-open skies, dappling the waters in a mosaic of silvery brilliance, Gondolas of Noosa evokes its special brand of La Serenissima on the Sunshine Coast.

Two children paddle pint-sized kayaks under the watchful eye of their deck-side Daddy, who issues gentle instructions while casting a line into his backyard oasis. The price of privilege could well provide the evening's supper, pulled fresh from the teeming river. We slide underneath an arched footbridge on our return journey, from the wider mouth of the estuary's opening. The gondola's quiet motor hums its gentle tune as I pull the plush blanket, deep-sea grey in colour, across my bare legs, and make eye contact with a pelican basking atop a jetty, opposite. We both seem to agree that this is most definitely the life.

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Sleek yachts line the banks of a sand island, populated only by trees and local wildlife. One vintage sailing vessel nearby is appropriately named “Dream Catcher”.

The human wildlife will surely come out to play as the sun slips into the horizon, painting the skies a rose-gold hue.

Richard's pride and joy was custom built to Venetian standards by a boat-maker in Brisbane. The luxuriously appointed six-seater cabin maintains privacy and shelter from the elements. He has since added a water taxi, which seats 11 people, to his fleet.

Sipping BYO vino, nibbling from lavish seafood platters from Peter Kuruvita's Beach House or tempting cheese and dessert plates from Ricky's or the Woodfire Grill, while canoodling with

one's beloved is the most perfect riverside pastime imaginable.

Richard has helped to orchestrate countless marriage proposals, including planting hidden engagement rings inside oyster shells, romantic beachside picnics and musicians serenading love-struck couples on board. The heartfelt joy of cruising clientele is infectious and inspirational.

“The best part of my job is seeing happy people,” Richard says. “I am always blown away by the gratitude and the beautiful comments from my clients' experiences; that's what keeps you going for 20 years.

“And it's also a pretty good office! I just love the Noosa River. Its natural beauty and pristine environment never cease to amaze me.”

As we round the expanse of the Sound, coming full circle, I spy the Sofitel Jetty looming in the distance, foretelling the closure of this intimately luxurious experience. I almost wish the journey could continue into the evening and beyond, transporting me to all the exotic waterside lands of my fancy, yet returning me, feeling pampered and privileged, to the sophisticated setting of Hastings Street, with its retail and culinary treasures.

To herald my return to land, a sleek, black seabird skates across the water in a dashing display of brilliance, which epitomises the service and style of Gondolas of Noosa. **DA**

NEED TO KNOW

Gondolas of Noosa operate romantic river cruises from morning until night, departing from the Sofitel Jetty at 14-16 Hastings Street. To book, call Richard on 0412 929 369 or visit gondolasofnoosa.com for details.

