

Experience a Gondola Cruise in America: La Gondola in Providence, Rhode Island

by Jan Ross | Travel, Travel blog | 0 comments



A couple enjoying a cruise with La Gondola.

It is not necessary to travel all the way to Venice to experience your first delightful cruise on a gondola; on the contrary, all you need to do is make a quick trip to Providence, Rhode Island. Surprisingly enough, you can enjoy a lovely gondola cruise on the Providence River with [La Gondola](#).

Dressed in the traditional striped shirt and flat, straw hat, your gondolier will paddle the gondola along the smooth river and provide an interesting tour of Providence as he does. Providence may seem like the most unlikely place you can imagine for a gondola cruise but Matthew “Marcello” Haynes, who owns the company, truly loves it. He grew up canoeing with his family on the lakes and ponds of northwestern Rhode Island, graduated from Ponaganset High School and moved on to study history and biology at Lehigh University in Bethlehem, PA. At Lehigh he joined the crew (rowing) team and started work as a gondolier in early June, 1999, the summer after his junior year of college.



Matthew "Marcello" Haynes, owner of La Gondola.

Becoming a teacher after college allowed Marcello to keep rowing each summer, and after 8 seasons of working for his former employers, "Marco" and Cynthia, he purchased two of their gondolas and La Gondola Providence was born. He has been even more of a mainstay on the river ever since, training an excellent set of new gondoliers along the way, singing at every opportunity, and both marveling at and showing off the amazing renaissance undergone by the city of Providence. Marcello says "I am not a businessman. I'm a gondolier. I bought this company simply so I'd be able to row forever, and it's been worth every penny."



Marcello padding the gondola.

We headed down to the river one beautiful summer morning to check out this unique tour. The gorgeous gondola we rode in is one of three in their fleet, all of which are paddled by experienced gondoliers who have been extensively trained in the art of paddling the river using long, thin paddles to propel the gondolas. Our gondola had been extensively restored in 2010, after being constructed in Venice by Tramontin, the foremost gondola builder in the city, approximately 35 years ago.

It was built as a wedding gondola, and brought to America over 30 years ago. It had been previously used by an event coordinator for Italian-themed events, and cut into three pieces to make it easier to get into and out of banquet facilities, although there was no evidence that it has ever been in more

than one piece! The gondola has beautiful, hand-sculpted ornaments and steel trim, giving it silver accents. The bow and stern are carved with mythological deities and sea creatures, and it also bears two plates with a Venetian expression: “Cocai in laguna, burasca in mar; dove no se crede, l’aqua rompe,” (translation: safety in the lagoon, stormy in the sea; where one does not believe, the water breaks [him.])

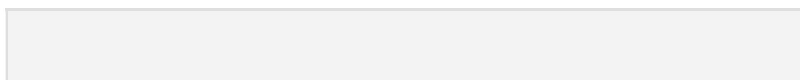


Dragon carving on the gondola.

The gondolas are all 36 feet in length and about 5 feet across at their widest points. They weigh approximately 1,800 pounds and seat up to six passengers. Each is powered by one man, the gondolier, and a 14 foot oar.

We were welcomed and helped aboard by Marcello who is friendly and personable, and made our tour a perfectly lovely experience. We stepped into the roomy and comfortable gondola which was complete with cushioned seats, a carpet for steady footing, along with fresh-baked cookies and iced bottles of water, which were perfect for the warm summer morning.

After we were settled and acquainted, Marcello paddled us out onto the river where we literally glided along on top of the water for one of the gentlest and most peaceful cruises we have ever taken. He narrated our tour, explained the history of Providence and some of what we were seeing. Seeing Providence from the gondola was an amazing experience. Noises of the city were so muted, they were not even noticeable and we skimmed along the river, enjoying the sights.





Skimming along the river.

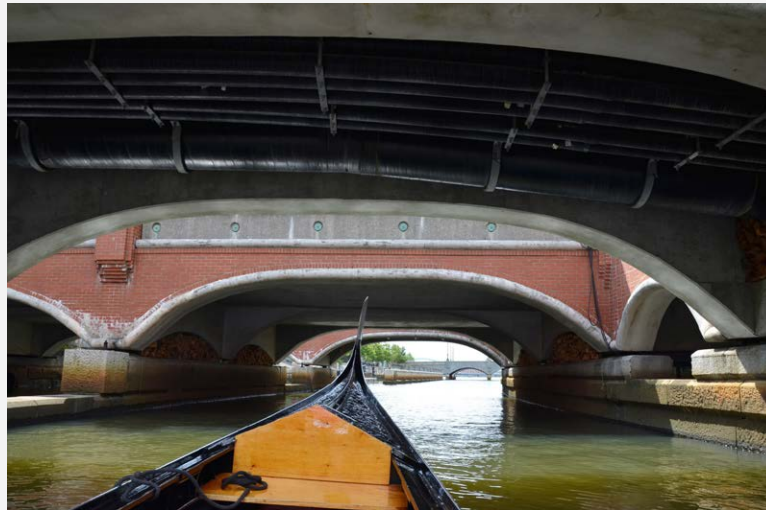
We slipped past the walk along the river, office buildings and restaurants, and people strolling along the river. We passed under several bridges and one of the first had big piles of firewood under it. We couldn't imagine what it was for until Marcello told us about [WaterFire](#), an art installation created by artist Barnaby Evans which consists of dozens of braziers that are floating in the middle of Providence's three rivers which are filled with wood and lit on fire. The fires are lit around dusk, and the braziers are fed by a small army of volunteers and staff over the course of the evening, utilizing the piles of firewood we saw under the bridges. Music plays, people stroll the river walk, and the entire experience must be wonderful.



View of the river from the gondola.

Marcello surprised us as he paddled under one of the bridges and broke out into a beautiful Italian song. It echoed under the bridge with a haunting melody that provided the perfect

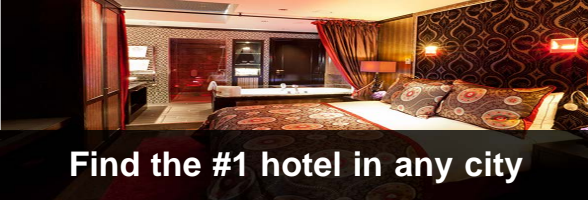
accompaniment to our first gondola experience.



Slipping under one of the bridges.



We were a little sad to head back to the dock when our gondola tour ended but agreed that it was one of the most interesting and enjoyable experiences we have ever had. Marcello and La Gondola offer group tours and weddings, in addition to their regular tours. Marcello is licensed to perform marriages so you can get married on one of the gondolas! Their season runs from April – November and you can make reservations online or just give them a call. Which you should do because how often can you take a gondola cruise anywhere but Italy?


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