

Venice: Orienteering Capital of the World?

Adrian Zissos, November 2005

If regarded in a particular way - one as crooked, bent, and twisted as the average Venetian street - one could argue that more orienteering takes place in Venice on any given day than anywhere else on earth. The orienteers are the tourists, every one map reading from hotel to museum to restaurant to bar and back. In Venice there are no cars at all so every inch traveled, save for the odd Gondola ride or water bus trip, is by foot. The passageways and thoroughfares are haphazardly connected so that for tourists - in fact, for anyone - navigating the Venetian labyrinth is outstandingly difficult: traveling down impossibly narrow alleys entered through tiny archways and almost invisible cracks between buildings, through streets thick with window shoppers, squares stuffed with sightseers, with hardly a street name or signpost to be seen, and twisting and turning all the while.

Inevitably, human nature what it is, in a city constantly jam-packed with orienteering someone will have the need to organize a competition to see who is the fastest. This competition takes place each November and attracts some of the best and most serious orienteers in the world - including Simone Niggli and Hakan Eriksson - as well as many locals and an impressive cast of holidaying orienteers - and in 2005 me, Adrian-O, so famous in Italy apparently that special O shirts are for sale all over Italy (but especially in Milan for some reason).



The competition map is drawn to ISOM Sprint standards and is awesome. The only complaint heard is that the ISOM standard gives no indication of "runability" of streets. Local knowledge is vital to avoid the crowded streets which some people feel should be drawn in dark green. Earlier map versions attempted to provide this information but after several attempts to devise something better the ISOM won out. During years with flooding, it also helps to be familiar with the tide tables and to understand which areas of the map might be underwater. Some paths alongside canals perhaps could be marked as intermittent streams.

The map has no contour lines. Climb is described in terms of bridge





crossings. The women's elite course in 2005 was 8.1 km long with 61 bridges of climb.

Route choice can be curious – picking out canal crossing points and joining them up for long legs is quite tricky. Since you often have to run in the opposite direction from your control, and sometimes very far off the direct line it is also surprisingly imperative to remember what your route choice is and why you are running in such unlikely directions.

Most challenging of all is maintaining concentration. There are no easy sections – you are always twisting and turning through narrow lanes and busy intersections. Keeping contact and keeping concentration is especially difficult later in the race when fatigue gnaws at the brain.

This is a “must” event for all serious orienteering travelers. If you go beware that it is organized “Italian style”. So it will be quite hard to get information until quite late – you must first search to find out the date of the race and then book your trip and patiently wait for event information and registration to appear on their website (www.orivenezia.it). Eventually, in Italian time, all will work out and you will enjoy a most fantastic experience.



Adriano's Run – Venezia O Meeting November 11 2005

8.1 km, 61 bridges of climb

M40, same as Women's Elite.

Adrian-O's time: 68min 04sec (23rd/94)

M40 Winner's time: 53min 43sec

Simone Niggli's time: 53min 05sec (1st in Women's elite)

We walk from our hotel fifteen minutes to the race centre, judging the locations and thickness of the Venetian crowds this Sunday morning. Arriving at the gymnasium clearly joining the impossibly long toilet queue immediately is imperative as we haven't seen a tree in the last forty-eight hours, and certainly nowhere is there sufficient bush cover for discretion. Thirty-five minutes later, fifteen minutes till my start, I am finally at the front of the queue when, having waited for this moment to maximize astonishment, two lady cleaners, to the outrage of a long line of anxious cross-legged men, close the facilities for cleaning. An agonizing ten minutes later the door, now dented by angry men's restless knuckles, reopens. A splash and dash and in fabulous Italian style I'm ready for my start twenty seconds before absolutely necessary.

The first leg is forgiving, easing us into the race: over the bridge, along a canal to the first big bridge, second left, a squiggle or two then look for the fountain in the square on the right. Lots of time to look ahead to the second leg which offers a left or right option which I get wrong: seventeen turns later I'm there. The third leg is the first long one and heads into the thick of tourists. I run for the Rialto Bridge. The crowds thicken and I look for other runners and drop in behind, letting them part the sea of sight-seers. Across the famous bridge my original route choice is chock-a-block with tourists. Luckily I've got another route up my sleeve: continue straight, then a quick left away from the crowds but dash it! route B is also crammed. Not exactly sure where I am I risk a desperate right turn to get away from the crowds, it twists left and then right and into a dead end. Curses! Backtrack to the original route B, resolving to quit doing that. I push forward, anticipating pedestrian movements, eyeing small gaps in the crowds, dodging and weaving between window shoppers and gawkers, my perspiration greasing the tiny gaps occasionally. Movement itself is the challenge on this leg. But as the brand name stores thin the running grows easier, the stress lowers, and another spiked control. Now follows some faster running to controls four, five, and six in what I imagine are the suburbs. Then back into the crush. Fatigue is growing and map contact is fading; I tell myself I'm chasing down the people in front but it feels more like following. I'm losing contact - one, two bridges I'm not absolutely sure of; then another; then an unexpected twist in the alley - yikes! I stop, anxious, glance at the map - relocation is hopeless in this fiendish maze. I look up - and (jubilation) I'm standing at the gallery we visited yesterday. Spurred on by being precisely where expected I dash onwards. Next control is near our hotel - no problem. Then a mad rush of adrenalin as I cruise through San Marco square scattering pigeons and setting flight to tourists all the way. One last tricky bit of navigation to concentrate on, then a longish easy looking leg that isn't, and finally out onto the esplanade for a wonderful run down one of the most fabulous finish chutes imaginable along the edge of the Venice lagoon, with San Giorgio Maggiore and Santa Maria della Salute as the backdrop.

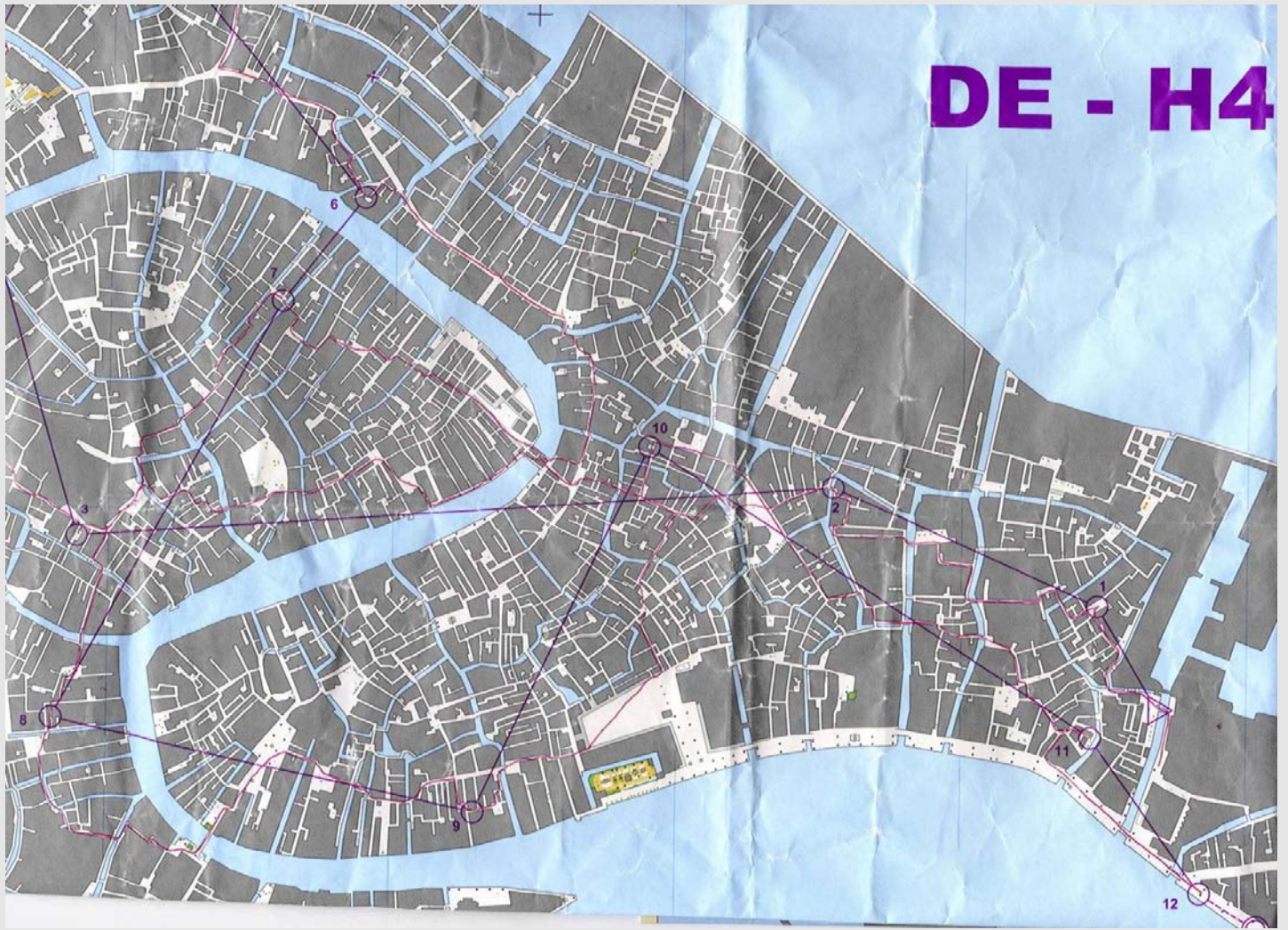


Racing Simone

Simone Niggli of Switzerland currently dominates the orienteering world. She has twice (in 2003 and 2005) won four gold medals – which is all of them (Sprint, Middle, Long, and Relay) - at the World Orienteering Championships. This year she came to Venice and I was fortunate to run on the same course. She, of course, was a little quicker – though I did manage to be faster than Simone on one leg - the second last – but only by two seconds. On all other legs she was consistently faster by about the same percentage (except when I made a route choice error and the percentage was much larger). What astonished me (though it probably shouldn't have) is that she crushed me in the finish chute – and I'm no slouch in the finish chute department – 14 seconds to 22!!! Running against such a wonderful orienteer was one more thrill in what is one of the most fun events ever.

Leg	Simone		Adrian-O			
	time	position in class	time	position in class	% behind Simone	
1	0:01:29	1	0:01:52	30	25.8%	
2	0:03:09	1	0:03:47	28	20.1%	
3	0:06:58	2	0:09:19	24	33.7%	20 sec - lost contact 40 sec - took chance
4	0:04:10	1	0:05:14	23	25.6%	
5	0:04:32	2	0:05:40	22	25.0%	
6	0:04:17	1	0:05:38	22	31.5%	20 sec - bad route (too far off straight line)
7	0:07:00	2	0:09:50	22	40.5%	75 sec - bad route (wrong bridge)
8	0:04:24	1	0:05:22	21	22.0%	
9	0:05:36	2	0:06:45	22	20.5%	
10	0:04:23	2	0:05:58	21	36.1%	20sec - accidental blind alley
11	0:04:49	2	0:06:15	23	29.8%	20sec - error near control
12	0:02:04	4	0:02:02	23	-1.6%	
F	0:00:14		0:00:22		57.1%	
Total	0:53:05	1	1:08:04	23	28.2%	

DE - H4



Map & route courtesy of Simone Niggli (www.simattu.ch)