



**Greg Mohr, a gondolier and owner of Gondola Adventures, waving to pedestrians during a ride with Jacob Files and his wife of nearly eight years, Rebekah, on Lake Carolyn.**

**Photograph by Desiree Rios**

**LIFESTYLE**

# These Suburban Gondoliers Have Seen 10,000 Proposals. Here's What They've Learned About Love.

Often party to multiple marriage proposals a day, the gondola king of Irving has learned a thing or two about the affairs of the heart.



By Lauren Larson

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“We are the most romantic city in the whole state,” says sixty-year-old Greg Mohr. He is referring, confidently but improbably, to Irving, the Metroplex outpost that was previously home to Texas Stadium—and that is now, in his estimation, the Venice of Texas.



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He would know. Greg runs an Irving-based gondoliering business called Gondola Adventures with his wife, Elisa. They began working with gondolas in 1993 as part of a yacht-chartering business they ran in California; they started offering gondola rides in Irving in 2002 before relocating there themselves, in 2020. Greg is also the president of the Gondola Society of America, advising prospective gondoliers who are trying to figure out where to buy boats, as well as insurance companies baffled about how to underwrite

the craft. He is, Elisa says, “the foremost authority on gondolas and Venice in the English-speaking world.” Naturally, he knows a little bit about love too.

Thanks to the very romantic city from whence they came—the Venice of Italy—gondolas are not just modes of transit but also modes of *amore*. Greg estimates that he and his fellow gondoliers have witnessed more than 10,000 marriage proposals in Irving over the years. “I’ve done seven in a row on a Saturday before,” says Tom Young, a musician who has gondoliered with the company since 2018. “I’m Cupid. That’s my job.”

Cupid lurks around the corner when I arrive in Irving in late January, and the gondoliers are already preparing for **Valentine’s Day**, procuring cases of Martinelli’s (guests may bring their own alcohol for a service fee) and piles of chocolate. Some of them are college students, and many come back to Irving just to work the big day, activating like Army reservists. Greg expects he and his colleagues to cast off more than a hundred times on Saturday, and almost all of those rides will be for couples. “Valentine’s Day is our Super Bowl,” he says.

“It is, truly,” agrees gondolier Jimi Dawson, who has oared in Irving for fifteen years. “This is what you row all year for.”



**Greg Mohr is a longtime gondola obsessive. “I would wither and die in an office at a desk,” he says.  
Photograph by Desiree Rios**



Straw gondolier hats from Venice on display inside the Gondola Adventures headquarters. “Gondoliering is very aesthetic,” says Mohr.

Photograph by Desiree Rios

But on this frigid Saturday, Lake Carolyn, the man-made lake where Greg's gondolas are moored, is empty but for a brazen duo in a swan-shaped boat. (Greg and Elisa have a monopoly on unusual watercraft in the area, dispatching swans, ducks, and standard paddleboats from another site.) I meet Greg in the company's office, a houseboat—office boat—with weathered gray siding decorated by aesthetic painted oars. He wears a black short-brimmed cap with an embroidered band, a red silk scarf, and a thick black jacket, and he stands with a hand tucked into his coat's placket, a recognizably nautical posture.

As Greg shows me around the office, a fellow gondolier with swimming pool-blue eyes is removing the wilting outer petals of peachy roses in a bucket. His name is Woody, and he joined the company after seeing a call for gondoliers on Facebook in 2014. A deejay for thirty years and a singer all his life, on the water he wows couples with his rendition of Al Green's "Let's Stay Together." Now he places each rose into a container in a clear-doored refrigerator. Later they'll be dismembered, their petals artfully strewn about the gondolas.

On one wall are rows of plastic sleeves where the gondoliers store their jaunty straw hats and paperwork. Sometimes this paperwork includes messages that get stuffed into bottles, which the gondoliers then fling into the water for passengers to "discover." (Greg says Gondola Adventures has trademarked the message-in-a-bottle maneuver. It does very little to defend its claim, however, and the move has become ubiquitous in the industry.) When one of Greg and Elisa's daughters was expecting, she informed her parents on a gondola ride, slipping her ultrasound into one of the glass bottles. Such is the confessional allure of Irving's waterways. Gondoliers operate the boats, yes—but more crucially, they are the facilitators of romance. They are "love artists," as Dawson puts it.

"A good gondolier is the ultimate wingman," Greg explains, stepping outside onto a dock that overlooks two-thirds of his fleet. He says that besides navigating the technical complexity of rowing a gondola (for which he trained in Venice), gondoliers must also be attuned to the moods of their passengers. They must know when to entertain—in his early days on the

suburban seas, Greg would play music on a cassette player, but he has since developed his own repertoire of opera songs—and when to dissolve into the background. “I get couples who are just getting to know each other, and the last thing I want to do is be the most interesting person on the boat,” he says. There are other times, with longer-tenured couples, when “he’s heard all her stories, and she’s laughed at all his dumb jokes. They can finish each other’s sentences. They want to talk to the guy they’ve never met before.”



**Mohr steering a gondola carrying the Files on Mandalay Canal in Irving. The canal and the development surrounding it were meant to evoke Venice.**

**Photograph by Desiree Rios**

And when someone is about to pop the question, as many passengers do, the gondolier is there for moral support. Before a client—or patient, depending on their level of anxiety—proposes, Greg will draw the *proposeur* into the office for a pep talk (under the guise of settling the payment) before they disembark. His advice is simple: Be cool. “The typical guy, especially in his twenties, they have no forethought, and everything is just ‘run out and do it,’” he says. “But on this one day, it’s *Mission: Impossible*. He’s got it planned

down to the *minute*.” Sometimes they’re nervous enough that they risk ruining the surprise, or worse, the gondola ride, for their would-be spouse.

Greg’s strategies are fine-tuned. When the time comes, the gondolier subtly flings a message in a bottle into the water and then draws the proposee’s attention to it, suggesting they help keep Irving’s waterways clean. The proposee collects the bottle, and while they’re reading its message, their lover gets down on one knee. Greg and his cogondoliers encourage brevity in these notes so that a nervous supplicant is not left sweating on the boat’s wooden floor while his target reads every word.



A tray with sparkling cider and chocolates being carried ahead of a couple's ride. On Valentine's Day, the company will go through several cases of Martinelli's.

Photograph by Desiree Rios



Gondola Adventures' aesthetic oars.

Photograph by Desiree Rios

It is strange to be a third party to so many couples' intimate moments. It helps, Greg says, that they're generally facing away from him. If a couple starts taking selfies, he is careful to strike a noble pose in the background. He demonstrates now, lifting his chin and straightening up like Washington crossing the Delaware. That his riders are not usually looking at him also aids his opera singing, he says. He has found that when there are more than two passengers in the boat—some unavoidably angled toward him—"I get weird."

Greg guides me around the inlet, introducing the boats by name as if presenting ten beautiful daughters to society. Some of his boats are fiberglass, but he is proudest of the five ornate wooden ones currently docked there. They were constructed using eight different types of wood and are painted a shiny black. He points out the floor of one, which is coated with a light turquoise that looks almost white in the bright afternoon sun but that in moodier light is closer to Tiffany Blue—an approximation of the signature color of the Italian bicycle maker Bianchi. He remarks on the smooth, piano-like black wood of another boat, this one made in Venice and purchased during the COVID pandemic. Typically, he explains, there is a years-long waiting list to buy a Venetian gondola, during which hopeful gondoliers save up—a gondola made in Venice can cost 50,000 euros (about \$60,000). But after demand in Venice plummeted during the pandemic, he and Elisa bought two new gondolas and brought them to the U.S. in shipping containers. Following that purchase, and with indoor activities limited during COVID lockdowns, their business exploded.

Winter, though, is a slow time for Irving's gondoliers. The city is several days into a deep freeze—I am impressed to learn that a duo has signed up for a gondola ride in the evening, when temperatures are expected to be 19 degrees Fahrenheit—and the path that surrounds the lake is empty except for two men running together in short sleeves, each of them flushed and whooping periodically. Even Greg, who at one point lived in Nome, Alaska, is cold. He locks the office and walks up a cobblestone street to the Italian Cafe, a restaurant that caters some of the meals his company serves riders.

This area, the Las Colinas development, was inspired by Venice, Greg explains. (Later, he tells me the cobblestones were imported from Italy.) He takes his seat in the restaurant and removes his jacket, revealing a classic gondolier's black-and-white-striped long-sleeved shirt underneath. When the server brings a cappuccino, he holds the mug in both hands, each with "*passaporti*"—the inner-thumb calluses that gondoliers like to compare. The scene lacks only a Tintoretto and 30 million tourists. But for a television playing a football game in the corner of the restaurant behind him, Greg looks as Venetian as anyone in North Texas ever has.



Gondolier Jimi Dawson displaying a message in a bottle. "I consider myself a love artist," he says.  
Photograph by Desiree Rios



Clockwise from top: gondoliers Mohr, Dawson, Woody, and Tom Young. Each of the four men sings his own romantic repertoire during gondola rides. “I literally get to drive a boat, sing a song, and get paid for it,” says Woody. “It’s been the best job of my life.”

Photograph by Desiree Rios

He takes out his phone and pulls up a satellite map of the area, then pulls out the file of a small blue Swiss Army Knife to use as a pointer. With a swipe of his finger, he swings the map onto Lake Carolyn before zooming in to reveal a fuzzy shape that looks like a long bacterium under a microscope. “There’s one of our boats right there,” he says. He moves north on the map, following the edge of the lake into the slender Mandalay Canal, which runs through the development. “We even have a special second-story bridge here, which we call the Bridge of Sighs,” Greg says, referring to Venice’s photogenic bridge.

Most of his proposal-inclined passengers pop the question at Glatter Falls, he continues, moving the map along the canal. The gondolier guides the boat under a footbridge where a photographer is positioned with a drone camera, ready to capture the moment. After the proposee says yes—ideally—the gondola might proceed to another bridge at the point where the canal rejoins Lake Carolyn, where visitors have begun hanging “love locks,” as they do at bridges across Europe. The gondoliers will often encourage couples to get out to take a closer look at the bridge and will slip one of them a lock as they disembark.

I wonder whether Greg, having served as an accomplice to so many proposals, has developed an eye for a good couple. “How do I tell if a couple is really all that,” he muses, cupping his cappuccino as he thinks for a moment. Then he tells a story not from gondoliering, but from a chapter in which he worked as a wedding officiant for hire, in the nineties, when he and Elisa owned their yacht company. He recalls one occasion when he had to preside over two weddings on two different yachts, transferring from one to the other by speedboat. “The first couple, they fought in the office, they had screaming matches, they were slamming doors,” he recalls. When he asked the man if he took the woman to be his lawfully wedded wife, the man perceptibly paused. “Ever so slightly. Enough to be awkward,” he says. When Greg turned to the bride, she paused for even longer. He saw rough waters ahead.

He had never met the second couple before. They had worked with another coordinator and were getting married on a yacht he wasn’t affiliated with—he

had simply been tapped to officiate. “I meet the guy, and he’s nice enough, seems pretty quiet and squared away,” he begins. “It was the way they looked at each other. I mean, when she walked up, I felt the energy from this guy. The whole room just went into soft focus. She just seemed to drift down the aisle. And when they came together, you just knew: These two are gonna be reaching for each other in the nursing home. You just knew.” He wipes his eyes. I blink rapidly.



**Greg and Elisa Mohr, married for 33 years, have placed their own lock on Irving’s love-lock bridge.**

**Photograph by Desiree Rios**

He and Elisa had that too. They met at a heavy metal church in California, and they dated for just three days before deciding to get engaged. They married six months later. “We’ve been married thirty-three years,” he says, and they have yet to become “one of those ‘Oh no, she’s not gonna tell *that* story again’” couples. “I really do credit the fact that I’m always revisiting earlier moments in a marriage. I see proposals every week,” he says. “I’m always revisiting the magic.”

Later, I ask Elisa why she was amenable to marriage so soon after meeting Greg. “Anybody who meets him thinks he’s wonderful,” she says. “I knew right away.”

I realize I’d forgotten to ask Greg how he, the proposal mastermind, had proposed. I ask now, and Elisa pauses.

“It was on a gondola.”