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Photography by River Thompson

45.4408° N, 12.3155° E

Hidden depths

From the lagoon to its canals, no place on Earth is more closely associated with water than Venice. Oddly, however, tourists seldom find the finest sights along its waterways

Lonely is the tower of Torcello. Beyond mud flats colonised by sea-gulls, past narrow canals and overgrown fields, the red-brick campanile rises. The small cloistered piazza at its base has the echoing, brooding air of a Giorgio de Chirico painting, column stumps and broken plaques huddled around the hollowed out remains of a baptistery. No dazzle of Carnival masks or pastel palazzi in this northerly corner of the lagoon. Instead, everything is faded stone and sombre tones.

All this makes stepping inside the basilica of Santa Maria Assunta, Venice’s oldest church, even more remarkable. Byzantine mosaics offer gilded visions of a looming Virgin Mary and gruesome Last Judgement complete with pitchfork-wielding demons and severed heads. These are the glittering traces of Torcello’s former glory. It was on this island, one of 117 that comprise Venice, where the first Venetians settled, fleeing barbarian invasions on the mainland for this marshy archipelago. In its heyday, from the seventh to 11th centuries, Torcello was a thriving capital, home to 20,000 locals. Its demise came through a combination of malaria and the growing dominance of the Rialto islands, better positioned in the lagoon’s centre. Buildings, taken apart brick-by-brick, were loaded on barges to make new homes along the Grand Canal.

Indeed, the water is at the heart of everything in Venice. From the start, it offered both protection and lifeline; these pale green shallows became the Republic’s arteries, bearing the spices, salt and silk that made it prosper. And it remains one of the unique draws here: the waterways are stunningly beautiful and bewildering as a mirage. Sometimes,



Venice’s legendary Bridge of Sighs, so called because it was the last place convicts saw before their imprisonment

Torcello’s Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta. One of the oldest religious buildings in Veneto, it was built in 639



when the light dances just so on traffic-stirred canals, the liquid becomes marble, swirled with reflected pastels, while the palaces appear insubstantial and gauzy as fabric. It is, I think, the only place you would turn away from sunset to instead watch shadows slowly wrapping around a church façade. This, in a nutshell, is the appeal of Venice, and the reason that more than 20 million people descend on it each year.

But that’s not to say that every watery delight of the floating city is heavily visited. Torcello is far from the only ghost island on the lagoon. As the vaporetto grinds between the guiding posts, carving through the pale mist on a cold morning, I

find myself drawing alongside a low brick wall and a tree-choked mass of ruins. These islands once had prescribed functions – this one a gunpowder store, the next a hospital ward. Scattered across a lagoon spanning 550km² (136,000 acres), their swansong sounds like lapping water and bird calls.

Torcello’s isolated campanile is a totem of Venice at large, the metropolis turned museum-city (perhaps one more fitting than the bronze lion in San Marco Square). What better backdrop could Daphne du Maurier have chosen for the grieving couple in *Don’t Look Now*, haunted by the memory of their drowned daughter? Or for Thomas Mann’s ill-fated obsession with a beautiful youth to play out, as it did in *Death* ➤



in Venice? “The lagoon is doomed,” wrote Jan Morris, one of Venice’s greatest chroniclers, “for its essences are too vaporous to survive.” Even 200 years ago, Byron viewed its glory days in retrospect: “Venice once was dear.” A mere eight per cent of its territory is land, the rest a mixture of open water, salt marshes and mud. Only desperation could have driven people to build a city in such a place. From the arrival of its refugee founders, the odds have been stacked against La Serenissima. And yet, such adversity dictates a resourceful, commercial spirit. Venetians did, after all, turn a swamp into a global trading superpower. Their ingenious idea was to hammer large wooden poles vertically into the lagoon, creating



Above left Venissa is the only winery in the world producing from Dorona grapes
Above right La Certosa island, a little over 500 yards from Lido, is being redeveloped with a sailing club and boardwalk

a foundation on which to build piazzas, churches and palaces. The Rialto Bridge exists today thanks to 6,000 submerged logs. Seven centuries on, its poles remain in near-perfect condition, deprived of oxygen down in the salt water and mud. Consider the Arsenal, where a pioneering production line employing 16,000 men could assemble a galley in a day. Before the Industrial Revolution, it was the largest workers’ complex in Europe. It is no surprise that, for all its melancholy, Venice’s enterprising spirit endures. For decades it has courted tourism but today attention is turning outwards again. Dozens of abandoned islands are being repurposed. Innovation is stirring across the lagoon.

Take La Certosa, where around the shell of a monastery, yachts line the boardwalk of a sailing club and children play around the public gardens. The clatter of tools comes from a workshop, where three brothers are hand-building sailboats. Also, wine is being made in Venice once again. On Mazzorbo, the Prosecco maker Gianluca Bisol reintroduced a long-forgotten local grape variety, Dorona di Venezia, after stumbling upon a few surviving vines on neighbouring Torcello. Now overseen by his son Matteo, and expanded into a boutique “wine resort” complete with a Michelin-starred restaurant and guest rooms, Venissa is the only Dorona vineyard in the world. It floods



Gianluca Bisol’s Michelin-starred restaurant Venissa serves local delicacies and gets fresh ingredients from the vegetable garden every day

with brackish water every few years, but it is these extreme conditions that give the golden wine its character, carrying the lagoon’s brine beneath stone fruit aromas. The same goes for the wet-land-loving crops – sea beans, erba stella and purslane – flourishing in its kitchen gardens. Just a little to the south, pastoral Sant’Erasmo island has long stocked the fruit and vegetable stalls of the Rialto Market. Now it also counts a mineral-y white wine, Orto di Venezia, in its exports thanks to Parisian retiree Michel Thoulouze, who realised the island had been covered with vineyards since the 16th century and enlisted winemaking contacts from Burgundy to help revive the practice. ➤

Right Once inhabited by monks, San Servolo now hosts the *Circuito Off* Short Film Festival
Below Isole delle Rose is now home to a JW Marriott hotel



One of Venice's *isole del dolore* ("islands of the sick"), San Servolo, has found a fresh lease of life as holiday homes and student dorms, though the on-site museum complete with dissection table and electric shock therapy machines attest to its grim past as a psychiatric institution. Another small island has been snapped up by the Ciprianis, owners of Harry's Bar, with rumours of an artichoke farm and cookery school opening.

The hotels are coming too, with a number of major groups colonising Venice's small wild islands, from a former asylum (Kempinski – San Clemente) to a pulmonary hospital (JW Marriott – Isole delle Rose) and convent (Bauer Palladio



Who can blame Venetians for wanting to guard the remaining quiet places?

on Giudecca). It's as if an additional leaf of the Venetian Monopoly board has been discovered and unfolded. Such developments have stirred up disgruntled mutterings that Venice is for sale to the highest bidder, manifest in recent protests where locals carrying empty suitcases blocked the canal-side streets. Who can blame Venetians for wanting to guard the remaining quiet places?

But progress is also welcome, even if, alongside that entrepreneurialism, a rebellious, autonomous streak runs equally deep in Venice's watery soul. Italian is not her mother tongue. The Venetian language is instead imprinted by Greek and Arabic as well as Latin. Where they call a glass *bicchiere* on ➤



the mainland, it is *goto* within the lagoon; apple is *pomo* or *pon* rather than *mela*.

Her food is not Italian in the traditional sense either. Pizza and lasagne are imports, while the lagoon offers up briny treats: boiled octopi (*folpetti*), cuttlefish cooked in its own ink (*seppie al nero*), sardine fillets marinated with white onions, raisins and pine nuts (*sarde in saor*), tiny grey-brown shrimp on soft polenta (*canoe*), hand-dug clams (*caparoso*), and the fugitive soft-shelled crabs (*moeche*) that can be caught in early spring and autumn. Bitter radicchio leaves abound in the recipes of Chioggia, while baby purple artichokes are synonymous with Sant'Erasmus.

Burano, known for its colourful houses and lace-making, takes 40 minutes to reach by vaporetto

The brightly coloured jigsaw of the lace-makers' island, Burano, is a world apart from the cloistered gardens of San Francesco del Deserto, ringed with cypresses and inhabited by a dozen or so monks. Borne on a low, narrow *bragozzo* sail boat, you can safari among the wild flamingos of Lio Piccolo, the vegetable gardens of Isola dei Laghi and between the mussel ropes and crab-guarded sandbanks until you reach the beaches of Jesolo. Skirt south-east along the Lido to abandoned Poveglia, where the bone ash of lepers once exiled there lies thick beneath the ruins. Or to Pellestrina and Malamocco, Adriatic waves buffeting their quaysides and the smell of grilled fish in the salt air.

Venice is sinking, we're told. A millimetre is reclaimed by the lagoon each year. Yet shortly before last Christmas, an extreme low tide saw the canals retracted to puddles, with gondolas and water taxis beached forlornly in mud. In short, La Serenissima isn't always predictable – she is the matriarch who refuses to pop her clogs despite decades of speculation, steely beneath her jewels and mist of white hair. Don't write the old girl off yet. ■

For boat tours of the lagoon visit Eolo

– cruisingvenice.com/the-boat, *Il Bragozzo* – ilbragozzo.it, or Terra & Aqua – veniceboat.org

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