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EXPO

The City of Bridges is at a contemplative moment. It has come through two sleepy years, freed by the pandemic from the usual tourist crowds, and is now cautious about their return. Ahead of the city's forthcoming Art Biennale, we discover a city basking in soft spring sun and waiting to see what's around the corner for its flotilla of craftworkers, wine-makers, hoteliers and gondoliers.

JUST ADD WATER

Venice marked its 1,600th birthday last year with quiet celebrations. Long a bastion of tourism and *mordi e fuggi* (eat and run) sightseers, Venice during the pandemic offered a glimpse of what life could be like without the crush of crowds. For some perspective on the turnaround, 2020 saw a little over 1.3 million people visit, compared to more than five million the year before.

Change usually comes rather slower to the ancient city. Venice remains entirely nautical, spread over 120 islands cobbled together from marshland and riven by canals rather than roads. There is a total absence of cars (even bicycles). While the manner of moving around has changed little – boats are ubiquitous and the best way to see the city – a ban on cruise ships entering the Giudecca Canal from 2021 and a clean-up of the lagoon signify a sea change in attitudes here as this beguiling metropolis battles both flooding and pollution.

There’s also a new generation of entrepreneurs taking over the mantle of age-old restaurants and bars, building boats (the old-fashioned way), blowing glass and even installing electric charging stations for a new fleet of greener vessels. On the eve of the Venice Biennale, MONOCLE visits in the calm before the show, in the off-season when the silvery ripples of the lagoon reflect the low spring sun. What we find is a city in flux – familiar, somehow, but quieter, more contemplative than before. A city with all of its charm, ritual and tradition intact but a little less chatter, chunter and churn. Join us for a tour of Venice as you’ve never seen it.

Under the surface

Canals less travelled

Venice is at its best – most mysterious, most sublime – deep at night and in the early morning when the crowds are absent. MONOCLE arrives by train, the tracks hovering just above the lagoon’s calm surface. We disembark at the 1950s Santa Lucia station and reach our accommodation by boat long after nightfall. It’s warm and we glimpse the deserted Rialto bridge and a shimmering bend of the traffic-free Grand Canal. Our hotel occupies one of the oldest stone palazzos in the city: once run-down, the building’s 1,000-year history includes a lengthy renovation to become the new (and emphatically named) Venice Venice Hotel. The ambitious fit-out was masterminded by Alessandro Gallo and Francesca Rinaldo, the Venetian founders of fashion brand Golden Goose. The lounges and 20 guest rooms are decked out with the couple’s custom-crafted furnishings and avant garde artworks by the likes of Polish sculptor Igor Mitoraj, Italian Francesco Simeti and pieces from the Fluxus movement.

“Hotels here are baroque and old-fashioned,” says Alessandro the following morning, sitting at the canal-side bar under arches of Constantine marble. “But we felt it

1. The Grand Canal is Venice’s main waterway



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- 1. Training in Venice
- 2. Floating through Burano's calm waters
- 3. Chefs in Trattoria da Romano in Burano
- 4. Family-run trattoria



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1. Michieli Alessandro at the Trattoria da Romano
2. Breakfast of frittelle at The Venice Venice Hotel



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1. The bar at The Venice Venice Hotel
2. Canal views from the comfortable rooms
3. Waiting for his gondola
4. Drinks trolley at The Venice Venice Hotel
5. Local pasta dish at the Locanda Cipriani in Torcello
6. Calm waters
7. Building gondolas in Squero Tramontin
8. Elena and Margherita Micheluzzi
9. Alessandro Gallo at The Venice Venice Hotel
10. Our guide, Francesco Palloni
11. Palloni knows all the local spots
12. Cooking risotto at the Trattoria da Romano
13. Warmly hued Burano houses
14. Cannaregio, the home of the 16th-century Jewish ghetto
15. Time for a spot of Venetian wine
16. Soaking up the sun



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was time to show the future of Venice, reflecting the spirit of the Biennale and the cross-cultural influences that once made this city *avant garde*.”

Before long, our captain and tour guide Francesco Palloni – trimmed beard, corduroy bomber, Persol sun-glasses – steers up to the Venice Venice pier, his electric boat purring quietly. Palloni, who offers tours around the lagoon, also co-founded E-Concept, a company that installs charging stations for boats. With six moorings already in position, he hopes to expand as more of Venice’s boats go electric. The first of the civic fleet to do so are the rubbish-collection vessels and there’s a growing trend of retrofitting private boats with electric motors.

As we glide into the narrow canals of Dorsoduro, we pass low footbridges and small boats berthed in tight, neat rows. “We’ve forgotten how to enjoy the journey,” says Palloni, who left a job working for a wine critic and consultancy company in Bordeaux to return to his native city. “With these boats, the journey becomes the best part,” he says, ducking his head as we pass beneath a bridge.

Our first stop is Squero Tramontin, where a team is busy building and restoring three 10-metre-long gleaming, black gondolas. A *squero* is a Venetian workshop hand-crafting boats in wood, a practice as old as the lagoon city itself. “We’re still making wooden boats thanks to the strength of local heritage but also to tourist interest,” says Silvia Scaramuzza, one of the boat builders, who is drilling a steel rail into a gondola. “They’re part of the cultural foundation of the city.” Fascination with gondola rides, as well as the wooden boats long used to navigate the lagoon, remains high, and state-run courses teach residents such as Scaramuzza how to build them according to tradition. Most *squeri* are owned by foreign investors but Squero Tramontin remains in the hands of a pair of Venetian sisters, descendants of the original 19th-century founders.

We float down the Dorsoduro canal to another sister-run workshop, where Elena and Margherita Micheluzzi are following in their father’s footsteps as designers of blown-glass objects but with their own youthful and international take on the artform. The pair moved back to their home town in 2019 after tenures in London’s fashion and art worlds to create objects such as sinuous drinking glasses that fit perfectly into hands – modern styles that build on the techniques of Murano, where the sisters’ designs are made and where Venice’s glass-blowing furnaces have clustered for centuries. Their vases and glasses now huddle along atelier shelves, a rainbow of turquoise, amber, smoky purple and more. “We wanted to return to Venice but we needed a project,” says Margherita, backlit by her delicate creations. “Now we’re applying what we learnt abroad to the experience of our father.”

After crossing the choppy waters of the Grand Canal, MONOCLE arrives at Giudecca, a mostly residential island where we find the Trattoria Altanella, a beloved, nostalgia-inducing fixture. Disembarking at the dockside stairs, the

troughs between the waves reveal the oysters, mussels and seaweed that cloak the sides of all of Venice’s waterways. Past the patio of canal-front tables, Altanella’s wood-lined interiors are hung with old paintings by patrons, with the tinkle and buzz of vintage jazz and lapping water as its soundtrack. Open since 1865, the restaurant is a family affair, with the fourth and fifth generation of the same dynasty cooking and serving fresh seafood from the surrounding waters. “It is done in the Venetian tradition: with a maximum of simplicity,” says co-owner Roberto Stradella, whose musician father and grandfather welcomed artists such as Yoko Ono and Nino Rota to perform at the trattoria. “We try to maintain the family spirit of the place by keeping everything as it has been,” he says, adjusting his necktie with one hand as he delivers a plate piled with squid-ink tagliatelle, tomato, courgette and prawns.

Heading to the north end of the lagoon, we glide past San Giorgio island and the Vatican’s 2018 Architecture Biennale installation of contemporary chapels spread out amid the greenery, then past the verdant pastures of the farming island of Sant’Erasmo. At Burano, an island known for its needle-lace tradition, Palloni pulls into a canal edged with low houses painted in deep pastels of violet, azure, persimmon and dahlia yellow, an old trick to help fishermen distinguish their homes when they returned in the lagoon’s thick winter fog.

The Remiera Vogaepara, on Burano’s shoreline, is a soaring wooden boathouse stacked with longboats in all the colours of the island’s homes, where rowers, including an increasing number of women, learn and practice their strokes. At a *remiera*, a Venetian rowing club, members practise the sport of *voga*, where boats once used to transport fruit, vegetables and other goods race across the water, powered by small rowing teams who stand up as they paddle their single oars. “It’s a unique sport born on the lagoon,” says Franco dei Rossi, a sea-worn champion *voghista* at Vogaepara, which also offers lessons. With an instructor paddling behind us, we make progress in a longboat, despite our amateur arms aching from the thrusting effort. Our position on the water rewards us with views of the colourful modernist-inspired social housing by Giancarlo Decarlo, the leaning bell tower of Santa Caterina from 1318, one of Europe’s oldest, and the snow-capped Alps in the hazy far-off distance.

In the late-day sun, the breadth of the lagoon is entirely illuminated, like a sheet of burnished gold, as our boat hums towards Venice’s old Jewish ghetto, now a hive of activity. At Vino Vero, a natural-wine bar with a selection of 600 artisanal wines and a tiny art gallery in its window, aperitivo is served at tables by a slender canal. “Venice is a city with so much visibility but it had little going on so there’s space for interesting projects here,” says Mara Sartore, who opened the bar with her husband Matteo Bartoli, along with another in Lisbon. “Decades ago, no one was practicing *voga*, and Venice’s tourist offerings were all *mordi e fuggi* places,” she says. “But now there’s more interest in reclaiming the culture of the city. Just look at all the young restaurateurs creating high-quality places today.”

One of the most compelling ventures lies a few short blocks away in the Jewish quarter. Anice Stellato, which

Elisa Pantano and her husband Estevan Bruno took over in 2015, also offers natural wine as well as innovative reimaginings of recipes from across the Mediterranean. “What sense is there in resurrecting old classics?” says Pantano, serving a bowl of pasta and beans with mussels and radicchio. “In a city of tourism, it’s personality that’s needed.” After concluding with a herby *amaro* at Anice Stellato, we head home to the hotel, sleepy from the wine, seafood and salty air.


The next morning, Palloni picks us up at the hotel dock and we set off to explore the canal beside the Giardini della Biennale, where national pavilions cluster among the trees, from the austere archways of Poland and Russia to Australia’s Denton Corker Marshall-designed black cube from 2015. Then we move on to the bay of the Arsenale, a military shipyard of old brick warehouses nestled around a small bay, which serves as a sprawling gallery space for a key exhibition at the Biennale. Looping around, we coast into the canal along the Palazzo Ducale and St Mark’s Church, where only gondolas and electric boats are allowed, past Byzantine-era palace walls and under the Bridge of Sighs in the peaceful waterway just behind Venice’s most tourist-jammed piazza.

Here we switch to a gleaming, oak-finished motorboat (Palloni restored it himself) and for the first time in our trip we stop for fuel. The fast boat will allow us to travel to the farthest reaches of the lagoon in less than an hour. We begin by docking at the island of San Michele, long Venice’s cemetery, which is full of old tombs, quiet tracts and a secret: a plot of land where friars who lived in the island’s now-abandoned monastery grew grapes for centuries. Today the vineyard has returned to life thanks to Laguna nel Bicchiere, an organisation reviving Venice’s island vineyards with help from volunteers who harvest and handpick the organic grapes and hand-paint the wine labels. Children enthusiastically provide some grape-stomping assistance. “Restoring the vineyards means creating a different kind of tourism – a mindful tourism,” says Renzo De Antonia, president of Laguna nel Bicchiere, as he tastes the group’s Sant’E red under a pergola crowned with knotted grapevines.

After zipping to Torcello, we settle in at a garden table at Locanda Cipriani, a traditional restaurant with white-jacketed waiters and diners shaded by creepers. The profound silence in the garden is broken only by the squawk of flamingoes flying over the lagoon. On Torcello, one of Venice’s earliest inhabited islands, archaeological remains and a stone throne date to the fifth and sixth centuries, when the first Venetians settled here. A neighbouring foot-path leads visitors around the small, mostly green island where residents gather at a handful of quaint old restaurants.

Palloni drives on, dropping us at the cypress-lined island of San Francesco del Deserto. Here, a handful of Franciscan monks (and a parrot that says, “*Ciao, bella*”) welcome guests of any faith for weekend retreats or to simply tour the medieval cloister, with its sprawling sanctuaries, a brutalist 1964 chapel in concrete by architect Camillo Bianchi and the tranquil gardens. “People who aren’t believers come to us for an encounter with nature and silence,” says Brother Agostino, who receives us in his long brown robes.

Crossing the lagoon gleaming under the high sun, Palloni moors the boat in front of Berengo Studio, a glass furnace and workshop renowned for its collaborations with artists. Inside, a chandelier-like glass sculpture by Ai Weiwei hangs in a former oven room. Artisans of all ages are working in the studio to fire, inflate and twist a piece of zebra-striped glass into a form for UK sculptor Tony Cragg. The studio’s gallery, with exhibitions of art in glass, is a few steps away.

When Palloni pilots across the northern lagoon to Burano again, he docks by the outdoor tables of Gatto Nero, a family-run trattoria, where plates of eel, *baccalà* (creamed salted codfish) and soft-shell crab from the lagoon arrive on fluffy white polenta – all Venetian staples. “We *want* tourists here,” says Massimiliano Bovo, the Burano-born maître-d’ whose parents are the chefs and owners of the restaurant. “But only if the tourists are well-informed and willing to learn about our culture.” As a fisherman, Bovo spends much of his free time out on the water. “The real Venice is the lagoon and the outer islands that have retained the most character – the Venice that you encounter by boat,” he says wistfully, his own small vessel bobbing in a nearby canal. “That is the way Venice was meant to be seen.” — 

Address book

Stay

1. Venice Venice Hotel
Sestiere Cannaregio 5631, Centro Storico
venicevenice.com

Shop

2. Micheluzzi Glass
Ponte de le Maravegie, Dorsoduro 1071
micheluzziglass.com

Eat

3. Trattoria Altanella
Calle de le Erbe 268, Giudecca
4. Anice Stellato
Fondamenta de la Sensa, Cannaregio 3272
osterianicestellato.com
5. Locandina Cipriani
Piazza Santa Fosca 29, Torcello
locandacipriani.com
6. Trattoria Gatto Nero
Via Giudecca 88, Burano
gattoneri.com
7. Trattoria da Romano
Via San Martino Destra 221, Burano
daromano.it

Try

8. Associazione Remiera Vogaepara (Venetian rowing)
Via San Mauro 58, Burano
vogaepara.it
9. Francesco Palloni (boat services and tours)
francesco@lagunab.com

Drink

10. Vino Vero (natural wine bar)
Fondamenta Misericordia 2497, Cannaregio
vinovero.wine
11. Laguna nel Bicchiere (winemaking organisation)
Calle Monte San Michele, San Michele
lagunanelbicchiere.it

See

12. Squero Tramontin (artisan longboat makers)
Sestiere Dorsoduro 1542, Dorsoduro
tramontingondole.it
13. San Francesco del Deserto (monastery)
Isola di San Francesco del Deserto, Burano
sanfrancescodeldeserto.it
14. Berengo (glass studio and gallery)
Fondamenta dei Vetrai 109, Murano
fondazioneberengo.org
15. Punta Conterie (glass gallery, restaurant, and rooftop terrace bar)
Fondamenta Giustinian 130141, Murano
puntaconterie.com

1. Glass design by Elena and Margherita Micheluzzi
2. Image of Marcello Bon, the King of the Oar



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1. San Francesco del Deserto island
2. Brother Agostino welcomes guests to the island



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