

# JEWELS OF THE LAGOON



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Words by CATHRYN DRAKE

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WITH ITS CANALS LINED WITH SPLENDID CHURCHES AND PALACES, VENICE HAS ALWAYS FASCINATED VISITORS, BUT THE VENETIANS' BEST-KEPT SECRET IS THE DREAMY CHARM OF ITS LAGOON'S LESS-FREQUENTED ISLANDS



My love affair with Venice started one hot afternoon nearly two decades ago on a chance visit to the island of Torcello – said to be the medieval birthplace of the Venetian Republic. Legend has it that after Attila the Hun sacked the nearby Roman port of Altinum in 452 and the Lombards invaded again a century later, its populace sought refuge out on the islands of the lagoon. Torcello would in time become the busiest trading center in the Byzantine Empire until its eventual decline – due to the ravages of the Black Death, along with the rise of the swamp and outbreaks of malaria. Although it was summertime, I was a solitary visitor, and from atop the campanile of the Church of Santa Maria Assunta I could see the tenuous territories of the marshland floating like apparitions on the watery horizon.

Living in Venice the following year, I found it surprisingly easy to avoid the tourists, who by evening had retired to their rooms after wandering the maze of *calli* around San Marco and Rialto. We lived in Sant'Elena, the last stop before the Lido, where it was almost too quiet; the produce market, butcher, and dairy had closed for lack of business as the local population diminished. In the evenings we would meet friends for spritzes at Café Rosso, on Campo Santa Margherita, or dine at the raucous Paradiso Perduto on Fondamenta della Misericordia, our footsteps echoing off the palazzi in the narrow passageways, bereft of the daytime bustle and gurgle of passing boats. We would travel by boat to spots around the lagoon – grasp for the elusive *cappelunghe* (razor clams) among the ripples of the Bacan sandbar or dive off the rocks at the Murazzi, named after the sea-walls along the Lido, before dining on grilled fresh catch at Ristorante Da Nane, in the fishing village San Pietro in Volta.

Venice in its heyday was the capital of a vast mercantile empire, its great wealth proclaimed in fine palaces, churches and art commissioned by

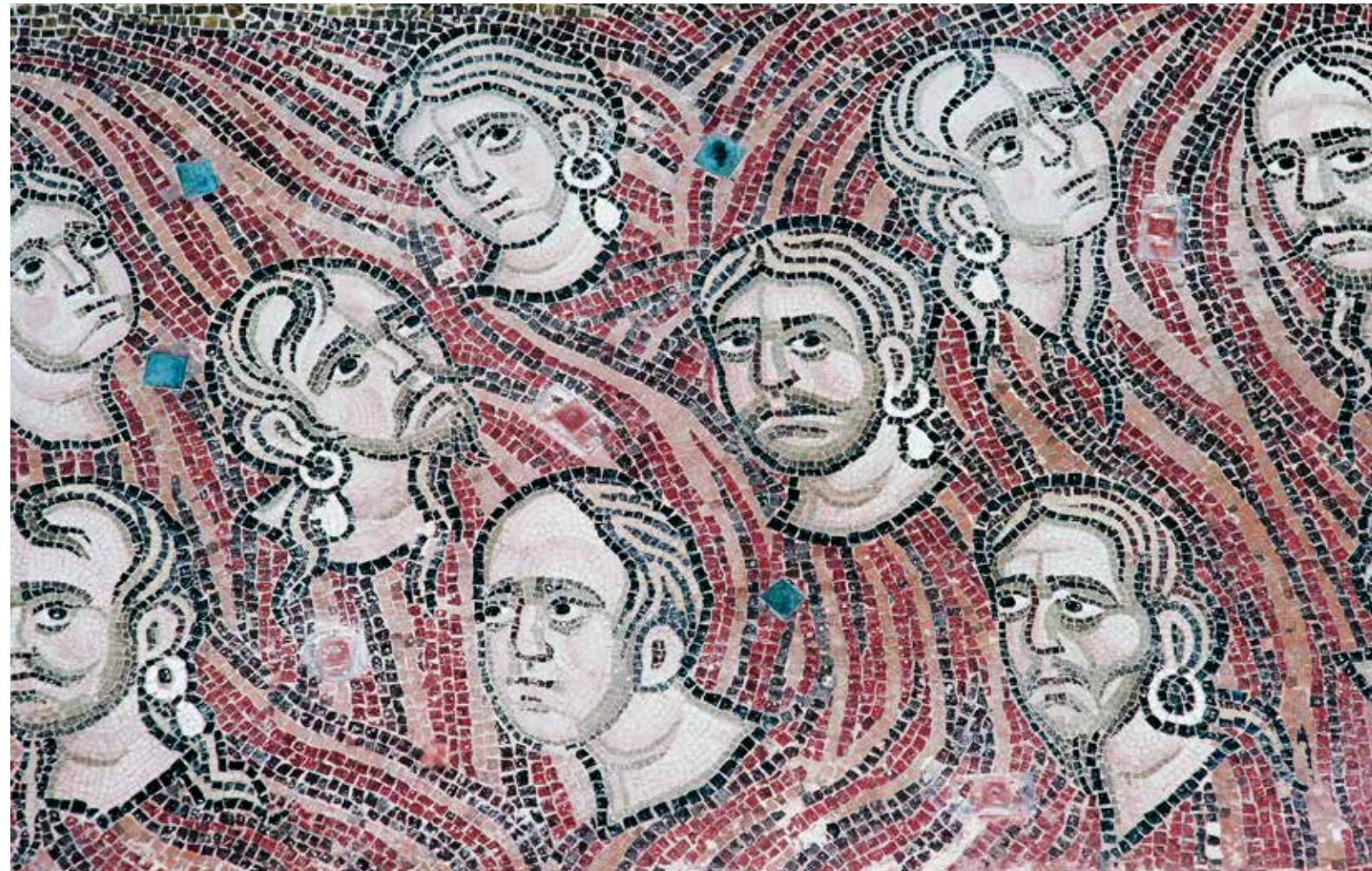
patrons like the Confraternity of San Rocco. But by the early 19th century it had declined to the point of neglect, a state found attractive mostly to artists and writers such as Lord Byron; or George Sand and Alfred de Musset, who conducted their passionate affair here, but found Venice a nightmare “with its Austrian military occupiers, its unbridled criminality and its ill-disguised venality.” De Musset fell ill, and Sand ran off with the doctor, naturally. Until a viaduct was constructed across the lagoon in 1846, the city was accessible only by sea and widely considered a decadent, cholera-inflicted open sewer. Yet by the time the first Cook’s Tour came to town, Venice was already being inundated with “armies of tourists.” Shortly afterwards, the Lido was developed and became a lively beach resort, described in *The Times* as a “parade-ground for the most daring bathing costumes which the taste of feminine visitors from Austria and Hungary could devise.”

The multitudes still come, and the lagoon is once again a place of exile and isolation, if only from the city of Venice itself. Seeking refuge from the hectic buzz of the Venice Biennale this spring, I returned to Torcello and arrived at the gate of Casa Museo Andrich. Paolo Andrich, who lives there and tends the legacy of his artist uncle Lucio, arrived on an old bike with his mastiff Ethos trotting alongside, and we all ambled to the water’s edge. I pointed toward the ethereal blue peaks of the Dolomites in the distance – beyond what was once Altinum, now Altino – and Andrich launched into a detailed geological history of the mountains and the lagoon, narrated in a beautiful singsong Italian as if recounting an oft-told children’s story. Elegant white egrets strutted here and there among thickets of cane in the shallows of the Palude della Rosa (rose marsh); meandering mudflats, called *barena*, were covered with Salicornia, a delicate succulent that turns fuchsia pink “at the first chill of September,” Andrich said.

Perhaps it is the sheer flatness of the lagoon perspective – a seemingly

#### Cultural treasures

Opening pages: reflection of brightly painted houses on the island of Mazzorbo; the campanile of St Mark’s in Venice. Below: 11th/12th-century mosaic of the Last Judgement, Basilica of St Mary of the Assumption, Torcello



Previous pages: Alamy; 4 Corners. Left: Getty Images. Opposite: Alamy

limitless space where sky converges with sea – that causes past to commingle with present as much as legend with reality in these parts. Locals talk as if long-ago events happened only yesterday – like Ernest Hemingway’s storied 1948 stay on Torcello, where he retreated from society to shoot fowl and, says Andrich, “drink bottles of Amarone while writing in his room every evening.” As Andrea di Robilant writes in his delightful new book *Autumn in Venice*, “Hemingway loved the rustic life on Torcello and the wide-open views.” The experience cured him of writer’s block, and the young woman he met during his sojourn, Adriana Ivancich, was the muse for *Across the River and into the Trees*, his first novel in more than a decade.

On that moody Monday afternoon, I dined with Matteo Bisol, whose family has revived a dormant vineyard on sleepy Mazzorbo, within eyeshot of Torcello and an unlikely setting for the Michelin-starred restaurant Venissa. A walk across the footbridge from the island of Burano – known for its brightly colored fishermen’s houses – brings you to the *tenuta* (estate), marked by a teetering medieval tower. Over a plate of shrimp risotto with zucchini and mint cream, he described how he and his father, Gianluca, had discovered the vines for the Dorona, an indigenous white grape favored by the doges and thought to be extinct. A local farmer, Gastone Vio of Sant’Erasmo, whose family had saved the vines after the disastrous flood of 1966, was secretly cultivating the grapes for his own consumption. In 2010 the Bisols harvested their first Dorona grapes; we sipped a velvety 2014 from a bottle wrapped in gold leaf.

A couple of days later we took out a *sampierota* skiff belonging to the American Nan McElroy, motoring perilously past oncoming speedboats in the narrow canals of Cannaregio before emerging onto the lagoon. You can hardly call yourself a Venetian if you don’t own a boat. There are 20 boat clubs in the city, and Venetian rowing, or *voga alla veneta*, is a popular

local sport (the non-profit organization Row Venice offers lessons). An avid rower, McElroy used to take us for night-time cruises around city canals in her *sciopon*. Designed for bird-hunting on the lagoon, the slim wooden boat would glide as silently as a serpent through the petroleum-black water, glistening in the lights of the palaces.

Our destination that day was Sant’Erasmo, where the prized purple *castraure* artichokes are cultivated in the saline soil, its farmland saved from the big flood by a slightly higher elevation. Surfing the wakes of waterborne crafts of every type, we navigated past San Michele, Murano, Le Vignole, and finally Lazzaretto Nuovo – where incoming ships were quarantined during the Plague and a museum displays fantastic relics such as pipes and talismans left behind – before disembarking at the Capannone dock, next to the vineyard Orto di Venezia. Owner Michel Thoulouze, a droll Frenchman who writes spy thrillers in his spare time, invited us for a drink on the estate, home of the only commercial wine produced entirely in the lagoon, its magnums aged underwater just beyond the seawall. “If you are in love,” the former TV producer told us, “the wine always tastes better.” Later, we lolled on the beachside terrace of Al Bacan, the island’s only restaurant, and enjoyed a fine seafood *frittura mista* with a side of fried artichokes.

The real lagoon dwellers are the farmers and fishermen, while the descendants of the commercial traders of yore live in the central island districts. The lagoon is sheltered from the Adriatic by the barrier islands Lido and Pellestrina, and the Cavallino peninsula to the north, separated by *porti* through which boats and tides enter and leave. The *laguna viva*, comprised of brackish water washed in by the tides, is the deepest part; the stagnant freshwater near the mainland shore is termed *laguna morta*. Navigable channels are defined by wooden posts tethered together, called *briccole*. Land and sea play hide-and-seek, and satellite images are unhelpful

#### Splendid isolation

Below: with its wide-open vistas, the island of Torcello seems a world away from the bustle of Venice’s *calli*; Overleaf: St Mary of the Assumption’s bell tower and, in the distance, the blue peaks of the Dolomites











Previous spread, left and above, right: 4 Corners



## Sea and sky

Left: a traditional Venetian "terrazzo" floor in a house on the island of Sant'Erasmus  
Above: "sky converges with sea" in Pellestrina, one of the lagoon's barrier islands

in discerning the difference. More than 50 islands dot the wetland, about half of them left only with the relics of a rich history and phantoms of the plague that wiped out a third of the population by the 17th century.

"The Venetians had a function for every island," Thoulouze had explained. "The lagoon provided naturally protected conditions for the growth of the Venetian Republic and its maritime empire." From the vaporetto stops at Fondamente Nove, the cemetery island of San Michele looks like a de Chirico painting: a turreted red-brick fortification crowned by dark cypresses levitating on the water. I first visited when the last monk was still alive to pay homage to Igor Stravinsky and Ezra Pound, both of whom are buried here. Of Isola della Certosa, Byzantine scholar Niccolò Zorzi had told me, "We call it our Central Park." I hopped off a friend's motorboat to take a stroll past the marina, where a Sicilian pizzeria had set up a wood-fired oven on a truck for the summer. After helping two ladies pick elderflowers, I wandered along a wide clearing, scores of wild rabbits scattering into the bushes as I passed overgrown ruins.

Near Sant'Elena and the Lido, La Certosa is an easy trip on the vaporetto from various points in the city. Fondamente Nove serves as the hub for water buses to the islands of the northern lagoon, taking anything from ten minutes to an hour, stopping first at San Michele and then Murano – the cluster of islands famous for its glassmaking industry – before heading either to Torcello and Burano or Le Vignole and Sant'Erasmus. For Lazzaretto Nuovo, you have to make a special-request stop on the way to Sant'Erasmus.

One clear day after the spring rain, I took Water Bus Vaporetto Line 14 to Punta Sabbioni, at the tip of Cavallino, and rented a bicycle from Rosa, who runs a kiosk opposite the dock. I cycled as far as the village of Lio Piccolo, a busy trading center in the Roman Empire that now has the air of a ghost town. The road passed right through a salt marsh animated with bird

life: spindly-legged black-winged stilts and stately swans basking among the grassy strips of mucky land – here today and gone, under the tides, tomorrow. From the last settlement, marked by the restaurant Al Notturmo, a narrow path navigates a strip of land that circles out into the northernmost reach of the lagoon to form a sort of basin. Large flocks of flamingos stood stock-still in the gentle current, the striking silence interrupted by sharp avian outbursts or the lone drone of a passing boat. The natural rhythms of the lagoon's ecosystem are nowhere more apparent than out here, and there is an ineffable feeling of being beyond the bounds of hours.

I hopped the same boat to the Lido and then the number 11 bus to Pellestrina, which runs the length of the island and then boards a ferry across to the second barrier island. As the evening sun warmed the brilliant colors of the portside facades, I dined on polenta with *schie* (small lagoon prawns) followed by spaghetti with *bottarga* at the celebrated Da Celeste. In the serene light of sunset, Venice looked like a distant mirage, its shadowy bell towers emerging from the horizon. It is an evening I will never forget.

Venice's allure lies largely in its torpid aura of timelessness, tinged with a drop of *tristezza*, captured compellingly in films like *Don't Look Now* and *Death in Venice*. Nature rules here and Venetians live according to the vagaries of the elements, while buildings molder from moisture and land sinks as the sea rises, lending a sensation of time running out, of the ephemerality of existence. When the Adriatic finally engulfs the florid palaces of the city, it will signal a new era for humankind. "Water equals time and provides beauty with its double," poet Joseph Brodsky wrote in *Watermark*, his ode to Venice. "Because we go and beauty stays. Because we are headed for the future, while beauty is the eternal present."

Your Address: The St. Regis Venice