

Venice

20-23 May 2024

Venice, Italy

Water.

Water everywhere.



Main drag

The Grand Canal, Venice's main "street," is full of boats and people waiting to ride them.

Ponte Rialto

The Rialto Bridge behind Emily is the oldest of four over the Grand Canal and was built in 1591. It's the vantage point from where the cover shot was made, but on the other side.



Water. Water everywhere.

SOURCES: Underlined words link to them

For most of its history, Venice has been an outward-facing international city always looking over the horizon through lenses of commerce and curiosity for its wealth and reason for being. International trade in the Middle Ages has become international tourism today, but it's all business.

Marco Polo, the Venetian who took a 27-year-long trip to China and back bridging a vast civilizational gap between Europe and Asia — not the San Marco of the Bible and Venice's basilica — seems the real patron saint of Venice's spirit. Yet I don't believe I thought about him until we got back home.

The ancestors of today's Venetians fled wars between Rome's collapsing empire and invaders from the north to find safety on marshy lagoon islands where they could fish and build houses on wooden pilings driven into the sea bottom. They elected their own Doges (Dukes), built ships and ports to sail them from, and ingratiated themselves with more powerful allies like the Byzantine Empire without surrendering their political autonomy.

In return for helping Byzantine emperors in the 8th and 9th Centuries, Venice was given special trading rights in the Adriatic basin. The navy it built in the 12th Century to protect its merchant ships from pirates made the eastern Mediterranean safe for trade to, and ultimately through, Constantinople as far as China, thanks to Marco Polo. In 1204, Venice became a shrewd and potent-enough power in its own right to conquer Constantinople by redirecting the fourth of the Catholic Church's crusades intended to remove Muslim control of Jerusalem to attack its one-time protector.

The success of Venice's navy and merchant ship fleets was due to how it utilized its human resources and manufacturing ingenuity. Its ships were manned by paid free men, not slaves or mercenaries. And they were built in the Venetian Arsenal, now a naval base, which came to employ 16,000 people by the 1500s who could produce one ship per day at a time when shipyards elsewhere in Europe took months to build a single vessel.

The secret, shielded behind the walls of the Arsenal, which occupied 20% of the city's land, was the use of mass production techniques to produce standardized hulls, rigging and other elements of a military or merchant ship. Centuries before the Industrial Revolution or Henry Ford, the Arsenal was using production lines. Today, Fincantieri, based in nearby Trieste, builds 90% of the cruise ships produced in Italy, and Italy builds 36% of all cruise ships in the world, according to the 38-member-country Organization for Economic Co-Operation and Development.

When you look at how this once-tiny settlement managed to insert and assert itself in world affairs through technology and trading acumen, you've got to think that one day Venice should be able to figure out how to stay high and dry. Because the oceans Venetians once mastered with their navy and merchant marine are now slowly swallowing the place.

In 1960, for the first time in seven centuries of counting, Venice's mainland population grew larger than that of the canal-laced islands visitors think of as the real city. Today's 50,000 island residents are 72% fewer than lived there in 1951, Venice's historical high-water population mark.

But we got to experience its food and hospitality while you can still walk and boat around.

Fresh from the furnace

A horse just shaped from a blob of molten glass by a glassblower cools at a factory in Murano, another of the islands in Venice's coastal lagoon.





God's chosen

After spending several days in Venetian rooms like this one in the Doge's palace, where images of the Doge and his mates share the ceiling with saints and angels, the lesson for me was not about art itself. It was about how important it was to the people who paid for it — in this case, Venice's rulers — to associate themselves with the divine authority they claimed gave them power to rule and profit from that privilege.

Piazza, basilica and Campanile

San Marco (St Mark) is Venice's patron saint. This plaza and the five-domed church at the far end are named for him and are about 1,200 years old. The campanile (bell tower) has existed in various forms since the 9th Century; this version dates to 1912. All of them were used as military lookout positions to spot a possible invasion.



Basilica interior

The art here is Byzantine, reflecting both the influence of Eastern Christianity centered in Constantinople (Istanbul) and the Republic of Venice's political and financial independence from Rome.





Gondola jam on Rio de Vin

The red-carpeted dock on the left is the Hotel Danieli, where a room starts at about €1,100 a night. We spent some free quality time in the lobby waiting for a tour guide.

Notes on photos

SOURCES: Underlined words link to them.

MAIN DRAG and PONTE RIALTO — The Grand Canal slices through the city of Venice like a backward “S,” a 2.4-mile / 3.8-kilometer waterway that divides the main city and serves as its main street. The first bridge over the canal was at this location, built in 1173, and was a pontoon bridge. Over the centuries it was replaced several times, first by wooden bridges and finally by the stone Ponte Rialto that stands today, which was opened in 1591. The idea to build rows of shops along the sides of the bridge, which can also be seen on other Italian bridges such as the Ponte Vecchio over the River Arno in Florence, was first used on one of the earlier wooden bridges at this location. Rents paid by the shops went into the Venetian treasury to help cover maintenance costs on the wooden structures. Two of the wooden bridges collapsed, one in 1444 from the weight of crowds who came to see the wedding procession of a regional nobleman and the other in 1524.

FRESH FROM THE FURNACE — The main city of Venice covers two adjacent islands in the Venetian Lagoon divided by the Grand Canal, but the lagoon contains 126 islands that are part of the metropolitan city. A tight cluster of seven islands just north of the main city is called Murano, which is famous for its glassmaking. The manufacture of glass had been an important part of early Venice’s economy, but all glassmaking in the lagoon was moved to Murano in 1291 by legal decree because of the fire danger that the furnaces posed to the main city and especially the Venetian Arsenal. To protect Venice’s monopoly on glass manufacturing, early glassmakers were allowed to own swords to protect their secrets — weapons most ordinary people could not legally possess — but they were also forbidden to leave the Venetian Republic. It took a glassmaker less than two minutes to pull this horse into shape with steel tongs from a fiery blob of molten glass, something he and his fellow artisans do dozens of times each day for tourists before the visitors are led into showrooms to see and buy hundreds of different crafted glass pieces from jewelry to huge chandeliers.

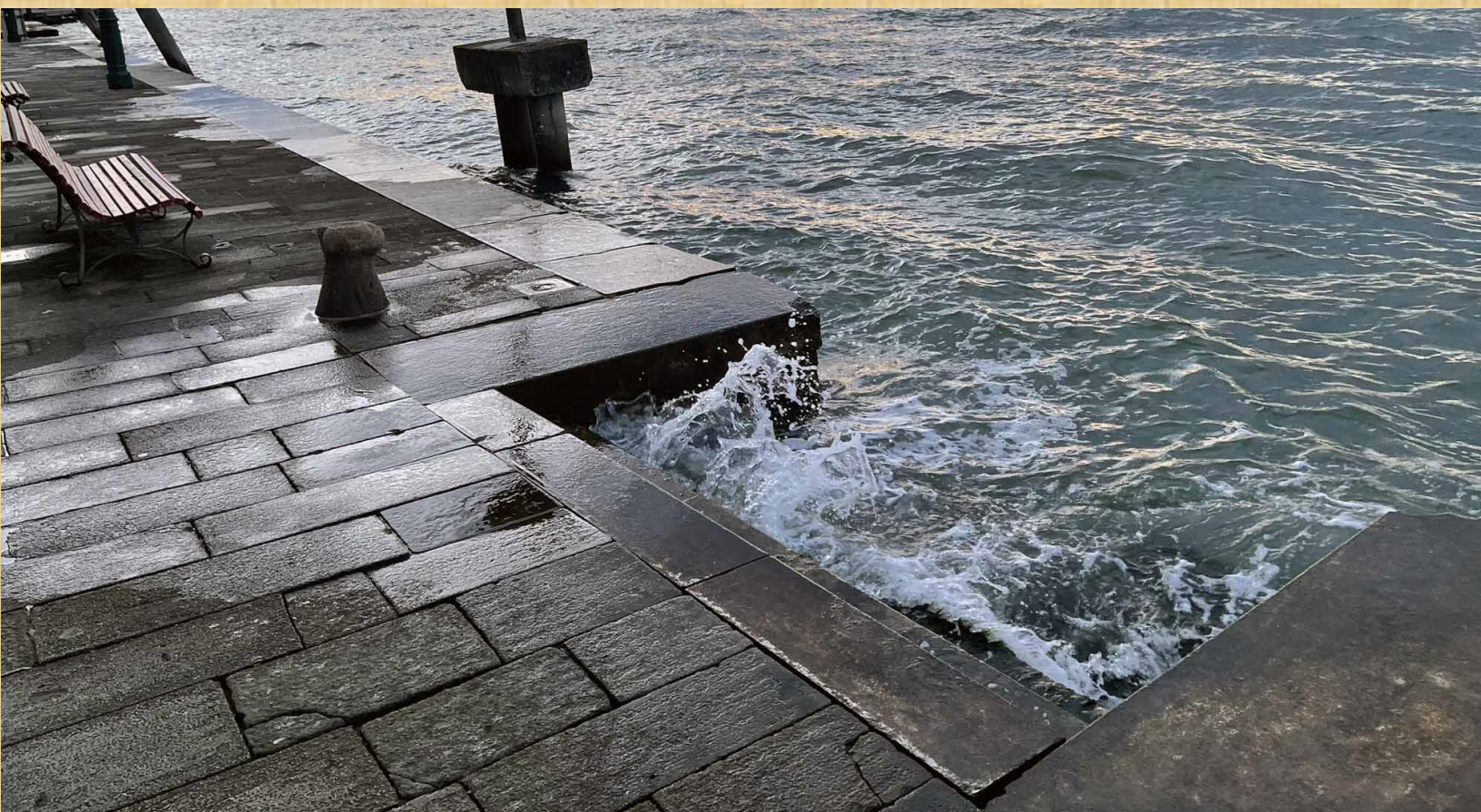
GOD’S CHOSEN — Today, the Palazzo Ducale (Doge’s Palace) is a massive public museum of the history and development of the Venetian Republic owned by the Italian government and operated by the city of Venice. But it began as a much smaller building in 1340, which replaced a building believed to have originally been built in the 800s, though nothing remains of it. Eventually the palace came to house public offices, courtrooms, prisons, the Doge’s apartments, stables, armories and other facilities. This room, largest in the palace, is the Chamber of the Great Council, which is more than 50 yards / meters long. The ceiling is wood, covered with gold and canvasses. The Great Council was composed of all male members of Venice’s noble families 25 or older, regardless of wealth or merit — about 1,200 to 2,000 people in all — which was as far down into the ranks of between 100,000 and 150,000 Venetians that participation in government was allowed to go. Nevertheless, in the Middle Ages, this was considered representative enough for Venice to call itself a republic. The council was the beginning stage of the lengthy and complex electoral process that chose the

new Doge. This 17th Century painting by Joseph Heintz the Younger shows what the Council's every-Sunday-afternoon meetings looked like.

PIAZZA, BASILICA AND CAMPANILE and INSIDE THE BASILICA — St Mark's Basilica was originally built as the private chapel of the Doge, and it's attached to the Doge's Palace. The palace is mostly hidden behind the Campanile. In 1063, when construction on the basilica began, Venice was allied with the Byzantine Empire and Constantinople, its capital, meaning the architecture and art do not follow the classical style of Rome but the Byzantine style characterized by symbolism over classical realism. Napoleon's defeat of the Venetians in 1797, which ended the city's days as a republic, also ended St Mark's days as a private chapel. Bells in the Campanile were rung in a pattern during the day so Venetians could tell the time and where they were in their workday. They were also rung to announce government meetings and public executions.

GONDOLA JAM ON RIO DE VIN — The gondola is really the symbol of modern tourist Venice and is, because of its narrow hull and maneuverability, the only boat able to navigate the narrowest of canals. They are no longer the means of mass public transport they once were but a means of stepping back into an older more romantic age for tourists. There were an estimated 10,000 gondolas plying Venice's canals in the 1500s; today there are about 400. Here's a video about how they're built. A new one runs about €40,000 / \$43,000.

ON THE "STREET" WHERE WE LIVED — The restaurants here are at the Giudecca Palanca dock where we caught vaporettos to and from Venice proper. You can see evidence that the tide is rising to walkway level on this evening from the puddles in the distance and the waiter who is clearing an empty table. We were just arriving for dinner at the end of our last full day in Venice and because of the rising water (see below) ate what was one of the few meals we had indoors.





On the "street" where we lived

Sunset diners enjoy their dishes on our last night in Venice and on this trip. Our apartment was on this island of Giudecca across the Giudecca Canal from Venice proper.