



Three Days on the Venetian Lagoon

By Margarita Gokun Silver

Walk the main thoroughfares of Venice's San Marco district, visit the Rialto or make your way across the Accademia Bridge to Dorsoduro and tourists are everywhere. Cheap trinket shops, with wares mostly made nowhere near Venice, line the streets; restaurants serve what Venetians call "the tourist fare"; and the signs of the real **Venice** — the one that emerged from the surrounding 212-square-mile lagoon and that for centuries prospered in connection to it — are completely missing.

"The lagoon that was the origin of the city is completely detached now," says Mauro Stoppa, an agronomist turned lagoon guide and accomplished chef. Born and raised in the environs of the lagoon, Stoppa spent several decades working internationally in agriculture before realizing he wanted to return. He purchased a *bragozzo*, a traditional Venetian sailing ship, restored it, added a kitchen and began taking groups of people around his beloved lagoon.

In April I joined him for a three-day excursion on *Eolo*, named after Aeolus, the god of winds in Greek mythology. My experience was the opposite of most people's when they visit Venice. Whereas on the streets and canals of the city there is the constant bustle of people, boats and gondolas, the lagoon itself offers a quieter, more meditative experience. "There is no hurry," Stoppa told me. "You decide where you want to go."

When Stoppa plans his trips, he accounts for the season, the conditions on the lagoon and the preferences of his guests. He also arranges overnight stays in boutique hotels along the route, dinners at award-winning restaurants or with a local family and tours of the islands themselves.

While guides show his guests around the islands where *Eolo* docks, Stoppa makes lunch. Cruising with *Eolo* isn't just about sightseeing and exploring the area. It's also about food. Stoppa sources more than 90% of his ingredients from around the lagoon and cooks everything himself. All of his dishes are seasonal, "according to

how it was in the past,” he told me.

During our three-day tour, he prepared more than a dozen recipes. His lunches were multicourse leisurely affairs accompanied by a selection of local wines and served on white tablecloth. We feasted on white and green asparagus; fried sardines dusted with thyme, tarragon, parsley and garlic; risotto with a local herb and wild hops; baked sea bass with samphire (sea bean); roasted purple baby artichokes; cuttlefish with peas; and *caparossoli*, the native lagoon clams that are so rare and prized they're available only through a network of local fishermen.

Torcello

Vineyards on Torcello in the Venetian Lagoon in Italy - Allison Zurfluh One of the regular stops — and a definite must — is Torcello, an island at the northern end of the lagoon. Considered by many the cradle of the Venetian Republic, Torcello was founded about 1,500 years ago. In its heyday, around the 10th century, it boasted a population of close to 20,000 people. But malaria and environmental disasters led to its depopulation, and eventually its grand palazzos and monasteries were looted for marble and stone by Venetians wanting to erect their own buildings. Only the doge's order in 1429 that condemned the practice prevented the island from complete ruin. Still, the pillaging had its effect. Today, only a dozen or so people live on Torcello full time and only two churches remain. Both are worth a visit, but the Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta is an absolute gem. Dating to the seventh century and built in the Venetian-Byzantine style, it houses stunning 11th- to 13th-century mosaics and has a bell tower that provides sweeping vistas of the lagoon and the surrounding islands. We climbed the tower via a series of easy ramps and took in the view — not only of the lagoon but also of Stoppa, down below on *Eolo*, decorating our lunch table with freshly cut tulips.

Burano and Mazzorbo

In Burano and Mazzorbo, two islands connected by a long wooden bridge, Silvia Zanella, the owner of **Discover Burano**, showed us around. Burano is well-known for its multicolored houses. Locals joke that the bright colors were to help the fishermen find their homes after a night of drinking, but Zanella told us these colors have a more practical purpose: By painting your house a different color from your neighbors', you knew exactly where your home ended and theirs began.

Burano is also famous for its lace making, which has been the island's staple industry since the 16th century. Today, even though most lace sold on the island is machine-made, you can still sometimes catch sight of a few Burano women sitting outside their houses, chatting and making needle lace. If you are interested in this centuries-old tradition, visit the **Museo del Merletto**, set in a gothic palace and showcasing designs from the 16th to the 20th centuries.

Just over the bridge, on Mazzorbo, the Church of St. Catherine acts as a repository for many works of art from nearby islands that lost their monasteries and churches. The island is also home to several famous pieces by the renowned 20th-century sculptor Remigio Barbato.

After a day of sightseeing, we had dinner at **Venissa**, a property that includes a Michelin-starred restaurant, a minimalist five-room guesthouse and a walled vineyard that was established to resurrect Dorona di Venezia, the indigenous Venetian grape.

San Lazzaro degli Armeni

While the history of the Venetian lagoon is full of stories of abandoned monasteries, a few survive and are well worth a visit. Among them is the Mekhitarist Monastery on San Lazzaro degli Armeni, a small island next to the Lido. It was founded in the early 1700s after the pope asked Venice to give persecuted Armenian monks a place of refuge after fleeing Constantinople. The tiny island became the center of all

Armenian culture. It established a polyglot printing press and publishing house and became so prolific during the 18th and 19th centuries that it turned Venice into the “world capital of the Armenian book.” It is now home to approximately 170,000 publications, including the first Armenian dictionary, and 4,500 manuscripts. On our tour of the monastery we saw the old printing presses; the Lord Byron room, where the English poet spent time studying Armenian; and a modern climate-controlled circular library where the most precious ancient manuscripts are held. (Tours are given in Armenian, Italian and English.)

Sant’Erasmus

For centuries the Venetian Republic thrived on cooperation among the islands of the lagoon. Burano made lace and supplied seafood, Murano traded glass, and Sant’Erasmus grew fruits and vegetables. Still known as the lagoon’s agricultural island, Sant’Erasmus is famous for its purple artichokes and, more recently, the **Orto di Venezia** winery, which ages some of its bottles in the waters of the lagoon. The owner, Michel Thoulouze, initially came to the island “for the view,” but he stayed to make wine. Today, only 10 years after its first vintage, Orto di Venezia ships wine to some of the best restaurants in the world. “Chefs want wine with personality,” Thoulouze told us during our tour of the winery. “Because our wine has a taste of the terroir — it has personality.”

The Other Side of Venice

Visiting the various places of the lagoon aboard *Eolo* is about much more than just staying away from the tourist hordes. It’s about spotting herons, swans, flamingos and other species native to the ecosystem; it’s about connecting with the people whose livelihoods depend on the lagoon and experiencing a side of Venice visitors normally never would: like having dinner in a private *bilancia*, a traditional

fisherman's hut on stilts, with a home-cooked catch of the day prepared by the owners themselves.

Ultimately, Stoppa's goal is to show his guests how the lagoon operates and to support those who want to preserve it. "People have no idea of this place; they are only thinking of Venice, but the lagoon is another world," says Stoppa. "It's a pleasure to show it to people. It's a place I'm proud of."

Stoppa's typical all-inclusive tour lasts three days and costs \$2,500; he also offers shorter excursions. Learn more at [Cruising Venice](#).

