

Understand Venice & the Veneto

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A controversial new mayor, unsustainable tourist numbers and a shrinking population – the lagoon city is sailing through some challenging waters.

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After controlling the Mediterranean for 500 years as a maritime power, Venice changed tack and conquered the world with charm.

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From glittering Byzantine mosaics to postmodern palaces, the city built on water astonishes at every turn of the gondola.

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Discover how this tiny city earned an outsized international reputation for colour, sensation and subversion.

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With rare wildlife and a unique aquaculture, Venice's lagoon inspires international admiration – and local conservation efforts.

Venice Today

It seems that everyone wants a piece of Venice, from selfie-stick-wielding tourists and foreign entrepreneurs to self-interested politicians and the rising Adriatic Sea. As La Serenissima sails further into the 21st century, new (and revisited) challenges are stirring up some rather choppy seas. How does a city reconcile its magnetism with its fragility, its individuality with an increasingly homogenised, globalised world?

Best on Film

Casino Royale (2006) James Bond hits the Grand Canal.

Pane e Tulipani (Bread and Tulips; 2000) An AWOL housewife starts life anew in Venice.

Casanova (1976) Fellini's take on Venice's famous seducer with Donald Sutherland.

Don't Look Now (1973) A couple's demons follow them to Venice in Nicolas Roeg's taut thriller.

Death in Venice (1971) Luchino Visconti takes on Thomas Mann's story of an infatuation and a deadly outbreak of disease.

Best in Print

Stabat Mater (Tiziano Scarpa; 2009) Winner of Italy's top literary prize; based on Antonio Vivaldi's orphan-girl orchestra.

Shakespeare in Venice (Alberto Toso Fei and Shaal Bassi; 2007) Local legends intertwined with Shakespearean dramas.

Watermark (Joseph Brodsky; 1992) The Nobel Laureate's 17-year fascination with Venice spills onto every page.

Venice, an Interior (Javier Marías; 1988) A tale of how history and imagination have shaped Venice.

#Venexodus

Tempers are fraying in La Serenissima as the rising tide of tourism – 25 million per annum – threatens to overwhelm the city. Of the 54,976 residents who remain in the historic centre (down from 102,000 in 1976), life in the world's most beautiful city is woeful, featuring low-wage employment, lack of affordable housing, neglected civic infrastructure, political disenfranchisement and a declining quality of life.

Top of the list of grievances is the lack of affordable housing, which is forcing young Venetians out of their island home and over to mainland Mestre from where 40,000 of them currently commute. The liberalisation of the rental sector in 2013 and the growth of home-rental websites mean fewer and fewer apartments are available to rent. After all, when tourists will pay €1000 a week to rent an apartment, renting to locals for a quarter of the price is hardly an enticing prospect.

Soaring real-estate prices have also precipitated the closure of essential businesses, from bakeries to hardware stores. Most of these are replaced by fast-food outlets and souvenir shops selling cheap, foreign-made trinkets. More worryingly, schools and libraries are underfunded; fish stalls at the Pescaria are disappearing due to lack of customers; valuable public properties (such as islands, parks and palaces) are sold off to cover city debts; and even the maternity ward at the Ospedale Civile is threatened with closure.

These challenges are propelling an increasing number of grassroots organisations – including Venessia (venessia.com), Generazione90 (facebook.com/generazione90), Venezia Cambia (veneziacambia.org) and We Are Here Venice (weareherevenice.org) – to raise public awareness and lobby politicians to take action. Their chief demands: immediate measures to tackle the housing crisis; a complete ban of cruise ships