

# Understand Venice & the Veneto

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Venice's population may be shrinking, but the lagoon city's spirits and talents remain unsinkable.

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

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

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With rare wildlife and a seafood bounty, Venice's lagoon inspires international admiration – and local conservation.

# Venice Today

**Look around: all those splendid palaces, paintings and churches were created by a handful of Venetians. In the city's thousand-year history, only about three million Venetians can claim grandparents from Venice. Despite its decadent reputation, it's not just a city of the idle rich. Most Venetians work in services, tourism and the arts, and live in flats – 1000 Venetian palaces are now hotels and B&Bs. Resting on past glories would be easy, and topping them seems impossible, but as usual, Venetians are opting for the impossible.**

## Best on Film

### **Pane e Tulipani (Bread & Tulips)**

(2000) An AWOL housewife starts life anew in Venice.

**Casanova** (1976) Donald Sutherland's sly take on Venice's seducer tops winsome Heath Ledger's.

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

**Casino Royale** (2006) James Bond hits the Grand Canal (don't worry, that palace survived).

## Best in Print

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

**Invisible Cities** (1972) Italo Calvino imagines Marco Polo recounting his travels to Kublai Khan – yet every city he describes is Venice.

**The Passion** (1987) In Jeanette Winterson's fable, Napoleon's cook pursues a Venetian con artist.

**Shakespeare in Venice** (2007) Venetian historian Alberto Toso Fei unravels local legends intertwined with Shakespearean dramas.

## Changing Demographics

With 60,000 official residents outnumbered by visitors on any given day, Venetians sometimes seem like a rarity in their own city. The population has halved in size since 1848, and a quarter of the city's population is retired. But there are 2000 children still playing tag in Venice's *campi* (squares) and local universities attract 23,000 students, keeping the city young and full of ideas. If you don't always encounter locals on the main thoroughfares, that's because Venetians prefer the city's 3000 backstreets. Join them, and you'll discover a whole other city backstage, keeping Venice's mainstage production running, and dreaming up its next act.

## Living by its Wits

Since the fall of its shipping empire, Venice has primarily lived by its wits. The city's extraordinary support for opera, orphan orchestras and satirical theatre kept Monteverdi, Vivaldi and Goldoni gainfully employed, and helped establish Venice as Europe's entertainment capital. Even in the dark days of the plague, Venetian artists Titian and Tintoretto filled the city with light and colour. Venice's Biennale and film festival kept inspiration coming to the city, and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection helped raise the city's spirits and expand its outlook after WWII.

Today Venice's traditions are upheld by civic institutions such as La Fenice, Goldoni Theatre, the Biennale and a dozen museums. Yet for local talent that has kept these institutions so vibrant, staying in Venice isn't easy. Housing is among Europe's most costly; many Venetian musicians now drag instruments back and forth to mainland Mestre. With Italy's ongoing recession straining resources for arts programming, public and private arts gigs are tough to find. Mose barriers are intended to prevent flooding in Venice (see p247),