

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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Discover how this tiny city earned an oversized international reputation for colour, sensation and scandal.

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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 dreamed up by a handful of Venetians. In the city's 1000-year history, there have only been about three million Venetians who could claim grandparents from Venice. Luckily, Venice attracted global talents and international admirers. 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) Fellini's take on Venice's seducer with Donald Sutherland tops Lasse Halstrom's with Heath Ledger.

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.

Stabat Mater (2009) Tiziano Scarpa won Italy's top literary prize for this tale based on the true story of Antonio Vivaldi's orphan-girl orchestra.

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

Changing Demographics

With 59,000 official residents outnumbered by visitors most days, Venetians may seem as rare as unicorns in their own city. The population has halved since 1848, and a quarter of the city's population is retired. But local universities attract over 26,000 students, keeping the city young and full of ideas.

Living by Its Wits

Since the fall of its shipping empire, Venice has lived by its wits. The city's extraordinary support for opera, orphan orchestras and theatre kept Monteverdi, Vivaldi and Goldoni gainfully employed, and established 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 keep inspiration coming to the city, and the Peggy Guggenheim Collection helped raise the city's spirits and broaden its horizons after WWII.

Today Venice's arts traditions are upheld by civic institutions such as La Fenice, Goldoni Theatre, the Biennale and a dozen world-class museums. Yet with Italy's ongoing recession straining resources, public and private arts gigs are tough to find. Mose barriers are intended to prevent flooding, but with billions of euros directed towards its establishment by 2014, it has drained funds that might have supported other programs essential to city life – including the arts.

This is where you enter the picture. Venice's admirers have been the heroes of its story many times, not only funding vital restorations after the devastating flood of 1966, but also filling its concert halls and galleries, keeping its signature arts and crafts traditions alive, and providing a steady stream of outside inspiration. So when Venetians thank you for visiting, they mean it.