

**Photographs by
Federico Ciamei**

*The Campanile
di San Marco and the
Doge's Palace, as seen
from the Grand Canal.*

Italy's wondrous floating kingdom is a city of paradox—both sustained and threatened by tourism, reliant on and imperiled by the surrounding sea. On a languid winter trip, **Kevin West** rediscovers the charms and contradictions of...

Venice

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IS LOOKS WERE cinematic, as if he'd walked out of a Fellini film, and he greeted me at Venice's Marco Polo Airport with an aria of lament. How much Venice had suffered! An

impossible situation! For years, he said, mass tourism had transformed the city, driving away native Venetians like himself. And, now, the opposite disaster—nobody comes!

First, the *acqua alta* of November 12, 2019, the worst flood in half a century, sent tourists packing. Now, a new virus had emerged in Wuhan—this was mid-February, in the final innocent days before the pandemic hit Italy—and Chinese visitors would not come to Carnival. For this city, synonymous with imperiled beauty, the bad news felt relentless.

This man, with his chestnut mane and Cortina tan, was my taxi driver, and as we sped along the causeway to the city, he explained that in his lifetime, he had witnessed residential neighborhoods hollowed out by short-term rentals. He had seen bakeries and vegetable stalls replaced by shops selling made-in-China trinkets. And every year, the *acqua alta* gets worse. Even the lagoon had gone crazy. He pointed to fishermen's nets, taut as clotheslines in the silver water, set out for *moeche*, or soft-shell crabs—a spring delicacy that had begun arriving months early, another portent of climate change.

"This is the situation now," the driver said. "The one I see is not the Venice I know." His English was limited, but he was fluent in the melodic shadings of speech, the coloratura of Venetian pride. "What is becoming?" he asked. "It is the big question point."

VENICE—A MAGNIFICENT CITY, even by Italian standards, with citizens more dashing, more irreformably *Italian*, than the Genoese, the Florentines, and the descendants of other Renaissance city-states that once battled against the Most Serene Republic and now align with it, if barely, under the tricolor flag.

That's how I remembered it, at any rate. I had been to Venice six or eight times before this trip, which was planned well in advance of the coronavirus pandemic and completed as northern Italy went into lockdown. But I hadn't been back since the early 2000s, when I lived in Paris and would find any excuse to go to Italy on assignment.

The first time I saw Venice, I was met at the airport by art restorer Toto Bergamo-Rossi, who welcomed me from the wheel of his elegant wooden speedboat, its varnished hull as shapely as a viola da gamba's back. We skittered across the lagoon on glittering waves, trailed by salt spray. As the medieval city floated into view, it seemed as fantastical to me as if a coral reef had risen from the deep. We glided through a maze of canals that smelled of seaweed, between palaces etched by water and sun; I could nearly touch the barnacle-encrusted stones.

Anything other than a sea-level approach to the city is a letdown, as I realized on this latest visit when my four-wheeled taxi pulled up to Piazzale Roma, Venice's drab terrestrial entrance. I probably could have walked the last half-mile to Il Palazzo Experimental, my waterside hotel in the Dorsoduro neighborhood, but a *motoscafo*, or water taxi, waited to carry me the final stretch.

Ten minutes later, I stood on the Fondamenta delle Zattere calling back to the driver, "Dov'è?" He pointed to a pink-brick palazzo and floated away. Its Gothic doorframes and ropework-trimmed loggia, all carved from white Istrian stone, seemed to quiver against the façade—the effect of sunlight bouncing off the Giudecca Canal.

The itinerary for my trip was modest: to walk around, regain a sense of direction, and try to disprove the traveler's adage that Venice lacks good food. It's not that I had no plans whatsoever. I intended to drop in here and there while allowing time for idleness. Above all, I planned to avoid the tourist mainstream and look instead for eddies of calm—living in Venice for a week as if I didn't have to leave. How could I have expected the twist ending?

IL PALAZZO EXPERIMENTAL is the architectural equivalent of new wine in an old bottle. The centuries-old palace reopened last year after a renovation by the trendy Experimental Group, which operates outposts in London

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The central gallery of Palazzo Grimani, in Venice's Castello neighborhood.

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Clockwise from top left: Laundry drying in Cannaregio; Gianni Basso Stampatore, a letterpress shop; fritto misto at Venice, in the Rialto fish market; a couple in Dorsoduro.



and Paris, among other places. The interior décor was as richly colored as a Venetian old master painting. I counted three shades of blue plaster in my room, as well as bottle-green worsted-wool curtains, a Prussian-blue carpet trimmed with brass inlay, and terrazzo floors the saline gray of oyster shells. The bathroom was yellow; the dining room downstairs, conch pink. The design also made jaunty reference to Gio Ponti, Memphis Group furniture, and the striped shirts of the city's *gondolieri*. It was a lot to take in, but then, so is Venice. It's a city where form has never followed function, unless you consider conspicuous display a function.

Out front on the Fondamenta delle Zattere, I joined pedestrians, joggers, and dog walkers, all of us drawn by

the same sun that coaxed *moeche* into the fishermen's nets. As I walked, I noticed a puzzling detail. Every so often, a set of stone steps descended from the quay. The topmost would be clean and wet from the splashing waves, the next slippery green with algae, the rest either encrusted with sea life, like a tidal pool, or completely hidden by oozy seaweed that swayed in the current like poor Ophelia's hair. The submarine staircases were presumably not built for water nymphs to ascend to the upper realm but for Renaissance-era Venetians to step down into a waiting boat. Then it occurred to me: over hundreds of years, the lagoon had risen and the land subsided. Each drowned step marked the advance toward disaster, as if Atlantis were sinking before history's eyes.

The wind off the lagoon had a rich planktonic smell, like mudflats at dawn. As I looked across the canal toward Giudecca Island, my eye settled on the white marble façade of Il Redentore, a compact masterpiece by quintessential Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio. The open-air dining terrace at Ristorante Lineadombra, on a wharf opposite the church, provided an ideal viewing platform. The menu skewed modern—a single shrimp in a thimbleful of avocado soup was the amuse-bouche—and the wine list included trendy natural offerings. Lunch was a delicious, if very expensive, refutation of Venice's bad rap for food.

But in Dorsoduro, the real feast is for the eyes. On previous visits I'd checked off Venice's must-see museums and monuments. Now I could go back and lavish time on a single gallery, maybe a single painting, like thumbing through a favorite book of poems for the umpteenth time. At Gallerie dell'Accademia, a short walk from the hotel, I briefly reacquainted myself with Bellini's wall-sized Madonna swathed in celestial blue, then stared straight down at an inlaid marble floor that I had rushed over on earlier visits.

Revisiting the Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute, the iconic wedding cake of a church facing the Grand Canal, I noticed for the first time a doorway to the sacristy, essentially a walk-in closet for clerical garments. Following the narrow passageway, I emerged in front of a vision of glory, circa 1561: Tintoretto's *Wedding at Cana*. Art lovers jostle one another to see other Tintoretto masterpieces at the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, a crowded 15th-century confraternity building along the main tourist route through central Venice. Here, I had the sacristy to myself. I sat in admiration for a long time, until at last a chill began to seep up through the damp stone floor.

ON ANOTHER UNSEASONABLY bright morning, I loaded my bags into a *motoscafo* and enjoyed a spectacular commute to Palazzo Cristo, a four-suite hotel that opened two years ago. The taxi emerged from Dorsoduro's



▲ A gondolier dressed in the official uniform of the trade.

▶ A view from Il Palazzo Experimental, in Dorsoduro.

interior canals into the sparkle of the Grand Canal, where a parade atmosphere reigned and Venetian flags waved from palaces. ("How many Italian flags do you see in Venice?" asked an aristocratic Italian I spoke to, explaining that the Piedmontese "ruined things" with their push for nationhood.) Past Rialto Bridge, we slid into the maze again, emerging at Campo Santi Giovanni e Paolo, where the Renaissance façade of the Scuola Grande di San Marco encloses a modern-day hospital, emergency room and all.

Palazzo Cristo's co-owner, Anna Covre, a slight woman with a penchant for high fashion, met me at the entrance in a small courtyard off the main square. My suite upstairs sprawled. Covre and her husband, Frederic Tubau, designed the interiors using a traditional roster of luxurious Venetian materials: polished travertine with the creamy, dappled look of ripe cheese; smoke-veined Carrara marble; and hand-troweled plaster offset by paneled cabinetry. The style was thoroughly modern, however, without a Rococo flourish in sight. Covre explained that the contemporary interiors were called for because the building had gone to ruin during the preceding 50 years of neglect. "We like it when something





◀ From top: Amo, a trendy restaurant by the Rialto Bridge; Anna Covre and Frederic Tubau at their hotel, Palazzo Cristo.

▲ The Cannaregio Canal in San Marco, near the Palazzo Grimani.

is destroyed,” she said, with the barest hint of a smile. “As designers, we like to do something new.”

Covre and Tubau invited me for coffee at a nearby *pasticciera*. I asked about their decision to move from Paris. Covre put it down to “the slow life.” “You get used to it,” she explained. “No noise. People take time to do things. We’re living at a human scale. We’re living in a city that never evolved.” I suggested that Venice is not an artifact of the Enlightenment, like Haussmann’s rational

reordering of Paris. Venice, older than reason, was shaped by inspiration. The centuries have failed to scour away the antique poetry of daily life. “You can have a country house on an island,” Covre said. “That’s the life that tourists don’t see,” Tubau added. “But Venetians live this way. It’s a very easy life.”

A message I had seen scrawled along the Calle de la Vida read WITHOUT HOUSES FOR ALL, VENICE DIES! Nearly everyone I had spoken to hated short-term rentals. Unsurprisingly, Tubau and Covre had a different take. Tubau believed that Venetians left for the mainland not only because of real estate prices but also because people today want to live “a normal life—an American life,” which in his view boils down to driving your car to a big-box store for groceries. Corporations and government agencies joined the migration. So what does that mean for the economy?

Now guests come to experience the culture of the city, rather than arriving for a day or two to get a selfie in St. Mark’s Square.

There is no clear future—short-term rentals help keep the restaurants and businesses alive. “You can have two jobs in Venice: either work as an architect or in tourism,” Covre said, “and there can be only so many architects.”

EVERYWHERE I WENT I looked for evidence of November’s flood, when the water rose more than six feet. But unlike the violent shock of earthquakes or the roaring disaster of fire, *acqua alta* is a quiet and patient destroyer. My old friend Toto, now the director of Venetian Heritage, gave me a lesson in water damage when he took me to see the church of San Moisè.

“The water arrived here,” Toto said as we stepped inside, lightly chopping at the top of his thigh. The lagoon had left its mark in bleached wood, ruffled veneer, and a residue of salt that crystallized as it dried, prying apart a carved marble altar. “The salt will come up for months, for years, and provoke erosion,” he explained. “There is no stopping it.” *Acqua alta*, once merely a nuisance, has now become an existential threat. With climate change and rising sea levels, the floods have become frequent and intense, averaging 60 major events annually for the past five years.

That evening, Toto invited me to dinner at Da Fiore in San Polo, an elegant bastion of traditional fine dining. The waiter set down a basket of impossibly long grissini and recited the specials, one of which inadvertently recalled another disruptive effect of climate change that I’d already heard about. The dish was very particular, said the waiter, very Venetian, and available for only a short time—the soft-shell crabs known as *moeche*.

I WAS MEANT TO VISIT the island of San Giorgio Maggiore toward the end of my trip, but distant rumors of the coronavirus broke over the city with the tumult of clashing cymbals. COVID-19 had arrived, and the mayor did the unthinkable, canceling the final two days of Carnival. Every cultural institution snapped shut. Unsure of what to do with myself, I went to St. Mark’s Square to gauge the mood. The few other tourists who hadn’t already left also seemed to be looking for clues.

Restaurants were still open, so I followed an alley behind San Moisè to the Grand Canal, where the restaurant Ombra del Leone has a small terrace

squeezed on either side by a couple of the city’s toniest hotels. On this chilly day of uncertainty and fear, I was the only person sitting outside, but the cheerful waiter indulged me as if I were a descendant of the last doge. As I waited for lunch to arrive, I watched a line of boats tied at a nearby dock. Here was the true everyday life of Venetians: a delivery barge stacked with Amazon packages and an off-duty gondolier hunched over his phone, watching a soccer match.

There is no reading, to paraphrase Vladimir Nabokov; only rereading. Perhaps the same holds true for travel. The first time you read a book, or visit a place, you hurry ahead in eager anticipation. On the second or third or fourth encounter, you know how the story ends. You can peruse at leisure. You can sit for a while on an empty terrace and try to catch the gist of the Italian soccer announcer on the radio. You don’t have to start at the beginning or end at the end.

COVRE HAD TOLD ME about “the slow life” in Venice, and the concept continues to echo, six months after I made it home barely in advance of the global lockdown. Venice is both bedeviled by tourism and doomed without it. In that sense, Venice is a microcosm of all Italy, where hotels, restaurants, and shops rely on tourists to stay open, just as those same tourists threaten fragile local ways of life.

It is not yet clear which side of the paradox will prevail. Perhaps the pandemic will create an opportunity to reset and correct course. Slow travel, in imitation of Covre’s slow life, would mean less frequent trips and less frenetic itineraries. In fact, since the pandemic, that future has arrived in Venice—for the moment at least. Covre confirmed by e-mail that though total bookings at Palazzo Cristo are down, guests are staying longer. They come to experience the culture of the city, rather than arriving on cruise ships for a day or two to get a selfie in St. Mark’s Square. “The tourism that has returned has a different feel,” Covre wrote, “one that is very much welcomed by us locals.”

BY THE END of my stay, I had regained my bearings and could walk confidently through the narrow maze of walkways that, at any turn, might open onto a plaza or end in a walled cul-de-sac. I took different paths to and



▲ Clockwise from above: Aperitivi at Ai Pugni, in Dorsoduro; a monument to Titian at the Basilica dei Frari; the courtyard of Il Palazzo Experimental.



com; entrées \$14–\$43) is the best fine-dining spot in Dorsoduro; for a more low-key affair, try dishes such as *sarde in saor* (sweet and sour sardines) at **Osteria da Codroma** (<fb.com/dacodroma>; entrées \$17–\$24). Don't miss the vegetable-forward small plates at **Amo** (<alajmo.it>; entrées \$27–\$40) or the seafood at the venerable **Da Fiore** (<ristorantedafiore.com>; entrées \$26–\$47), in San Polo. Visit **Ombra del Leone** (<ombradelleone.com>; entrées \$19–\$41) for an aperitivo overlooking the Grand Canal. Fritto misto at **Wenice** (<venice.it>; entrées \$7–\$12) is just the thing after a stroll through the Rialto market.

Exploring Venice

Where to Stay

The buzzy, 32-room **Il Palazzo Experimental** (<palazzoexperimental.com>; doubles from \$260), in Dorsoduro, is a riot of colors and patterns. **Palazzo Cristo** (<palazzocristo.com>; suites from \$770), situated on Campo Santi Giovanni e Paolo, has just four sumptuous apartments.

Where to Eat

Ristorante Lineadombra (<ristorantelineadombra.com>;

What to See

Take in works by Bellini, Tintoretto, and Titian at the **Gallerie dell'Accademia** (<gallerieaccademia.it>). After a lengthy renovation, the **Palazzo Grimani** (<palazzogrimani.org>) is a worthy addition to the tourist circuit. The 17th-century **Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute** (<basilicasalutevenezia.it>) is as famed for its silhouette as for its artwork. At **Gianni Basso Stampatore** (5306 Calle del Fumo; 39-041-523-4681) buy paper goods printed on centuries-old presses.

from the cluttered *stampatore* of Gianni Basso to place an order for business cards printed on his antique letterpress. On the way out, I passed a favorite church clad in marble panels, then came back past an appliance store, a shoe repair, and a funeral home—the stuff of everyday, non-tourist life. Each successful foray further engraved a map in my mind. I later asked Toto if he ever got lost, if there were any corner of the city he didn't know. "I was born in Venice," he said. "I have touched every stone."

Before leaving, I made a point to see the Rialto fish market—my taxi driver from the airport had told me it's in terminal decline, and I didn't know when I'd be back in the city. The steady loss of fishmongers to age and retirement marks the approach of an unthinkable future. Already, the outer stalls are filled with sunglasses and refrigerator magnets. Foot traffic piled up behind tourists dragging rolling bags, and a group of Germans sat on the confetti-strewn quay drinking rosé at 11 a.m.

One customer, surely Venetian, was dressed in a fox-fur coat and pushed in a wheelchair by an attendant. She

looked elegant but frail, like the city. Who else would buy the lagoon's treasury of silver anchovies, gobies, *triglie rosse*, spider crabs, scallops in their shells, clams no larger than a thumbnail, and whole monkfish longer than my arm? The lookie-loos took pictures—and left empty-handed.

Then the surprise of something new and vibrant. A stall had been refitted as *Wenice*, a takeaway shop for prepared seafood: *sarde in saor*, sweet and sour sardines; tiny cuttlefish stewed in their ink; and fritto misto, Poseidon's realm sold in a paper cone. I spoke to the young owner, Luca Franchin. He was from the mainland and, so rare among his generation, had moved to Venice.

"My problem is I fell in love with a Venetian girl," he joked. His shop was busy and cheery. Like Toto, like Covre and Tubau, Franchin had willed himself a future in Venice. And his goal was not just to survive, but to grow and thrive. "The big idea," he said, "is to transfer it to other places, so it's not just tied to the market. And if it works, why not?" +

DAVID NOTON PHOTOGRAPHY/ALAMY. ILLUSTRATION BY MAY PARSEY

