

BACKGROUND

HISTORY

To transport yourself back to the origins of La Serenissima Repubblica (the Most Serene Republic) – damp early days of refugees who chose the dubious swampy safety of the Venetian lagoon over the hazards of the lawless Italian mainland – get out of Venice. All the grand *palazzi* (palaces), busy canals and splendid squares – none of these existed in the beginning. Strike out for the distant scrub-covered flats of Torcello, in the north of the lagoon, where the first mainlanders sought haven as the edifice of empire and the rule of law on the mainland crumbled before the barbarian invasions at the beginning of the Dark Ages.

IN THE BEGINNING

Legends suggest refugees from ancient Troy founded colonies in northeast Italy, just as the mythical Trojan Aeneas landed in what would one day become Rome. A more sober reading of events sees Celtic tribes, the Veneti, moving in from the east around 1500 BC.

Founders of Patavium (Padua) and Ateste (Este) and staunch allies of the Roman Empire, the Veneti would eventually be absorbed into the expanding empire and granted full Roman citizenship in 49 BC. For centuries thereafter they shared the empire's fate and lived mostly in peace, far from the frontier-expanding wars of the legions.

All good things come to an end, and by the beginning of the 5th century AD, Italy was under threat as the empire slowly crumbled. In 402 Alaric led a Visigothic invasion through the province of Venetia. His hordes sacked the port and bishopric of Aquileia and pillaged cheerfully all the way to Rome. Many Veneti fled to the islands in the lagoon that stretches along part of the province's Adriatic coast, returning when the invaders were expelled. More barbarian invasions followed, the most terrible by Attila the Hun in 452, and refugees increasingly opted to stay on the islands. The nascent island communities elected tribunes and in 466 met in Grado, south of Aquileia. There they formed a loose federation and established a degree of self-rule. Little evidence supports Venice's traditional 'foundation' date of 25 April 421.

In the meantime the Western Roman Empire collapsed. Britain, Spain, Gaul and North Africa had all fallen, or were about to fall, into barbarian hands by 476, when the last, ineffectual emperor, Romulus, capitulated to the German Odoacer. Odoacer in turn was replaced by the Ostrogoth Theodoric, who proclaimed himself king in 493 and installed himself in Ravenna.

A DOGE IS BORN

In 540, the ambitious leader of the Eastern Roman Empire, Justinian, decided to turn the tide and recover Italy. Venetia (roughly equivalent to the modern Veneto region), the islands and Ravenna were quickly bound into the Eastern, or Byzantine, Empire, whose capital was Constantinople (modern Istanbul). The retaking of Italy and other former imperial territory proved costly and the successes short-lived, truncated by the Lombard invasion from France

TIMELINE

c 1500 BC

Celtic Veneti tribes, possibly from Anatolia (in present-day Turkey), arrive in northeast Italy and inhabit the region now known as the Veneto. They leave a legacy of hundreds of inscriptions in the Venetic language.

25 April AD 421

Venice's traditional foundation date, 25 April AD 421, is much disputed. It's thought that the date was marked retrospectively in honour of San Marco (St Mark), patron saint of Venice, whose feast day is 25 April.

726

Orso Ipato is named doge. Although Ipato is usually considered the first doge, the position is surrounded by various tales, and it's possible that the role started as a military nomination by Constantinople.

top picks

HISTORY BOOKS

- *A History of Venice* John Julius Norwich
- *Francesco's Venice* Francesco da Mosto
- *Venice – The Biography of a City* Christopher Hibbert
- *Venice: Paradise of Cities* John Julius Norwich
- *The Venetian Empire – A Sea Voyage* Jan Morris

in 568. As the Lombards swept across the Po plains, refugees made for the islands in unprecedented numbers.

The new migrants settled primarily on Torcello, which would for some time remain the commercial centre of the islands, Malamocco (a now disappeared island), Chioggia and Rivoalto (later called Rialto). Some stayed in the coastal settlements of the lagoon.

Anti-Byzantine uprisings had in part paved the way for the Lombards, and the Venetian lagoon communities were not immune to the spirit of rebellion. They named a certain Orso Ipato as their *dux* (leader, duke) in 726. The

Latin *dux* is rendered as doge in the Venetian dialect – and in this figure (another 117 dogi followed) would reside the office of head of the Venetian state for the ensuing millennium.

Orso and some of his successors found it hard to resist turning their appointment into a hereditary monarchy. However, such temptation had its price: Orso was assassinated during a stoush between the folks of Eraclea and Jesolo, and two of his immediate successors were deposed. Blinding became the common fate of later leaders who fell into disgrace. Orso's first successor, Teodato, transferred the ducal seat to Malamocco in 742. What slowly emerged was an electoral office, which was kept in check by two councillors and the Arengo (a popular assembly).

The Franks replaced the Lombards and tried to invade the islands on several occasions and failed. By 810 the Venetian lagoon area was the only part of northern Italy still anchored in the Byzantine sphere of influence.

THE REPUBLIC & ITS BODY SNATCHERS

The hero of the battle against the Franks was Agnello Partecipazio, from Rivoalto. He was elected doge in 809, and the cluster of islets around Rivoalto became the focus of community development. They were virtually impregnable to all who did not know how to navigate the deep-water channels that crisscross the lagoon. The duchy now began to come into its own. Its commercial and naval fleets were already the most powerful in the Adriatic, and Venetian ships were trading as far away as Egypt.

At home, Partecipazio built a fortress on what would later be the site of the Palazzo Ducale. To the east, a church to St Zachariah (San Zaccaria) was going up at Byzantine expense. Land was drained and canals cleared. Most impressive of all, the land mass was extended by driving great clusters of wooden pylons into the muddy depths as foundations.

Legend has it that the evangelist St Mark (San Marco) had once visited the lagoon islands and been told by an angel that his body would rest there (see the boxed text, p66). A band of Venetian merchants decided to make true the prophecy and in 828 spirited the saint's corpse out of Alexandria, Egypt. To house the holy relics, the doge ordered the construction of a new basilica, which would rise next to the Palazzo Ducale. Thus was the Byzantine-imposed patron saint, St Theodore (San Teodoro or Todaro), upstaged.

HAIL MARYS

The Slav forces that Doge Pietro Orseolo defeated in 999 had long posed a piracy problem in the Adriatic. In one celebrated incident in 944, pirates kidnapped a group of Venetian women (and their rich dowries) while they were crossing from Venice to the Lido to be married. The pirates were busy enjoying their booty in nearby Caorle and were caught by a posse of very unhappy Venetians. They slaughtered the pirates and brought the soon-to-be brides back home. This soon gave rise to the Festa delle Marie (Feast of the Marys), in which each year the top 12 families of the city would provide money for a dowry for 12 poor but beautiful young women. It was long a popular annual event, now remembered during Carnevale with a procession and a beauty pageant election of the most beautiful of the 12 Marys.

As Byzantine power waned, the duchy, which would become known as La Serenissima Repubblica, assumed greater autonomy. What it needed was a symbol to distinguish it from its official patrons in Constantinople. The image of a winged lion was soon appropriated by the city – the symbol of St Mark in Christian iconography.

By the end of the century, local administration had been centred on Rivoalto, the core of which would be known as Venezia, or Venice, by the 12th century.

Pietro Orseolo was elected doge in 991 and proved to be one of the Republic's most gifted leaders. By careful diplomacy he won the medieval equivalent of most-favoured-nation status in Constantinople and in much of the Holy Roman Empire.

Constantinople went further before the end of the 10th century, virtually opening up all of the lands east of the Mediterranean exclusively to Venetian merchants under the leadership of the doge Pietro Orseolo. Venice's growing prestige and prosperity could not have been better expressed than by the Eastern opulence of the Basilica di San Marco.

BYZANTIUM, BARBAROSSA & THE VENETIAN BLIND

In the wake of the First Crusade in 1095, Venice increasingly took part in naval operations in the Holy Land, almost always in return for trade concessions. But rivals Genoa and Pisa were also making their presence felt, and so Venice established the Arsenale shipyards in the Castello end of Venice that would become the greatest industrial site in medieval Europe. Here commercial and fighting ships could be constructed more efficiently than hitherto imaginable. Venice was going to need every last one of them.

Venetian participation in the First Crusade, although limited, spoiled relations with Constantinople. In 1171 the Byzantine emperor Manuele Comnenus staged an assault on the newly formed Genoese colony in Constantinople, blaming it on the Venetians, who were promptly clapped into irons. A fleet sent to rectify this situation ended up sloping home ravaged by plague without having fired a shot. Around the same time Venice found itself joining the Lombard League of Italian city-states and the papacy to oppose the designs of the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick Barbarossa (Redbeard – no prizes for guessing why the nickname), on northern Italy. Venice was more or less at war on two fronts.

Barbarossa's intent was plain: the unequivocal subjugation of independence-minded city-states in northern Italy and, by extension, the recognition of his sovereignty throughout Italy by all, including the Pope. He was surprised by the spirit of resistance. From 1154 on he descended on Italy several times. But after 1167, things began to go seriously awry. His army

828

The corpse of St Mark the Evangelist is smuggled from Alexandria (Egypt) to Venice by Italian sailors. St Mark becomes the patron saint of Venice, usurping the Byzantine patron saint, St Theodore, in the region.

1094

The Basilica di San Marco in its present form is consecrated. Filled with gilded mosaics and also known as the Chiesa d'Oro (Church of Gold), it is a status symbol of Venetian wealth and power.

1171

After staging an attack on the Genoese in Constantinople and pointing the finger at Venice, Byzantium orders the arrest of all Venetians present in the Empire.

1271

Traders Nicolò and Matteo Polo set sail for Xanadu, the court of Kublai Khan, with Nicolò's 20-year-old son, Marco. For the next few years, the Polos trundle around the Orient making a fortune in the jewelery business.

1295

Marco Polo returns home from China. His adventures are the talk of the town, but sceptics consider them exaggerated and call them *il milione* (the million) because there were so many of them.

1310

The Consiglio dei Dieci (Council of Ten) is established as a temporary, emergency measure to deal with the rebellion led by Tiepolo. The council proves itself a useful security organisation and becomes a permanent body in 1334.

was struck by plague and he was forced to withdraw to Pavia. There he learned that 15 Italian city-states, including Venice, had formed the Lombard League against him; they defeated him spectacularly. Throw in excommunication and Barbarossa knew that the game was up.

Venice was quick to seize the opportunity and staged an international public-relations coup by inviting Pope Alexander III and the repentant emperor to make peace in Venice in 1177, after which it could turn its attention back to the East, where the events of 1171 had not been forgotten. When Doge Enrico Dandolo agreed to head the greatest armada yet put to sea in the service of God, few of the participants in this, the Fourth Crusade, could have known what he had in mind.

Dandolo, who had lost his sight many years before, drove an extraordinary bargain: Venice would provide a fleet to carry 30,000 men at a cost of 84,000 silver marks – approximately double the yearly income of the king of England at the time.

In the end, only one-third of the proposed forces turned up in Venice the following year, and their leaders couldn't pay. Venice had kept its side of the bargain. To compensate for their non-payment, Dandolo suggested the Crusaders help Venice out with a few tasks of its own on the way to Palestine.

The most important of these involved a detour to Constantinople in 1203. In repeated assaults that lasted into the following year, Dandolo sacked and looted the city, put a Western (Latin) puppet emperor on the throne and had the figure of the doge declared 'Lord of a Quarter and a Half-Quarter of the Roman Empire [ie Byzantine]' – Venice's three-eighths of the spoils.

To what extent the wily Dandolo was directly responsible for these events is unclear. At any rate, he managed to extract from this so-called Crusade more benefits for his city than anyone could have imagined. Venice was now at the head of a thriving commercial empire and the city's direct control of the Adriatic was undisputed.

WAR, PEACE & THE BLACK DEATH

In the course of the 13th century, Genoa's growing presence in the Black Sea and eastern Mediterranean began to upset Venice's appellation. In Constantinople the Byzantines, with Genoese connivance, overthrew the Latin emperor, threatening Venice's possessions and trade routes. Venice later suffered a heavy blow at the battle of Curzola (Korç) on the Dalmatian coast.

The conflict would simmer throughout the 14th century, which was also marked by a long spat with the Papal States and a rebellion at home in 1310. The rebellion was ruthlessly crushed and in its aftermath the Consiglio dei Dieci (Council of Ten) was set up to monitor security. From then the Consiglio wove an intelligence network in the city and throughout Europe unequalled by any of the Republic's rivals.

Venice also found itself embroiled in a short, sharp fight against the Scaliger family, who from Verona had come to control Vicenza, Padua, Treviso, Parma and Lucca. Venice found plenty of allies willing to put an end to this dangerous expansion, and by the end of it all Venice had acquired its first mainland territories, land up to and including Treviso. For the first time, Venice could now secure its own supplies of staples for its population, but the maritime republic would never again be able to remain aloof from the intrigues of mainland politics.

At the same time, trade had never been better. Commercial vessels were larger and voyages more frequent. The only serious cloud on the horizon was Genoa. But before Venice and Genoa could even begin to grapple properly, their merchant vessels had brought back from the Black Sea a most miserable import: the rats on board the vessels of 1348 were carrying the Black Death.

KNOCKING REBELLION ON THE HEAD

By 1310 Venice was in serious difficulties. Doge Pietro Gradenigo's pursuit of mainland conquests had brought upon the city a papal interdict. The Venetians had been defeated in the field, and many Venetian merchants abroad had been arrested and had their goods confiscated.

Gradenigo was not without his opponents, foremost among them Marco Querini, who had commanded Venetian forces at Ferrara and claimed Venice had not given him the support he needed. Querini convinced General Baimonte Tiepolo to lead a revolt against Gradenigo. They both lived near the Rialto and so planned to send two armed columns over the bridge. Querini's would proceed down Calle dei Fabbrì to Piazza San Marco and Tiepolo's down Le Marzarie. They would join in the piazza and assault the Palazzo Ducale, at which point a third force would arrive across the lagoon from the mainland.

It might have worked, but word of the plan got out. Gradenigo and his allies gathered forces in Piazza San Marco, alerted the workers of the Arsenale, who served as a kind of ducal militia in times of uncertainty, and ordered the *podestà* (mayor) of Chioggia to intercept the invasion fleet.

Things went wrong for the rebels from the start. A storm delayed the fleet, and while Querini marched on Piazza San Marco, Tiepolo's troops hung about looting in Rialto. By the time they went clattering down Le Marzarie, Querini was already battling it out with ducal troopers in Piazza San Marco.

Tiepolo's boys were engaged while still in Le Marzarie. The decisive moment came when a local housewife, who was leaning out her window and bombing the rebels with anything that came to hand, pelted Tiepolo's standard-bearer on the head with a mortar (another version suggests she just leant out the window to see what the fuss was about and accidentally bumped the mortar off her sill). The standard fell and the fight was over. Querini had already died in Piazza San Marco. Tiepolo beat a hasty retreat home, from where he negotiated to keep his life, but in exile.

Today a bas-relief of the woman leaning out of her window marks the spot just above the Sotoportego e Calle del Cappello.

The effect on Venice was as horrific as anywhere, with as many as 600 people dying every day. Up and down the canals, barges plied their sorry trade: '*Corpi morti! Corpi morti!*' (Bring out your dead!). This was not the first outbreak in the city's history, nor would it be the last, but it was one of the most devastating. To make things worse, an earthquake some months earlier in Friuli had seriously shaken Venice, destroying many houses and emptying the Grand Canal.

In 1372, an incident in Cyprus sparked the last and most devastating duel between Venice and Genoa. The climax came in 1379, when a Genoese fleet appeared off the Lido and took Chioggia. On Genoa's side were Padua and Hungary, busy devastating Venetian mainland territories. It was one of Venice's darkest hours.

The city worked day and night to build new ships and defences on and around the islands. Incredibly, the Genoese opted to starve out Venice – a decision that served only to grant the city precious time. The Venetian commander, Vittore Pisani, turned the tables by laying siege to Chioggia, but his forces were inadequate. All of Venice prayed for the return of Carlo Zeno's war fleet, which had been sent out to patrol the Mediterranean long before the siege. His appearance on the horizon at the beginning of 1380 spelled the end for the Genoese.

TURKEY ON THE MARCH

By the time the Turks marched into Constantinople on 29 May 1453 and snuffed out Byzantium, Venice had in most respects reached the apogee of its power. The Venetian *zecchino* had largely

1342

One of the first recorded *acqua alte* (high tides) inundates the city. While Venice has always been synonymous with watery canals, flooding continues to be a major concern, financially and environmentally, to this day.

1479

Venice signs a peace treaty with Turkey after the fall of several of Venice's Greek possessions. This concludes a 50-year attempt by the Ottoman Empire to wrest maritime control of the Adriatic and Aegean seas from Venice.

1492

Christopher Columbus discovers the New World. Six years later, Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama sails around the Cape of Good Hope. In time, the Atlantic overshadows the Mediterranean, with predictable consequences for Venetian trade.

1508

The League of Cambrai, an alliance of the Holy Roman Empire, the Papal States, Spain and France, is formed against Venice to curb its power in northern Italy. The league collapses two years later.

1718

Venice and Austria sign the Treaty of Passarowitz with the Ottoman Empire. Venice retains control of its mainland empire and Istria, Dalmatia, parts of coastal Albania, Corfu and a smattering of Ionian islands.

February 1755

The Venetian lagoon freezes over. The 'Little Ice Age', which lasted from the 13th to the 18th century, sporadically brought devastatingly cold winters to Europe and the Northern Hemisphere.

replaced the Florentine *fiorino* as the European currency of reference, and Venetian was widely spoken across the eastern Mediterranean. Local historian Alvise Zorzi recounts that a Venetian ambassador was told by a Turkish minister prior to an audience with the Grand Sultan: 'Go ahead and speak Venetian, the Grand Lord will understand!'

Since the Battle of Chioggia, the Republic had largely kept out of naval conflicts. In a series of rapid conquests early in the 15th century, it acquired a land empire stretching from Gorizia in the east to Bergamo in the west. Venice allowed the conquered cities to retain their own statutes and for the next 2½ centuries they would mostly live in peace under the standard of the winged lion.

Greek refugees poured into Venice after the fall of Constantinople and confirmed the Republic's reputation as the most Eastern of Western cities and also as one of the most tolerant. La Serenissima's ambassadors hammered out commercial treaties with the victorious Sultan Mehmet II but were soon confronted with a harsh new reality. By 1500, the Turks had taken most of Venice's Greek possessions.

Another concern was the formation of the League of Cambrai against Venice. Pope Julius II had decided that Venice was too powerful and drummed up support from France, the Holy Roman Empire, Spain and several Italian city-states. In return for cutting Venice to pieces, all were promised rich territorial rewards. In April 1509, French forces marched on Venetian territory, and within a year Venice had lost virtually all its land empire. The coalition, however, fell apart and by 1516 Venice had fully recovered its territories.

But La Serenissima, like the rest of Italy, was being increasingly overshadowed by Europe's great nation-states: France, Henry VIII's England and the Habsburg Empire. More than ever, Venice had to tread a subtle line to ensure survival against the unquestionably greater powers around it: it adopted a policy of armed neutrality, attempting to stay out of bloody European squabbles.

For some years, the Republic was able to avoid trouble from Turkey, too. But it was only a matter of time. In 1537, Süleyman the Magnificent tried and failed to take Corfu. Frustrated, he quickly swallowed up a series of small Venetian-run Greek islands and two remaining bases in the Peloponnese. He then took Cyprus, an act that finally spurred united action by Christian powers. Venice, Spain and the Papal States vowed to fight until 'the Turk' was destroyed. In 1571, a huge allied fleet (much of it provided by Venice) routed the Turks off Lepanto, in

THE EXCOMMUNICATION OF VENICE

They say that, late in the 16th century, Cardinal Camillo Borghese and the Venetian ambassador to Rome, Leonardo Donà, had a verbal skirmish one day in the halls of Roman power. The cardinal hissed that, were he pope, he'd excommunicate the entire Venetian populace. Donà replied: 'And I, were I doge, would thumb my nose at the excommunication.'

As luck would have it, cardinal and ambassador were, in 1606, Pope Paul V and doge, respectively. Rome had never liked the fact that the Venetian government reserved for itself a degree of control over church matters. Paul V decided to excommunicate Venice. The doge ignored the papal bull, ordered all churches to remain open on Venetian territory and ordered into exile anyone who tried to apply the bull. Paolo Sarpi, a philosopher of some note, became the Republic's orator in a year of quarrelling that ended with a humiliating climb-down for the pope. Venice's obstinacy not only confirmed its position on ecclesiastical matters, it damaged papal credibility in all Catholic territories.

1846

The first train crosses the new rail bridge from Venice to Mestre on the mainland. Before this, travel between Venice and the mainland was possible only by water.

1848

Daniele Manin leads an anti-Austrian rebellion and declares Venice a republic again. The Austrians retake the city in 1849, and Venice remains under Austrian control for the next 17 years.

1866

Venice and Veneto join the Kingdom of Italy. The unification of Italy was nearly complete: Rome, the major obstacle to Italian unity, was made the capital of Italy in 1870.

February 1918

Austro-Hungarian planes drop almost 300 bombs on Venice. Earlier in WWI, bombs hit the Chiesa dei Scalzi and damaged works by Giambattista Tiepolo, and damaged the Chiesa di Santa Maria Formosa.

1933

Mussolini opens the Ponte della Libertà (Freedom Bridge) from Mestre to Venice, creating another link to the mainland by land. The 3.85km-long, two-lane highway remains the only access by road vehicle to the Veneto capital.

November 1966

Record floods cause widespread damage and unleash debate on measures needed to protect Venice. The first of many laws on the preservation of Venice and its lagoon had been passed in 1937 after major floods the previous year.

Greece. Venice urged its allies to press the victory home, but in vain. Seeing allied resolve so brittle, Venice had little choice but to sue for a separate peace.

The watchword in the remaining years of the century was caution. Venice had by now embarked on the most illustrious period of its diplomatic career: from here on its single greatest weapon would be lots of fast talking.

DECLINE & FALL

As the 17th century dawned, Venice began a slow decline, which was due in part to its loss of territory to the Turks and the revocation of its trade privileges. The city's well-heeled wallowed in luxury, but in the face of the great nations and empires around it, Venice had neither the will nor the manpower to equip great fleets, let alone armies.

Venice's policy of maintaining neutrality wherever possible helped turn it into a den of espionage. The Consiglio dei Dieci, in its role as the state's security service, had plenty to do in these years of intrigue. Its spy network within and beyond the Republic was one of the most effective in the world: it needed to be. Trials, torture and executions were all generally carried out in secret. That said, compared with its neighbours to the east and west, Venice remained a haven of tolerance.

Life remained unpredictable in Venice as elsewhere in Europe, and plague remained a recurring problem. In 1630, a massive bout that would last 16 months began. In the city alone, 40,000 out of a total of 140,000 people perished. Small wonder that the Venetians still celebrate its end (see Festa della Madonna della Salute, p19).

Venice did what it could to avoid costly conflict, but in 1645 the Turks landed on Crete and launched a 25-year campaign to conquer the island. Venice then joined a coalition of Christian countries in a series of campaigns against the Turks in the late 17th century, but the gains were short-lived. Venice was a shadow of its former self. Its once proud navy was already obsolete and under-equipped. The shipbuilders of the Arsenal and their techniques had long been eclipsed by their counterparts in England, France and the Netherlands. The great commercial families that had made Venice's wealth and provided many of its most illustrious characters had lost interest in the sea. They neither traded nor had any desire to endure the rigours of naval life. By the 18th century, Venice had become known across Europe above all as a city of leisure and pleasure.

Venice managed to tootle along unmolested until French revolutionary troops under Napoleon appeared. Napoleon's French republican army had raced across northern Italy in its campaign against the Austrians. Venice, powerless to stop either army ranging across its territories, had protested against such blatant disregard for its neutrality. Venetian shore batteries repelled the attempt by one of Napoleon's warships to enter the lagoon north of the Lido. But the little general made it clear to Venetian ambassadors that he would have no qualms in destroying Venice should it resist.

And so on 12 May 1797, with Napoleon's guns ranged along the lagoon, the panicking Maggior Consiglio (Grand Council) simply decreed the end of the Republic. Rioting citizens were incensed by such cowardice. Shortly thereafter, French forces arrived and Napoleon declared the Democratic Republic of Venice and set about the systematic plundering of the city.

For six months, the puppet 'democracy' remained under the French. In January 1798, however, Venice and most of the Veneto passed to Austria under the Treaty of Campoformido, signed by

THE PRINCE OF PLEASURE

Never was a hedonist born at a better time and in a more appropriate place. Eighteenth-century Venice had turned its back on the arduous business of running a merchant empire and maintaining a fighting fleet and had converted itself into the pleasure capital of Europe. Into this world was born Giacomo Casanova in 1725. He was orphaned as a young boy and educated in law in Padua. Already a known rake and by all accounts one of the world's great lovers, Casanova got lucky when he befriended an elderly Venetian patrician, who set him up in an all-expenses-paid apartment. Venice was a licentious place, but not everything went. Denounced for an evening of foursomes with the French ambassador and a couple of nuns, Casanova wound up in the Piombi (the Leads) for his moral 'outrages'. Sentenced to five years, after 15 months he escaped and made for Paris. There he made his fortune and continued his adventures, fathering children (including, it appears, a child by one of his daughters) and contracting venereal diseases (despite his occasional use of a linen prototype of the condom). He wound up an elderly librarian in a castle in Bohemia, the ideal location for him to write his memoirs. They are a veritable compendium of the mores and vices of 18th-century Venice.

Napoleon and the Austrians. Venice thus became a minor playing piece to be shunted around among the great powers.

From 1806, Venice was tied to Napoleon's Kingdom of Italy before reverting to Austria in 1814. These times brought hardship and economic decline to the city and people voted with their feet. Between 1797 and 1825, the population fell from 138,000 to 99,000.

FROM AUSTRIAN RULE TO UNITED ITALY

What did the Austrians ever do for Venice? They built the rail connection with the mainland, dredged and deepened entrances to the lagoon to ease shipping access, implemented a street-numbering system and invented the *spritz* (a sparkling wine-based drink). The Venetians were not impressed and, in 1848, joined the long list of rebels who rose up against the established order across Europe.

The prime mover behind the Venetian revolt was lawyer Daniele Manin. As the Austrian authorities, bamboozled by the confusing reports of events in Vienna, hesitated, the Venetians rose up, took the Arsenal and forced the capitulation of the Austrian forces. But Austria's General Welden warned the Venetians it would be better for them to surrender.

Manin was declared dictator in August and the elected president by a popular assembly in early 1849. Defences were organised, but Venice lacked a fleet to assure supplies to the city, or disciplined soldiers. In April, by which time Venice stood alone against imperial Austria, Manin's government decided to resist. From then on, Austria imposed a hermetic blockade. In July, a 24-day artillery bombardment began in which some 23,000 shells rained down on the city and its increasingly hungry and cholera-stricken populace: the exhausted city was ready to accept defeat.

The return of the Austrians proved to be of limited duration. Five years after the proclamation of a new united Italian kingdom in 1861, the people of Venice and the Veneto voted in favour of annexation to the new kingdom as the Austrians agreed to cede the territory to King Vittorio Emanuele II.

During the last decades of the 19th century, the city was a hive of activity. Increased port traffic was coupled with growing industry. Canals were widened and deepened, pedestrian zones were laid out and tourism began to take off.

August 2001

A bomb rips through the court buildings in Rialto just 12 hours before prime minister Silvio Berlusconi is due to visit. The bomb occurs in the wake of the violence at the Genoese G-8 summit in July.

May 2003

After decades of debate, the Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico (Mose; Experimental Electromechanical Module) project begins in Venice, with the aim of preventing disastrous floods caused by rising sea levels.

2007

Venice seeks sponsors for costly infrastructure projects. Mayor Massimo Cacciari muses that a new bridge, to replace the Ponte dell'Accademia, could be called the Ponte Gates (after Bill Gates, the kind of sponsor the city has in mind).

During WWI, advancing Austro-Hungarian forces were halted on the road to Venice by navy marines. Air raids on the city started in May 1915, two days after Italy declared war on Austria, and continued intermittently until 1918, although they caused little damage or loss of life.

Under Mussolini, a road bridge was built parallel to the railway bridge, and this marked the shift of industry to what is now 'greater' Venice: Mestre and Porto Marghera. Massive immigration, especially from Friuli to the east, provided labour for the factories in Venice itself and mainland industry. These latter areas would bear the brunt of Allied bombing campaigns during WWII, although Venice itself came out of it unscathed. The guns silent, Venice the charmer soon started working her magic again.

In 1951, Venice reached its highest-ever population density. Then the middle classes started to move out: Venice was pretty but also pretty inconvenient. People left in search of work and modern housing on the mainland. As tourism began to take off and outsiders began to buy property in Venice for conversion into hotels and holiday residences, Venetians began to find the cost of living increasingly untenable. The process has continued to this day.

RECENT EVENTS

Is Venice broke? Mayor Massimo Cacciari reopened a debate when, in March 2007, he announced he would seek sponsors to build a new bridge to replace the creaky timber Ponte dell'Accademia (see p41). It would not be the first time. Major restoration work has been carried out thanks to big-name companies that, in return, were able to drape their brand names in strategic city points.

Some Venetians think it a practical means of attracting needed funding, but others find it humiliating. Unfortunately, there's too little money to cover even a fraction of the tasks that could/should be carried out in the city. Cacciari's cry for sponsors seems to be the only way ahead. One piece of good news, at least, was the announcement from the national government in Rome that extra finances and special planning for Venice would be forthcoming to meet the high costs of dealing with mass tourism. Cacciari's response was laconic: 'I'll believe it when I see the money.'

Cacciari's arch-enemy has long been the Veneto's regional governor, the right-wing Giancarlo Galan. On one thing they do agree: the need to reform tax laws that strongly favour Italy's five semi-autonomous regions, two of which rest on the Veneto's borders, and which draw companies away to the Veneto's lower-taxed neighbours. In 2007, a growing number of Veneto towns voted to apply to join either Friuli-Venezia Giulia or Trentino-Alto Adige. Most of the bids were rhetorical, but that of Cortina d'Ampezzo, the chic snow resort in the Dolomites, to secede from the Veneto and become part of the Alto Adige, was deadly serious.

Water has dominated the history of the city from the beginning, and this particular phase of Venice's history started with record inundations on 4 November 1966. Never in living memory had such disastrous flooding been seen – Venice looked set to be submerged. Ever since, debate has raged on how to protect the city, from the system of flood barriers to lesser measures such as raising pavement levels. In 2003, the then Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi unveiled the first stone in a controversial project to protect the lagoon with a series of mobile flood barriers (among a battery of other measures). Many Venetians, including Cacciari, believe the barriers will prove an enormous white elephant, if not worse (see the boxed text, p32).

In 1997, seven young Venetian 'nationalists' invaded Piazza San Marco with a truck dressed up as an armoured vehicle and scaled the Campanile to place a home-made Venetian flag high up for all to see. Ten years later, having done some time for the 'assault' itself, they were declared innocent of charges of subversion against the state and military conspiracy. The aim of this rather quixotic operation? A reminder to Venetians of their glorious past, exactly 200 years after the last doge capitulated to Bonaparte and ended Venetian independence.

THE FRAGILE LAGOON

Venice is under siege. For the most part, public attention to the city's ailments has focused on flooding and the chilling cry of '*Venezia sprofonda!*' (Venice is sinking!); for more on this, see the boxed text, p32. For hundreds of years, the city's greatest defence was its unique lagoon

THE ACCIDENTAL MAYOR

When Massimo Cacciari (born 1944) was elected for a third term in 2005, he seemed more resigned than joyful. A philosopher with a sparkling academic career, he had already done the job for seven years from 1993 to 2000.

Mr Mayor, it seems the biggest threat to Venice is its falling population.

The drop is the same as in the historic centres of Florence, Bologna, Milan and anywhere else on the face of the earth. I can't stop the social and economic processes that are happening as much in Piazza della Signoria (Florence) or Piazza del Duomo (Milan) as here! The mayor of Turin tells me that in 10 years the population there has fallen from 1.2 million to 900,000.

The first big exodus, in the 1950s, was of the middle class. Do you have any idea how people lived in Venice in the 1950s? Appallingly. The city was falling apart. As soon as people had enough money, they moved to Mestre. Because in Mestre they had *toilets*. You see? I wasn't poor, but nine of us lived in 100 sq m with a kitchen and one bath.

Nobles on the Grand Canal also sold out. Instead of paying millions to heat their huge houses, they said 'ciao' and went to the mainland. The ones who did not leave Venice were the poor, because they received housing subsidies.

One reason for the fall in population is the cost of housing, and many point to the growing number of hotels.

We could put buildings tax up to 20% on hotels and it wouldn't make any difference. It is the free market. Do you see small businesses operating on Fifth Avenue? No, they're in the Bronx. Here we're on Fifth Avenue! Do you know what Gucci pays in rent in San Marco? Sixty thousand euros a month. Can you see a local craftsman setting up shop there?

What can be done?

With a billion euros, I could help Venetians resist, with housing subsidies to attract the middle class and incentives to attract businesses to set up in Venice. Right now, we need two to three million euros, just to cover cleaning costs. In next year's budget, the central government has to give us more money. And not because of Venice's precious monuments. We contribute an extraordinary amount to the economy. Take out Venice, Florence and Rome and I'd like to see what would happen to Italy's GDP!

Does tourism divide Venetians?

There is a clear difference of interest between most residents and the tourist industry. Certainly, many Venetians live nicely thanks to tourism, but most people suffer because of the growth of tourism, especially the elderly. I exaggerate, but we should double the capacity of public transport. But we don't have the resources. Tourism operators make no contribution to the big events, to city services. They content themselves with paying their taxes. Frankly, they offer no solidarity at all.

position. Now, the one-time guarantor of Venice's survival seems bent on the inexorable eradication of the city.

It is tempting when gazing across the lagoon to think of it as a simple extension of the sea. No impression could be more mistaken. The Adriatic forces its way into the lagoon through three *bocche di porto* (port entrances) that interrupt the bulwark of narrow sandbanks strung north to south in a 50km arc between the mainland points of Punta Sabbioni and Chioggia.

The lagoon was formed by the meeting of the sea with freshwater streams running off from several Alpine rivers. It is like a great shallow dish, crisscrossed by a series of navigable channels. These were either the extension of river flows or ditches created by the inflow of seawater. One of the deepest is the Grand Canal, which runs through the heart of the city. It is thought to have been an extension of the River Brenta (since diverted south).

No-one knew the lagoon better than the Venetians – whenever invaders threatened (such as in 1379–80, during the Battle of Chioggia), the Venetians would pull up buoys marking the course of navigable channels and so pretty much close access to the city. The channels are marked today by lines of *bricole* (wooden pylons).

The territory of the Comune di Venezia extends over 457.5 sq km, of which 267.6 sq km are lagoon waters, canals and so on. On the mainland, the city's boundaries take in 132.4 sq km. The *centro storico* (historic centre) is just 7.6 sq km of land (1.15 sq km of which has been added since the end of the 18th century), while the remaining islands together total 49.9 sq km. More than 40 islands and islets dot the lagoon. The better-known ones include the Lido, Pellestrina, Murano, Burano and Torcello. The tinier ones have served as convents, quarantine stations, hospitals, madhouses and cemeteries. Today some belong to the city of Venice, while others are privately owned. One has become a luxury hotel. Some, such as San Michele, are easily accessible, while others have been abandoned to decay.

The 7.6 sq km of the *centro storico* today wasn't always there. The islands that together formed Rivoalto were a fraction of the area now covered. The very shallowness of the lagoon allowed

Of Venice's 20 million visitors a year, 13 million are 'hit-and-run' tourists who come for the day.

We can't stop them coming. But we will do everything we can to reduce the phenomenon, to make access to the city more difficult. We want quality tourism and tourists who spend at least a night or two in the city.

Many visitors complain about the cost of public transport.

Friends of Venice should think of the high fares as their contribution to the upkeep of the city. Venice has maintenance costs that cannot be compared with any other city. Does anyone realise that this is the only inhabited lagoon in the world?

Advice for visitors who want to really get to know Venice?

Be intelligent and not a mass of Pavlovian mice marching behind an umbrella! Venice is not just Rialto and San Marco. Visit San Pietro in Castello, Giudecca, La Madonna dell'Orto. This is a city, not a museum. Go and visit other, splendid parts of the city where, while an army is camped in Piazza San Marco, you can have a wonderful, peaceful day! The same goes for museums. It's not just about Palazzo Ducale and the Gallerie dell'Accademia. How can you not visit, for instance, the Museo del Settecento Veneziano?

How has the city changed?

When I was a child, 15,000 people worked at the Giudecca and thousands at the Arsenale. Venice was an industrial city. No-one can imagine that, at the end of each day, sirens would wail and an exodus of men in overalls would head across to Venice. The last Giudecca factories closed in the 1960s.

What do you do in your free time?

I try to read, I try to do my real work, which is *not* being the mayor.

Would you live elsewhere?

Are you joking? I'd move to Paris or New York tomorrow. I like Spain a lot. I go to Barcelona often, and Madrid. In Italy, I lived in Rome for five years and in Milan and was very happy.

London?

I don't like London.

You don't feel any particular attachment to Venice? You don't have to die here?

No, no. I can die in New York, Paris, Istanbul. I don't feel any great sense of roots. I believe I understand the feeling, but I don't have any morbid sense of attachment. Not to anything really. Rather a sense of distance. Without distance you can't be critical.

the next step. Along the edge of the deeper channels, the inhabitants began to expand their tiny islands. They did this by creating platforms on which to build new structures. Pine pylons were rammed into the muddy lagoon floor, then topped by layers of Istrian stone. The action of the sea water on the wood caused a process of mineralisation that hardened the structure, while the upper stone layers were impervious to the tides. It was an ingenious solution and the method has remained pretty much the same to the present day.

The lagoon, however, is under threat. The digging of a major transit channel for tankers in the 1960s and other interventions have radically altered natural flushing mechanisms. This and overfishing put pressure on fragile marine life. And the rush of water from the sea into the lagoon through the deep channel is a big part of Venice's tidal problems. The creation of the Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico (Mose; Experimental Electromechanical Module) moveable barriers at the lagoon entrances will, according to many, lead to further powerful inflows of seawater (see the boxed text, p32).

The blatant disrespect of motorboat drivers for lagoon speed limits causes *moto ondos* (wave motion), the damaging waves that eat away at Venice's buildings but also destroy the *barene* (mud banks) that help keep the lagoon alive. Giant cruise ships also cause wave damage. Huge sums are spent on preserving the *barene* – but little is done to bring the boat drivers to heel.

Water pollution has also long been a major problem. For decades, the petro-chemical plant and oil refinery of Porto Marghera spewed pollutants directly into the lagoon. Much is now passed through purification plants. Little has been done, however, about civilian waste dumped into the lagoon from the cities and towns around and in it. Since 1930, it is estimated that lagoon water transparency has dropped 60%. A fifth of birdlife has been killed off, half of local flora and as much as 80% of lagoon flora.

Until the years after WWII, the Adriatic Sea's tidal currents flushed the lagoons and kept the canals relatively clean (so clean that Venetian kids played in them until the end of the 1950s).

A SINKING CITY

Venice can be flooded by high tides. Known as *acque alte*, these mainly occur between November and April, flooding low-lying areas of the city such as Piazza San Marco. Serious floods are announced several hours before they reach their high point by 16 sirens throughout the city and islands. Although there is nothing new about the phenomenon (disastrous floods have been recorded since at least the 13th century), the wailing of the sirens is a common part of the Venetian winter.

There are three main types of flooding: that caused by tides that the Modulo Sperimentale Elettromeccanico (Mose; Experimental Electromechanical Module) flood barriers project is aimed to control; waters flowing back up drain pipes; and water filtering up from underground. These latter two problems are caused by heavy rain.

When floods hit, buy a pair of *stivali di gomma* (Wellington boots or gumboots) and continue sightseeing. *Passarelle* (raised walkways) are set up in Piazza San Marco and other major tourist areas of the city (you can pick up a map of them at the tourist office), and the floods usually last only a few hours. If the flood level exceeds 1.2m you can be in trouble, as even the walkways are no use then. For lesser floods, the walkways are no longer needed as many streets have been raised in the past few years.

Since 1900 Venice has sunk by more than 23cm (some claim the real figure is much higher – anything up to 60cm), partly due to rising sea levels and partly due to subsidence. Climate change could cause a global rise in sea levels of 40cm to 60cm by 2100, which would make the city uninhabitable if no preventative measures were taken. Floods have become increasingly common and even occur out of the usual wet season.

After years of debate, the controversial plan to install mobile flood barriers (known as the Mose project) at the main entrances to the lagoon began in 2003 and is scheduled for completion in 2012. Around the Malamocco lagoon entrance (the main shipping lane into the lagoon), works include a semicircular breakwater to reduce the effect of high seas pushed up the Adriatic by southerly winds, and a lock for waiting ships while the barriers are up. In all, 78 mobile barrier gates are being installed, half of them in two sets at the northern Lido lagoon entrance. An artificial island (decried by ecologists as an eyecore) has been created to connect the two Lido barrier sets and will house the control buildings of the entire system.

The barriers will be activated when floods of 1.1m or more above mean sea level (which occur on average about five times a year) threaten the lagoon.

Many believe the system will not work at all and that other measures are required (many would start by filling the petrol-tanker canal).

The Mose project is the centrepiece of a wide series of measures aimed to protect the city. In 2003, work got underway to protect Piazza San Marco, one of the lowest and hence worst-affected spots in the city. The waterside has been raised to 1.1m above mean sea level and subterranean rainwater run-offs are being repaired. A layer of bentonite may also be installed below ground level to further seal off the surface from rising waters. Similar work is being done along parts of Riva degli Schiavoni. When all this is finished, perhaps the flood days in Piazza San Marco will be largely a memory.

But the dredging of a 14m-deep canal in the 1960s to allow oil tankers access to Porto Marghera changed the currents.

The lagoon's rising salt content (in some parts, the lagoon is now almost completely sea water) is corroding the foundations of the city's buildings (not to be confused with the city's pylon foundations, upon which the houses are built). Canalside buildings could start to collapse if nothing is done to combat the corrosion. Indeed, big problems have already revealed themselves. The Punta della Dogana has had to be shored up with injected cement. Gaping holes have appeared along some waterside walkways.

Air pollution caused by car and boat motor emissions is another problem. The sulphur is gradually effacing building decoration and eating into the stone of columns, foundation stones and the like.

The good news is that the operations in Porto Marghera have been reduced over the years and water is cleaner today than in the 1980s. Idealists dream of one day converting the entire Porto Marghera industrial complex into environmentally friendly terrain, with hi-tech parks and other projects. That is a way off yet, and in the meantime another threat remains the possibility of oil spills from the hundreds of tankers that continue to traverse the lagoon. One proposed solution is the creation of an offshore oil loading platform in the Adriatic, from which the oil would be pumped to Porto Marghera by underground pipeline.

As for the air pollution, in 2005 the first of four LPG stations was opened in the lagoon. Authorities hope that at least 20% of private motorboats will eventually switch to this cleaner

GONDOLAS & CO

There was a time when the only way to get about effectively in Venice was by boat. But things have gradually changed over the past few centuries as more and more canals and other waterways have been filled in and bridges have been added. Today Venice is really a pedestrian city and not, as often romantically imagined, a boat town. Of course, the canals are the only way to move goods around, but your average Venetian will walk to get from A to B. Only when they have to get from one end of town to the other will they bother with *vaporetti*, while the *traghetti* (commuter gondolas) come in handy for crossing the Grand Canal at strategic points and cutting down walking detours to bridges.

So mucking about in gondolas is nowadays largely a tourist activity. Back in the 16th century someone calculated the number of gondolas in use at 10,000. It would be interesting to know how they worked it out. At any rate, considerably fewer ply the canals today.

Gondola owners used to paint their vessels every colour of the rainbow, and those with money to spare went to enormous lengths to bedeck them with every imaginable form of decoration. Finally, the Senato decided in 1630 that this was getting out of hand and decreed that gondoliers could paint their vessels any colour they wanted as long as it was black. Nothing has changed since.

No-one knows the origin of the term 'gondola', but it seems probable that it came from the Near East. These people-movers don't just come in the standard size you see every day on the canals; special ones come out to play for regattas. They include the *dodsona* (with 12 oarsmen), the *quatordesona* (14 oarsmen) and the *disdotona* (18 oarsmen). The *gondolino da regata*, or racing gondola, is longer and flatter than the standard model.

In times past the construction and maintenance of all these vessels required the expertise of the *squerarioli*, master carpenters and shipbuilders, who often came from the mainland (as that is where the timber came from). *Squeri*, the small-scale shipyards where they carried out their trade, once dotted the city. By 1612 the *squero* near the Chiesa di San Trovaso (Squero di San Trovaso; Map pp76–7) employed 60 masters and scores of apprentices, who built not only gondolas but also trading vessels. Run by the Della Toffola family and easily the most visible (and photographed) in Venice, it still does brisk business today. Only two other traditional *squeri* exist in Venice proper, that of the *Tramontin family* (Squero di Daniele Tramontin; Map pp76–7; Calle della Chiesa, Dorsoduro 1542) and, virtually next door, *Bonaldo* (Map pp76–7; Calle del Balastro, Dorsoduro 1545). The last great gondola builder, Nedis Tramontin, died in February 2005, but his son Roberto is keeping the family tradition alive. A further two relatively new *squeri* operate in Giudecca.

Making a good gondola is no easy task – seven types of wood are employed to make 280 pieces for the hull alone. Also, it has to be asymmetrical. The left side has a greater curve to make up for the lateral action of the oar, and the cross section is skewed to the right to counterbalance the weight of the gondolier.

Nowadays, a master craftsman can build a gondola in about a month. Your standard model costs from €20,000. If you want more fancy ornament, the price starts to rise. A really 'pretty' gondola can cost more than €50,000. A newly arrived gondolier, however, will satisfy himself with a simple, second-hand vessel to get started in the business. A gondola will last 20 to 30 years and, if it's well made, often longer.

Against the Tide

In March 2007, a 35-year-old German, Alexandra Hai, stirred the waters by winning a signal discrimination court case over the guild of gondoliers. For 10 years she had trained as a gondolier, and three times sat (and failed) gondoliering tests. The *Istituzione per la Conservazione della Gondola e la Tutela dei Gondolieri* (the guild whose exclusively male members include 425 licensed gondoliers and 175 substitutes) claims 'she can't row'. She accuses the guild of male chauvinism (her being a non-Venetian doesn't help) and rigging the tests.

Before the court case, Hai had won some unexpected support. One of the city's historic rowing champions, Gianfranco Vianello (known as Crea), had helped Hai and declared: 'She rows better than some licensed gondoliers.' A hotel organisation, JM International, and the count Girolamo Marcello had also stepped in. The count took Hai on as his private gondolier (*gondolier de casada*, in Venetian) in the style of noblemen of the past. And JM International employed her in 2006 as a private gondolier for their hotels. Months later, the town hall introduced a new regulation stopping hotels from using private gondoliers, saying that the gondoliering tradition of Venice must be protected against illegal gondoliers like Hai, who had failed the official tests. This regulation failed to stand up in a Milan court and Hai won the right to continue ferrying hotel passengers on the chain's private gondolas. The Venice town hall vowed to take the issue to higher courts and, in any case, the decision did not allow Hai to become a public gondolier.

fuel by 2009. In 2005, a prototype hydrogen-powered vaporetto was unveiled, although when such boats might go into service is anyone's guess.

A plan for a [Parco Regionale di Interesse Locale della Laguna Nord](http://www.parcogunavenezia.it) (www.parcogunavenezia.it in Italian), a kind of natural park, was approved in 2003, although little has happened since and even its delineation remains a mystery. With so much of the area actually inhabited, the idea presents problems, but the mere approval for the creation of such a park is a hopeful sign for the future of the lagoon.

If the lagoon and the many related environmental issues interest you, pop into [Punto Laguna](#) (Map pp62–3; ☎ 041 529 35 82; www.salve.it; Campo Santo Stefano, San Marco 2949; 🕒 2.30–5.30pm Mon–Fri). It has a range of brochures, some in English, as well as videos and computers on which to search out specific information.

ARCHITECTURE

In few places can it be claimed that the entire city is one panoramic work of art. There seems barely a building in Venice that does not contain hundreds of years of precious historical testimony. Of course, much changed down the centuries. A great deal of the city's early Romanesque and Byzantine buildings were swept away to make room for Gothic splendours. Napoleon's arrival in 1797 resulted in the loss of countless buildings. A surprising amount of new building was done throughout the 20th century, although many high visibility projects were stopped in their tracks.

Of the early centuries in the life of Venice, no visible sign remains. The bulk of the city's surviving architectural testimony dates from the 11th century.

VENETO-BYZANTINE

East was West. That Venice stood apart from the rest of Italy is never clearer than in the city's monuments, whose inspiration is a mixture of Western and Byzantine influences. The obvious starting point is not in Venice at all, but on the island of Torcello. While Venice proper was still a motley collection of muddy refugee settlements, Torcello was a booming focal point. Its people raised the Cattedrale di Santa Maria Assunta (p114), a singular lesson in cross-cultural experimentation. Essentially following the Byzantine style that can be seen in the basilicas of Ravenna, its builders also appear to have been influenced by Romanesque developments to the west. The iconostasis separating the central nave from the presbytery was a prime feature of Eastern Orthodox churches. The apses (dating to the 7th and 9th centuries) appear distinctly Romanesque. Both Byzantine and Romanesque buildings took much of their inspiration, directly or indirectly, from the Roman basilica model. Indeed, the English student of Venetian architecture, John Ruskin, threw the two together and spoke rather of Eastern

(or Byzantine) Romanesque and Western (or Lombard) Romanesque.

The real treasures of Santa Maria Assunta are inside. Craftsmen from Ravenna created extraordinary mosaics, including the 12th- to 13th-century *Madonna col Bambino* (Madonna and Child) in the semidome of the central apse. Some art historians rate this work more highly than anything done in Constantinople itself. At the other end of the church, Byzantine and local artisans created the blood-chilling mosaic depicting the *Giudizio Finale* (The Last Judgement).

Use of mosaics dates from Roman times and continued under the Byzantine Empire. In Venice the use of a gold background became the norm. Nowhere is that clearer than in the dazzling décor of the city's star attraction, the Basilica di San Marco (p61).

This also started off as a three-nave basilica when founded in the 9th century to house the remains of St Mark. Later, two wings were added to create a Greek-cross form, again a Byzantine idea (and based on the Church of the Holy Apostles in Constantinople). To the casual observer the clearest signs of its Eastern form are the five domes – add

a couple of minarets and you could think yourself in Istanbul. Less visible from the outside, but still another characteristic that separates the basilica from Western churches, is the narthex (or atrium) wrapped around the front and side of the church up to the arms of the cross.

The basilica, with bits added and redone over the centuries, is a hodgepodge. Romanesque elements appear in the main entrances, and Gothic and even Renaissance contributions demonstrate the difficulty of easily categorising such monuments, altered over centuries.

ROMANESQUE

The Romanesque style, the architectural expression of Western Europe's reawakening in the 9th century, emerged in the Lombard plains and spread across much of Italy, to France, northeast Spain and later Germany and England. Over the four or so centuries that the style dominated European building, many local variants emerged. The difference between the modest stone chapels of Catalonia (Spain) and the marble coated splendours of rich Tuscan churches bears witness to that diversity.

Romanesque is easily enough identified by a few basic characteristics. The exterior of most edifices bears little decoration and they tend to be simple, angular structures. In the case of churches in particular, the concession to curves comes with the semicylindrical apse, triple apse or even quintuple apse. Semicircular arches grace doorways, windows, cloisters and naves. Earlier Romanesque churches typically have three naves and no transept, although with time that changed as building methods improved and ambitions grew. Sculptural decoration also became more elaborate with time. The term Romanesque was coined in 1818 by a French archaeologist, Charles de Gerville, to underline its Roman inspiration and distinguish the style from later Gothic creations.

One reasonable surviving example is the Chiesa di San Giacomo dell'Orto (p88) in Santa Croce. Here you can see all the classic elements of the style. The pretty cloister at the Museo Diocesano d'Arte Sacra (p107), just east of the Palazzo Ducale, is a perfect specimen of Romanesque simplicity.

As the Gothic fad caught on, church authorities had few qualms about rebuilding churches, seeing little value in their humbler

top picks

NOTABLE BUILDINGS

- **Basilica di San Marco (p61)** The symbol of architectural cross-breeding in Venice, a treasure Byzantine treasure linking East and West.
- **Palazzo Ducale (p67)** A harmonious display of the best in Venetian Gothic.
- **Chiesa di Santa Maria dei Miracoli (p91)** A veritable chocolate box of the early Renaissance.
- **Ponte di Rialto (p86)** An elegant Renaissance bridge.
- **Arsenale (p98)** A sprawling complex and once the greatest shipyards in all Europe.
- **Chiesa di San Giorgio Maggiore (p111)** Palladio's most visible showpiece in Venice.
- **Libreria Nazionale Marciana (p70)** A homage to classical learning by Sansovino.
- **Ca' Rezzonico (p80)** One of the most striking noble houses in Venice open to visitors.
- **Chiesa di Santa Maria della Salute (p80)** A glorious baroque bastion.
- **Chiesa dei SS Giovanni e Paolo (p99)** The city's grandest Gothic church.

Romanesque predecessors. Oddly enough, the bell towers that stood beside them were sometimes spared (for instance the Chiesas di San Giacomo dell'Orto and Sant'Aponal). A stark example is the Chiesa di San Domenico in Chioggia, where the present church was built in the 18th century next to a tower raised in 1200!

GOthic

The Gothic style (the term was coined during the Renaissance) was born in and around Paris in the 12th century, largely out of architectural ambition. The desire to build larger, higher places of worship led to the use of a variety of engineering tricks such as buttresses, flying buttresses, new methods of vaulting and so on. The style spread slowly and did not have the universal appeal in Italy that it won elsewhere in Europe. As with Romanesque, styles changed markedly from one place to another.

By the early 14th century, Gothic winds prevailed in Venice, although the more sensual Byzantine aesthetic (which had some points in common with Romanesque) continued to inform artistic and architectural

RUSKIN'S RANT

John Ruskin, Victorian England's senior art and architecture critic, had visited Venice twice by the time he graduated from Oxford in 1842. Inspired by what he found in this 'paradise of cities', he penned his 450,000-word *The Stones of Venice* in the 1850s. Touted as one of the great handbooks on the lagoon city, it is rather more: an impassioned and eloquent defence of the marvels of Gothic architecture over what he considered the sterile formality of the Renaissance. Indeed, in most contemporary abridged editions you find only a couple of chapters devoted to buildings in Venice (especially one on the Palazzo Ducale, which Ruskin thought one of his best pieces of writing). Even he realised that his three volumes were a trifle long to reach a wide audience and so published an abridged version in 1877. Various others have appeared since, each seeking to extract the essence of his rambling but lyrical treatise. Ruskin declared: 'I believe the architects of the last three centuries to have been wrong; wrong without exception; wrong totally, and from the foundation.' His advice to architects of his own age looking for inspiration: 'Let us cast out utterly whatever is connected with the Greek, Roman or Renaissance architecture, in principle or in form.'

thinking. One way of identifying Venetian Gothic is by looking at the windows. Where you see windows in clusters, with their tops tapering to a point, you can be reasonably sure the building you are looking at is Gothic (or a remake!). The ogive (pointed) arch is similar to those employed in France and Germany, but with a clearly Eastern flourish, elegantly tapered and often in the trilobate shape that is a hallmark of Venetian Gothic. The building techniques had been exported to Jerusalem and other European Crusader enclaves along what is today the Syrian, Lebanese and Israeli coast and there Eastern and Western styles had inevitably influenced one another. That much of Venice's commerce was with the Near East has had inevitable consequences on the city's building aesthetics.

The Palazzo Ducale (p67) is representative of Venice's unique approach to Gothic, known as *gotico fiorito* (flamboyant Gothic), or International or Late Gothic. The palace displays a mixed result, combining Gothic and other elements: building started in the early 15th century, with several extensions and then reconstruction after fires in the late 16th century. The graceful arcaded façades facing the Bacino di San Marco and the square are given a translucent quality by the use of white Istrian stone and pink Venetian marble (white and red were also the Byzantine imperial colours). The arches are traced out over two levels, typical of civilian Gothic building in Venice. Decoration is mostly restrained, but the carving on the Porta della Carta and the Arco Foscari are fine examples of the Gothic potential for intricacy and fantasy.

By the time work began on the Palazzo Ducale, the typical layout of the Venetian noble family's house had been firmly established. The main floor, known as the *piano nobile* (noble floor) or *portego*, formed a grand central hall, usually on the 1st floor. Its façade was opened up with an elegant series of windows. Topped by the typical ogive arches, they were bunched in twos or threes (and sometimes more), each element separated by a slender column.

The two greatest Gothic churches in Venice were built earlier, at the height of Gothic's hold. The Chiesa di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari (p87) was completed in 1443 (after a century's work), while the interior of the Chiesa dei SS Giovanni e Paolo (aka San Zanipolo; p99) was consecrated in 1430 (work

continued thereafter). Both are magnificent edifices on a Latin-cross plan.

The churches are interesting for several reasons. Their relative sobriety of external ornament underlines the fact that, throughout Europe, the Gothic style took many shapes and forms. These churches could not be further from the flying-buttressed creations such as Paris's Notre Dame. They also symbolised the rivalry between two of Christendom's most important orders, the Franciscans (who built the Frari) and the Dominicans (SS Giovanni e Paolo).

EARLY RENAISSANCE

The Renaissance cracked over Italian society like a burst dam. Revelling in the rediscovery of the greats of classical literature, philosophy, science and art, writers, thinkers and artists embarked on a frenzied study of the ancient and an impatient search for the new.

The 'rediscovery' of classical learning, and hence also building, would profoundly alter architectural thinking. The process began decades earlier in Florence and Venice was slow to react. When it finally did, there would be no looking back.

If Gothic churches soared high into the heavens, reminding people of their smallness compared with the Almighty, Renaissance grandeur spread laterally, luxuriating in the power of the human mind and the pleasure of the human eye. While tall Gothic spires might be topped by the cross, a building such as the Libreria Nazionale Marciana is low, flat-roofed and topped by statues of great men. It is a house of learning. Above all, the return to classical thinking implied in the Renaissance, with its submission to a strict order of perspective and proportion, appealed to logic and reason.

Of course, it is not as simple as that. Among the identifying signs in Venetian Renaissance building is a proclivity for spacious rounded arches on all levels (usually two but sometimes three storeys). Fluted half-columns often feature on the upper storey, but otherwise ornamentation is generally restrained. The classical triangular pediment borne by columns is another common touch, which is seen clearly at the front of Andrea Palladio's grand Chiesa di San Giorgio Maggiore (p111).

During this period, three of the city's master architects were from elsewhere. As

THE POWER OF PALLADIO

Although Palladio (1508–80) was active in Venice, the greater concentration of his work is in and around Vicenza. Palladio's name has worldwide resonance far beyond that of any of his contemporaries, largely because his classicism was later taken as a model by British and American neoclassicists. The White House in Washington, DC, owes much to Palladio.

Palladio is best known for his villas in the Venetian hinterland (see p228). Of them, La Rotonda (p231), just outside Vicenza, is among the most famous. The villas were built for local nobility or those well-to-do Venetians who had turned their backs on the sea. They were conceived with a double role in mind – pleasure dome and control centre over agricultural estates.

Steeped in the classicism of Rome that had inspired much Renaissance architecture, Palladio produced buildings rich in columns and triangular pediments and occasionally with a central dome (as in La Rotonda). Palladio's version of Renaissance architecture is often described as 'archaeological' due to his unwavering recourse to antiquity.

Palladio was made Venice's official architect on the death of Jacopo Sansovino in 1570. His single greatest mark on the city was the Chiesa di San Giorgio Maggiore (p111) on Isola di San Giorgio Maggiore. Even in the distance, seen from Piazza San Marco, its majesty cannot fail to impress. He also built the Chiesa del Redentore (p110) on Giudecca and the magnificent façade of the Chiesa di San Francesco della Vigna (p105).

It is no accident that Palladio received commissions to work his particular magic in such relatively isolated corners of the city. Bereft of significant surroundings, these grand churches, with their weighty columns, high domes and strong classical façades, command respect – and are best contemplated at a distance. What's more, the conservative authorities in Palazzo Ducale had no intention of letting him loose in central Venice. Palladio was no conservationist nostalgic and would have demolished half the city to rebuild in his modern style had he been given the chance.

Palladio died before finishing many of his projects. For their completion we are largely indebted to Vincenzo Scamozzi (1552–1616), who faithfully carried out their designer's plans. Scamozzi did his own thing, too, designing the Procuratie Nuove in Piazza San Marco (completed by Baldassare Longhena).

well as Palladio, there was Pietro Lombardo (1435–1515), from Lake Lugano in Lombardy. Chiefly a sculptor, his latter years were occupied with building. One pleasing result was the 1489 Chiesa di Santa Maria dei Miracoli (p91), which has the air of a marble jewellery box.

Bergamo-born Mauro Codussi (also known as Coducci; c 1440–1504) first set to work in Venice on the gracious Chiesa di San Michele on the island of the same name (p112). He was also responsible for the imposing semicircular remake of the Chiesa di San Zaccaria's (p104) façade, which he carried out from 1483. The bulk of the church is a Romanesque-Gothic mix but much of its International Gothic flavour (the apse for one is a good example) is the work of Antonio Gambello. Codussi crowned the façade with a grand semicircular front. Codussi also worked on the renovation of the Chiesa di Santa Maria Formosa (p105). Here he was in his element, creating a Renaissance model within the Veneto-Byzantine tradition. He adapted the original Greek cross to the Latin one and topped the whole with a main dome and two series of smaller domes. Codussi also built the 15th-century Torre dell'Orologio (p71) and several of the patrician families' grand *palazzi*, including Palazzo Vendramin-Calergi (p94).

LATE RENAISSANCE

In the 16th century, too, architects from elsewhere would continue to set the pace in Venice.

Jacopo Sansovino (1486–1570), whose real name was Tatti, was born in Florence and lived and worked there and in Rome. Michele Sanmicheli (1484–1559) was from Verona, but he also was drawn to Rome. The sack of that city in 1527 spurred them both to leave. Sansovino moved to Venice and Sanmicheli back home. Both remained from then on in the service of the Republic. Palladio (1508–80) was from Padua; see the boxed text, [above](#).

Sansovino, steeped in knowledge of Rome's classical architecture and named *proto* (the city's official architect) by the Procurators of St Mark, dominated the Venetian scene. He had a hand in 15 buildings, among them La Zecca (the Mint; p71), the Palazzo Dolfin-Manin on the Grand Canal (p135), Palazzo Corner (Ca' Grande; p124) and the Chiesa di San Francesco della Vigna (p105).

Perhaps the most prominent testimony to Sansovino's work in Venice is his Libreria Nazionale Marciana (aka Biblioteca di San Marco, or Libreria Sansoviniana in memory of its creator; p70). This seat of learning boasts an arcade of Doric columns on the ground floor topped by another arcade of Ionic columns

on the floor above. The whole is crowned by a line-up of statues. Sansovino also created the Loggetta at the base of the Campanile (p66) and the Scala dei Giganti in the Palazzo Ducale (p67).

Sansovino's most ambitious project, thankfully, never came to fruition. He wanted to turn Piazza San Marco into a Roman Forum.

Sanmicheli's main contribution to La Serenissima's 'skyline' was Palazzo Grimani (built 1557–59; p129), a grand edifice with a triumphal arch and an imperial Roman feel that today houses the city's appeal court. Otherwise, the Republic's leaders kept him busy principally engineering defence works for the city and Venice's scattered possessions. In the lagoon his most important defence accomplishment was the Forte Sant'Andrea (p118), also known as the Castello da Mar (Sea Castle).

BAROQUE & NEOCLASSICISM

The 17th century in the Venetian building industry was dominated by Baldassare Longhena (1598–1682), who stepped into the role as the city's official architect. A master of baroque, which took to florid ornament in seeming reaction to what some plainly considered the austerity of the Renaissance, Longhena cannot be said to have fallen for the most extreme of its decorative excesses.

His masterpiece is the Chiesa di Santa Maria della Salute (p80), the great dome of which dominates the southeast end of the Grand Canal and not a few Venetian postcards. An octagonal church, its classical lines are a reminder of Palladio, but the sumptuous external decoration, with phalanxes of statues and rich sculpture over the main entrance, shows where Longhena was headed. To see where he ended up, you only need to look at the opulent façade of giant sculptures of the Ospedaletto (p105).

Giuseppe Sardi (1630–99) stepped into Longhena's shoes as Venice's official architect and built the Chiesa dei Scalzi (p96).

In Venice's last century of independence, neoclassicism came into vogue. This return to classical lines, a kind of rediscovery of the Renaissance's rediscovery of Antiquity, but with little of the creative zest or fantasy, well reflected the conservative atmosphere that pervaded much of Europe in the 18th and 19th centuries. It produced results that often

can be seen as little more than retro-bombast. One of the senior names of the period was Giorgio Massari (c 1686–1766). Inspired by Palladio, his more lasting works include the Chiesa dei Gesuati (p82), Palazzo Grassi (p71) and the completion of Ca' Rezzonico (p80) on the Grand Canal.

In the second half of the century, the two main figures were Giovanni Scalfarotto (1690–1764) and Tommaso Temanza (1705–89). The former built the Chiesa di San Simeon Piccolo (p127), while the latter was above all a theoretician.

The arrival of Napoleon in 1797 brought violent winds of change. Under him, Giovanni Antonio Selva (1753–1819) was commissioned to erect the Ala Napoleonica (see Museo Correr, p70), demolishing the Chiesa di Geminiano (by Sansovino) to make way for it. The architect was kinder to another church, redoing the façade of the Chiesa di San Maurizio (see Museo della Musica, p74). Napoleon had an entire district with four churches bulldozed to make way for the Giardini Pubblici (p106) and Via Garibaldi (the name was applied in 1866) in Castello. The roll call of churches across the city to simply disappear under Napoleon is breathtaking: Sant'Angelo, San Basilio, Santa Croce, Santa Maria Nova, Santa Marina, San Mattio, San Paterniano, San Severo, San Stin, Santa Terzina, San Vito and more. All that remains, if that, is their names.

THE 20TH CENTURY

The century opened with a burst of activity on the Lido, with the construction of grand hotels, including the fanciful Byzantine-Moorish Excelsior (Giovanni Sardi, 1898–1908). One of the brightest jewels of Art Nouveau (or Liberty as it is known in Italy) inventiveness is the Hungaria Palace Hotel (p116), designed by Guido Sullam. Art Nouveau, a movement born in France and Belgium, was inspired by Japanese art, nature and past styles. The joyous use of 'poor' materials such as iron, ceramics and stained glass in decoration, a free rein on the imagination of architects and, in many countries, the search for a new national architectural expression, fuelled this brief flame of creation across Europe from the late 19th to the early 20th centuries.

In the 1930s, a more functional neoclassicism of the kind that went down well with the Fascists lay behind the Palazzo del Cinema and former Casinò (the latter is now used for congresses),

built in under a year in 1937–38. That was double-quick time for structures that, in those days, were remarkable in their concept and used for staging grand congresses. The present Ponte dei Scalzi and Ponte dell'Accademia (p74) went up in the 1930s too.

Many new buildings never left the drawing board. A design for a magnificent building on the Grand Canal by Frank Lloyd Wright (1953), Le Corbusier's plans for a hospital in the area of the former Macello Comunale in Cannaregio (1964) and Luis Kahn's Palazzo dei Congressi project for the Giardini Pubblici (1968) are among projects never to have left the drawing board.

That said, the common misconception that virtually nothing has changed in Venice since the late 18th century couldn't be further from the truth. Fully one third of all buildings in Venice have been raised *since* 1919!

The best known of Venice's modern architects was Carlo Scarpa (1906–78). He designed the entrance to the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia (Map pp140–1) in Santa Croce, one of the country's prime architecture schools, and redesigned the inside of several museums, most notably the Palazzo Querini Stampalia (p103). He also worked on pavilions for the Biennale in Castello from 1948 to 1978.

A handful of strangely out-of-place developments, such as the extension of the Hotel Danieli (p207), the entrance to the Bauer hotel

(p201) and, worst of all, the exceptionally ugly Cassa di Risparmio di Venezia bank on Campo Manin (Map pp62–3) seem quite inexplicable, given the tendency down the years to knock back other modern and more innovative projects.

THE PRESENT DAY

Venice, a labyrinth of canals, tight streets and urban-planning restrictions, leaves little room for innovation. But lately the city appears to have been bitten by some kind of design flea – with notably little progress, however.

The Ponte di Calatrava saga (see the boxed text, below) has become the biggest soap opera in town, seemingly timed perfectly to coincide with the long-delayed completion of the rebuilding of the Teatro Fenice, another intrigue that lasted years after fire gutted the historic theatre in 1996. Many Venetians wish the Fenice had been rebuilt as a sparkling modern theatre rather than painstakingly restored.

The city decided in April 2007 to entrust French magnate and modern art collector, François Pinault, with the creation of a new contemporary art museum in the Dogana da Mar buildings at the Punta della Dogana. The former customs offices were vacated in 2002 and several museum ideas had emerged and been strangled at birth.

Urban renewal projects in Venice abound, although many are painfully slow to get off the

A BRIDGE TOO FAR

The Ponte di Calatrava (p90), designed by Spaniard Santiago Calatrava, between Piazzale Roma and Ferrovia, is an elegant and airy bridge of glass and steel, a smallish leap into the 21st century, but what an effort to get it into place! Already a source of controversy because of its apparent superfluity, the proverbial poo hit the fan when it was revealed in March 2007 that design faults would hold up completion. After countless false starts, the structure was finally put in place in 2007.

Did Venice really need a fourth bridge over the Grand Canal, however slick? Until the 19th century the city did quite nicely with just one, the Ponte di Rialto. Folks crossed at other points (as some still do) with *traghetti* (commuter gondolas). Still, the Austrians figured a couple more bridges would be useful, especially with the arrival of the train era. And so they raised two iron ones at Accademia (1854) and the Chiesa dei Scalzi (near the train station, 1858). The latter was then replaced in 1934 with a more solid-looking stone-and-marble effort, while the Accademia bridge was replaced in the same year by the present, supposedly temporary, timber version.

Venetians weary of the Ponte di Calatrava (which at that point still hadn't been raised) saga were informed breathlessly in 2007 by the mayor, Massimo Cacciari, that a replacement would be commissioned for the Accademia bridge. It would be financed through private sponsoring (the sponsors are yet to be found) and possibly rebaptised with the sponsor's name.

The best known bridge of all is one of the smallest of the lot, the Ponte dei Sospiri (Bridge of Sighs), which connects the Palazzo Ducale with the Prigioni Nuove (New Prisons).

Venice counts around 410 bridges, in all shapes, sizes and ages. Once many had no form of handrail. Only one survives in this state today: the little dead-end at the junction of Fondamenta di San Felice and Fondamenta della Misericordia in Cannaregio near the Scuola Nuova Misericordia (p147).

A WINDOW ON WORLD ARCHITECTURE

Not a great deal of spectacular new building goes on in Venice, but every two years it is *the* place to be to see what is going on elsewhere on the planet at the **Biennale Architettura**, which has been held to growing acclaim in alternation with the main art Biennale since 1980. In 2006 the palette of these expositions and debates was broader than ever, ranging from one display on architectural styles in Switzerland's Ticino region through to a photographic study of the Brazilian *favelas* (shantytowns) or a look at micro-cities in Taiwan to a major presentation on 'Cities. Architecture & Society', with multimedia studies of 16 major cities around the world. The event attracts more than 100,000 visitors and has become a major international showcase for architectural thinking now and into the future.

ground. Much former industrial land in the Giudecca has been transformed into housing and commercial space (and the extraordinary Molino Stucky carcass has been turned into a megacomfort Hilton hotel). The island of

Tronchetto is to be transformed with fair space, offices, produce markets and more. Plans are afoot to completely overhaul the Arsenale, already partly used for exhibitions.

On the Lido, plans for a brand-new conference and cinema complex to host the Mostra del Cinema were approved in 2007. Under increasing competition from the Rome film festival, the Venice event is in desperate need of a modern stage, but it will still be years before building begins.

Outside the city, Frank Gehry got the go-ahead around 2003 to transform Marco Polo airport with his Venice Gateway project, his first commission in Italy. A series of buildings seemingly half-covered in billowing drapes (or spinnakers according to the official interpretation) and what might pass for rigging will symbolise the air, the sea and the dynamism of the Veneto region. The process of getting started has been anything but dynamic, with a promise of the €17 million in funds from the town hall only coming in 2007. The capacity of the airport will also be doubled, but talk of a rail link between the airport and central Venice beneath the lagoon seems to have been shelved.

THE ARTS

Venice was by tradition a city of practical people – merchants interested above all in the business of trade. This is not to say they were aesthetically indifferent; the reality is quite the opposite, as is evident in its periods of artistic greatness.

VISUAL ARTS

Venice's artistic golden era coincided with its expansion across northeast Italy. It was a happy combination, for as Venice became the capital of a considerable land empire it attracted artists from its newly acquired territories. All of this happened as the winds of the Renaissance finally began to blow over the region in the first half of the 15th century. Many of the greatest names in Venetian art did not come from Venice, and many moved around in search of patrons, so that much of their work was either produced in other cities or has found its way to distant collectors' homes and galleries.

The arrival of Napoleon in 1797 was a disaster. In the years of his Kingdom of Italy (1806–14) he and his forces systematically plundered Venice and the region of their artistic treasures. Many were whisked away to Paris, while countless others were sold off at hasty auctions. Venice sank into provincial obscurity.

Things improved after Venice joined the newly unified Italy in 1866 and still further in the 20th century, when Venice produced some of the country's more outstanding painters and sculptors.

The high notes of the art scene today come largely from outside Venice, particularly in the form of the temporary shows of the Biennale Internazionale d'Arte (Biennial International Art Exhibition; p18), which have kept Venice on the international contemporary art circuit since the late 19th century.

The arrival at Palazzo Grassi (p71) in 2006 of the private collection of François Pinault is seen by many as an important step in making Venice a permanent pole of contemporary art. Temporary shows are one thing, but art lovers are keenly aware that little of the world's art business takes place in Venice. The Peggy Guggenheim Collection got the ball rolling, and Pinault will further establish himself in the city as he turns the Dogana da Mar buildings in Dorsoduro into a new contemporary art museum. Some of his vast collection will certainly go on show there, but more importantly, the city will gain a new, prestigious permanent exhibition space for contemporary art. Already, Monsieur Pinault has let it be known that he would welcome combined initiatives with the Guggenheim museum and the Biennale.

PRELUDE

Before the Renaissance, Venice followed a largely pedestrian trail. The glory of its mosaic tradition (Venetian mosaicists, steeped in the training of masters from Byzantium, worked in cities across the northern half of Italy) dominated the Middle Ages, and the likes of Paolo Veneziano (c 1300–62), perhaps Venice's most notable Gothic-era artist, could not break free from the Byzantine mould. His *Madonna col Bambino* (Madonna and Child; Gallerie dell'Accademia, p75) is a perfect example. The almost expressionless face of the Virgin Mary and the Christ child inside the almond with a gold background are typically Eastern iconic touches, although the presentation of the gift-bearers reveal traces of a greater realism in step with developments in Gothic painting elsewhere in Italy.

Some of Venice's best Gothic sculpture is represented in the tombs of the dogi (leaders, dukes) Michele Morosini and Marco Corner in the Chiesa dei SS Giovanni e Paolo (p99). The latter was done by a Pisan, Nino Pisano (c 1300–68). Sculptors never achieved the renown of some of their counterparts elsewhere in Italy, notably Florence and Rome.

top picks

KEY WORKS OF ART

- **La Tempesta** (Giorgione, Gallerie dell'Accademia)
- **Assunta** (Titian, Chiesa di Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari)
- **Convito in Casa di Levi** (Veronese, Gallerie dell'Accademia)
- **Crocifissione** (Tintoretto, Scuola Grande di San Rocco)
- **Madonna col Bambino tra le Sante Caterina e Maddalena** (Giovanni Bellini, Gallerie dell'Accademia)
- **Processione in Piazza San Marco** (Gentile Bellini, Gallerie dell'Accademia)

Tombs of several dogi in the same church are among the city's most important Renaissance sculpture.

In the early 15th century, the bulk of painters at work in Venice (such as Gentile da Fabriano, Pisanello, Jacobello del Fiore and Michele Giambono) continued in International Gothic mode. Meantime, the real innovative impetus in painting came from the mainland. Tuscans such as Donatello and Filippo Lippi worked in Padua and influenced the work of Padua's Andrea Mantegna (1431–1506). Although Mantegna never worked in Venice, he became the conduit between that city and the fresh new Florentine artistic vision. He embraced the new idea of depicting perspective and injected a lifelike warmth and movement into his paintings.

The Renaissance was, in essence, a joyous rediscovery of classical models. They served as a launching pad to shoot away from the didactic but largely motionless world of Gothic art, itself an outgrowth of the still more instructive and almost exclusively religious Romanesque era.

This new wave brought another change. Although some Gothic-era artists had begun to sign their work, it was only with the Renaissance that painters and sculptors truly began to emerge from centuries of artisan anonymity. That said, artists continued to operate as small businesses, running workshops and often having only a supervisory role in the execution of many orders. For this reason, paintings are often attributed to an artist's workshop rather than the fellow himself. In some cases doubt remains over whose brushes

were used. Although no longer anonymous, most artists are known to us by sobriquets – Veronese was from Verona and Tintoretto was the 'Little Dyer' because his father was a tintore (dyer).

Various Venetian painters, among them Jacopo Bellini (c 1396–c 1470) and Murano-born Antonio Vivarini (c 1415–c 1480), came into contact with Mantegna, but it was Antonio's brother, Bartolomeo (c 1432–99), who picked up the baton. Altarpieces by him can be seen in the Chiesas Santa Maria Gloriosa dei Frari (the Frari; p87), San Giovanni in Bragora (p107) and SS Giovanni e Paolo (p99), as well as in the Gallerie dell'Accademia (p75). He filled his best and most lively paintings with a vivacious colour and crystal luminosity that were altogether new in Venice.

THE BELLINI BOYS & CO

Jacopo Bellini's sons Giovanni (1432–1516) and Gentile (1429–1507) proved less reticent about plunging into the new artistic wave than their father, who no doubt kept a keen eye on the order book and preferred to deliver what his clients wanted. Gentile had a clear eye for detail, evident in works such as *Processione a Piazza San Marco* (Procession to St Mark's Square; Gallerie dell'Accademia). A specialist portraitist in his early career, he was sent to Constantinople in 1479 to do Sultan Mehmet II's profile (now in London's National Gallery).

Giovanni shone out still more. The clarity of his characters, dominating their landscape backdrops, betrays Mantegna's influence, but Bellini extracts greater variety in tone and colour, creating a new softness and a meditative quality. He also experimented with oil, which would replace tempera (powdered pigments mixed with egg yolk and water). He learned this new technique from Antonello da Messina (c 1430–79), an artist who was working in Venice around 1475 and with whom Giovanni struck up a keen friendship. Giovanni's works are scattered across the globe, but some can be admired in the Gallerie dell'Accademia, Museo Correr (p70) and elsewhere in Venice.

The following generation bubbled with enthusiastic artists. Among them were Vittore Carpaccio (1460–1526), Lorenzo Lotto (c 1480–1556), Cima da Conegliano (c 1459–c 1517) and Giorgione (1477–1510), the last two from the provinces. Carpaccio has left us some wonderful scenes that give us clues as to what

top picks

ART GALLERIES

- Gallerie dell'Accademia (p75)
- Peggy Guggenheim Collection (p79)
- Ca' Pesaro (p83)
- Palazzo Grassi (p71)
- Ca' d'Oro (p91)

the Venice of his day looked like, but the most extraordinary works come from Giorgione. He eschewed the usual route of the workshops, wrote poetry and music, and danced to his own tune. Credited with inventing the easel and teaching Titian, Giorgione was a man out of time. He painted *La Tempesta* (The Storm; Gallerie dell'Accademia) without having first drawn his subject – a striking step into new territory.

THE GLORY

Venice might have been slow to catch on to the Renaissance, but with the dawning of the 16th century came the immortals.

Titian (Tiziano Vecellio; c 1490–1576) was a 'sun amidst the stars', as one admirer put it. Born at Pieve di Cadore and a student of Giovanni Bellini, Titian at first tended to follow the manner of his partner, Giorgione, but after the latter's death soon found his own style. He brought an unprecedented poetic approach to painting, full of verve and high drama. Confirmation of his status as leading artist of his day came in 1518 with the unveiling of his monumental *Assunta* (Assumption) in the Frari. His fame spread across Europe, and he executed portraits of the greatest leaders of his day, from Habsburg emperor Charles V to Francis I of France. Around 1540, Titian came into contact with the Florentines Giorgio Vasari and Pietro Aretino and began to infuse greater movement in the Mannerist style into his painting. Increasingly, his resort to a greater luminosity tended to lend his subjects a ghostlike quality that is far removed from the sharper and more heroic images typical of the Renaissance.

Little of his work remains in Venice. A few pieces adorn the churches of Santa Maria della Salute (p80), I Gesuiti (p94) and San Salvador (p72). His most poignant work is in the Gallerie dell'Accademia: the *Pietà* (the dead Christ supported by the Virgin Mary), intended for his burial chapel, was finished by Palma il Giovane. Titian was carried off by the plague before he could finish it.

Titian was a hard act to follow, but he had fierce competition from Venice's Jacopo Robusti, aka Tintoretto (1518–94), and Paolo Caliari, or Veronese (1528–88).

Tintoretto is regarded as the greatest of all Mannerists in Italy, going beyond Michelangelo's lead away from the more classical Renaissance, and right up with the singular El Greco in Spain. Indeed the latter, who studied in

IN TITIAN'S STUDIO

We are told that, at some early point in Titian's career, the great Florentine master, Michelangelo, popped by his studio while visiting Venice. Known for his catty quips, Michelangelo is said to have remarked: 'He paints well, pity he can't draw!' Perhaps Titian took it to heart. The younger Tintoretto came to his studio as a student but after only 10 days, Titian sent him away. Did he feel threatened by the bravura of his young colleague's fiery style?

Venice in 1560, may have encountered Tintoretto. Some of their works show surprising similarities.

Mannerism is one of those twilight phases in the history of art, falling between the splendours of the late Renaissance and the excesses that would come with baroque in the 17th century. It is characterised in painting by a yearning to break with convention and a certain wilful capriciousness in the use of light and colour. Michelangelo and Raphael led the way, creating a tension between the faithful representation of what is seen that many Renaissance painters aimed for and a more interior, existential vision of the image.

In his earlier stages, Tintoretto's paintings are dominated by muted blues and crimsons and spectral figures. He also relished three-dimensional panoramas – see his *Crocifissione* (Crucifixion; Scuola Grande di San Rocco, p87) – and a swift, airy brush stroke. Much of his work is dominated by the dramatic use of shafts of light penetrating the dark. But his colours, and those of other Venetian artists of the time, sometimes display a unique brilliance that academics have recently attributed to the use of finely crushed glass in their pigments – an ingenious trick!

The Scuola Grande di San Rocco is a Tintoretto treasure chest, but also look for his masterpieces in the Palazzo Ducale (p67), the Gallerie dell'Accademia (p75), the Chiesa della Madonna dell'Orto (p91), Chiesa di Santa Maria del Giglio (p73), Chiesa di Santo Stefano (p73), Chiesa di Santa Maria della Salute (p80), Chiesa di San Polo (p88), I Gesuiti (p94) and elsewhere in the city.

Veronese, too, was busy in the Palazzo Ducale. His grand canvases are resplendent with lively colour and signal a penchant for architectural harmony. He liked to have all sorts of characters in his paintings, something that brought him uncomfortably close to the Inquisition. His *Ultima Cena* (Last Supper),

done for the Chiesa dei SS Giovanni e Paolo, included figures the Inquisitors found impious, including dogs and a jester. It is unlikely that Veronese's defence of freedom of artistic expression won the day. The Inquisition was viewed unkindly by La Serenissima and so the latter decided on the face-saving solution of proposing another title for the painting, *Convito in Casa di Levi* (Feast in the House of Levi; now in the Gallerie dell'Accademia), which was inserted in Latin (Fecit D Covi Magnum Levi) on a pillar in the forefront of the painting. You can change the name, but there is no disguising the fact that this is a particularly lively Last Supper!

Other important artists of this epoch include Palma il Vecchio (1480–1528), originally from Cremona, and his grandson Palma il Giovane (1544–1628). Various works have been attributed to the former, but the younger Palma was more prolific. He finished Titian's final work, the *Pietà*. The Oratorio dei Crociferi (p96) is jammed with his work.

Another busy family were the Da Ponte, aka Bassano because they were from Bassano del Grappa (p237). Francesco Bassano il Vecchio worked in the first half of the 16th century. Four of his descendants stayed in the family trade: Jacopo (1517–92), Francesco Bassano il Giovane (c 1549–92), Leandro (1557–1622) and Gerolamo (1566–1621). Of the lot, Jacopo stands out. His works can

be seen in his home town and the Gallerie dell'Accademia (p75).

ROCOCO & CITY VIEWS

The 18th century was marked by the steady decline of the Venetian Republic. In the arts, a handful of greats kept the flag flying before the end finally came.

Venice's greatest artist of the century and one of the uncontested kings of the voluptuous rococo style was Giambattista Tiepolo (1696–1770). He painted numerous ceilings in the churches and homes of grandees across Venice, filling these painted skies with grandiose worlds and agile characters wrought in new and surprising colour tones and wholly original perspectives. One might say his images constitute the dream of a new world.

Tiepolo lived most of his life in the lagoon city, but he spent his last years working for royalty in Madrid. You can see some examples of his work in the Chiesa dei Scalzi (p96), the Chiesa dei Gesuati (p82) and Ca' Rezzonico (p80). The Gallerie dell'Accademia has a fair smattering of paintings, too. Tiepolo's son, Giandomenico (1727–1804), worked with him to the end, returning to Venice after his father's death. Working in the last days of the Venetian republic, his art reflects the decadence and rot of a society that would collapse without a fight. Some

DIFFERENT STROKES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS

Always in search of the new, Albrecht Dürer (1471–1528) left his native Nuremberg for Venice in 1494. Word of an artistic rebirth (the Renaissance) had reached his ears, and more intriguing news of perspective and a rediscovery of the classical world. Of all the local artists he met, Giovanni Bellini in particular took him under his wing. Dürer returned to Germany in 1495 but could not get Venice out of his system, returning in 1505, this time much feted by the local German community. It has been said that these trips turned a Gothic painter into a Renaissance artist. Dürer also in no small degree set off what would later become quite a fashion, the pilgrimage from northern countries south to Italy in search of art, culture, light and inspiration.

The example was followed particularly by Anglo-Saxon artists and writers in the 19th century. Only now they came to capture their own images of the city rather than seek out local sages. William Turner (1775–1851) came three times (in 1819, 1833 and 1840), fascinated by the once-powerful merchant city that, like his native England, had built its greatness on its command of the sea. What stands out most in Turner's typically indistinct portraits of the city is his study of light. He painted views of the city at all times of day, capturing its spirit rather than its form. He once told John Ruskin that 'atmosphere is my style'. Ruskin loved it, but in London many critics loathed Turner's work. Nearly 40 years after Turner's last visit, American James Whistler (1834–1903) arrived in Venice in 1879, bankrupt and exhausted after a failed libel case brought against... John Ruskin. He stayed until the following year, rediscovering his verve and brush, painting the lagoon city prolifically, and returning to London with a formidable portfolio that re-established him.

Of all of the city's creative visitors, perhaps John Singer Sargent (1856–1925) was the most sedulous. Between 1880 and 1913 he was in Venice time and time again during extensive trips that took him and his canvases all over Italy. In 1908 Claude Monet turned up for a couple of months, and he too set feverishly to work, creating such memorable images as *Saint Georges Majeur au Crépuscule* (San Giorgio Maggiore at Dusk).

caricatures of his, now housed in Ca' Rezzonico, presage the Spaniard Goya and the Frenchman Daumier in their almost savage grotesqueness.

On a completely different note, Antonio Canal, also known as Canaletto (1697–1768), became the leading figure of the *vedutisti* (landscape artists). His almost painfully detailed *vedute* (views) of Venice, filled with light, were a kind of rich man's postcards. It is perhaps no coincidence that one gets the uncanny feeling that Canaletto was taking photos. In a sense, he was! Traditionally, artists had made more or less rough sketches of their subject and then done the painting in their workshops. Canaletto used a forerunner to the photographic camera, the *camera oscura*, to great effect. Light entered this instrument and reflected the image on to a sheet of glass, which Canaletto then traced. His eye for detail took in daily street scenes and people, and even the algae left on building basements by the fluctuating lagoon tides.

Many well-to-do visitors to 18th-century Venice took home such a souvenir. Canaletto was backed by the English collector John Smith, who lived most of his life in Venice, bringing the artist a steady English clientele. This led to a 10-year stint in London. His English country landscapes had a considerable impact on how English gardens were subsequently styled, as well as on 19th century painting.

Canaletto's success with foreigners was such that only a few of his paintings can be seen in Venice today, including one in the Galleria dell'Accademia (p75) and a couple in Ca' Rezzonico (p80).

Also fooling around with the *camera oscura* was Canaletto's nephew, Bernardo Bellotto (1721–80), who worked all over Europe but especially in the courts of Dresden, Vienna and Warsaw. His works have a more dramatic and less photographic style, with a strong dose of *chiaroscuro* (shadow and light) contrast. A couple of his paintings hang in the Galleria dell'Accademia.

Francesco Guardi (1712–93) became the Republic's chosen artist to paint official records of important events, such as the visit of Pope Pius VI. Guardi opted for a more interpretative, less photographic approach than Canaletto. His buildings almost shimmer in the reflected light of the lagoon. One of the few of his major works in Venice is *Il Bacino di San Marco con San Giorgio e la*

Giudecca (which is located in the Gallerie dell'Accademia).

One of the rare women artists to achieve renown at this time was Rosalba Carriera (1657–1757), whose pastel portraits of the great and the good across Europe won her fame from an early age. Carriera's works are on display in Ca' Rezzonico (p80) and the Gallerie dell'Accademia.

Born in Possagno, Antonio Canova (1757–1822) was the most prominent sculptor to emerge in late-18th-century Italy. He debuted in Venice but by 1780 had shifted to Rome, where he ended up doing most of his work. A few of his early forays, such as *Dedalo e Icaro* (Daedalus and Icarus), remain in Venice, in the Museo Correr (p70). You could also head for Possagno (see p239).

TO THE PRESENT

Few Venetians stood out after the Republic's fall in 1797. Francesco Hayez (1791–1882) started in Venice but spent most of his life in Milan, where his work ranged from a strict neoclassicism to the more sentimental Romanticism.

One of the more original artists of the years of Austrian occupation was Ippolito Caffi (1809–66), whose landscapes were infused with Romanticism.

The busiest time in Venetian 19th century painting came after Italian unity. Favouring landscape art, two dominant figures were Federico Zandomenighi (1841–1917) and Guglielmo Ciardi (1842–1917).

In the early 20th century a group of young Venetian artists started holding shows in Ca' Pesaro in protest against the 'official' art of the Accademia. Among their number was Gino Rossi (1884–1947), whose career took him from Symbolism to a growing interest in Cubism. The figures in his works seem stiff and unable to let out their emotions. He spent many years in psychiatric institutions, where he finally died. Another important figure of the Ca' Pesaro group was sculptor Arturo Martini (1889–1947), whose works seem to exude a natural vitality.

It is unlikely that any of these artists took too much notice of the rants by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876–1944), who headed up the Futurist art and literature movement and in 1910 cast packets of his manifesto from the Torre dell'Orologio. The Futurists embraced industry, technology and war in what they claimed to be a new art. Marinetti sug-

HOMECOMING

Gaspare Manos (b 1968) has come home. Descendent of a wealthy Venetian landholding family in Dalmatia (a part of the former Yugoslavia – mostly Croatia – that for centuries was Venetian territory and then part of united Italy from 1918 to 1945) and son of a UN diplomat, he was born in Bangkok, raised in Nairobi, Geneva and Athens, completed a PhD in economics at the London School of Economics and set up his own software company. His true love was, however, his art. A night never passed when he didn't paint or sculpt.

'One day a couple of years ago I finally lost it. I tossed my mobile phone into a bin on Tottenham Court Rd. That was it. I had lost everything. And so I came home to Venice.'

Home is an enormous frescoed apartment in a nobleman's palazzo near the Grand Canal off Campo Santa Maria del Giglio. Here hang some of his almost 4000 works. 'I have been all over the world but I wanted to come back here to centre and, in a certain sense, cut out the modern world.'

'My grandfather's family was one of the wealthiest in Dalmatia. The Austrian emperor, Franz Josef, would come to them for finance. They had a 38m sloop that was sunk by the British off Split during WWII. And from one day to the next in 1947, all their land was nationalised by Tito's communists.' And so they fled to Venice.

'Venice needs to get into contemporary art. Art sells. In November (2006) in New York, over US\$1.5 billion was exchanged in contemporary art sales. Why can't we have a piece of that? Venice was always a city of brokerage. Why can't we go from small-scale business to the international art brokerage scene?'

'I think Cacciari (the mayor) is trying to reposition Venice on the international art scene. Around the Salute area people are buying shops to turn into art galleries. Pinault has arrived with his collection. There's definitely something about to happen. And I think I am in the right place at the right time.'

'Venice will always be my base. But I love travel. I love Venice because I know I can leave. I have friends all over the world and I feel at home wherever I go. Venice is a death trap if you need Venice.'

'Venice is like a woman, and I am in love with her. But women can drive you crazy. What's the saying? Can't live with them, can't live without them! But as people say here: *Dio quanto xe bea* (God it's beautiful)!

gested that Venice (a 'magnificent sore of the past') should be wiped out and replaced with a vigorous new industrial city to dominate the Adriatic.

One of the few noteworthy painters to emerge since WWII is Emilio Vedova (1919–2006). Setting out as an Expressionist, he joined the Corrente movement of artists, who opposed the trends in square-jawed Fascist art. Their magazine was shut down in 1940. In the postwar years, Vedova veered towards the abstract. Some of his works can be seen in the Peggy Guggenheim Collection (p79) and the Galleria d'Arte Moderna (p83). Eventually a museum dedicated to his work will be created in the Magazzini del Sale in Dorsoduro. An interesting contemporary of Vedova was Giovanni Pontini (1915–70), a worker of humble origins for whom painting was, until the 1950s, more a passionate pastime than a way to make a living. His work ranged from landscapes to portraiture but doubtless his most striking works are the broad-brush images of workers, fishermen and other humble Venetians, done in dark emerald green tones.

Fabrizio Plessi (1940–), although born in Bologna, is seen by many Venetians as one of their own. He is known for his video art. Water is, appropriately, a central theme in

his installations and sculptures, for which he combines all sorts of materials (anything from iron to straw) with videos.

LITERATURE

Venice does not enjoy a senior place in the history of Italian letters and has only occasionally taken centre stage in the minds of great writers from abroad. The lagoon city's mysterious location has, however, generated several strands of entertaining detective stories.

IN THE LIFE OF THE REPUBLIC

Venice-born Marco Polo (1254–1324) was an adventurer and trader rather than a writer, but he had some tall tales to tell in his *Il Milione*, the story of his years in the Orient.

Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch; 1304–74), one of the 'big three' behind the birth of literary Italian in Florence, lived in Venice for some years, although he preferred Padua. He had already won fame for his sonnets in Italian but wrote much in Latin as well. Of the same trio, Giovanni Boccaccio dedicated the fourth tale of the second day of his *Decameron* to Venice. (Dante, the third of the big three and the biggest of them all, never set foot in Venice.)

top picks

LITERATURE

- **Night Letters** Robert Dessaix
- **The Comfort of Strangers** Ian McEwan
- **Death in Venice** Thomas Mann
- **The Wings of the Dove** Henry James
- **Watermark** Joseph Brodsky

One of the earliest Venetian writers of any importance was Leonardo Giustinian (1388–1446). A member of the Consiglio dei Dieci (Council of Ten) and author of various tracts in Latin, he is remembered for his *Canzonette* (Songs) and *Strambotti* (Ditties). They are a mix of popular verses wrought in an elegant Venetian-influenced Italian.

The shining literary light of early Renaissance Venice was Pietro Bembo (1470–1547), librarian, city historian, diplomat and poet, who in his *Rime* (Rhymes) and other works defined the concept of platonic love and, above all, gave lasting form to Italian grammar. Bembo created something of a fashion in Venice, and many others tried to emulate him, including a couple of high-society women, Gaspara Stampa (1523–54) and the courtesan Veronica Franco (1546–91), who treated the themes of love and eroticism in subtle fashion in her *Lettere Familiari a Diversi* (Family Letters to Various People) and poetry.

Bembo worked with Aldo Manuzio on a project that would help revolutionise the spread of learning – the Aldine Press. From 1490 on, Manuzio and his family became the most important publishing dynasty in Europe. He produced the first printed editions of many Latin and Greek classics, along with a series of relatively cheap volumes of literature, including Dante's *La Divina Commedia* (The Divine Comedy).

Playwright Carlo Goldoni (see p53) by far overshadowed the competition in the 18th century. The magistrate and part-time writer Giorgio Baffo (1694–1768) is known above all for his risqué dialect verse (he was a pal of Casanova's and particularly enamoured of the female behind), while Francesco Gritti (1740–1811) satirised the decadent Venetian aristocracy. The bulk of the latter's work is collected in *Poesie in Dialetto Veneziano* (Poetry in the Venetian Dialect).

MODERN TIMES

One of Italy's greatest poets, Ugo Foscolo (1778–1827) was born in Venice's overseas territories and arrived in Venice as a teenager. Caught up in revolutionary activity in the last years of the century, he wound up in exile in Switzerland and London.

Camillo Boito's 1883 short story *Senso* (Sense), a twisted tale of love and betrayal in Austrian-occupied Venice, was turned into a major film by director Luchino Visconti in 1954.

Meanwhile, foreign writers were discovering Venice. Early in the 19th-century parade were the romantic poets Lord Byron (1788–1824) and Percy Shelley (1792–1822), along with French writer George Sand (1804–76), who stayed at the Danieli with poet Alfred de Musset and immediately fell in love with a local doctor (fair enough, as Musset had picked up something unpleasant from the prostitutes in Venice's taverns!).

Henry James (1843–1916) set his *Aspern Papers*, a brief tale of a literary researcher determined to get his hands on an American poet's love letters from his aged and reclusive one-time lover, in the lagoon city in the 1880s. Weightier is *The Wings of the Dove*, in which the penniless Merton Densher foists himself on the ailing heiress Milly Theale in the romantic setting of Venice. The American author of *Moby Dick*, Herman Melville (1819–91), commented in his diary on his way through: 'Rather be in Venice on rainy day than in any other capital on fine one.'

The English novelist Edward Morgan Forster (1879–1970), better known for his Florentine introduction to *A Room With a View*, gave Venice a run in his first novel, *Where Angels Fear to Tread*. A young English widow flits off on the Grand Tour, marries an Italian (tut tut), dies tragically and leaves behind a young child being raised, much to the family's horror, as an Italian!

If you were to pick up just one piece of fiction concerning Venice, Thomas Mann's (1875–1955) absorbing *Der Tod in Venedig* (Death in Venice; 1912) should be it. The city itself seems to be the main protagonist, reducing Gustav von Aschenbach, its feeble human 'hero', to a tragic shadow.

Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961) was in maudlin form when he penned *Across the River and into the Trees* in post-WWII Venice. It is hard not to imagine Hemingway seeing himself in his Colonel Cantwell character, as

he mooches about between lagoon hunts and monosyllabic trysts.

A more mystical view of the city emerges in *Guida Sentimentale di Venezia* (Sentimental Guide to Venice), by mainland-born poet Diego Valeri (1887–1976).

In *Venezia - La Città Ritrovata* (Venice Revealed; 1998), Paolo Barbaro (Venetian by adoption) struggles to come to terms with the wintry lagoon city after several years' absence. In the latest wave of modern Italian literature is Tiziano Scarpa (1963–), a Venetian whose most recent work, *Amami* (Love Me; 1996), descends into the murky depths of the psychology of love and the self.

Better known internationally is Daniele Del Giudice, who has reeled off a series of novels set just about anywhere but Venice, including *Lo Stadio di Wimbledon* (Wimbledon Stadium) and *Mania*.

A modern hit was Ian McEwan's *The Comfort of Strangers*, an early novel (1981) in which an outsider rocks a marital boat in the unsettling setting (for couples!) of Venice.

The Russian-born American poet and essayist Joseph Brodsky (1940–96) was well bitten by the Venice bug and for 17 years kept coming back to the city. His melancholy love affair with the city is best expressed in *Watermark*.

Every night for 20 nights a man just diagnosed with an incurable disease writes a letter in Robert Dessaix's *Night Letters* (1997). The letters are written on a journey from Zurich to Venice, the terminus of the voyage and the setting of some of the elements of the story-telling, in which figures like Marco Polo and Casanova emerge. The reader is swept up in a whirlwind of past and present, tale and musing.

Daughter of Venice (2002), by Donna Jo Napoli, is an intriguing story of a rich young girl in 16th-century Venice. Sally Vickers' *Miss Garnet's Angel* (2002) is the twisting tale of a retired teacher and Communist who decides to set off and live in Venice for six months.

Several crime writers have found rich inspiration in Venice. Donna Leon's inspector Guido Brunetti resolves case after case in Leon's burgeoning series of detective stories. Try *A Venetian Reckoning*, *The Anonymous Venetian*, *Acqua Alta* and *A Sea of Troubles*. Michael Dibdin created another Venetian detective, Aurelio Zen, who tends to roam all over Italy. One book set in the detective's home town is *Dead Lagoon*.

John Berendt's *The City of Falling Angels* (2005) takes the fire that destroyed the Teatro

THE MADNESS OF EZRA POUND

The epicentre of the modernist movement, controversial American poet Ezra Pound (1895–1972) spent his last 10 years in Venice. His had been a turbulent life. Having chosen to live in southern Italy in 1924, he became a leading apologist for the Mussolini regime (frequently writing and broadcasting invectives against the US and world Jewry) and, in American eyes, a traitor. Having pleaded insanity to avoid a possible death penalty in the USA after the end of WWII, he spent 12 years in an asylum. Asked what he then thought of America upon his release, he quipped: 'America is a lunatic asylum.' He later moved to Venice. Here in the lagoon city he had published some of his earliest poetry in 1908.

La Fenice as its *leitmotif* in a story that is part fiction, part journalism and an interesting view on some aspects of contemporary (albeit largely expat) Venetian life.

MUSIC THE CLASSICS

Just because the first great names of Venetian music arose in the 17th century does not mean there was no music in Venice before. Church, court and popular music abounded, and some of it has been rediscovered. Massimo Lonardi, who plays the lute, has resurrected sounds of the past.

During the Renaissance, the centre of musical attention rested on the Cappella Ducale, which especially flourished under the 35-year directorship of the Flemish Adrian Willaert (1490–1562).

In the 17th century, as the state musical groups declined, a new phenomenon emerged. Four major orphanages, where some of those taken in were given a musical education, became the focal point for quality performances in the city.

The musical director of one such orphanage and Venice's greatest musical name was Antonio Vivaldi (1678–1741), born in Castello. A gifted violinist from an early age, he completed his first important compositions in 1711. By the time he died, he had left a vast repertory behind him; some 500 concertos have come down to us today. He was not simply prolific but also innovative, perfecting the three-movement concerto form and introducing novelties that allowed greater room for virtuoso displays. Surely his best-known

concerto is *Le Quattro Stagioni* (The Four Seasons).

Overshadowed by the genius of Vivaldi was Tomaso Albinoni (1671–1750), something of a dilettante, who nevertheless produced a small body of exquisite music. Notable are the *Sinfonie e Concerti a 5*. His single best-known piece today is the airy *Adagio in G Minor*, although this was in fact an arrangement written by his biographer in the early 20th century! Another important contemporary and far more popular at the time than Vivaldi was Bernardo Marcello (1686–1739), after whom the city’s conservatorium would later be named.

Bruno Maderna (1920–73), composer and conductor, was at the forefront of the avant-garde in 20th-century European classical music, along with composer Luigi Nono (1924–90).

OPERA

Claudio Monteverdi (1567–1643), born in Cremona, is the father of modern opera. He cut his teeth as a composer at the court of the Gonzaga family in Mantova (Mantua) and his *Orfeo* (Orpheus; 1607) has been acclaimed as the first great opera. Monteverdi’s relationship with the Gonzagas was unhappy, and he snapped up Venice’s offer to make him music director at the Basilica di San Marco in 1613.

Until 1637, opera and most chamber music were the preserve of the nobility, performed in private sessions. This changed in Venice, which threw open the doors of the first public opera houses. Between 1637 and 1700 some 358 operas were staged in 16 theatres scattered across a city that at the time boasted a population of 140,000. As the only composer with any experience in the genre, the elderly Monteverdi wrote his two greatest surviving works, *Il Ritorno di Ulisse al suo Paese* (The Return of Ulysses) and *L’Incoronazione di Poppea* (The Coronation of Poppea). In each, Monteverdi created an astonishing range of plot and subplot, with strong characterisation and powerful music. Although he was not Venetian, the city liked to consider him one of its own – he was buried with honours in the Frari.

A singer at the Basilica di San Marco under Monteverdi’s direction, Pier Francesco Cavalli (1602–76) went on to become the outstanding Italian composer of opera of the 17th century and wrote 42 operas.

top picks

CDS

- **Vivaldi: Four Seasons** Antonio Vivaldi (Boston Symphony Orchestra with Joseph Silverstein)
- **The Complete Concertos Opus 9 & Adagio for Organs & Strings** Tomaso Albinoni
- **Il Liuto a Venezia** (The Lute in Venice) Massimo Lonardi
- **Odissea Veneziana** (Venetian Odyssey) Rondò Veneziano
- **Venice Goes Ska Ska-J**

Baldassare Galuppi (1706–84) opted for the light touch and in so doing gave birth to a new genre, the *opera buffa* – comic opera. Although he composed more serious material and instrumental works, it was for pieces like *Il Filosofo di Campagna* (the Country Philosopher) that he achieved widespread popularity.

MUSIC IN VENICE TODAY

Venice’s scene is dominated by opera and classical concerts by top Italian and foreign companies, who maintain full programmes at La Fenice and Malibran theatres (p197).

On a cheesier note, baroque music groups regularly stage works by Vivaldi and company at various venues, mostly churches and other little-used religious locations, for tourists. One that has gone beyond that and produces its own compositions is **Rondò Veneziano** (www.rondoveneziano.com).

Young folk left utterly indifferent by these offerings seek solace in a small local music scene. Jazz, blues and rock can all be seen in Venice. Ciuke e I Aqarasa does a mix of reggae, ragamuffin and rock, or what they call reggae ‘n’ roll. For a ska variant, try Ska-J.

Venice and the surrounding area have also produced notable jazz musicians, such as Pietro Tonolo and Massimo Donà.

For reviews of live-music venues, see p195.

FILM

Back in the 1980s a film archive in Venice found that the city had appeared, in one form or another, in 380,000 films (feature films, shorts, documentaries and so on). However, the city has starred in its own right in surpris-

ingly few great flicks, tending rather to take bit parts.

From the early 1920s Venetians Othello and Casanova got their fair share of runs on the silver screen. A good one was the 1927 *Casanova* by Alexandre Volkoff.

As the German film industry collapsed in the wake of Hitler’s rise to power, mostly shifting to Hollywood, Venice began to get a bit of a run in German-made Hollywood films, too. Ernst Lubitsch’s *Trouble in Paradise* (1932) has a lot to answer for. In his studio re-creation of the lagoon city, Lubitsch has a gondolier (dubbed with the voice of Enrico Caruso) singing that great Neapolitan song *O Sole Mio*. So that’s where that constant tourist request came from!

Orson Welles had a go at *Othello* in 1952, a film he shot partly in Venice but mostly in Morocco. The antithesis of this was standard Hollywood schmaltz, of which *Three Coins in the Fountain* (1954), directed by Jean Negulesco, is a fairly telling example. A year later, Katherine Hepburn fronted a more substantial production, David Lean’s *Summertime*.

Morte a Venezia (Death in Venice), Luchino Visconti’s 1971 rendition of the Thomas Mann novel, has a suitably ashen-looking Dirk Bogarde in the main role of Aschenbach. Perhaps less well known, but a better film, is Federico Fellini’s *Casanova* (1977), starring Donald Sutherland, who was no stranger to Venice when he played Casanova. In 1973, he starred with Julie Christie in Nicolas Roeg’s *Don’t Look Now*. Based on a Daphne du Maurier novel, it shows Venice at its crumbling, melancholy best (or worst).

Venice made appearances in *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989) and Woody Allen’s *Everyone Says I Love You* (1996), while films set in the city include the disappointing screen version of Ian McEwan’s novel *The Comfort of Strangers* (1990), Oliver Parker’s *Othello* (1995), and Henry James’ *The Wings of the Dove* (1997), starring Helena Bonham-Carter. *Dangerous Beauty* (1998), directed by Marshall Herskovitz, is a raunchy and somewhat silly romp through 16th-century Venice seen through the eyes of a courtesan.

A charming Italian film, Silvio Soldini’s *Pane e Tulipani* (Bread and Tulips; 1999) charts a housewife’s unlikely escape from urban drudgery in central Italy to the canals of Venice, where she embroils herself in all manner of odd occurrences.

Venice stars in several flicks by the controversial filmmaker and erotophile, Tinto Brass.

Born in 1933, raised in Venice and trained as a lawyer (he has lived in Rome since the 1950s), Brass has directed a mountain of films, some teetering on a razor’s edge between serious cinema and porn. Whatever you make of his films, many agree that his vision of his hometown is among the most acute (if you can see past the sex, that is). His latest effort, *Monamour!* (2005), is vintage stuff. The title in Italian is a typical play on words, combining the French *mon amour* (my love) with the Venetian *mona* (a reference to the female genitals and also meaning fool).

On a rather different note, in 2004 Al Pacino starred as Shylock in Michael Radford’s big-screen adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*, which failed to meet expectations.

Almost 30 years after Donald Sutherland’s rendition, Casanova got another outing in 2005 with the Swedish director Lasse Hallström’s rather idiotic production of the same name, starring Heath Ledger.

More impressive was the latest James Bond effort, starring the new look Bond, Daniel Craig, in *Casino Royale* (2006), whose final extraordinary scenes are shot in Venice (and by computer simulation!).

For information on the Venice Film Festival, see p18.

THEATRE & DANCE

‘Oh God,’ Venetians groan as they peruse the programme at the city’s main theatre, the Teatro Goldoni (p197), ‘more bloody Goldoni!’ The 18th-century playwright Carlo Goldoni (1707–93) bestrides the Venetian stage much as William Shakespeare dominates the English world’s theatrical memory. Goldoni’s stormy life saw him moving from one city to another, at times practising law but dedicating most of his energies to the theatre. Especially from 1748 the prolific playwright wrote dramas and comedies at an extraordinary rate.

Goldoni single-handedly changed the face of Italian theatre, abandoning the age-old Commedia dell’Arte, with its use of masks, rigidity in storytelling and concentration on standard characters. This form of theatre had dominated the stages and public squares of Italy, and to a large extent France, for the previous couple of centuries, but Goldoni would have none of it. Instead, he advocated more realistic characters and more complex plots. *Pamela* (1750) was the first play to dispense with masks altogether.

Some of his most enduring works came during the 1750s and ‘60s. Among the best

known are *La Locandiera* (The Housekeeper), *I Rusteghi* (The Tyrants; written in Venetian dialect) and *I Malcontenti* (The Malcontents). His decision to move to Paris was not an entirely happy one. With the exception of *Il Ventaglio* (The Fan), he produced little of note in the French capital, where, overtaken by the French Revolution, he lost his pension and died in penury.

A lesser figure who opposed Goldoni's innovations was Carlo Gozzi (1720–1806), whose plays maintained the tradition of the Commedia dell'Arte. His *Turandot* would later be the basis for Puccini's eponymous opera.

Talking of theatre classics, Shakespeare's *The Merchant of Venice*, starring Shylock and a host of colourful characters, and *Othello*, are mandatory reading for a distant Elizabethan view of what in those days must have

seemed an exotic and bizarre city. There is much academic speculation over whether the Bard actually visited Venice and northeast Italy. His apparent knowledge of the city suggests to some a personal acquaintance with the place.

The modern theatre scene is not all Goldoni and Shakespeare reruns. Local theatre groups and a few small companies stage modern plays, both Italian and foreign, in Venice and Mestre. Tiny avant-garde and experimental theatrical hideaways lend a smidgen of local creativity, sometimes in dialect, to the scene.

Since 2003, contemporary dance has received a thorough workout during the Biennale arts and architecture extravaganzas with the Festival Internazionale di Danza Contemporanea (International Festival of Contemporary Dance).

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