

lure OF THE lagoon

Just beyond the tourist crush of Venice, writes *Josephine McKenna*, the storied islands of the Venetian Lagoon are a trove of age-old traditions, architectural treasures and culinary gems all their own.

PHOTOGRAPHY SUSAN WRIGHT



LIVING COLOUR

Santa Maria e San Donato church, Murano. Clockwise, from right: (from left) Ruggero, Lucia and Massimiliano Bovo of Burano trattoria Gatto Nero; Burano; pastry chefs Daniele Molinari (left) and Davide Amadi making bussolà on Burano. Opposite: Burano's San Martino church and its leaning bell tower.





Dawn breaks over the Venetian Lagoon in breathtaking silence. In a few hours, Piazza San Marco will fill with great swirls of pigeons and tourists bearing selfie sticks, and the Grand Canal will be as busy as a peak-hour freeway. But at this hour, on a jetty off the island of Burano, all is calm, and there's barely a ripple on the water as we set off with Lele D'Este in his shabby fishing boat. "It's so beautiful here," D'Este says as he kills the engine a few kilometres north of Burano and throws a net into the opaque water. "It's truly heaven."

Caught between the Italian mainland and the Adriatic Sea, the 550-square-kilometre lagoon stretches from Jesolo in the north-east to Chioggia at its southern tip. Dotted with 118 islands, it's a marvel of nature and human endeavour, having evolved from the estuarine lagoons of the Roman era well before Venice emerged as an ambitious maritime power in the 10th century.

Like the storied city, the lagoon is recognised as a World Heritage site of critical environmental significance. Flooded by the salty waters of the Adriatic, its shallow marshes are a haven for marine life and birds, but they're increasingly vulnerable to rising sea levels, pollution, dredging and erosion.

D'Este, 58, has been fishing these waters since he was a teenager. Apart from a few cefalo, the lagoon's

grey mullet, the fish aren't biting this morning. He slips overboard, gathers a few crabs and mussels from the muddy shallows, and we head home to Burano.

Considered the hub of the lagoon's northern archipelago, Burano is criss-crossed by narrow canals flanked by rainbow-coloured houses. According to legend, the technicolour palette was meant to guide fishermen home through heavy fog. The leaning bell tower of the Church of San Martino – home to a Tiepolo painting – adds to the island's whimsy.

Fewer than 3,000 people live here. It's the kind of place where people sleep with their doors open in summer and everyone greets each other by first name. As I return to the port with D'Este, tourists are spilling from a crowded vaporetto. Residents are chatting in the piazza or buying S-shaped biscotti known as essi. Laundry hangs from the windows. Cats laze in the sun.

"We're a family," says 25-year-old waiter Enrico Rosetti of the island community as he heads to Al Gatto Nero, the town's most famous trattoria, to begin his working day. "We have to take care of ourselves and protect our way of life because there are so few of us left. There's another mentality here."

For centuries the town has been known for fishing and lacemaking. Nilvia Costantini is one of the few islanders who still work with needle and thread. The 79-year-old artisan sits on her stoop and embroiders a tube-shaped tombolo pillow.

"When I got married, I told my sister I wanted to learn how to sew," the great-grandmother tells us when

we stop to say hello. "My passion took hold of me like a drug. If possible, I work every day, even Sundays."

Burano's lace work, which dates back to the 16th century, was once as prized as the hand-blown glass made on the nearby island of Murano. Costantini takes orders from around the world for her delicate baptismal outfits and baby booties. One of her tablecloths sold for €8,000, she says. But there are fewer than a dozen lacemakers left here now and Costantini says cheap imports threaten the craft's survival. "Tourists don't appreciate it," she says. "If this tradition disappears, it will be a tragedy."

At Gatto Nero, the lunchtime tables are full and there's a queue of diners at the door. Owner Ruggero Bovo shares some kitchen secrets as he tosses fresh lagoon shrimp in a pan with onions, rocket, smoked ricotta and a splash of wine. "You add a drop of Worcestershire sauce. Only one. You add two and you're ruined," he says as the perspiration glistens on his forehead.

Bovo dreamed of studying music until his father ordered him to get a job. He took over the trattoria in 1965 when it was a rundown fishermen's haunt. One night he ended up in the kitchen and he's been there ever since. Fishermen bring their catch directly to his door. "There's no timetable – it can be day or night," he says. "When they arrive, I have the same sensation as one who loves art or music. I immediately start thinking about how I'm going to cook it. Working as a chef is not a job, it's a passion."

Bovo and his wife, Lucia, have served princes, presidents and Hollywood royalty. Francis Ford Coppola, Brad Pitt and other A-listers have stepped from water taxis onto the jetty outside Gatto Nero's front door. Jamie Oliver fine-tuned a risotto recipe here during one of his roving TV episodes.

"Through the restaurant I have given something to the whole world and that gives me great satisfaction," says Bovo.

The trattoria always has a table for the Buranelli, who banter with Bovo in dialect whenever he emerges from the kitchen, ferrying the likes of risotto alla Buranella studded with chunks of a white fish called ghiozzi, cuttlefish Venetian style, and freshly caught sea bass served as branzino al forno. From a long list, his sommelier son, Massimiliano, recommends wines from local producers – a blend of chardonnay, trebbiano, sauvignon and Veneto's garganega grapes from Giuseppe Quintarelli, or Zenato's Lugana Riserva, made from trebbiano – to match the catch of the day.

On the neighbouring island of Mazzorbo, linked to Burano by a wooden footbridge, it's hard to spot a tourist or a souvenir shop. So it's a surprise to find the chic Venissa resort in a walled vineyard, once part of a 14th-century convent. Gianluca Bisol, who hails from a long line of prosecco producers in >

CANAL PLUS

Top, from left: Burano's trademark colourful houses; the island of Murano.

BOATMAN'S CALL

Clockwise, from top: Burano fisherman Lele D'Este in the Venetian Lagoon; Burano lacemaker Nilvia Costantini works on an embroidery; spaghetti with clams at Gatto Nero.

Valdobbiadene, discovered the overgrown vineyard on a visit to the lagoon in 2002, and was astonished to find remnants of the rare golden grape variety dorona di Venezia.

While the Veneto region has a reputation for producing fine wines, winemaking in the lagoon all but died out, and Venissa represents part of a revival. Bisol restored the vineyard and surrounding buildings, and from 80 original vines, he and his son Matteo propagated and planted 4,000 dorona vines, and produced the first vintage in 2010. As well as the small resort, they have a smart restaurant and an osteria overlooking the vines, and recently added guestrooms in apartments in Burano, under the name Casa Burano.

Matteo, the resort's marketing manager, pours a glass of the golden wine and describes the complexity it derives from the salt in the soil and the vineyard's susceptibility to seasonal flooding known as acqua alta. "Once every three or four years, the vineyard is completely flooded and a lot of salt is left in the soil but also many microorganisms," Matteo explains. "It's a phenomenon that really makes this wine unique."

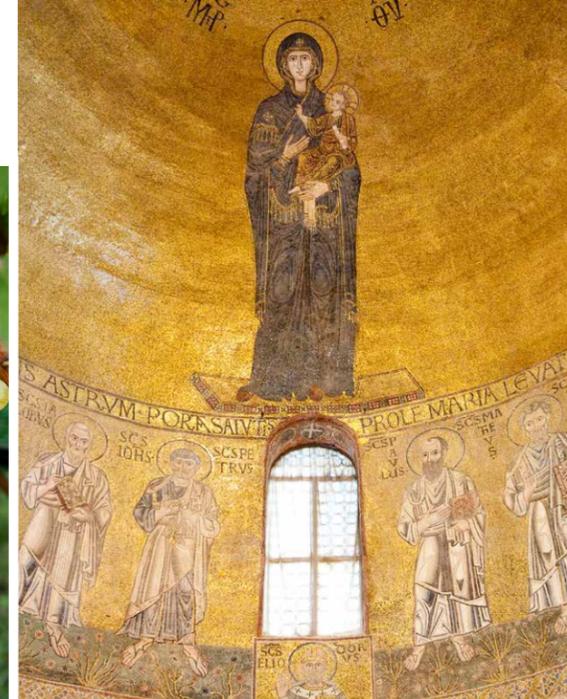
He also wants "to bring to the lagoon a cuisine that is cutting-edge". In the kitchen of Venissa's one-star restaurant is one of Italy's most promising chefs. Francesco Brutto was named Italy's best young chef for 2017 by *L'Espresso* magazine and returned recently for his second stint at Venissa. Originally from Treviso, the 28-year-old champions the produce of the lagoon, including the small castraure artichoke, grown on the estate, which he halves, pan-fries and serves with marinated egg yolk and calamint leaves, and a local fish called go, served with spaghetti, saffron cream and basil.

Across a narrow stretch of water from Mazzorbo to the north-east lies the island of Torcello, where the Romans sought refuge from Attila the Hun and the Venetians fled a barbarian invasion in the 5th century. Torcello evolved into a thriving trading port with several thousand inhabitants until malaria swept through the area in the 12th century. These days it's a sparsely populated landscape of empty fields and orchards; it's hard to imagine this sleepy backwater was once the most vibrant island in the lagoon and a rival to Venice itself.

A 10-minute stroll from the Torcello ferry stop is a deserted piazza and, astonishingly, one of Italy's oldest artistic treasures. The Cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta, originally founded in 639 AD, is considered the lagoon's oldest Byzantine-Romanesque monument. The bell tower dates back to the 11th century and has sweeping views across to Burano and Mazzorbo and the rest of the lagoon. Inside, its renowned Byzantine-era mosaics include a dazzling Madonna and child in the apse, with the 12 apostles lined up at her feet in adoration, and a riveting mosaic of the Last Judgement, graphically contrasting the consequences of good and evil on the west wall of the church.

Just as improbably, the near-deserted island is home to one of the region's most notable restaurants. Locanda Cipriani was opened in 1934 by Giuseppe Cipriani, founder of the famous Venetian hotel on Giudecca Island, after he fell in love with Torcello. "There were only 200 people on the island. There was no electricity or gas – he created it out of nothing," says Cipriani's grandson, Bonifacio Brass, who runs the six-room inn.

Ernest Hemingway stayed here and George Clooney has been known to drop in for a bite. Despite its rustic entrance, Locanda Cipriani serves classic dishes with discreet service in a lush garden setting. "We offer simple cooking based on quality ingredients and tradition," Brass says. "If we took away the menu tomorrow, there would be a revolution because they>



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VENETIAN CLASS

Right: the view to Burano from the bell tower on Torcello. Opposite, from top left: Venissa's dorona di Venezia grapes; mosaics of the Madonna and Child, and the apostles in the main apse of the Cathedral Santa Maria Assunta; chef Cristian Angiolini of Torcello's Locanda Cipriani restaurant serving John Dory alla Carlina.



want the dishes that we always do.” Chef Cristian Angiolin serves the likes of tagliolini verdi gratinati, created by the founder, and San Pietro alla Carlina, John Dory served with tomato and capers. There’s a list of about 60 wines, most from the Veneto and Friuli regions.

On the south side of Burano lies the island of San Francesco del Deserto, or St Francis of the Desert. Hidden behind a wall of cypress trees and maritime pines, it’s easy to miss it. Mamed after St Francis of Assisi, who stopped here in 1220 on his return from the Holy Land, the four-hectare island has an air of mystique. There are no ferry services, shops or restaurants on this little gem. The best way to discover it is to slide in silently by oar.

It’s home to a small group of Franciscan monks, who observe a vow of silence – unless they’re sharing the island’s colourful history with the handful of tourists who make their way here by private boat or water taxi. As we pull up, one of the monks waves as he sails past us on his way to Burano for a newspaper and a coffee. His colleague, Friar Felice, leads me and a dozen pilgrims through the monastery’s 15th-century



cloister, telling tales of a plague that devastated the community in the 14th century and the occupation of Napoleon’s troops centuries later. “This was the small chapel where St Francis prayed,” Friar Felice says. “Whenever I come here, it’s like the first time. The presence of St Francis is here.”

From San Francesco del Deserto, we head to the popular glassmaking island of Murano on a vaporetto now loaded with sightseers. Artisans have produced glass here for more than 700 years, though that legacy is under threat from cheap Asian imports and rising costs. The island, comprising seven islets, is most picturesque in the early mornings before daytrippers mount their assault on the island’s smaller version of the Grand Canal and its pastel-coloured palazzi.

Despite the daily onslaught, Murano’s community life remains firmly focused on the art of glassmaking. First-time visitors flock to the fornaci to see glass being moulded from a fiery bubble, or visit the Museo del Vetro, or browse in a handful of shops stocking fine-quality glassware. Others marvel at the Church of Santa Maria e San Donato, known for a 12th-century Byzantine mosaic floor that rivals those in St Mark’s Basilica.

The best food on Murano is served at Acquastanca, a stylish eatery established by Giovanna Arcangeli and her sister-in-law and chef, Caterina Nason, in 2012. It’s in a former bakery on Fondamenta Manin along one of Murano’s main canals. The pair, both natives of Murano, rely on the day’s catch for dishes such as tagliolini con le seppie nere or sarde in saor, a classic Venetian dish of sardines fresh from the lagoon cooked with onions and pine nuts. “We want to make clients feel at home,” Arcangeli says. “We cook typical Venetian dishes just like our mothers used to do it.” ●

THE FINE PRINT

GETTING THERE

Emirates operates daily flights from Sydney, Melbourne, Brisbane, Perth and Adelaide to Dubai, connecting to a daily flight to Venice (emirates.com). From Venice, a one-way ticket on a vaporetto (waterbus) from **Piazza San Marco** to the lagoon islands costs €7.50 and is valid for 75 minutes. A tourist day-pass costs €20. A private water taxi

costs €130 for four people one way. It’s possible to visit Murano and Burano in a day and squeeze in a lazy lunch at one of the islands. For more leisurely exploration, extend your visit over two days and include an overnight stop at Mazzorbo or Burano.

EAT

Al Gatto Nero Via Giudecca 88, Burano, gattozero.com
Venissa Wine Resort Fondamenta Santa Caterina 3, Mazzorbo, venissa.it
Locanda Cipriani Piazza Santa Fosca 29, Torcello, locandacipriani.com
Acquastanca Fondamenta Manin 48, Murano, acquastanca.it

TIME AND TIDE

Clockwise, from above: Friar Felice on the island of San Francesco del Deserto; gondoliers on Venice’s Grand Canal; Locanda Cipriani’s alfresco dining area, and its tagliardi with scallops and zucchini. Opposite: Murano.

