

The Washington Post

Travel

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ESCAPES

Seat of history

In this small Delaware town, you'll find that the past still looms very large. **F6**

The Navigator Can a European law apply to U.S. airline passengers? **F3**

Travel Ticker Have a trip planned to Egypt or the Middle East? Here's our advice. **F4**

What's the Deal? We scope out the week's best travel bargains for you. **F4**

CHAT We answer reader questions at 2 p.m. Monday at live.washingtonpost.com.

BED CHECK

Miss Popularity

This Connecticut inn is always abuzz with admirers, but you can get some time alone if you hang around a little while. **F4**



MARCO SECCHI/GETTY IMAGES

Into the lagoon

Exploring the islands near Venice is like peeking into the past

BY CATHRYN DRAKE
Special to The Washington Post

One day last spring, a friend and I were meandering down the road on the pastoral island of Sant'Erasmus, in the Venetian lagoon, when we ran into Fabio Collavini, a former chief of Venice's gondolier association.

I asked him whether he'd had anything to do with his group's recent controversial rejection of a foreign female gondolier's bid for membership.

"I voted her down because she was not good enough," the burly redhead replied. But he pointed out that the association had recently accepted its first woman member, "a Venetian whose father was a gondolier."



WANG QINGQIN/XINHUA PRESS/CORBIS

Water world: At top, Venice and the lagoon from a seaplane. Above, villagers on the island of Burano, northeast of the city, have a long tradition of painting their houses in bright colors.

Well, there you go. Nepotism is a trademark of the gondolier's trade. And the insular residents of Sant'Erasmus, Venice's farmland (along with Le Vignole next door) and the largest island of the lagoon, can come off as slightly gruff, which is part of their charm.

Heading down the road, we popped into the quaint farmhouse of Il Lato Azzurro, a bed-and-breakfast that rents bicy-

VENICE CONTINUED ON F5

A forgotten Indian empire, still amazingly alive

BY ST. JOHN BARNED-SMITH
Special to The Washington Post

I peered over the edge of the Queen's Bath, an immaculate, now-empty pool where the ladies of one of India's great empires once used to bathe. Then my guide, Kumar, pointed outside. "That's the moat," he said, motioning toward a deep trench ringing the building we were in. "The king filled it with crocodiles so that no one could watch" the queen in her bath. Bad luck for any would-be peeping Toms.

The bath was just one of many amazing buildings that I saw during my visit to Hampi, a small town in the southwestern Indian state of Karnataka. The town, with only a fraction of the population that once inhabited it, is quiet and sleepy now, but centuries ago, it was the site of the city of Vijayanagar, the capital of the once great

Rock of ages: Vittala Temple is one of Hampi's most exquisite temples and the site of the stone chariot at right, a shrine that once held an icon of the Hindu god Garuda.

Vijayanagara Empire that stretched across a vast swath of southern India from the 1300s to the 1500s. The "Kingdom of Victory," as it was known, reached from the western port of Goa to India's eastern shores and as far as its southern tip, Cape Comorin. Now, only its ruins remain.

I first came across a mention of Hampi in a guidebook while visiting Nepal, where I'd gone to attend the wedding of a friend from college. Dubious at first (I'd heard of the Golden Temple, the Taj Mahal, and the glitter and hubbub of Mumbai, but what was this hidden kingdom of the south?), I asked travelers I met in Nepal for advice. I was persuaded to visit after listening to rave reviews from travelers I met while trekking in Nepal. "Hampi? Go!" was the just about universal consensus.

HAMPI CONTINUED ON F2



ST. JOHN BARNED-SMITH FOR THE WASHINGTON POST



PHOTOS BY CATHRYN DRAKE FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Island-hopping in Venice's lagoon

VENICE FROM FI

cles and canoes and is the only place to stay on the island. Tonino, the owner, was stepping out, so we asked for a lift to the stout Habsburg fortress, the Massimiliano Tower. Our destination was the rustic Bar Tedeschi, where we ate sandwiches at one of the picnic tables overlooking the beach and contemplated the serene view across the water toward the Lido and the mouth of the lagoon. In the summer, there's a trendy hot dog stand down the beach that serves cocktails and hosts parties. Farther along the shore is the Seca del Bacan wildlife reserve, where migratory wading birds flock.

Exploring the Venetian lagoon, an enclosed bay off the Adriatic, is an adventure that evokes both the ghosts of the Republic's fascinating past and the enduring rhythms of life in this marshy archipelago.

While living in Venice's Sant'Elena quarter several years ago, I discovered that there's much more to Venice than the art-rich city center. More than 50 islands are scattered throughout the lagoon, many inhabited only by the ghosts of the devastating plague, which took at least 80,000 lives and triggered the Venetian Republic's decline. Many of these abandoned places are filled with atmospheric monastic ruins and the tangles of overgrown gardens, relics of a tumultuous history of expansion, invasion and contraction.

Where time stops

My first foray was to tiny Torcello, the longest continuously inhabited island of Venice, now with only a score of residents holding down the fort. It's hard to believe that it once had a population of about 20,000, the largest in the far-flung Republic in medieval times, when it was an important outpost of the Byzantine Empire. Centuries before it inspired the imagination of Ernest Hemingway — who stayed there in the fall of 1948 while working on "Across the River and Into the Trees" — Torcello was the first refuge for Romans fleeing successive "barbarian" invasions. It was they who coined the term *incolae lacunae* ("lagoon dwellers") to describe the fishermen they found living on the swampy wetland.

The day I visited, aside from the mesmerizing Byzantine mosaics of the Last Judgment in the church of Santa Maria Assunta, my only company was the grumpy clerk, who grudgingly proffered the audio guide. The clock seems really to have stopped in this place, making it ripe for fantasy: Climbing up the church campanile, I surveyed the watery panorama and a grassy field of wildflowers, pretending that I was an initiate into the convent of this malarial outpost.

More amusing company, and gourmet sustenance, can be found at Hemingway's chic former perch, Locanda Cipriani, the country relation to the author's legendary San Marco haunt, Harry's Bar. I opted for the garden at the Ponte del Diavolo, or Devil's Bridge, where the spaghetti con vongole and torta di fragola were delicious and the waiter was indulgent and kind, perhaps grateful for some company on that deliciously lost afternoon.

Recalling the Black Death

The following spring, my mother and I set out for Murano, which hosts hordes of daytime visitors at its glass-blowing studios but is worth a stopover for the Museo del

Vetro (Glass Museum): It depicts the history of the craft through a spectacular collection — newly updated with contemporary masterpieces — and occasional glass-making demonstrations. We took in the museum and the Basilica di Santi Maria e Donato, a wonderful example of the Venetian-Byzantine style. Afterward, we took a lunch break at bustling Osteria ai Bisatei, a short walk away on the Ramo San Bernardo, where we ate fresh seafood at long tables with the boisterous locals, handily escaping the crowds from the Museo boat stop.

It was on this excursion that we accidentally discovered Lazzaretto Nuovo, when a chatty group of Italians requested the stop. During the Black Death, which lurked in cargo such as Oriental spices and textiles, all incoming merchant ships were detained for 40 days on this minuscule islet just off the shore of Sant'Erasmo. We joined in on the tour of the Tezon Grande, a gigantic storehouse where everything was fumigated while sailors waited out the quarantine (the term was coined here, derived from the Italian "quaranta," meaning forty).

The guide pointed out the plague doctors' black cloaks and macabre white masks, whose long beaks were filled with medicinal herbs and which inspired a style of carnival attire. The wall is inscribed with graffiti in a Babel of archaic tongues that evidence arrivals from places such as Crete and Constantinople. Judging by the jovial notes, it seems that this was not a bad place to spend a mandatory holiday, particularly after confinement at sea; the comfortable little houses where the ships' crews resided still line the island's periphery.

In a former gunpowder magazine, we found objects that the sailors had left behind: pipes, skull charms and coins, invoking exotic locales. The skull of a suspected vampire, the jaws jammed with a brick to prevent her from feeding on plague victims, has since been unearthed in a mass grave from 1576, the year the artist Titian succumbed to the illness. Mulberry trees, daisies and buttercups, the legacy of later French and Austrian military outposts, have replaced the brick pavement that was thought to prevent the spread of the disease. We lounged under a tree in the unruly grass near a little well bearing a carving of a lion with splendid wings — the symbol of Venice's patron saint, Mark the Evangelist — with a locked book in his paws.

Lunch amid the grapes

Daily life in the Venetian archipelago is still dictated by the rhythms of nature, but it's a clock ticking furiously to the pace of the rising sea — as well as encroaching development. With the glass business going south, luxury hotels have been going up in the place of Murano foundries, and a number of fishermen's houses on nearby Burano are being converted into tourist accommodations.

Meanwhile Mazzorbo, the tiny island next to Burano, has become a bucolic haven: Recently opened guesthouse Venissa offers six stylishly spare rooms (a rarity in Venice, where historic kitsch reigns) and a gourmet restaurant on an idyllic vineyard. The homey guesthouse opens onto the lagoon with an expansive terrace, blending in with the neighboring houses lining the waterfront, each painted in a different primary color.

A friend and I went there for lunch on a fine April day, eating out



Back to life: The island of Mazzorbo, top, features an ancient vineyard, above, where the long-lost Dorona grape, the basis for a white wine favored by the dogs, is being produced again after more than 500 years of dormancy.

on the wooden deck with a view onto the grapevines, which are watched over by an old leaning bell tower. Chef Paola Baudel served us kamut spaghetti dressed with the classic trio of garlic, oil and peperoncino, followed by fresh Adriatic catch: coda di rospo crudo with gelatin minestrone, made from vegetables grown in the estate's garden; codfish with fried grapes and fennel cream; and stewed cuttlefish accompanied by Sant'Erasmo artichokes. The big news this year is that the first vintage of Dorona, the native white grape favored by the Venetian dogs and revived on the dormant vineyard after disappearing for several hundred years, has been bottled and is available for savoring once again.

We headed across the footbridge to Burano, the fishing enclave with modest houses painted in cheerful colors — pink, orange, red, green, purple — and explored the canals, miniature versions of those on the central islands. We nosed around the back streets until we found designer Philippe Starck's house — peach with green shutters — where workers were putting on the finishing touches. The natives tend to hide out or fish until evening, so if you stay overnight on sleepy Mazzorbo you can do as they do: grab an aperitif at the bar in the former Communist Party headquarters after taking in the evocatively refurbished Museo del Merletto, a renowned former lace school founded in 1872, both on Piazza Baldassare Galuppi.

Reviving the lagoon

Until recently the foreboding, overgrown site of a former military base and the ruins of a Carthusian monastery, Isola della Certosa has been spiffed up as part of the same municipal lagoon restoration project that is reviving the Mazzorbo vineyard. Just one vaporetto stop from Sant'Elena, the island hosts a marina where you can take sailing lessons, rent a vessel or embark on a lagoon excursion in a kayak or a bragozzo, a traditional Venetian fishing craft.

There's a casual hotel with 18 rooms and the seasonal restaurant Il Certosino. I've often eaten a leisurely lunch on the terrace, surrounded by a lush green lawn, before taking hikes on the nature trail being cultivated around the run-down army barracks and fragments of an explosives factory, where rabbits dart to and fro. Although you can see the main island from there, it feels miles away.

On the way back from Egypt, Saint Francis of Assisi stopped at San Francesco del Deserto, now home to a few Franciscan monks and a sacred pilgrimage site that hosts weekend spiritual retreats.

Various boat tour operators organize lagoon explorations for groups, or you could just buy an island: Isola di Crevan, the former property of a now-deceased politician, complete with a house in a converted 19th-century fortress, just sold for several million dollars. An island with a villa and four other buildings is still available for a mere \$5.8 million.

Tasty produce

After our lunch at the Bar Tedeschi last spring, my friend and I flagged down young farmer Carlo Finotello, driving past in his pickup, who agreed to transport us to his family's estate to see the new cistern developed by Venice's university design students. Carlo and his brother, Claudio, grew up on the farm and have taken over its management from their parents. The saline soil makes agriculture on Sant'Erasmo a challenge, but it's also why the vegetables, including the famed violet artichokes and the asparagus, are so flavorful. "We have saltwater underground, which is good and bad: It makes the produce very tasty, but we need fresh water to grow it, which is hard to get," Carlo said.

After a tour of the greenhouses, where their father, Silvano, was watering the plants, we visited the market stand to sample some of the famous miniature artichokes and the Finotello brothers' own robust raboso rosso wine. (There's a wine festival in early October, when you can see some grape stomping.)

It was Wednesday, so I hopped onto the motorboat with Claudio and Silvano to deliver fresh produce around the city center, a popular new direct-sales service that they have initiated. We sped off down an overgrown canal past homely farmhouses and under tiny wooden bridges until we reached larger waters, stopping first at Lido San Nicolo, where the residents stood waiting for us on the edge of the canal. Along the way we passed

DETAILS

GETTING THERE

Delta offers one-stop flights from Washington Dulles to Venice, with late-October fares currently starting at \$1,050 round-trip.

WHERE TO STAY

Venissa
Fundamenta Santa Caterina 3
Isola di Mazzorbo
011-39-041-527-2281
venissa.it
Intimate villa on a small vineyard, with a gourmet restaurant. Rooms from \$190, breakfast included (open March-November).

Certosa Hotel
Isola della Certosa
011-39-041-277-8632
www.venicecertosahotel.com
Relaxed hotel with a cozy bar and lounge. Rooms from \$90.

WHERE TO EAT

Venissa
World-class restaurant on a serene vineyard, helmed by a top Italian chef. Entrees from \$25.

Il Lato Azzurro

Via Forti 13
Sant'Erasmo
011-39-041-523-0642
latoazzurro.it
Restaurant in a charming guesthouse. Entrees from \$10 (book ahead).

WHAT TO DO

I Sapori di Sant'Erasmo
Azienda Agricola Fratelli Finotello
Via Boaria Vecia 6
Sant'Erasmo
011-39-041-528-2997
www.isaporidisanterasmo.com
Farm where you can buy fresh produce and taste wine.

Museo del Merletto

Piazza Galuppi 187
Burano
011-39-041-730-034
museomerletto.visitmuve.it
Lace-making museum in the original palace that housed the celebrated school, active from 1872 to 1970. Open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. until Oct. 31, 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Nov. 1 to March 31. \$6.50.

Isola del Lazzaretto Nuovo
011-39-041-244-4011
www.lazzarettonuovo.com
Explore the former plague quarantine island as well as the natural sandbar environs.

Venice Kayak
011-39-346-477-1327
venicekayak.com
Various lagoon tours from Isola della Certosa for groups of two to 12. Half-day \$115, full-day \$155 per person for two to five people.

Terra & Acqua
011-39-329-659-6727
www.veniceboat.org
Itineraries in a traditional bragozzo include a tour of the Northern Lagoon — Torcello, San Francesco del Deserto, Sant'Erasmo and Lazzaretto Nuovo — departing from Venice's Squerio di San Trovaso. \$490 to \$540 for a full weekday for up to 12 people; \$540 to \$590 on Saturday or Sunday.

INFORMATION
www.venice-tourism.com/en/visit-venice.html

— C.D.

a man digging clams on the Bacan, a sandbar that emerges between the Lido and Sant'Elena just before sunset every day. To our left, a fleet of small wooden boats, propelled vigorously by standing rowers practicing the local voga, a Venetian rowing sport, sped by silently like specters in the diminishing daylight. I hopped off at the Giudecca stop and made my way home.

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