



Canal hopping

Leave Venice's tourist crush behind and head for its outlying islands, writes **Kathryn Tomasetti**

Raised in Milan, a three-hour rattle along Trenitalia's westward rail line, I've been visiting Venice for decades. I've cruised through the city, taking in the ancient palazzi from the seat of a gondola. I've even donned one of those hideous facemasks and immersed myself into the incognito revelry of Venice's world-famous February Carnevale (carnival). Yet in all these years – and despite the fact

that the surrounding lagoon encompasses a whopping 117 specks of land – I've never hopped on a Vaporetto ferryboat and left Venice's central city island behind.

This year, my husband and I visited Venice with a different agenda. Rather than stopping over during the city's clement spring or autumn months, we planned a weekend in deepest winter. Instead of rambling around Piazza San

Marco (St Mark's Square), we'd explore Venice lagoon's islands. Our goal? To discover the city's secret side – and hopefully lose Venice's omnipresent crowds along the way.

Winter mornings here dawn brilliantly sunny and bitterly cold. Wrapping ourselves in thick scarves, we make our way through the northern Cannaregio neighbourhood.

As we near our Vaporetto stop of Fondamente Nuove, florists line the narrow alleys. A group of elderly people chatting in the local dialect of Veneziano cluster on the pier. We join them, hopping aboard ferry number 4.2, and overhear their destination: the island of Murano. As our Vaporetto nears its tree-ringed shores we make a snap decision, and jump ashore too.

Not an island as such, but a series of smaller landmasses spliced by canals, Murano has been renowned for its glassmaking since Marco Polo left the still quiet of Venice for the Chinese court in Beijing. Downtown Venice is saturated with tourist shops selling colourful vases and chandeliers, all painstakingly created from hand-blown Murano glass.

As we wander along the footpath that rings Murano's shore, a burly gentleman quickly shepherds us to the island's glass factory. Unlike residents of other European city

states, Venetians are known for their commercial savvy, and never pass up the opportunity to earn a buck.

Ten minutes later and we're queuing up for Vetreria Murano Arte's free glass-blowing demonstration. An artisan blows glass into bubbly vases, then works it by hand into carafes, bottles and finally a galloping glass horse.

We venture into one of Murano's narrow alleys. Our backstreet saunter is capped off with a warming cappuccino at a locals-only bar. My offer to settle the bill is met with a smile. "There's no rush. Enjoy your coffee; take your time." That's not an attitude you find in St Mark's Square.

Sun streams through the windows, shining like a spotlight on a pair of elderly men playing heated rounds of *scopa*, a traditional Italian card game. It's well before noon, but they – and the crowd of friends offering "advice" over their shoulders – sip bright orange spritz, a Venetian cocktail of bitter Aperol alcohol, white wine and soda water.

En route to Torcello, the next island north, our Vaporetto weaves past minuscule islands, many of them home to a single, picturesque, abandoned palazzo.

The average depth of Venice's lagoon is a paltry 1.5 metres – which explains why our route is so carefully traced between the semi-



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submerged poles indicating the water levels.

Torcello may be the oldest continuously inhabited island in the lagoon, but today it's home to a mere 20 residents. We meander ashore, following Torcello's canal to its petite town centre. The wind has dropped, and a solitary accordion player busks in the sunshine.

We make a lazy loop taking in Torcello's Santa Maria Assunta Cathedral, shimmering with 11th century mosaics, followed by the island's small archaeological museum. It's empty. Wildflowers poke up between neglected villas, while local roses are somehow still in bloom.

On the five-minute ferry to the island of Burano, flocks of egrets and a heron can be spotted: hundreds of thousands of birds winter here in the salt marshes that surround these far-flung dots of land.

A riot of brilliantly painted facades, sleepy little Burano is best known for its fishing fleet and its handmade lace. But it's the obvious sense of community here that steals our hearts, something lacking in the tourist-laden town centre.

Grandmothers bask in the winter sunshine, chatting with each other across alleys; at midday, older brothers and sisters chaperone little ones home from school. No one looks at us twice. I stop a sun-weathered local and ask him where we should eat lunch. "Cross that bridge to Mazzorbo Island. The best trattoria is on the waterfront, about 50 metres along."

The Simoncin family have owned Antica Trattoria alla Maddalena since 1954. Vegetables, including tender castraure artichokes, come from their garden; ravioli and spaghetti are both homemade, as are the desserts. Their own fisherman sources fresh fish for the restaurant every morning.

Signora Simoncin reels off the day's offerings: soft-shelled crab, deep-fried and served with wedges of lemon; razor clams; fillets of grilled sea bream, and moeche, tiny Venetian crabs, their bellies plump with coral. She encourages us to order off-menu, to try the seasonal delicacies.

Post tiramisù, sweet homemade biscuits and local wine, we head

to Lido, the 11 kilometre sandbar of an island where the annual Venice Film Festival is held every autumn. The sky is already tinged with the beginnings of a sunset blush.

After hours spent exploring car-free islands, it comes as a jolt to see buses idling outside of Lido's ferry station. Yet we're soon looking everywhere but at the traffic: the island's art nouveau architecture is dazzling.

We stumble upon Grande Albergo Ausonia & Hungaria, a hotel with an ornate 1905 facade decorated with 7,000 colourful ceramic tiles. In the hotel's cocktail bar, well dressed ladies with poodles in tow are sipping early evening aperitifs.

We follow Gran Viale Santa Maria Elisabetta eastwards along the long, skinny, outer island. The palm-lined road deposits us directly onto the wide sands of the Adriatic Sea – swim east from here and Croatia is the next stop. A teenage couple photograph each other against the setting sun. We are otherwise alone.

A hike south along the shoreline takes us to the Hotel Excelsior. Built in 1908, its Moorish outline is silhouetted against the darkening sky.

The first Venice Film Festival was held here in 1932. Greta Garbo sunbathed in the private waterside cabanas here, as did Clark Gable, Woody Allen, Brad Pitt and George Clooney.

We wander through the vast, arched foyer. On the high walls are black and white photos of the "Miss Excelsior" beauty pageant from the hotel's 1930s heyday. Opposite the entrance, guests are ferried back to central Venice on the hotel's private launch.

We're heading in the same direction, too. As our final Vaporetto of the day glides silently back to St Mark's Square, it's clear why Venice is known as La Serenissima ("The Serene").

It may have been the chilly nighttime air that kept the other passengers inside. But for us – alone at the boat's bow – this passage seems more like our own privately chartered crossing. Without the crowds, Venice is like a secret only the two of us share. lifestyle@scmp.com



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FLOW YOUR OWN WAY

Where to eat
Antica Trattoria alla Maddalena, Via Mazzorbo 7/B, Mazzorbo, www.trattoriamaddalena.com. Closed Thursdays

Where to stay
• Grande Albergo Ausonia & Hungaria, Gran Viale Santa Maria Elisabetta 28, Lido, www.hotelhungaria.com. Doubles from €76 (HK\$790); spa and/or half-board packages available.
• Hotel Excelsior, Lungomare Marconi 41, Lido, www.hotelexcelsiorvenezia.com. Doubles from €264

What to see
Vetreria Murano Arte, Calle San Cipriano 48/1, Murano, www.vma-murano.it

Getting around
Venice vaporetto pass €18 for 24 hours. www.actv.it



Clockwise from left: the colourful island of Burano; some islands are home to only a handful of families; the gilded interior of Santa Maria Assunta Cathedral on Torcello; fresh soft-shelled crabs from Antica Trattoria alla Maddalena, Mazzorbo; a glass maker in Murano creates a Christmas bauble; a vaporetto plies its way along a canal. Photos: Corbis, Kathryn Tomasetti

