

# Cruising with Gondolas

BY FRANCES & MICHAEL HOWORTH

## Bareboat Chartering in the Venice Lagoons

There are many ways to arrive in Venice but perhaps the very finest way is to do so in your own yacht. Fortunately in recent years several companies have set up shop offering self-drive motor yachts, which enable sailors to undertake such an adventure. We chose to use Connoisseur a British based company using British built boats that come with easy to read instructions all in English. The company has bases throughout Europe and in each employ young English speaking staff full of enthusiasm for yachting vacations.

I will never understand why the Venetians built their city on islands inside a swamp in the first place but within minutes of our arriving there, I was awfully glad they had. The city was, according to legend, founded in 422 by Roman refugees fleeing from the Goths who invaded and ravaged northern-eastern Italy and was probably built as a result of the influx of refugees into the marshes of the estuary of the river Po. The ruling families moved to the city's current location between 811 and 827 and it was here that they subsequently built the monastery of St. Zachary, the first palace, the basilica of St. Mark, and a walled defence. In 828 the prestige of the new city was greatly increased by the stealing of the relics of St. Mark the Evangelist from Alexandria, which were placed in the new basilica, and it has been a tourist destination ever since.

We are here to cruise the lagoons of Venice in a chartered motor boat and will return to this magnificent city by boat but first we have to pick up our boat. A taxi took us to the Porto Levante base, in almost total isolation in the middle of the countryside and a short distance from the town where we picked up essential provisions at the local supermarket. Our trip was to be a one way journey aboard a 42 foot motor boat from Porto Levante to Casier, not far from Treviso, sailing along the River Po then turning to starboard to join the Po Brondolo Canal that cuts through the countryside towards Choggia then across the Venice Lagoon itself for the essential city stop and the islands of Burano, Murano and Torcello, each offering spectacularly differing scenery and experiences. Leaving the lagoon the canals leads into the Sile River at Portograndi from where it is a short trip to Casier. We planned meticulously beforehand to ensure our family group would enjoy it all to the full during our weeklong trip and satisfy everyone's different predilections.

At the base well informed and happy to please shore based personnel quickly and efficiently went through the ropes. Our boat was clean tidy and both comfortable and well maintained. Her spacious awning covered sun deck, provided protection from the midday sun as well as being perfect for eating al fresco. She came with all the domestic equipment you might need, from the essential bottle opener and wine glasses to bed



linens and towels, everything except perhaps a BBQ.

Our voyage of adventure began when we set off down the canal towards the delightful town of Choggia (key-oh-ja) where we moored for the night inside the marina. Choggia is a delightfully colourful and bustling fishing village and is the principle port for this activity in the area. Large fleets of deep sea and inshore fishing boats use this as their home port venturing out to sea from here every day except Sunday and selling their catch every day except Monday at a spectacular street side covered market that offers a cornucopia of differing fish caught both inside the lagoon and just outside in the Adriatic. Needless to say this is the town in which to eat fish at one of the many restaurants that line the streets but if cooking on board is what is wanted then there is no finer choice than at the market. Eel, crab and cuttlefish are the local specialities. The walk back to the boat was an essential exercise after our excellent lunch.

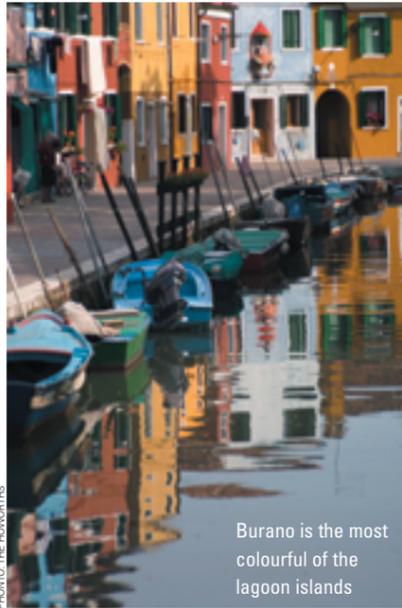
### Venice

At the heart of our cruising ground is perhaps one of the most beautiful cities of the world and if tourist numbers are taken into account one of the most popular with its famous St Marks Square



### The Journey ▲

Our trip was a one way sail along the River Po then turning to starboard to join the Po Brondolo Canal that cuts through the countryside towards Choggia then across the Venice Lagoon itself for the essential city stop and the islands of Burano, Murano and Torcello



Burano is the most colourful of the lagoon islands

PHOTO: THE LOGGERS



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**Glass Artisans** ▲

Glass is made by artisans on the island, in a trade that grew when the glassblowers were exiled to Murano in the 12th century, after a particularly severe fire destroyed Venice

“At the heart of our cruising ground is perhaps **one of the most beautiful cities of the world – Venice**”

and stunning cathedral. If you were hoping that you could motor along the Grande Canal in your motor cruiser now is the time we upset you, navigation in that very busy thoroughfare is off limits to all private craft. Our own disappointment at not being able to drive along this maritime main street turned to relief when we saw just how busy it was and how little regard each of the other boats seemed to have for what we affectionately call the rule of the road. The city does however offer three choices of marina. The first, San Georgio Marina, is the nearer, more convenient and with one of the most spectacular views in the world; it is located on its very own island directly opposite St Marks, the downside of course is the price. The second is San Elena which can be a bit of a hike if you do not use the vaporetto whilst the third, and cheapest is on Certosa island which has yet to get its own stop on the vaporetto service and therefore you immediately become dependant upon the marinas ferry service. Each, with varying degrees of ease, offers the opportunity to see the sights. From these you can wander through the narrow streets and alleys, visit the Rialto Bridge and discover some of Venice's incredible Gothic Palaces most notably the Palace of the Doges who ruled the Republic. Steeped in history, art and romance you cannot help but be inspired by the wonders of Venice.

Like any tourist our first stop has to be St Marks Square to see the pigeons of course; we get our bearings and set off to find it. Frequently on route we get lost and frequently we find ourselves again, such is the nature of the backstreets and alleys that crisscross the city. Anyone designing a maze could learn a trick or two here, with so many dead ends and a chosen direction blocked by a canal or the lack of a bridge. Everywhere there is something to stop and see: Gondolas are full of tourists of all shapes, sizes and nationalities, even a wedding party; plazas are full of school children herded by harassed teachers and nuns; shops are full of delightful temptations to refresh the wardrobe and carnival masks for further dalliances; grand palazzi and exquisite churches house art treasures galore.

**Murano, the Island of Glass with a touch of Class**

Mooring spaces on the island of Murano are at best limited, if only because the locals drive and use their boats as we do cars, so we chose to stay on at our marina in Venice and catch a Vaporetto for the short distance across the lagoon. A day ticket valid for 24 hours costs 12 and can be used on almost all Vaporetto routes. It is best to arrive on the island independently and hang back when disembarking, high pressure salesmen sponsored by the glass

vendors can be difficult to shake off once they pounce on an unsuspecting visitor. Offers of lunch and private transport back to Venice are often only forthcoming once you have paid an inflated price for glass that first saw the light of day far away. Having said that glass is made by artisans here on the island, in a trade that grew here when the glassblowers were exiled to Murano in the 12th century, after a particularly severe fire destroyed Venice. Tours of Glass Houses and glassblowing demonstrations can be arranged and those you pay for will be less pressurised.

Monday is always a quiet day in Italy and it is often the best day to visit this island. Once the obligatory furnace and glassblowing tour has been completed a stroll alongside the canal side looking into the shops or a visit to the Museo del Vetro ( 5.50 Open 1000-1700 each day, closed Wednesdays) is a splendid way to spend a few hours. A city museum pass if purchased for 18 allows visits to some twelve other museums operated by the municipality including the lace museum in Burano and the Ducal Palace in St Marks Square and is well worth it if museums are your thing. Church spotters will also enjoy the colonnaded exterior of the Basilica dei Santi Maria e Donato. Alongside the canals many restaurants cater for lunch although not so many open for dinner given that most visitors to the island leave before early evening. We had a great meal at Antica Tattoria Valmaranea (+39 041 739 313) at Navagero 31.

At first glance motoring around the lagoons looks a nightmare of impossible navigation from a distance but it does make sense as you get closer. The water is dotted with triffid-like markers buoys, called briccola, made of three huge bare tree trunks hammered into the bottom and banded together. These and the four poled Meda mark the safe routes across the water; some have lights whilst others have red or green marks to help, others display all three at once!. Our voyage through the twists and turns that lead towards Burano took us three and half hours but we confess we stopped at a pleasant canal side mooring dock on the southern end of the island of San Erasmo to consume a splendid lunch of Serrano ham and local cheeses washed down with a delightful local wine which our catering crew had so cleverly purchased from a delicatessen before leaving Venice.

**Burano**

Burano is the most colourful of the lagoon islands; its tall and dramatically tilted church tower make it easy to spot as you approach through the dredged canals. Fishing and lace making are the mainstays of the island and it is the later that brings in the day-trippers that fill the canal side pathways during the day. In the early evening they

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**More Information**

Travel Connoisseur bases are conveniently located within a reasonable distance from an airport. Venice Marco Polo is served by airlines operating out of the USA. Taxis from the airport to Porto Levante take about 90 minutes and cost €90. From Casier our taxi to the Venice airport took 40 minutes and cost € 50.

**Charter Costs**

Our trip took place in May when the cost of this boat was priced at €2365 for a week. It rises to €3700 per week at the height of the season. The only boat based extras is the cost of the fuel and this is charged at €7.90 per hour of engine time used and deducted from the fuel deposit paid at the start of the charter. In 7 days we clocked up 26 hours of use. A one-way supplement of €100 is charged and both base car parking and hire of bicycles must be allowed for if required. Marina charges along the route vary greatly. There are a few free mooring in some areas but it is only possible to stop in designated places.

[www.connoisseurafloat.com](http://www.connoisseurafloat.com)

**Information**

*To charter this trip or any yacht you see in this issue of YV&C, please contact any of the recommended charter brokers listed on page 8*

depart for their hotels, leaving the island a haven of tranquility and us boat folk grateful to be travelling like snails with our homes. Genuine lace from the island is hard to find, little wonder since most pieces take many weeks of constant labour to produce. To watch and learn quite how difficult it really is to do visit the school of lace making and the museum that is attached to it. We found one expert needle lacemaker, Daniela Battaiu, working outdoors in a quiet corner, a sheltered spot protected from the fierce afternoon sun. Around the corner a fisherman was inspecting his nets ready to make his own type of lace-like repairs where necessary. If the island becomes too crowded during the day head off to Mazzorbro an island of gardens and beautiful orchids which is connected to Burano by a long wooden bridge and is seldom visited by tourists. It offers a pleasant walking excursion that is well rewarded by a splendid view across the lagoon towards Venice.

Our next destination lay just the other side of the canal, five minutes away if not for bridges and shallow waters. Still with only a thirty minute passage ahead we had plenty of time to buy the delicious jam filled croissants from Panificio Constantini in town and enjoy a leisurely breakfast before departing.

**Torcello**

Torcello was established in the 5th and 6th century and flourished to where 20,000 lived on the island, today only 60 inhabitants live here permanently the island having declined in popularity as that of Venice grew. Silt in the canals and malaria hastened the event to the point that today only one canal remains. A visit to the Byzantine cathedral of Santa Marie Assunta and the church of Santa Fosca is highly recommended and the extra cost of an audio guide is well worth paying

for as it leads one around the Roman sarcophagus of St Heliodorus, the huge Doomsday mosaics of the Last Supper and outside to sit on the marble seat said to have been the throne of Attila the Hun. The view from the top of the campanille across the lagoon to Venice is spectacular though it is definitely a mistake to be up there at 12 noon when they ring the bells, trust me! Full of culture it is time to fill the corporeal body and what could be better than a visit to the Locanda Cipriani rated on of the top restaurants in the areas, sadly the prices are high too.

From here the canal winds its way through marshlands that are amongst the most ecologically rich bodies of water in the Mediterranean. The wetlands are the habitat of many species of birds and wildfowl. The journey takes two hours.

**Portegrandi**

This modern town has a large marina surrounded by apartment blocks, berthing here is easy and convenient if you want a quick stop whilst waiting for the locks that lead from the canal to the River Sile open. The lock is closed for one and half hours each day for lunch. From here the two and half hour journey to the base at Casier is against a weak current and the town of Casale sur Sile makes an interesting stop for lunch. Leaving Casale the riverbanks are dotted with spectacular villas boasting waterside frontage as it passes through countryside reminiscent of that found in the UK. Further still and the banks are littered with the rotting hulls of several *Burci*, shallow draught transport barges that were used extensively on this river propelled by sail, oar or towed upstream by horse or oxen relying upon the current for their return journey downstream.

**Casier**

Two hours of motoring after leaving the lock we reached the Connoisseur base at Casier, also home to the company's sister fleet of the Crown Blue line, it lies hidden from the river up a spur that, unless you are expecting it, is somewhat difficult to spot. The staff here are happy to help you disembark and will if asked organise taxis to the nearby town of Treviso which also has an airport serviced by budget airlines serving the UK. 

**About the Authors**

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