



Cruising With Gondolas

Words & Images © FRANCES & MICHAEL HOWORTH; ISTOCKPHOTO.COM

There are many ways to arrive in Venice. Perhaps the very finest way is to do so in your own yacht. We are here on a one-way journey aboard a self-drive, 42-foot motor boat from Porto Levante to Casier via the Venice Lagoon, for the essential city stop, and then onto the islands of Burano, Murano and Torcello.



Our voyage of adventure began when we set off down the canal towards the delightful town of Choggia, (pronounced *key-oh-ja*), a colourful and bustling fishing village. 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 offering a cornucopia of different catches

from both inside the lagoon and just outside in the Adriatic Sea. Eel, crab and cuttlefish are the local specialities. Needless to say this is the town in which to dine on fish, and you cannot go wrong with a purchase from the market if cooking on board is your preference.

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: Venice. If you were hoping that you could motor along the Grande Canal in your

yacht, now is the time we disappoint you – navigation along that maritime main street is off limits to all private craft. Our own discontent 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 rules of the road.

The city does, however, offer three choices of marinas at San Giorgio, San Elena, and Certosa Island. 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 from 700 AD for almost a thousand years. Like any tourist, our first stop was St Marks Square; to see the pigeons, of course. En route, we frequently got lost and frequently found ourselves again; such is the maze of backstreets and alleys that crisscross the city. But the journey is a delight, as everywhere there was something to stop and see: gondolas of travellers, tourists and newlyweds; plazas of school children being herded by harassed teachers and nuns; market stalls laden with carnival masks; and grand palazzi and exquisite churches housing art treasures galore. Steeped in history, art and romance, one cannot help but be astounded by the wonders of Venice.

Known as the "Island of Glass," Murano is where artisans have practised the art of glassblowing since the 12th Century – they were originally exiled here after a particularly severe fire destroyed Venice. If travelling by boat, mooring spaces on the island of Murano are, at best, limited. One option is to catch a *vaporetto* (a motorboat for transporting people along the canals in Venice) for the short distance across the lagoon. Try 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.

Monday is usually a quiet day in Italy, and it is often the best day to visit this island.

Burano is the most colourful of the lagoon islands. Its tall, dramatically tilted church tower makes 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 latter that brings in the day-trippers, who fill the canal-side pathways throughout the day. In the early evening they depart for their hotels, leaving the island a haven of tranquillity 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 continuous labour to produce. To watch and learn quite how difficult it really is to do, visit the school of lace-making and the museum attached to it, or chat to those who do it for a living. We found one such expert needle lace-maker, Daniela Battaiu, working outdoors in a quiet, sheltered spot protected from the fierce afternoon sun.

If the island becomes too crowded during the day, head off to Mazzorbro, an island of gardens and beautiful orchids that is seldom visited by tourists and which is connected to Burano by a long wooden bridge. It offers a pleasant walking excursion that is well rewarded by a splendid view across the lagoon towards Venice.

Torcello was established in the 5th and 6th Centuries and peaked in the 12th Century when the island declined in popularity as that of Venice grew. Silt in the

canals and a malaria outbreak hastened the process to the point that only one canal still remains. Today, there are only 60 permanent inhabitants. A visit to the Byzantine cathedral of Santa Marie Assunta and the Church of Santa Fosca is highly recommended. Wander around the Roman sarcophagus of St Heliodorus, the huge Doomsday mosaics of the Last Supper, and then outside to sit on the marble seat said to have been the throne of Attila the Hun.

From Torcello, the canal winds its way through marshlands which are among the most ecologically rich bodies of water in the Mediterranean, and the habitat of many species of birds and wildfowl. The journey takes two hours before you arrive in Portograndi, a modern town with a large marina where it is convenient to stop while waiting for the locks that lead from the canal to the River Sile to open. From here, you meander through a countryside dotted with spectacular villas boasting waterside frontage. 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 and propelled by sail or oar or towed upstream by horse or oxen and then relied upon the current for their return journey downstream. We arrive at our final destination, Casier, which lies hidden from the river up a spur.

I will never understand why the Venetians built their city on islands inside a swamp in the first place. Within minutes of our reaching there, however, we were awfully glad they had. ❁