



Left: Basilica di Santa Maria della Salute, seen from the Grand Canal. This photo: The author and crew Moo aboard a vaporetto.

VENETIAN BLINDER

Great cities look even greater when you arrive aboard a boat you are skippering. The first in our new Charter Tales series begins with a cruise around Venice **TEXT** MICHAEL HOWORTH **PHOTOS** FRANCES HOWORTH

I'll never understand why the Venetians built their city on islands inside a swamp but I'm glad they did. Within minutes of leaving the arrivals hall at Marco Polo airport we were zooming off along the aquatic version of the city's ring road, our water taxi throwing a plume of water from its stern, dousing the speed restriction sign that indicates a limit of 20 knots. Our taxi-skipper Thomas slowed only once—to point out where the Carabinieri have set up radar traps to catch boats that break the speed limit.

We passed hospital and ambulance motor boats with their flashing blue lights before darting down a one-way canal and turning left at the lights at the bottom. Suddenly we were dodging the gondolas in the Grand Canal, with a packed St Mark's Square to starboard. Then we arrived at our hotel in style: the concierge-cum-dockmaster managed to unload our suitcases at the same time as keeping the small boat alongside the jetty.

But we weren't in Venice as typical tourists: we were there to charter a 47ft motor boat from the Connoisseur base a few miles south in Porto Levante on the Po delta. We planned to cruise the lagoon on which Venice stands, the largest in Italy. Beyond the buzzing *vaporettos* (water taxis) and the tourist sites there's a side to Venice that visitors don't often see. Offshore bars have created peaceful lagoons and beautiful holiday beaches, such as

Lido and Bibione. Inland of the lagoons is a Mediterranean countryside of wheat fields, orchards, vineyards and olive groves. All of these we wanted to explore under our own steam.

We're off!

Next morning we took a taxi to Porto Levante, finding the base in almost total isolation in the middle of the countryside. The helpful shore crew quickly and efficiently went through the ropes and asked if I had any boat handling experience. Once I understood that there was only one propeller aboard our 65hp-powered charter boat, and grasped the fact that there was no need for a compass or a chart plotter, I was well away.

Our week-long one-way cruise would take us to Casier near Treviso, with the first leg along the Po, and up the Po Brondolo Canal towards Choggia. At the heart of the cruise was the Venice lagoon, and we intended to stop at the islands of Burano, Murano and Torcello. From the lagoon, we had a short cruise up the canal that leads into the Sile river, past Portograndi and on to Casier.

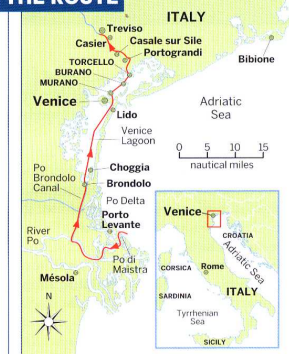
Our boat was clean, tidy, comfortable and well maintained. It was surprisingly well equipped too, with air-conditioning, two steering positions and a useful bow thruster. A small generator or an inverter for charging a mobile phone, laptop and digital camera would have been useful for those of

THE BOAT



Type: Magnifique 8+2
LOA: 47ft 5in (14.50m)
Beam: 13ft 6in (4.10m)
Draught: 3ft 4in (1.00m)
Air draught: 7ft 3in (2.20m)
Builders: Porter & Haylett, Wroxham
Engine: 65hp Nanni diesel
Fuel capacity: 350 litres
Fuel consumption: 2.5 litres per hour
Fresh water capacity: 1,000 litres
Berths: 8 fixed; 2 converted from sofas
Speed: 8 knots

THE ROUTE



THE HIGHS & LOWS

HIGHS

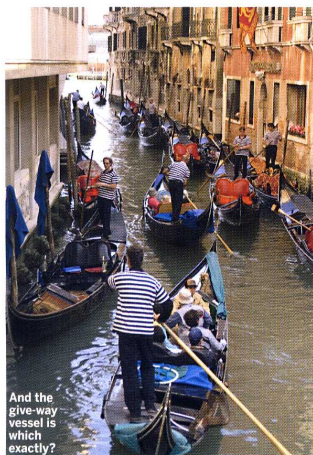
- the fish market in Choggia
- the historic sights of Venice
- the glass factories of Murano
- the ladies making lace on the streets of Burano

- Treviso for its history
- the wildlife in the marshlands
- the local produce and wines

LOWS

- dull views before we reached Choggia
- canal-side moorings not always marked

Beyond the buzzing *vaporettos* and the tourist sites there's a side to Venice that visitors don't often see



And the give-way vessel is which exactly?



Follow that taxi: approaching Venice.

us stupid enough to want to work occasionally along the way. The only other niggle was that there was no staff from where I could fly my colours – but then I'm old school!

Quite how crowded the boat would be if it carried its full complement of ten, I shudder to think, but we saw a number of full boats – I can only think that crews ashore and showered at marinas. Our group of six meant the boat was spacious and my feeling is that between four and eight on board is the ideal number. The spacious awning-covered sundeck is great for eating alfresco and the boat comes with all the galley gear you might need, except a barbecue.

We're off!

The first five hours of the journey motoring along the Po river and the Po Brondolo canal was through generally flat and rather featureless countryside. We crossed the Brenta river using the locks and 90 minutes later were moored for the

night inside the marina at Darsena Mosella in Choggia. The colourful and bustling fishing village of Choggia (pronounced 'key-oh-ja') boasts a large fleet of deep-sea and inshore fishing boats. It's busy every day except Sunday and there's a spectacular fish market (open every day except Monday), offering a huge variety of fish caught inside the lagoon and 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 you're cooking on board there is no better place to stock up than the market. Eel, crab and cuttlefish are the local specialities.

The town offers two marinas. The first is the rather pretentious and overpriced Sporting Club, whose snooty attitude to anything without a significant sail area is apparent the moment one's bows cross the entrance channel. At €90 a night it has pretensions of grandeur but it's nearer the town than Darsena Mosella, its more modest neighbour that is half the price.

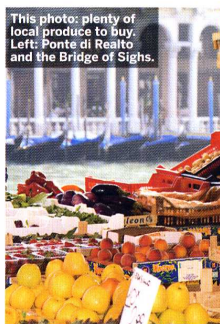
Venice

At the heart of our cruising ground is one of the most beautiful cities in the world and, if tourist numbers are taken into account, one of the most popular, with its famous St Mark's Square and stunning cathedral. James Bond in *Casino Royale* had a good time motoring along the Grande Canal, but you'll be disappointed if you want to do it in your boat – navigation 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 rules of the road.

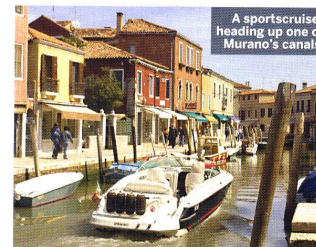
The city does, however, offer three choices of marina. The first is the most central and convenient, if somewhat pricey, San Giorgio Marina, located on its very own island directly opposite St Mark's. The second is San Elena, which can be a bit of a hike if you do not take a *vaporetto*. The third, and cheapest, is on Certosa island, which has yet to get its own stop on the *vaporetto* service and therefore you are dependant on the marina's ferry service. From each you can wander through the narrow streets and alleys, visit the Rialto bridge and discover some of Venice's incredible Gothic buildings, most notably the Palace of the Doges. With history, art and romance all around, you can't help but be inspired by the wonders of Venice.

Murano

Mooring spaces on Murano, the island of glass, are at best limited if only because the locals use their boats as we do cars, so it might be better, given the short distance from Venice, to hop on a *vaporetto*. 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



This photo: plenty of local produce to buy. Left: Ponte di Rialto and the Bridge of Sighs.



A sports cruiser heading up one of Murano's canals.



Eat on board (left) or, if you're feeling energetic, walk a few yards and eat out (this photo).

when disembarking – high-pressure salesmen sponsored by the island's 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 imported from elsewhere. But glass is still made by artisans on the island in a trade that was first established in the 12th Century, when Venetian glassblowers were exiled here after fire destroyed Venice. Tours of glass houses and glass-blowing demonstrations can be arranged and those you arrange yourself will be less pressurised.

Monday is always a quiet day in Italy and it is a good one to visit this island. Once the obligatory furnace and glass-blowing tour has been

With history, art and romance all around, you can't help but be inspired by the wonders of Venice

completed, a stroll alongside the canal and a browse of the shops or a visit to the Museo del Vetro (€5.50, open 1000-1700, closed Wednesdays) is a splendid way to spend a few hours.

A city museum pass at €18 allows visits to 12 other museums operated by the municipality, including the lace museum in Burano and the Ducal Palace in St Mark's Square – it's 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, there are plenty of restaurants for a lunch stop, although not all open for dinner, given that most visitors to the island leave before early evening. Try the Antica Trattoria Valmaranea (+39 041 739 313) at Navigaro 31.

Burano

The short distance through the twists and turns that lead towards Burano took us 3½ hours, though that included a pleasant stop in the canalside mooring dock at the southern end of the island of San Erasmo. Here was had a splendid lunch of serrano ham and local cheeses washed down with wine. Burano is the most colourful of the islands, its dramatically tilted church tower making it easy to spot as you approach.

Fishing and lace-making are the mainstays of the island and it is the latter that brings in the day-trippers who fill the waterside pathways during the day. In the early evening they depart and leave the place tranquil – we were grateful we'd brought our home with us. 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 how it is done, visit the lace-making school and the museum that is attached to it. If the island becomes too crowded during the day head off to Mazzorbo, an island of gardens and beautiful orchids, which is connected to Burano by a long wooden bridge and is seldom visited by tourists but offers a pleasant walking excursion that is well rewarded with a splendid view across the lagoon towards Venice.

Our next destination was just the other side of the canal, although bridges and shallow waters mean the trip can take half an hour or so. That should leave plenty of time to buy the delicious jam-filled croissants from Panificio Costantini in town and enjoy a leisurely breakfast.

Torcello

Some 20,000 people once lived in Torcello; today there are 60 permanent inhabitants, 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 6th-Century basilica, and the church of Santa Fosca with its Roman sarcophagus and marble seat said to have been the throne of Attila the Hun, are worth a visit. 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 home to many species of birds.

Portograndi

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

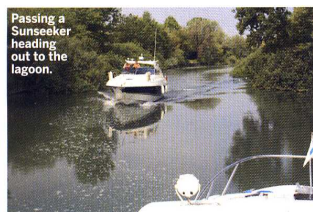


Every home should have one: a boat is an essential tool.



Approaching
Casale sur Sile.

for the lock from the canal to the Sile river. The lock is closed for 1½ hours each day for lunch. Our cruise to Casier was against a weak current and the town of Casale sur Sile was an interesting stop for lunch. As we left Casale the riverbanks were dotted with spectacular villas boasting waterside frontages, and yet the countryside is reminiscent of southern England. The banks were littered with the rotting hulls of *burci*, shallow-draught transport barges that were once used extensively on the river, propelled by sail, oar or towed upstream by horse or oxen and relying on the current for the journey downstream.



Casier

It was two hours of motoring to the Connoisseur base at Casier, which lies hidden from the river up a spur that, unless you are expecting it, is somewhat difficult to spot. The staff helped us disembark and later organised taxis to the nearby town of Treviso, which boasts an airport serviced by Ryanair.

Treviso

A few miles to the south, this wonderful walled city is a must-visit. Many say its beauty rivals Venice and its quiet canals are the perfect backdrop for a stroll. The walls that surround the city date from the 1500s and the shopping in the street market is just the thing for those wanting to take home fresh pasta and Parmesan cheese to prolong their gastronomic tour of Venice and the lagoon that surrounds it. With careful planning and the co-operation of the staff at the base, it is possible to take the boat through the normally closed lock almost into the centre of town.

A week is never enough on charter. There was plenty more we could have explored around the Po delta – the Po di Maistra is a superb wildlife reserve, Barricata boasts great beaches, and Mesola is a beautiful town dominated by its castle. Next time, maybe. The whole area is packed with riches, and at its heart has a gem of a city that is a joy to explore is by boat. **MBY**

About the authors

Frances and Michael Howorth have been travelling together for 25 years. They have cruised to Africa, North and South America, the Caribbean, the Med, India and plenty of islands in between. Michael is a qualified Captain of luxury yachts up to 3,000 tonnes.

FACTFILE

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DISTANCES

Our one-way trip from Porto Levante to Casier covered 100km (62 miles), through three locks controlled and operated by keepers. The recommended time for this trip is no less than seven days if you want to take in all the sights.

GETTING THERE

Connoisseur bases are each a reasonable distance from an airport. Venice Marco Polo and Treviso are served by UK airlines. We flew from Heathrow to Marco Polo with BMI, costing £100 return. Ryanair fly to Treviso from Stanstead, Luton and Liverpool. Taxis from the airport to Porto Levante take an hour and 20 minutes, costing €90. From Casier our taxi to the airport took 40 minutes and cost €50.

CHARTER COSTS

Our trip took place in May when the cost of our boat was €2,365 for a week. It rises to €3,700 per week high season. The only boat-based extras is the cost of fuel, charged at €7.90 per hour of engine time and deducted from the fuel deposit paid when we picked up the boat. In seven days we clocked up 26 hours of use. A one-way supplement of €100 is charged, and base car parking and hire of bicycles must be allowed for if required. Marina charges along the route vary greatly and were generally higher than we expected.

CHARTS, PILOTS & GUIDES

There is a guidebook on board each boat produced by the local staff. We also used guidemaps published by Belletti Editore, available from nautical bookshops or from Connoisseur at the time of booking – they are the perfect pre-cruise planning tool.

PAPERWORK

Very little is needed and what there is will be handled by the base staff who know all the ropes and hand it all over at the time of the boat briefing. If using credit cards in Italy it is useful to carry a photo ID card.

WEATHER

It was very pleasant in early May – we didn't need on-board air-conditioning or heating.

MARINAS

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