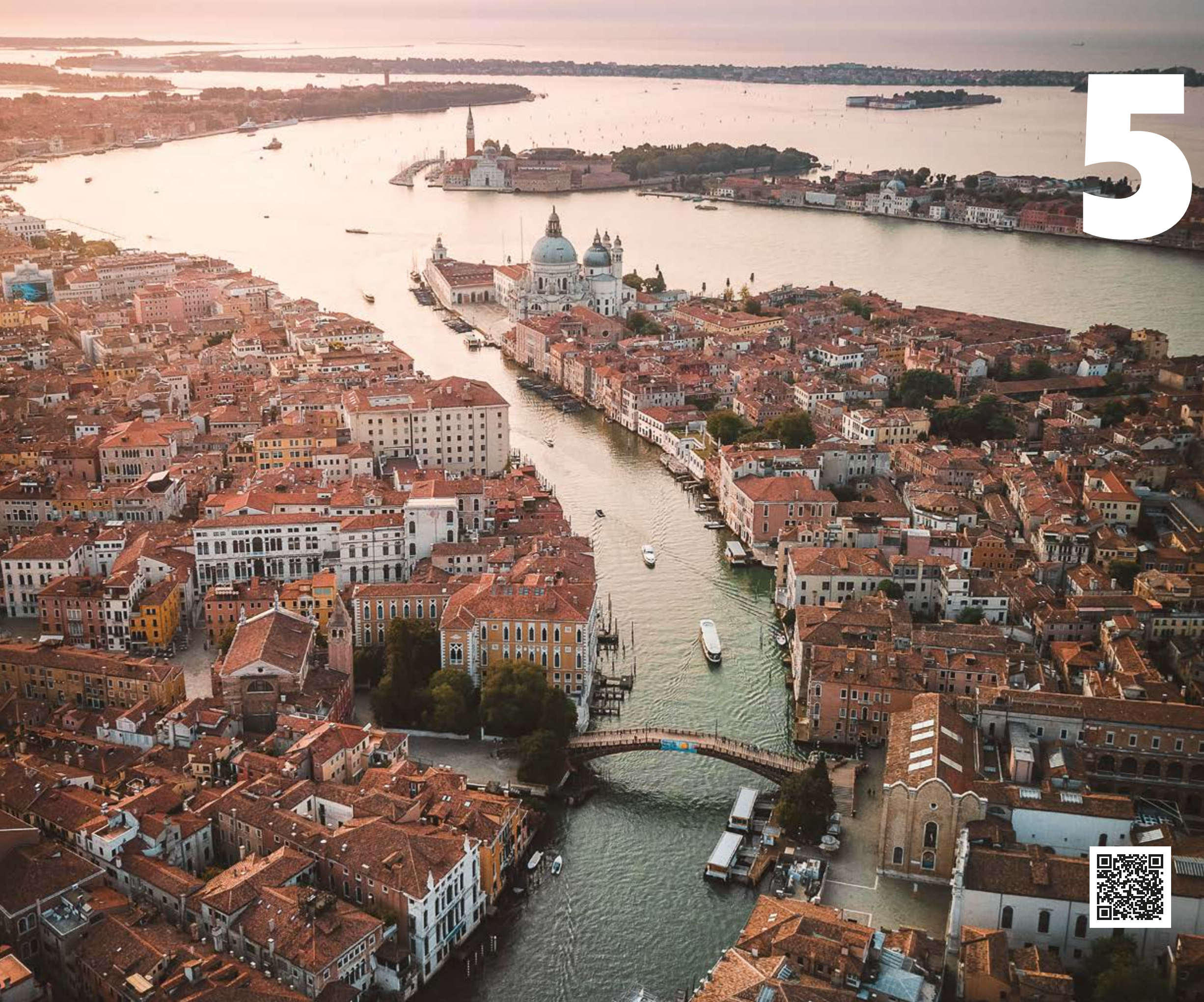




5 VENICE AND ITS LAGOON

*“[...] a ghost upon the sands of the sea, so weak
—so quiet,—so bereft of all but her loveliness,
that we might well doubt, as we watched her faint
reflection in the mirage of the lagoon, which was
the City, and which the Shadow.”*

The Stones of Venice, John Ruskin

The sandbank is still there, under the Istrian stone, behind the walls of the houses, under the Tintoretto and the Titians. That stretch of land that emerges from the lagoon, that “high bank” where the name Rialto comes from, crossed by canals swollen and emptied by the life-giving breath of the sea, still exists. It can be seen in the network of canals and observed on the undulating surface of the squares. It is Venice that emerges from the lagoon and not vice versa. The place-names reveal it: the southern quarter of Dorsoduro recalls the solid land on which it is built, the northern one of Cannaregio the rushes that used to cover it; at the eastern ends of the quarter of Castello, the squares are still called “marshes”. The familiarity with water and boats and the amphibious culture in which cities, fishing villages, small artisanal and cultural centres thrive on almost every tiny island come from the lagoon, while in the centre Venice becomes one of the most influential capitals of Europe, from the lagoon reaching Crete, Cyprus and Constantinople and taking on its global dimension. Like the Arabs and the Portuguese, the Venetians, with Marco Polo, take part in the medieval West’s discovery of the world. However, they remain aware of their original luck and dedicate art and intelligence to creating barriers, deviating the course of rivers, establishing balances and preserving the lagoon, becoming their cause and effect.



CULTURAL HERITAGE
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CRITERIA FOR SELECTION: The city of Venice is an architectural masterpiece in which even the smallest building contains works by some of the world’s greatest artists; its lagoon is a virtuous example of man’s intervention on nature.



“‘There is still one of which you never speak.’ Marco Polo bowed his head. ‘Venice,’ the Khan said. Marco smiled. ‘What else do you believe I have been talking to you about?’ The emperor did not turn a hair. ‘And yet I have never heard you mention that name.’ And Polo said: ‘Every time I describe a city I am saying something about Venice.’”

For Calvino’s Marco Polo, describing any city is always a little like speaking about Venice; but in Venice itself there is an infinity of places which tell of “another place”.

St Mark’s Basilica alone – with its four horses and columns which arrived from Constantinople in 1204, and with the mosaics telling the story of the removal of the relics of St Mark from Egypt – would suffice as an example; or the **Arsenal**, a word of Arabic origin which means “seat of industry”, with the memory of its ships and the great Greek lion at the entrance which has words in runes on its right shoulder; or the **Riva degli Schiavoni**, the long promenade on the lagoon which bears the name of the Dalmatian soldiers at the service of Venice, where the echo of the sea bounces back in the clear air while **St Mark’s Basin** and the building of the **Dogana da Mar** can be admired. Some places, however, are more emblematic than others. The merchant is alleged to have set off from the legendary



1 homes of Marco Polo, fascinating Gothic buildings in the Corte del Milion, at the age of seventeen, first on board ships, then on camelback; this is the same animal that, when you go into the quarter of Cannaregio, almost comes out of the façade of **2 Palazzo Mastelli**, facing the church of **Madonna dell’Orto** and its oriental-style bell-tower. After going round the splendid Gothic building to reach **3 Campo dei Mori**, other enigmatic statues look at the visitor with eyes that come from afar: they are the “Moors”, for the Venetians the inhabitants of Morea, i.e. the Peloponnese, which until the beginning of the 19th century was under Ottoman domination; these merchants, who used to live in the Venetian quarter, wear a turban like the one in the paintings by Giovanni

Bellini in the **Accademia Gallery**. The oldest **4 Ghetto** in Europe is only a few steps away, with six synagogues hidden among the houses and a Jewish community which still lives there today and prepares delicious traditional Jewish Venetian pastries. Go to the ticket office of the **Jewish Museum** to visit it and find out which of the temples is open to visitors. It is time to reach the nearby **Campo San Marcuola**: take a vaporetto and go to the **5 Fontego dei Turchi**, formerly home to the trading community. Here, in the **Natural History Museum**, the paleontological, anthropological and natural history collections accumulated by Venetian explorers perpetuate the memory of extraordinary voyages and adventures.



LIFE IN THE LAGOON

“The city is a hard oyster shell where life is in ferment amid mother-of-pearl reflections. On the steps of the first bridge, old fishermen, bent almost double and working quickly, repair the nets burnt by the salt, keeping them taut with their toes. Further on, we realise the island temperament of the people, who keep staring at us and commenting on the material of our overcoats.”

Una città di pescatori, in Gente di mare, Giovanni Comisso

There are many settlements on the islands in the Venice lagoon. Murano and Burano have thousands of residents; Lido and Pellestrina are also coasts between the sea and the lagoon with solid communities; some minor islands are still inhabited by religious communities or small groups of people, but there is only one other town: Chioggia. Chioggia is not Venice’s little sister, but an autonomous place, with a firm identity linked to the tradition of fishing and shipbuilding, and it is “Venetian” in that it is a cousin of Portogruaro, Caorle and Grado, of Roman Ravenna and medieval Ferrara, or of the many other cities in the Po Valley which prospered between land and water. It is above all a city of art and culture, with the oldest working clock in the world, on St Andrew’s Tower, a museum dedicated to seafaring traditions, an incredibly lively historic centre, excellent fish cuisine and a seaside dimension, in the neighbouring town of Sottomarina, which is in no way inferior to the more well-known resorts on the Adriatic coast.



"ARSENALE! MIND YOUR STEP! THE SAILOR WARNED IN A LOUD VOICE. THE PEOPLE BEGAN TO DISEMBARK, WHILE THE CAT STAYED BELOW, WAITING, QUIVERING, READY TO LEAP, UNTIL THE LAST PASSENGER PUT THEIR FOOT ON THE JETTY, THEN HE BOUNDED OFF LIKE LIGHTNING. [...] 'THE CAT'S COMING,' THE SAILOR SAID TO THE CAPTAIN IN THE COCKPIT."

Like Pallino, in the *Gatto che viaggiava in vaporetto*, who embarks at the Arsenal stop, we could do the same setting off on our adventures in the aquatic dimension of Venice, which is obvious at first sight, with all the water there is, but which is understood better from on board a boat. Before boarding the vaporetto, let's stop at the **1 Arsenal**. The large entrance watched over by two towers, today joined by a wooden bridge, was once the gate through which the ships of the Venetian Republic left after having been built or repaired. To look into the matter more thoroughly, we can take just a few steps and reach the **2 Naval History**

Museum, which tells the story of the navy and houses countless models of boats and ships, including that of the famous **Bucintoro**, the boat of the Doge of Venice. If you find it open, do not miss the **Pavilion of Ships**, which is home to many vessels some of which can be boarded. Let's then take the vaporetto (Arsenal stop) and cross **St Mark's Basin**, the ancient port. We can imagine it covered by a forest of ship masts and we pass by the white building of the **Dogana da Mar**, where the ship captains had to show their documents. Alternatively, we can walk to the ferry of **Calle Vallaresso** and take a gondola to reach the stop of Salute, where we will recognise the **3 Nuovo Trionfo**: it is not a pirate vessel, but one of the very rare Adriatic sailing coasters, a small cargo ship which would go back and forth between Venice, the Istrian and Dalmatian coasts. A stroll of about 15 minutes will take us to the **4 Squero San Trovaso**, one of the last traditional shipyards where gondolas and the other lagoon boats are still being built. When we reach the Accademia stop, we can get on board of the vaporetto again, sail down the whole length of the **5 Grand Canal**, admiring the dozens of palaces floating on the water, and get off at the San Marcuola stop. It is then about a 15 minute walk to reach the northernmost part of the city where, in the long and straight canals of **Cannaregio**, there are some **6 rowing schools** where one can experience the excitement of gliding over the water in a rowing boat, as the Venetians have been doing for over a thousand years.



VENICE AND THE LAGOON in books

Some books to plunge you into the canals and go from one island to another.

• **The Stones of Venice**, John Ruskin (1851-53). This is a detailed and passionate approach to the architecture, the history and the art of the city of Venice, contextualising them culturally, adding aesthetic evaluations and philosophical reflections, and presenting Venice as a living work of art. This multiplicity of approaches makes Ruskin's book a work of literature.

• **The Aspern Papers**, Henry James (1888). In the decadent Venice of the 19th century, this story is a fascinating portrait of literary intrigues and obsession. The main character, an unnamed American literary critic, is trying to acquire a collection of letters left by the poet Jeffrey Aspern, whom he venerates as one of the greatest of all time.

• **Death in Venice**, Thomas Mann (1912). Beauty, desire, death and art

run through the story of the tragic demise of Gustav von Aschenbach, a writer who goes to Venice to find new inspiration and ends up devastated by his obsession for the young Tadzio.

• **Gente di mare**, Giovanni Comisso (1929). Impressionistic accounts of the author's experiences on board fishing boats plus his visits to Chioggia, Venice and in the lagoon. As well as having evocative qualities, they represent an invaluable repertoire of memories of the lagoon.

• **Invisible Cities**, Italo Calvino (1978). Calvino explores the fantastic cities described by Marco Polo to Kublai Khan, which become a metaphor of states of mind and emotions, existence and experience of the world.

Children's books:

• **The Thief Lord**, Cornelia Funke (2002). The lives of the two orphans Prosper and Bo are transformed when, running away from their unloving aunt and uncle, they arrive in Venice and join a gang of children, headed by the

"thief lord", who lives in an abandoned cinema.

• **Sull'Arca con Noè**, Zaira Zuffetti, Paola Bona (2004). The mosaics in St Mark's tell the story of the Universal Flood and the deeds of the captain of a legendary vessel, Noah.

• **Il gatto che viaggiava in vaporetto**, Stefano Medas (2020). Pallino is a cat that loves travelling by vaporetto and exploring the canals and crowded streets of Venice. During his adventures, he makes friends with other animals and meets some eccentric characters, who help him discover the real meaning of family and friendship.

• **Zhero. Il segreto dell'acqua**, Marco Alverà (2020). The mysterious disappearance of the leading light in physics Bepi Galvano, in a labyrinth-like Venice, catapults three youngsters into a race against time, in which the future of humanity seems to depend on them. They have to protect the professor's last invention: an extraordinary machine which can generate green energy from water.