

7 SECRETS OUT OF VENICE

Away from the hordes of tourists, **NORMAN MILLER** gets acquainted with Venice's extended family of little-known sister islands scattered across the Venetian lagoon.

▲ Scattered around Venice are little islands perfect for escaping the crowds.

My wife and I sit back in a little motor boat sipping Prosecco, gliding past little abandoned islands topped by mysterious crumbling buildings on a private tour of the Venetian lagoon. Here, an abandoned 19th-century Napoleonic barracks, there, an old medical outpost where Venice's sick were once sent. This is a world the vast majority of tourists miss by sticking to Venice's crowded canals. The lagoon archipelago of around 40 islands is scattered about the largest wetland region in the Mediterranean Basin – 550 sq km of shallow water and shifting mudflats traversed by channels busy with vessels, from water buses (vaporetti) to fishing boats. Apart from glassmaking Murano and lacemaking Burano, most of these islands are overlooked, and it's these secrets that we've come to discover over a week.



1 THE ANCIENT REPUBLIC

Torcello, where the Venetian republic began – before mediaeval politics shifted the lagoon's seat of power to Venice – has no more than a dozen residents today. History buffs are drawn to the archaeological treasures in its tiny museum (museoditorcello.provincia.venezia.it) flanked by crumbling old statuary in the lee of the lagoon's oldest cathedral, the Basilica of Santa Maria dell'Asunta. Founded in 639, the church's interior is a jewel of glittering mosaics and frescoes. Torcello also attracts Hemingway fans tapping into the bucolic vibe that enchanted the novelist during his stay in the 1940s. We smile at a possible one – bearded and puffing a pipe – while wolfing down spaghetti vongole and grilled seabass in the canal-side garden of Taverna Tipica Veneziana (*Fondamenta dei Borgognoni 5, Tel: 39 041 99 6428*).

2 SERENE VINEYARDS

We spend two nights on Mazzorbo in the northern lagoon, attached at one end to the island of Burano by a wooden bridge. This compact spot was once a hideaway for Venetian aristocrats, who would probably have approved of the serenity of Venissa (venissa.it). The charming quayside haven has a handful of luxurious rooms set in a vineyard, over which a campanile rises like a Renaissance rocket.

Its wines are historic too, using the Venetian dorona grape thought to be extinct until Venissa's founder Gianluca Bisol found a few old vines on Sant' Erasmo. He transplanted them here to make some of Italy's finest sparkling wine. In Venissa's Michelin-star restaurant, sublime dishes celebrate lagoon seafood and produce like eel or samphire plucked from an adjacent inlet. ➔

B A mosaic at the Basilica of Santa Maria dell'Asunta.

C Archaeological treasures on the grounds of the lagoon's oldest cathedral.

D The contemporary interior of Venissa's Michelin-star restaurant.

E A historic campanile soars over the vineyard at Venissa.



3 THE BAYOU

Le Vignole offers two contrasting takes on greenery. At one end it's solidly agricultural, covered with groves and vineyards that once produced wine for Venice's ancient rulers. At the southern end, the greenery takes a wild turn into a riot of untamed bush. This mini jungle is pierced by aquamarine inlets that look like a bayou in Louisiana.

Making our way to the south-western end of Vignole by a rented boat, we land at a tiny pier and step ashore like Robinson Crusoe-style explorers landing on a castaway island. We follow a tiny dirt path through the bush, to the clearing where the ruins of the 16th-century Fort Sant'Andrea stands. We wander through its cool stones and then climb up to the battlements to take in a stupendous view over the lush trees and the lagoon.

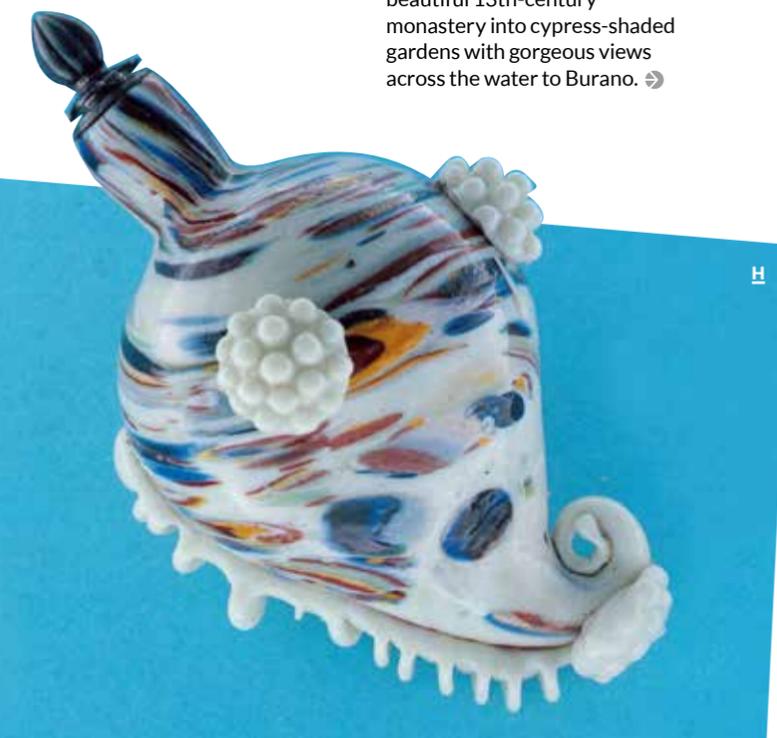
4 NATURE RESERVE

We stay the night on La Certosa, a haven of wilderness. Circumnavigating the wooded shoreline, the aura is utterly peaceful, with the only sounds being that of birds and a few Italian teenagers splashing off a boat. Their laughter fades as we walk on, settling on a tiny beach to watch boats sail by in the warm evening sun. We have dinner on the terrace of the island's solitary Hotel La Certosa (hotelcertosa.com/en) while gazing over the beach – the sort of “luxury” nowhere in Venice could offer.

5 SPIRITUAL SANCTUARY

Devotion pervades San Francesco del Deserto, home to the world's first Franciscan monastery. We're met by Father Lorenzo, who shows us around a heavenly hideaway that's home now to just a handful of monks. He seems happy, even though his day begins at 6.45am and doesn't end till 9pm. But anyone (male or female) can come for a spiritual retreat without sticking to such long hours, simply enjoying the beauty of solitude and reflection in one of the lagoon's most idyllic spots.

Bells toll sonorously as we step out from the austere beautiful 13th-century monastery into cypress-shaded gardens with gorgeous views across the water to Burano. ➔



F The tranquil San Francesco del Deserto monastery on La Certosa.

G Ornate glass chandeliers hang from the ceiling at Museo del Vetro.

H A bottle from the perfume section at Palazzo Mocenigo.

LA DOLCE VITA

Torcello resident **MARTINO RIZZI**, who offers personalised lagoon tours in traditional boats, gives his take on enjoying culture around the lagoon.

MUSEUM REVIVAL I'm looking forward to the reopening of the refurbished glass museum, Museo del Vetro (museovetro.visitmuve.it) on Murano. I also like the museum of Palazzo Mocenigo (mocenigo.visitmuve.it), which covers the history of valuable ancient Venetian garments and accessories. There's also a new section on perfumes.

TANTALISING PLATES Trattoria Alla Maddalena (trattoriamaddalena.com) is run by locals, and you can eat traditional dishes like risotto di go, made with fish from the lagoon. In Venice, Il Paradiso Perduto (*Fondamenta della Misericordia 2540, Tel: 39 041 72 0581*) is where you can have good seafood while listening to live music.

ART AND FOOD EXTRAVAGANZA The Art Biennale comes to Venice from May 9 to November 22 with a food-focused extension. It is slated to take place in pavilions in Venice's public gardens, as well as on Torcello, Mazzorbo and Burano. Taste the best of Venetian cuisine in a beautiful environment.



! Luchino Visconti's *Death in Venice* was shot in Alberoni beach at The Lido.

! Savour fresh seafood on Pellestrina.

K The fishing island of Pellestrina is lined with colourful houses.

L A seaside resort on the shores of The Lido.



6 FISHERMAN'S TOWN

There's a sleepy beauty to Pellestrina, the lagoon's southernmost island. It's a fishermen's hangout known as one of the best spots for seafood. Our boat brings us to lunch, mooring just metres from our quayside table at the acclaimed *Da Celeste (daceleste.it)* where, over fried soft-shell crab, we admire ramshackle huts set on stilts far out in the water.

Pellestrina is popular with cyclists thanks to its flat terrain, offering views across the lagoon and the Adriatic. If you keep riding to the very southern end of the island, you'll reach the Ca' Roman bird sanctuary. We take a post-lunch stroll through the pastel-coloured houses, greeting elderly ladies sitting in their shady porches or pausing to watch gnarled fishermen mending their nets.

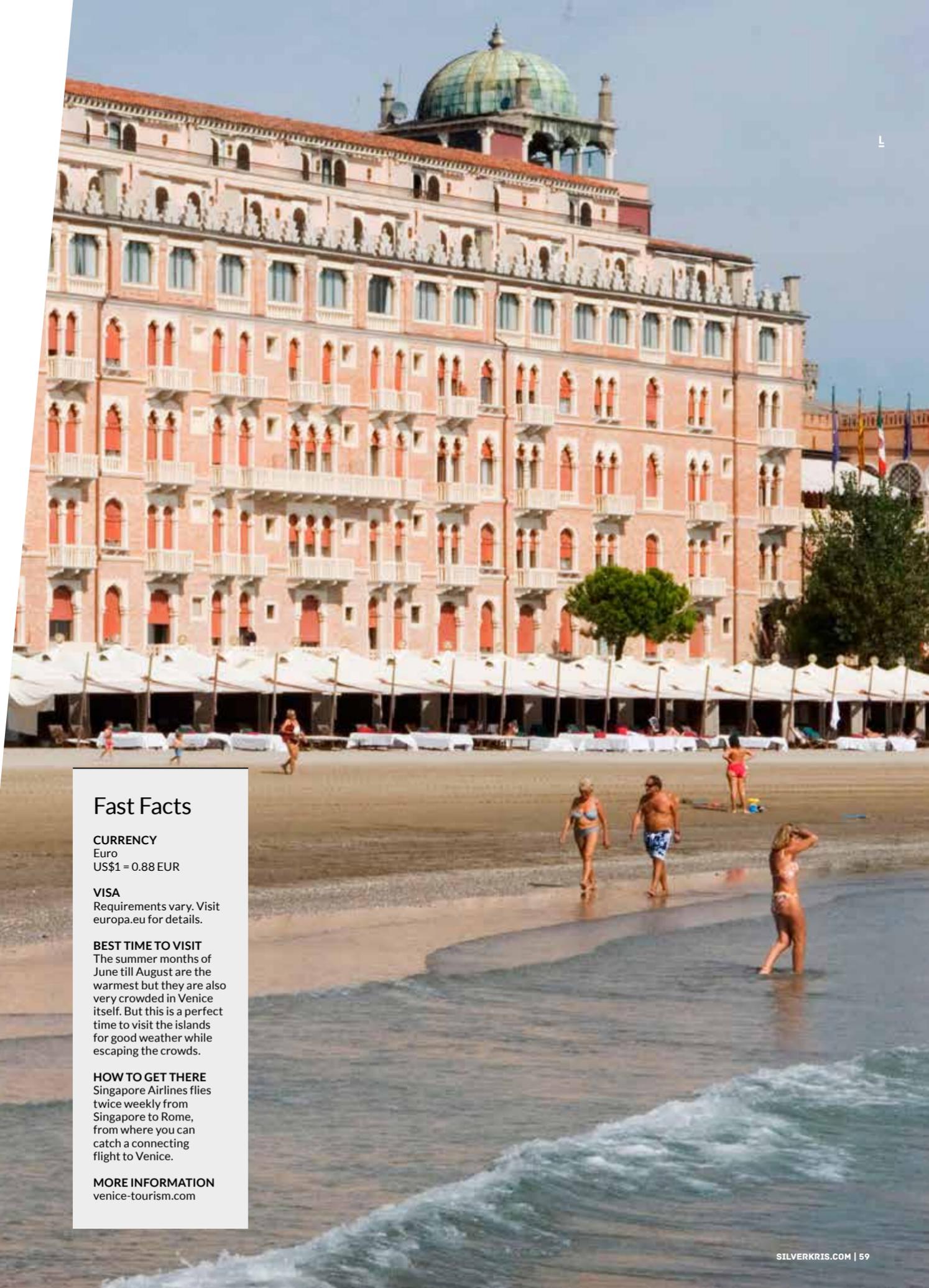
7 CINEMATIC BEACHES

In the early 1800s poet Lord Byron enjoyed galloping around The Lido's unspoilt fields and woods. Today, the island is home to beach resorts, ice-cream parlours and beachwear shops, whose kitschy vibe sharply contrasts to the ravishing villas that line the back streets. Many of these are built in Liberty-style - Italy's showier take on Art Nouveau, with added flourishes like turrets and balconies.

The Lido is famous for its wide sandy beaches and is also the backdrop of the Venice Film Festival every September. But we discover our own cinematic ambience at Alberoni beach, backed by dunes and peaceful pinewoods. It was here that Luchino Visconti shot scenes in his classic 1971 film based on Thomas Mann's *Death In Venice*. It feels as timeless and beguiling as anything you'd find in Venice, but utterly different. ■



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Fast Facts

CURRENCY
Euro
US\$1 = 0.88 EUR

VISA
Requirements vary. Visit europa.eu for details.

BEST TIME TO VISIT
The summer months of June till August are the warmest but they are also very crowded in Venice itself. But this is a perfect time to visit the islands for good weather while escaping the crowds.

HOW TO GET THERE
Singapore Airlines flies twice weekly from Singapore to Rome, from where you can catch a connecting flight to Venice.

MORE INFORMATION
venice-tourism.com