



Vineyards may tower 500 metres over its lowest

4Corners/Giovanni Simeone

...nce there are no secrets at all here, and everyone has a dress-circle view of everything going on within a 10-mile radius. Few of the port companies as yet have official tours in the upper Douro, since they concentrate their activities in the warehouse district of Vila Nova de Gaia, opposite Porto. But if you stay at La Rosa or Passadouro, you can find out all about the farm activities, book a vintage, and you can even climb into the tanks and tread away for yourself. Fishing, swimming and viewing the prehistoric cave paintings at Foz de Arouce are other options, and the local towns and villages are always spectacular. I would find it hard not to jump on and off the lumbering, friendly train which rolls up and down the river; the region is an eye-

...ur-star, air-conditioned 40-bed hotel called The Vintage House. It is now sold this on to local entrepreneur Mario Ferreira, who owns some of the cruise boats which ferry 400,000 boat trippers up and down the region's river each year. There are more graceful 'turismo de habitação' (manor-house tourism) options available such as the pretty Casa Visconde de Chanceléiros, which combine basic hotel comforts with a sense of Portuguese ease and charm.

Tourism in the Douro is about to take another leap forward, too, with the planned opening next year of a French-owned, luxury 'destination hotel' at Quinta de Maneira, complete with helipad

brightening challenge for photographers and painters, too.

And, of course, you will never be short of a drink. Most wines taste at their best when the evidence of their creation fills the air around you; but there's something almost sacramental about a glass of inky-sweet port drunk when the mountains from which it has been wrestled gleam at you through the late afternoon haze, or pump another day's heat back into the dark, uncaring universe.

Andrew Jefford is the author of "A Complete Guide to Contemporary French Wine"

PORTS OF CALL

- Bed and breakfast: Quinta de la Rosa, +351 254 73 22 54, www.quintadelarosa.com
- Quinta do Passadouro, +351 254 73 12 46, www.quintadopassadouro.com
- Self-catering: Lamelas (Quinta de la Rosa): via www.quintadelarosa.com
- Amarela (Quinta de la Rosa): via www.manorhousesofportugal.com
- Casa de Mendiz: +351 91 79 13 20, www.casademendiz.com
- Hotels: The Vintage House, +351 254 73 02 30, www.hotelvintagehouse.com
- Casa do Visconde de Chanceléiros: +351 254 73 01 90, www.chanceléiros.com
- Quinta Nova, +351 254 73 04 30, www.quintanova.com
- Casa de Casal do Loivos: +351 254 73 21 49, www.casadecasaldoivois.com
- Quinta do Vallado (Regua): +351 254 32 31 47, www.quintadovallado.com
- Railway Tours: PTY Tours, +44 1235 230007

Forget churches – try the lagoon with a view

Rachel Spence sees an older and wilder side of Venice

Maybe Copernicus got it wrong and the world is flat after all. A skein of sunlit, blue water, level as a mirror, stretches as far as the eye can see. Mudflats cloaked in sea-grasses break through the shallows either side of the channel in which our boat, the Eolo, is moored.

The lagoon is one of Venice's treasures. Yet most visits are confined to the islands of Murano, Torcello and Burano which are reached on the FN waterbus. A trip on the Eolo reveals a side of the lagoon few tourists – or residents such as myself who don't possess their own boat – ever see.

A traditional *bragozzo*, one of the flat-bottomed boats that plied these waters from Renaissance times until midway through the last century, the Eolo's 16-metre long deck is ample for our 10-strong party. Mauro Stoppa, our host, greets us at the marina next to the island of San Giorgio Maggiore.

We glide north past the fortress islands of La Certosa and Sant'Andrea, the sun fierce in a Tiepolo sky. Our skipper Alessandro, who grew up fishing these waters, points out a rectangle of water with peculiarly precise proportions: "That's the hydroscala where the seaplanes landed in the last war."

The lagoon has always been a battlefield, usually to Venice's advantage. In the 9th century her complex topography baffled Pepin's navy, foiling his plan to wrest Venice from Byzantium. Three hundred years later, the 210-square mile half-moon of water repelled the Genoese and sealed the Republic's future as queen of the eastern Mediterranean's shipping routes for the next four centuries. Only Napoleon, in 1797, breached her defences.

The Eolo hugs alongside the island of Sant'Erasmo, nicknamed the "orchard of Venice" for its acres of fruit trees and vegetable gardens. The salty soil means that it's lush with trees – acacia, laurel, tamarisk and the bushy white-flowered sambuca. To an outsider, their presence seems random but little happens by chance here – the tamarisks, for example, are planted near the water's edge because they bind the soil.

Every stage of our journey unlocks a slice of history. The Regatta Storica – Venice's annual rowing competition – was inspired by the Sant'Erasmo gardeners' practice of loading their rowing boats with produce at dawn, then racing each

got to the market first set the prices for the day.

Today, the Eolo is hosting a party of sophisticated Californians. At their request, our first stop is the island of Torcello, whose Romanesque basilica was Venice's first cathedral.

Normally one approaches Torcello from the vaporetto stop that fronts the lagoon. The Eolo, however, carries us around to the canal at the north of the island. Here lies a narrow islet behind which lie vegetable allotments. Scruffy wooden boats are tied up in the stagnant water; crab baskets droop from stakes.

Mauro serves *prosecco* and *scampi*, heads encased in spiky armour, tails raw. Then he fixes a canvas awn-

If settlers had not flourished on this swamp, Venice would not exist

ing above the deck to shade us from the sun while a mosquito buzzes in the salt-stained air. For a moment, the Mediterranean has evaporated. "This could be the Bayou swamps," someone murmurs.

Brooding over us is the Basilica of Torcello, its brick façade defiantly simple in comparison to Venice's ornamented churches. Yet if the first lagoon settlers, in flight from the northern barbarians rampaging through the mainland towns, had not flourished on this swampy islet some 1,500 years ago, La Serenissima would never have been born.

The first stone of Torcello cathedral was laid in 639AD and for the next two centuries, the island was Venice's seat of government, until the settlers moved to the archipelago then known as Rio Alto.

Today, the barbarian hordes at Torcello are the tourists. Yet the cathedral, with its awesome Byzantine mosaics, is still a joy to visit.

Before lunch, Mauro wants to take us out further north to the channels of *acqua dolce* where no waterbus ever ventures. When we moor again, the tower of Torcello is no more than a smudged rectangle. Away to the west, brick walls screen the interior of Sant'Arianna, or *l'ossario* (the ossuary), as the Venetians call her, for centuries a dumping-ground for skeletons from the overcrowded cemetery of San Michele.

Lunch aboard the Eolo is a tour de force. Mauro swears he was taught to cook by his grandmother but his dishes have a professional gloss. Hatchets are raised and within minutes, a dining table is laid with flowers and fingerbowls.

We start with mussels steamed with white wine and the purple artichokes (*castrauze*) that are a springtime speciality of Sant'Erasmo. Next comes the Venetian classic, risi and bisi (risotto with peas). But it's the main course, a two-kilo bream cooked to flaking perfection, that wins a round of applause.

By the time pudding arrives – a chocolate confection accompanied by a Sardinian sweet wine so dark and heavy, it could be port – an atmosphere of good-tempered languor prevails.

We stretch like cats in the sunshine, tell a few jokes and ponder the wisdom of going for a swim so soon after lunch. On the way home, as a *scirocco* wind ruffles the water, Mauro's team revives us with espresso and black cherries. And for the next couple of weeks, I feel more at home in the city than I have for months, having reconnected to her ancient, aquatic origins.

CRUISE IN STYLE

The Eolo offers a variety of cruises, including cooking courses, lasting from one to eight days, with accommodation in hotels, private palaces and villas. For more information, contact Mauro Stoppa on: +39 042 977 7037, www.cruisingvenice.com British Airways (www.ba.com, 0870 8509850) fly three times a day direct from London Gatwick to Venice with an additional flight on Saturdays.

