

International Traveler

On quiet lagoon, Venice of yesterday

By Elisabetta Povoledo

VENICE

John Ruskin once described this watery city as a "ghost upon the sands of the sea, so weak — so quiet — so bereft of all but her loveliness." Were he writing now, 153 years later, he would be more likely to compare this packed tourist magnet to a shopping mall during the sales season than to a shadowy mirage.

But Ruskin's Venice still exists. It simply needs to be sought out, far from the madding crowds.

Sitting on a historic fishing boat on a recent July evening, with the sun setting over the island of Torcello and the sound of gull cries splitting the silence of the seemingly endless lagoon, a visitor might even get a sense of what the Victorian thinker was going on about.

The boat, *Eolo*, is named after the god of the wind, though its pace is far from hurried. Instead, savoring a slower rhythm is the point of getting onboard, or so claims Mauro Stoppa, the industrialist turned seaman who began offering lagoon cruises seven years ago.

"You need to take time and respect the time of the lagoon, which is a time without time," Stoppa said. Most tourists, he added, tried to pack the usual Venetian lagoon itinerary — the islands of Murano, Burano and Torcello — into a couple of hours, "running from one to the other like crazy," he said, his voice punctuated with disbelief.

That's the opposite of the *Eolo* experience, which can last anywhere between a few hours to eight days — stopping overnight in Venetian villas on the coast and on the mainland — and the course is dictated, in part, by the whims of the wind. "It takes you where it wants, but sooner or later you see everything," Stoppa said, though on this particular evening the two sails had been rolled up and a motor pattered softly in the background.

The lagoon's islands lay witness to Venice's rich history and to the continuous interventions that the local inhabitants have wrought from the time of the first settlements. Fires still blaze in the glass factories on Murano, lace makers tat for tourists on Burano, vegetables for local consumption are grown on the flat expanse of Sant'Erasmus, and cypresses surround a small church in the island of San Francesco del Deserto, where hermit monks once removed themselves from the world.

Salt marshes — the Venetian "barene" — are scattered throughout, covering about 8 percent of the total area (at the beginning of the 20th century they covered more than 25 percent). Many disappear when the tide rises, only to reemerge like so many ghostly islets when the water recedes.

In the distance, a sizable construc-



The course of the *Eolo*, a historic fishing boat that tours the lagoon around Venice, is dictated in part by the whims of the wind. Below, the boat docked at the port of San Giorgio Maggiore, the island in front of the Piazza San Marco. Left, two of *Eolo*'s crew members prepare the evening's gourmet meal, one of the highlights of the cruises. The boat also offers cooking courses.

tion site was visible in the water. "That's part of MOSE," explained Stoppa, referring to a system of flood gates currently being erected at the three mouths that connect the lagoon to the Adriatic. The controversial project, which took decades to be approved, is meant to protect the ecosystem of the lagoon and especially Venice, its pearl.

The 18-meter, or 59-foot, *Eolo* is one of three traditional fishing boats — the Venetian term is "bragocero" — built in 1946 by a boatmaker in the port of Chioggia. It is flat-bottomed, making it easier to navigate the lagoon, which can be quite shallow in points. "It's the only boat this size still floating," said Tony, the ship's captain that night.

Despite its plebeian origins, the *Eolo* is probably one of the only fishing boats on the lagoon to serve gourmet meals, but even though Stoppa is the onboard chef (one would never call him a ship's cook; the cuisine is too refined), he sometimes wishes the gastronomic element were less predominant.

"Because now people say, 'we did dinner or lunch on the lagoon,'" he said, with the sailing aspect, which he clearly loves, taking a back seat.

Still, it's hard to blame people for getting excited when they eat risotto with sea asparagus — the Venetian "sall-corno" — or grouper cooked in peaches with a Bressane basilica as a backdrop.

Stoppa is not reticent about sharing his gastronomic secrets. Some recipes are posted on the *Eolo* Web site, www.cruisingvenice.com, and cooking cruises — which include market stops to choose fresh fish and local produce — are offered.

Returning to Venice after hours at sea and seeing the lights glittering along the Grand Canal are equally magical, particularly if nature does its part and throws in a full moon.

"It's not like escaping to the Galapagos or the Maldives," Stoppa said of the two-shot punt. "But it's a chance to return to a notion of life that's less absurd than those many of us have adopted."

