

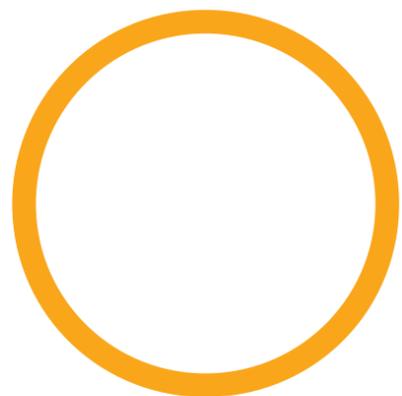
BY ADAM H. GRAHAM
PHOTOGRAPHY BY JON WHITTLE

BEYOND VENICE

A short boat ride from busy Piazza San Marco, these under-the-radar Venetian

Lagoon islands promise a tourist-free taste of the real Italy.

The view of Venice from the JW
Marriott, set on a private island.



ON THE WATER-TAXI RIDE FROM Venice's Stazione di Venezia Santa Lucia, a storm is building on the horizon. The boat skids over the canals, blurring past Gothic arched windows and ornamental bridges before emptying out into the vast, open wetlands of the lagoon. The driver points to the inky sky and shouts over the engine, "*Acqua alta!*" It means "high water" in Italian, but it's the Venetian term for the especially high tides that affect the lagoon from September to May. Tellingly, it's also interchangeable with the local word for storm. Water, as every Venetian knows, is ubiquitous here: It's under you, around you and, in this case, even over you.

This rainy day is the start of my five-night trip to Venice, capital of the Veneto region. This time, though, I'm not setting foot in the city proper; the tourist-clogged Doge's Palace, Bridge of Sighs, Saint Mark's — those I've done. Instead, I'm turning my sights to the oft-overlooked islands of the Venetian Lagoon, 118 in total. Some are mere islets covered in grass and of interest only to nesting ducks and their hunters; others are home to crumbling ruins and fishing camps. But several are undergoing a major renaissance — with new luxury hotels, revived vineyards, locavore yoga

retreats and Michelin-starred restaurants. Mazzorbo, Isola delle Rose, Burano, Torcello, Sant'Erasmus and Isola di San Clemente: what these islands offer is a taste of Venice — with far fewer crowds.

The lagoon itself is having a resurgence, finally recovering from decades of pollution. At 212 square miles, it's not only the largest wetland in Italy, it's the largest in the Mediterranean Basin. It's a critical flyway for birds and home to a variety of marine life, including bottlenose dolphins. It also serves as Veneto's larder, with seafood staples like native shrimp, octopus, anchovies, razor clams and *moleche*, native green soft-shell crabs.

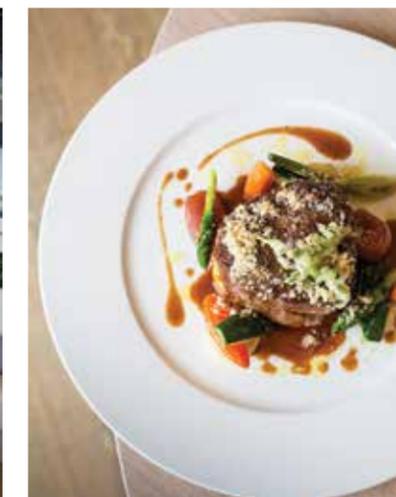
The most transformative new development has been on Isola delle Rose, about 1½ miles from Venice's iconic Piazza San Marco. The former sanitarium reopened as the 266-room JW Marriott Venice Resort & Spa in March of last year, with discreet canalside luxury villas with private plunge pools and docks; two-story maisonettes with zigzag-tiled floors; and a brick warehouse converted to loft suites. The property also features a century-old arboretum with cypress and olive trees, the one-Michelin-starred restaurant Dopolavoro, and a 19th-century neo-Romanesque chapel festooned with Barovier & Toso glass chandeliers crafted

GET HERE

There are complimentary water shuttles for guests of both the JW Marriott and Kempinski from Piazza San Marco that depart every 30 minutes and take approximately 15 minutes to reach the islands. From the airport and train station, private shuttles or water taxis can be hired at the canal or arranged ahead of time through the hotels. Venissa Wine Resort can arrange private water taxis, but you can also reach it by taking the public Vaporetto line. Getting to Torcello, Mazzorbo and Burano takes 35 minutes from Piazza San Marco, but only 15 minutes from the airport.



Clockwise from above: The private shuttle boat at the JW Marriott; drinking and dining at the hotel's Sagra Rooftop Restaurant; a neo-Romanesque church on the grounds.





Dusk on Mazzorbo — the tourists have departed, and quiet returns to the island's colorful corridors.

on the neighboring island of Murano. More Miami than Mediterranean, the spacious, modern lobby is dotted with white wing chairs, teal velvet sofas and long cotton drapes fluttering dramatically in the wind. There's a handsome marble bar, a grand piano and old-fashioned glass jars stuffed with licorice and hard candy. From the hotel's promenade, you can see the lights of Piazza San Marco, which is reachable in 15 minutes via the complimentary shuttle. But the guests who come and go from the resort use the island as an urban sanctuary during their visits to Venice. Another sanctuary: the property's 18,000-square-foot spa, with thermal pools and treatment rooms situated right on the water.

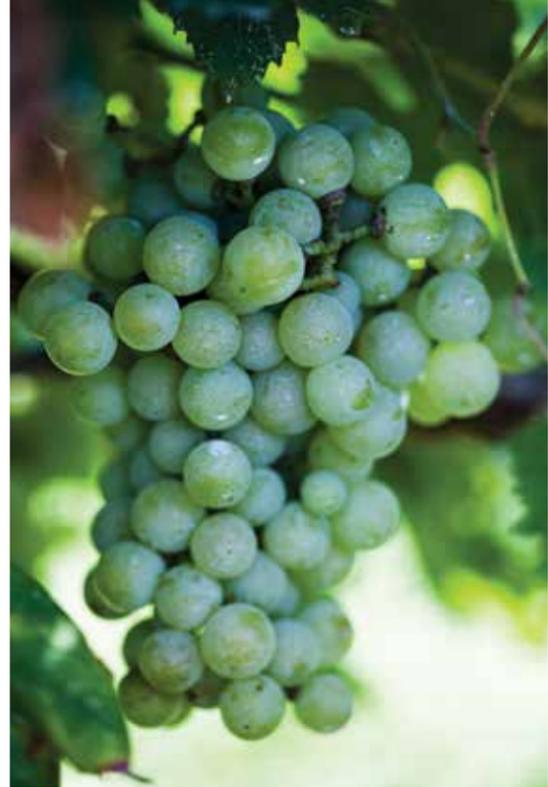
On a nearby lagoon island, the 15-acre Isola di San Clemente, sits another refurbished property, Kempinski's San Clemente Palace. The history of the island dates back to A.D. 1131, and it has played the role of monastery, hospice and even a quarantine site for plague victims. Today, its posh 190-room hotel counts a spa and tennis courts among its amenities, as well as the private, fully renovated, 12th-century San Clemente Church.

But these splashy luxury palaces are only a part of the lagoon's transformation. Several smaller and more organic developments are helping to restore some of these islands to their roots. Perhaps the most significant is happening on Mazzorbo, a small, quiet island connected by a pedestrian bridge to the lagoon's largest island, Burano.

Only a few hundred people live on Mazzorbo, which to this day preserves an authentic way of life that you won't find in Venice proper or on the private hotel islands. Like Burano, the village is

WHEN TO GO
MAY
TO SEPTEMBER

In high season, the weather is warm and dry, but April and October are the best months to avoid crowds.



made up of brightly colored houses that recall the Caribbean, but with full-on Venetian characteristics: narrow alleyways, leaning campaniles and, of course, wet sidewalks.

Few tourists make it to Mazzorbo, but those who do inevitably take to the streets to photograph the colorful houses and the laundry hanging from the windows. But just before the sun sets, they head back to Venice on the Vaporetto, the public water-transport line. At the same time, the local fishermen come home to eat with their *mamas*. Lace curtains are drawn over the small windows of old houses, and the smells and sounds of the kitchen trickle into its twisting streets and canals. This is when Mazzorbo reveals its true self.

The handsome, spritely Matteo Bisol, youngest son of the famed Italian Bisol wine family, owns Mazzorbo's only hotel, Venissa. The tidy six-room inn has a Michelin-starred restaurant overlooking

Atop the tower is a breathtaking view of the Venetian Lagoon and its islands in the distance. "This is the birthplace of Venice," Bisol says.

the Mazzorbo canal and is home to its own farm and vineyard — a Venetian version of agritourism. Over the course of my three-night stay, Bisol, the unofficial mayor of Mazzorbo, plays the consummate host. He introduces me to Venissa's chefs and to the owners of a new yoga retreat on the neighboring island of Santa Cristina. I also get a tour of the nine gondolier-inspired guesthouses that he's set to open this spring on Burano.

One morning, Bisol takes me on his boat to the island of Torcello, less than a mile away. It's the oldest continuously occupied part of Venice, and Bisol tells me about how his family got involved in growing grapes there. "This is the vineyard my father discovered on his visit to Venice," he says as we approach the 7th-century Cattedrale di Santa Maria Assunta, one of the tallest and oldest churches in Veneto. "When he saw those grapes, he wondered if they were the rare, endangered Dorona grapes. When he found out they were, he offered to buy the vineyard on the spot."

Bisol's wiry frame sprints up the stairs of the basilica's bell tower while I lag behind, weighed down with the pasta and wine from last night. Atop the tower is a breathtaking view of the Venetian Lagoon and its islands in the distance. "This is the birthplace of Venice," he says, gesturing to the ancient islands and their watery world below. It's a landscape marked by sky-scraping campaniles, flat vermilion fields and, of course, water in every direction. If you dropped someone atop the tower, they'd immediately know where they were. Few places in the world can claim such distinction.

On my final day in the lagoon, Bisol's boat whisks me to Sant'Erasmus, a 2-mile-long island, one of the lagoon's largest. As the crow flies, it's only 2 miles from

Mazzorbo, but we have to wind through a labyrinth of channels for 20 minutes to make the crossing. Our wake spills over grassy duck blinds and irks Venetian fishermen in small boats along the way.

Once there, I meet Michel Thoulouze, who moved to the island from France 14 years ago to make wine with ancient grapes — especially the honeyed white Malvasia from Istria. "We wanted to dig a cellar to store the wine, but the water table is too high, so I decided to sink the wine in the lagoon, which is actually an ideal place for it to age," he says in a thick French accent while pouring me a glass of 2011 Orto di Venezia. "The first year we sank the wine, it was stolen, so I had to make sure I was discreet about the location. Now the only problem is remembering where we sank it," he says, chuckling.

Thoulouze's wines — vegetal and mineral and perfectly balanced — are considered some of the best in Venice. "The grapes do well in this salty climate and love the clay and limestone soil," he explains. He opens another bottle and we talk about wine, which segues to a discussion about the importance of the water, which somehow segues to heirloom chickens (he's raising them on Sant'Erasmus).

After a very "comprehensive" tasting, we lean into more personal topics like love, food and the most sacred and profound of all Venetian topics: how to avoid Venice's tourists. Other than water, this is a subject that consumes Venetians. But, as I discovered, it's easy to do if you stick to the lagoon. •

JW Marriott Venice (open April to October), rooms from \$450; jwvenice.com. Venissa Wine Resort (open year-round), rooms from \$150; venissa.it.

On Mazzorbo is Venissa, a six-room inn and Michelin-starred restaurant owned by the Bisol family, who grow grapes and produce wine on the tiny lagoon island.

