Sink or swim

Venice | While giant ships and rising tides menace the city, *Rachel Spence* joins the maiden voyage of a cruise company offering intimate, expert-led trips to rarely visited parts of the lagoon

Every time I put down my feet they are engulfed in silky black mud so I keep swimming. It's no hardship. The sky is a hazy blue; the water has the metallic sheen of a mirror; so still are the seagrasses they could be carved from wood. The only movement comes from darting butterflies and jumping fish. Were it not for the distant tolling of a church bell we could be in the Amazon delta.

Welcome to the Venetian lagoon as you have never experienced it before. Even for me, as someone who lived in Venice for many years, this week is special. I have swum often in the lagoon's soggy-bottomed waters, yet I never knew, for example, that the channel in which we are splashing around is known in Venetian dialect as a *ghebo*.

My source of information is Francesco Calzolaio. An architect by trade, he moved to Venice from Le Marche in 1978 at the age of 19. His realisation that the lagoon is, as he puts it, "the city's heartbeat", compelled him into a lifelong study of its history, ecology and infrastructure.

"Most visitors spend no more than an afternoon on Murano, Burano or Torcello," observes Calzolaio. "They never discover how much the lagoon has to offer nor why it is so important."

Without the lagoon there would be no Venice. Part salt, part fresh, the body of water was born millennia ago as the Brenta, Piave and Sile rivers coursed down towards the Adriatic Sea to find their impetus halted by land separated by three inlets — Chioggia, Malamocco and the Lido — which allowed the water a restricted passage.

In the 5th century AD, the wetlands became a refuge for mainlanders fleeing Germanic invaders, who didn't like getting their feet wet. The marsh-dwellers quickly learnt how to shore up their shape-shifting havens. A trade in salt flourished. As Cassiodorus, the prefect of Ravenna, put it enviously in AD523: "You live like sea birds . . . The solidity of the earth on which [your homes] rest is secured only by osier and wattle; yet you do not hesitate to oppose so frail a bulwark to the wildness of the sea."

Resilient though the inhabitants have been, their islands and the 220 sq mile lagoon itself are also fragile. New commercial canals have altered the delicate tidal flows; the *acqua alta* that floods the city periodically has grown higher, owing partly to global warming. The €5.4bn scheme to build a giant dam, Mose, as a barrier to the worst of the flooding, has been slowed since an investigation into corruption which last year saw the arrests of 35 politicians, finance police and businessmen, including Venice's then mayor Giorgio Orsoni.

Venice needs tourism but of a different kind: small-scale, sustainable and intelligent

Meanwhile gigantic cruise ships continue to sail perilously close to St Mark's Square, damaging the tidal equilibrium and risking irrevocable destruction should they touch land.

Calzolaio aims to help visitors experience the lagoon on a rather more intimate scale. His new company, Lagunalonga, offers week-long tours for groups of between two and six guests, who eat and sleep on board a classic, three-cabin cruiser. Expert guides to islands that are infrequently visited by outsiders, in addition to gourmet cuisine (both on board and in restaurants) that draws on local produce, add to the rarity of the experience. I joined him, and some of his friends and colleagues, for the maiden voyage last month, before he launches in earnest next March.

We rendezvous on the mainland at Villa Malcontenta, a Palladian dwelling on a willow-fringed kink of the Brenta canal. After exploring the villa's luminous volumes, we set sail downstream, sprawling on the vessel's front deck to watch the Veneto roll by. Cyclists purr along the towpaths; dragonflies scoot across lily-pads; behind the bulrushes, ramshackle boathouses heighten the *Wind in the Willows* spell.

We slide between the factories of the Porto Marghera industrial zone as if bidding farewell to the material world, then sail out into the lagoon. Soon we are in Venice's Giudecca canal, the leisurely pace of our cruiser — just eight knots — barely raising a ripple of the *motondoso* (wave motion) so dangerous for the city's foundations. Only the rowers, standing upright in signature Venetian style, move through the water more slowly.

Sealed within the silvery-blue prism of sea and sky, it's hard to believe that behind the waterfront hundreds of thousands of people are crowded in the narrow streets. But Venice is under assault from 27m tourists a year. When Calzolaio arrived, its residents numbered 100,000. Today the figure has fallen to around 60,000, as locals migrate to terra firma in search of jobs, house prices and infrastructure that have not been fatally skewed by hordes of visitors. Venice needs tourism but of a different kind: small-scale, sustainable, intelligent. Initiatives such as Lagunalonga could set a precedent for a brighter future.

Thanks to Calzolaio's connections, we have a mooring for a few hours within the Arsenale, the medieval shipyard usually off-limits to private boats. After tying up beneath the watchtower, our host pours his guests a glass of Brum Brum, a peppery Cava from a vineyard near Pordenone.

When we nudge our way out into the open water at sunset, it is easy to imagine ourselves at the prow of one of the galleys whose prowess once made Venice the most powerful state in the western world. Here and there on outlying islands abandoned fortifications testify to the republic's war-scarred history.

Yet to voyage through the lagoon at this hour is to enter a metaphysical dimension: the air is still gauzy with heat, the water like liquid glass. Only the flap of a cormorant launching itself off a *bricole* — one of the wooden tripods that mark out the navigational channels — breaks the stillness.

Our chefs tonight are Dimitri Gris, who normally presides at the up-and-coming CoVino restaurant in the city's Castello district, and his Italo-Vietnamese partner Huyen Tran Thi Thu, who is training with the Alajmo brothers, the masterminds behind the three-Michelin-starred Le Calandre near Padua and the one-star Quadri in St Mark's Square.

Despite the diminutive kitchen, they summon a feast fit for a *doge*. Gazpacho is served in little glasses as we cruise through the twilight. Concocted from local tomatoes, asparagus and white peaches, its salty-sweet tang is heightened by stalks of samphire that grow on the lagoon's *barene* (sandbanks) and flame-coloured nasturtiums sourced from an orchard on the Giudecca. A single *calamaro* tentacle has been hooked over the rim.

The lagoon's genius loci continues to whisper through the salad of local shellfish and seafood risotto that follows. Given Venice's historic rapport with the east, it is fitting that dessert should consist of a green-tea ice cream scattered with chunks of white peach and crumble. So exquisite is that finale, it reduces us all to silence, the only sounds the whirr of the cicadas and the clink of masts. By now, after eating as we cruise, we have moored at Sant'Elena on the eastern tip of the city. A new marina with space for 150 vessels, it is the first step in a development whose plans include a hotel and a covered Miami-style art market.

The next morning, I wonder if such a cosmopolitan vision can become reality. Untouched by tourism, Sant'Elena is a sleepy enclave. At 8am, only the pad of runners disturbs the pine-dotted park that fronts the lagoon and the café-bar is a dialect-only zone. Yet it is the children being born in these streets who are growing up to abandon their home town. The new marina might offer opportunities to lure some into staying.

After feisty espressos — with coffee bought from Venice's celebrated Torrefazione Cannaregio, where the beans are roasted and ground before your eyes — we set sail for Lazzaretto Nuovo. Surrounded by a brick wall softened by thickets of ash and hawthorn, this island also testifies to the way locals are taking the future into their own hands.

Inhabited since the Bronze Age, by 1975 the island was deserted. Then a group of volunteers, the Ekos Club, gained permission to renovate it. Our guide leads us through an avenue of 200-year-old mulberry trees into a long, red-brick building which was built as a quarantine space in the 15th century, when Venice was at the zenith of her trading empire. Then the plague was a constant danger so all those who arrived by ship were required, along with their merchandise, to spend 40 days on Lazzaretto Nuovo before entering the city proper.

The building is a repository of illuminating objects — from Roman amphorae to the long-nosed mask stuffed with herbs the plague doctor used to wear. But it is the writing on the walls that catapults us back into another era. From what the goods were, to where they were destined, plus myriad gnomic messages, those medieval merchants scribbled their thoughts down in a babel of tongues including Hebrew, Arabic and Masonic symbols. In all my years in the city I have never felt such an intimate bond with the residents of times past.

That near-mystical connection to Venice's roots is ever-present in the lagoon. I feel it as I watch young boys leap into the water from the roof of the *vaporetto* (water bus) station on the island of Sant'Erasmo. It's there as we potter about on Bacan, a scruffy archipelago of sandbanks, alongside Venetians who come here in their boats to swim, sunbathe and gather clams. "My grandma used to come here and put her deckchair on the sand and her toes in the water," recalls our photographer Giacomo Cosua, with a smile. "But you have to be careful because the beach disappears at high tide."

Yet this peaceful waterworld has never been more under threat. Jumping into the water off Bacan, I struggled to swim against a current stronger than I had ever known. Some Venetians believe these new rapid streams are caused by the Mose works.

Our final visit is to San Francesco del Deserto, a monastery island inaccessible by vaporetto. As our guide, a monk in a brown robe, guides us through the complex of cloisters and chapels, he tells us that, after a spell in the Holy Land, St Francis hitched a lift home to Italy with the Venetians. Pausing to pray in the lagoon, his worship was disturbed by twittering birds. When they obeyed his request for silence, he founded the monastery.

As he finishes the tale I ask him how long he has been here.

"Three years," he replies, adding that he could be moved on at any time.

In silence, we gaze out at the steel-blue prairies of water and the barene with their purple cloaks of sea lavender.

"You'll be sad to leave this place," I venture.

He shakes his head. "You mustn't get attached to things."

An egret takes flight out of the reeds, its legs slicing the air like calligraphy. Perhaps I should read it as a message to ask for divine help before disembarking. God can't stop me from missing the lagoon but he might arrange for me to come back next year.

Clockwise from main: children jump from the water-bus station on the island of Sant'Erasmo; a canal on Burano; the boat moored at Sant'Erasmo; stopping for lunch at a restaurant in Murano; a visit to San Francesco del Deserto
Giacomo Cosua

FT **Lagunalonga** For a slideshow with more pictures go to ft.com/venice

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Rachel Spence was a guest of Lagunalonga (lagunalonga.it), which offers a week's trip for up to six people, including all meals on board, from €8,000. Most excursions, such as museum visits, cycling, catamaran sailing, rowing a traditional Venetian boat, and airport transfers, are also included. The trips start in March next year and run until December