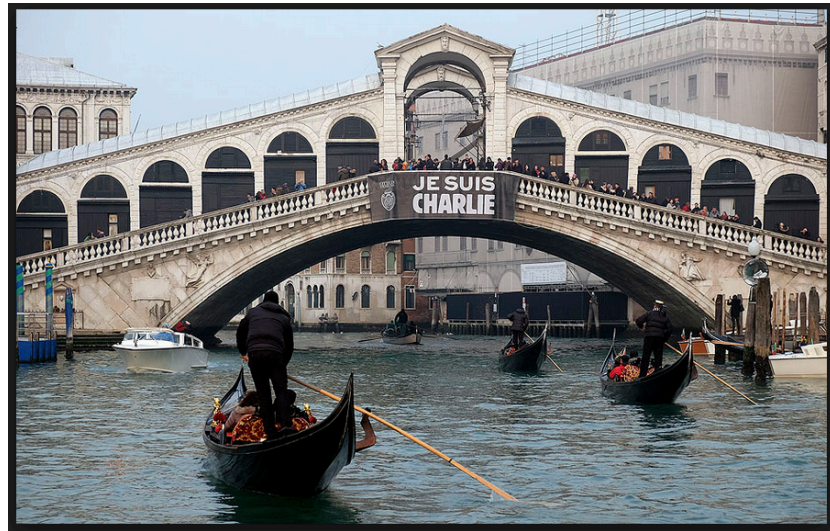


## VENICE IN WINTER

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*Venice is a paradigm of European economic decline—relentless but remediable*



Ponte Rialto

10 January 2015

Reuters

Ever since my first off-season trip to the Laguna in 1991 in February, I've been coming to Venice in winter for working holidays to photograph. Quiet, uncrowded, soft winter light, bargain-priced, past the days of *acqua alta* and before warmer temperatures turn canals unpleasant, this is the best time of year to see this extraordinary place.

But this year I sensed something very different, a weight carried by its people and behavior I had never seen before. After decades of Italian government mismanagement, corruption, and continent-wide recession--the lack of imaginative response to economic and systemic problems, the inability to unleash pent-up creativity and entrepreneurship—Venice feels like a breaking point passed that's extending well beyond the city's boundaries.

Some anecdotes.

My pleasant two-star hotel in Santa Croce near San Rocco saw one of its 4 housekeepers retire. Three remaining women are now doing the work of four . . . at the same wages.

A venerable publisher I have been working with over the past year suddenly closed.

A fine-arts gallery that had sold my work for several years near Teatro La Fenice shut down, moving to the down-scale commercial street of Via Garibaldi as a low-priced shop of *objets d'arts*.

Besides the shift in clientele that came with the new venue, the owner claims it wouldn't be worth carrying my work because with me being a non-EU resident, he now couldn't legally represent me without paying several thousand euros for a special sales certificate. And the 22% value-added tax that retailers are forced to build into prices, leave little income left to split. To him, taxes on all facets of business are choking creativity and the desire to take risk.

A man who has maintained his spirit throughout—the manager of a 4-star hotel near San Marco--has seen his job now include extensive hours at the front desk, keeping him on his feet and at work 6 days a week, including night shifts until 10pm. He doesn't reach home in suburban Spinea until more than an hour later. He doesn't complain, grateful for still having his work as he approaches retirement.

There are outside forces at work here too. For years, Delta flew its non-stop flight from JFK to Marco Polo airport, 20 minutes outside the city throughout the year. Daily most of the year; 3 or 4 days a week in winter. But the winter flight has been suspended, despite the Veneto being one of the wealthiest regions and a key economic engine of the country, Marco Polo being the nearest civilian connection to the expanding US Air Force base in Aviano, and poor alternative connecting flights to Venice.

Delta's explanation: a plain-vanilla comment about falling demand, failing to address the possibility of driving tourism by making travelers aware of the deep value and splendor of Venice in winter.

But the city is equally at fault for failing to push Delta or Alitalia to promote the city's off-season qualities. It's like a top Broadway show with three-quarters of the house empty for a quarter of its run.

How cheap does Venice become in winter?

My hotel has a high-season day rate of €250; I paid €55 a night. Rooms at five-star hotels like the Danieli and Gritti can be gotten for half their normal four-figure price. Stores advertise big discounts in their windows from Ferrovia Santa Lucia to Sant'Elena, and bargaining is the norm in winter.

In a shop near the Guggenheim Museum in Dorsoduro, which sells Murano glass, a friend of 20-plus years works alone. Typically of excellent spirit, he's now unapproachable, laddened by divorce, the loss of an apartment he gave up everything for, which now houses his ex-wife and her new boyfriend, and his small two-room flat in Murano hosting his two teenage girls who have become his charge. He is at his wits end. He couldn't hear anything but his suffering and after several minutes of trying to listen sympathetically, I exited behind clients who had ventured in, hearing his apologies in the background.

His plight isn't unusual. Most couples I've come to know in Venice over the past 27 years have separated. Making things tough: most jobs have limited upside making money tight. Good housing isn't cheap. And in Venice, people smoke . . . lots . . . as if saying, "What the hell."

Many friends have moved away—the furthest destination—Australia, from where a friend's wife hails. They left to give their teenage children a better future. No surprise to find Venice has lost two thirds of its population from its contemporary-era maximum of 175,000 in 1951. On the hyper-chromatic island of Burano, every other home around the vaporetto stop is for sale—something I've never seen before.

My morning ritual typically involves a series of telephone calls to potential new shops, publishers, and clients. But after several days, I stopped, failure leaving me depressed. Unlike my friends, I need but step out of my hotel with my camera to revive. Never before had I given up active pursuit of commercial contacts while in the city. So affected by this malaise, this was the first year I looked forward to returning to my work in New York.

But Venice is not a dying city. It remains among the world's top tourist destinations. There is outrageous wealth, plenty of local and foreign money, with much renovation going on across the city. There are more five-star hotels than ever \*now popping up obscurely on the edge of Cannaregio and on islands in the Laguna. Via 22 Marzo remains the city's Fifth Avenue with large banks and elegant shops. And every day, 20,000 students come to university at Ca' Foscari's various buildings across the city and to the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia.

Where Venice is concerned about preserving its past, there seems far less focus on how to ensure its future. The city has no sense that it needs to actively compete for tourism that now has access to far more choices than it did just a score ago. And there seems no effort made to promote alternative businesses—like a normal town might pursue through tax incentives and special designated development zones.

When faced with urgent problems, the city is painfully slow to address them. The government has taken decades to build MOSE—the submersible network of dykes designed to protect the city from rising tides. But cost overruns and corruption associated with it have cost the city its mayor and other civic leaders.

The gap between the "Haves" and "Have Nots" feels even greater here than it does in the States. And for those looking for a way up, a way out, there seems a dwindling sense of opportunity and of hope . . . in the city, in Italy . . . Europe in microcosm.

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