

EXPLORER

An Artists' Armada to Venice on Ancient Waterways

By PORTER FOX

BEHIND the sweep of the northern Adriatic, nestled in the bootstrap of northeastern Italy, lies a second Venice. The doppelgänger is similar to the original — with murky canals, sleek wooden speedboats and Romanesque buildings teetering on the water's edge. Just as in Venice, boaters can be mesmerized by the labyrinth and get disoriented if they don't keep a close eye on the map. Thankfully, this Other Venice has directional signs on its waterways. Bright yellow ones, in fact, that are right now coming into view. To the left: Venice. To the right: Grado.

Our flotilla of three sculptural rafts — designed as an homage to Venice by a Brooklyn artist who goes by the name Swoon and fitted with intricate carvings, salvaged stairways and rebuilt Mercedes diesel engines — stumbled across the canals in June on the way to the Venice Biennale. Swoon, a 31-year-old street artist whose real name is Caldonia Curry and whose portraits and installations have hung in the Museum of Modern Art and the Deitch Projects gallery in New York, planned to parade through the Grand Canal during the Biennale's preview week, uninvited and unannounced, as a surprise floating installation.

But first, our crew of 30 artists and friends — mechanics, musicians, puppeteers and trumpet-blowing vaudevillians — had to get there from the beachfront town of Grado, near the border with Slovenia. After a harrowing first three days on the wavy Adriatic, we were relieved to find the placid canals, just a few hundred yards from the sea.

Grado marks the beginning of the Litoranea Veneta, an inland waterway that has sheltered mariners sailing to and from Venice for more than 2,000 years. The 372-mile matrix of canals, rivers, inlets and lagoons is mentioned as far back as 301 B.C. by the Roman historian Livy and forms a larger, more bucolic version of Venice's aquatic highways, with 100-foot-wide channels, acres of farmland and orchards edging the shoreline and ancient Roman ports every 10 miles.

With a glacial cruising speed of three miles per hour, we figured it would take two weeks to make the 80-mile journey from Grado to Venice on the canals. The crew had built eating, sleeping and cooking spaces on the boats and we planned to provision and use restrooms in towns along the way.

It was a hazy 80 degrees when our Rabelaisian armada followed the sign signaling left to Venice and entered the Litoranea Veneta. A mob of curious onlookers gathered at Grado's breakwater to watch the procession. Two lines of wooden posts — red on the right, green



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A fisherman by the dock at the medieval town of Marano, along the Litoranea Veneta waterway, long a route to and from Venice.

on the left — marked the San Pietro di Orio Canal, the easternmost entrance of the system.

We motored past tiny islands circled with 12-foot-tall cane thickets and A-frame thatched fishing huts called casoni. Two hours west of Grado, three young men spotted us and invited everyone to join them at their renovated hut. We tied the rafts to trees and hopped onshore, where our hosts set out chilled prosecco and red wine on a concrete picnic table. For two hours, we drank with the men, picked fresh cherries and listened to stories about the host's grandfather hunting ducks in the lagoon with Ernest Hemingway in the 1930s.

With the sun sagging low on the horizon, we bade farewell to our new friends and headed west to find a spot to sleep. Several miles later, as night began to fall, we rounded a turn and saw a dozen yachts tied to channel markers opposite the tiny private island of Sant'Andrea. After securing the boats to one of the green posts, we took a dinghy ashore to

a ramshackle restaurant composed of 20 picnic tables and weathered shacks draped with fishing nets. Then we feasted for three hours on grilled calamari, sea bass and a fiery rakia distilled with fruit and herbs found on the island.

Half the crew camped on Sant'Andrea

Approaching the Venice Biennale on canal and river routes.

that night while the other half dozed off on the boats in hammocks and makeshift beds. We'd covered 15 miles the first day and slept soundly, relieved to not have to worry about the Adriatic's wind, waves and tide.

The next morning, we woke with the sun and took a slight detour north to the medieval fishing town of Marano, where we pulled into a mile-long public pier in

front of 20 steel-hull trawlers. For three days, we rode bicycles through the town's concentric cobblestone streets, swam with high school kids at public swimming steps, chatted with fishermen over 50-cent espressos and generally fell under the spell of the maritime hamlet. By the time we left, our boats were overfilled with food and wine that townsfolk had generously delivered to the pier.

Over the next few days we worked our way west, past one of the last working locks in the canal system near Bevazzana and the bustling port town of Porto di Baseleghe. When our passage was blocked by a broken drawbridge at the Del Morto Canal, we were forced to go by sea to our next stop. Luckily, the Adriatic was calm that day, and we cruised over mirror-flat water to the ancient Roman port of Caorle.

Two additional crewmembers joined us in Caorle. They informed us that we were already two-thirds of the way to Venice, so we decided to spend two days at a campsite along the banks of the Lemene River.

Gangs of darkly tanned tourists gathered onshore to catch a glimpse of our rafts while we explored the town's crowded beaches, 11th-century bell tower and bustling fishing pier. Much of the area was preserved as a bird sanctuary, and enormous swans circled in the current to the sound of singing marsh warblers, while fishermen dug for mussels near the mouth of the river.

On the third day we cast off and followed the Largon Canal past miles of dried-up rice paddies and rows of cypress trees bent back by the sea breeze, until we reached the town of Torre di Fine. There, our progress came to a sudden halt. A mile downriver, and just 18 miles from Venice, we discovered another broken bridge blocking the way.

Then, an hour later, one of the most feared storms on the Adriatic — the Bora — reared its head, making the ocean route impassable as well.

As it turns out, sailors have sought shelter from the Bora — a wind that rushes off the Alps at speeds of up to 60 miles per hour — in Torre di Fine since the 11th century, when the town was the last stop between Venice and Caorle. We whiled away the next three days exploring abandoned farmhouses, eating pizza at one of the town's two restaurants and taking midnight cruises along the canal. Each morning, schoolchildren serenaded our boats, and at night, bartenders from the Country Bar taught us how to knock the top off a prosecco bottle with a saber.

It took another four days for the wind to die, and sadly, I had to fly home before the armada made the final leg to Venice. I settled for stories and photos of the boats cruising between the red and black lighthouses guarding the entrance to the Venice Lagoon; then, riotous tales of the flotilla barnstorming the Grand Canal at 3 a.m. a week later.

Before my flight, I spent one night in Venice. It was Saturday, and the sidewalks and canals were crammed with tourists and art dealers preparing for the Biennale. I toured the museums and looked at huge billboards advertising galleries and artists taking part in the show. In the hustle of the great island city, though, I couldn't help but think of the quiet backwaters we'd motored through and the grassy banks where I'd left the crew.

Watching the Bora bend back the treetops from the safety of the canal those last days, the Litoranea Veneta hadn't felt like the Other Venice at all. Rather, it seemed like a relic of the original one, cast off and passed over by the modern world.

WHERE THE CANALS LEAD TO, NOT THROUGH, VENICE

For a history of the area and navigational maps of the canal system visit the Web site of the **Litoranea Veneta** (www.litoraneaveneta.com). Cruises or bareboat charters out of Chioggia, near Venice, can be found at the Web site of **Rendez-Vous Fantasia** (www.rendez-vous-fantasia.com).

For in-depth information about the towns the canals connect, download **The Lands of Eastern Venice, Tourism and Cultural Guide** at www.turismo.provincia.venezia.it/pdf/produzione/terre_veneziorientale/guidaVEorEN.pdf.



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