Gillian Knows Best Guide to the Lagoon islands of Venice

Murano and Burano are great but there are so many more Venetian lagoon islands to explore

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There is so much to learn about my new home. It has been a little overwhelming learning new words and about different foods at the market and on the menu. My knowledge about Venetian artists like Tintoretto and Titian and Tiepolo is elementary. Not to mention getting from point A to point B efficiently. One subject I focused on first is Venice's lagoon islands. The city of Venice is made up of 118 islands that are connected by over 400 bridges. In the lagoon there are over 40 islands. Murano, Burano and Torcello are the most well known. Those islands are wonderful and you should visit them. Once you have done that, I made you a guide to some of the lesser talked about ones.

Venice has always been so much more than the palaces on the grand canal and the ship builders in the Arsenale. Just as they did centuries ago, the lagoon and its islands still serve many functions for the glittering city. They are where plague victims once were quarantined. They were defensive outposts to keep Venice safe and places to harbor people fleeing aggressors. They are still where our food is grown and where Venetians go to escape the city and spend some quiet time in nature. Schedule an extra day into your trip to Venice and spend some time exploring the lagoon island.

Some of these island are easy to get to with a **vaporetto pass** and some are only open a few days a year. Dove.ti.va and Detourism Venezia are two good places to look for announcements about special openings and events.

Pellestrina

If you want the charming fishing village vibe without the Instagram crowd then take the vaporetto to the bus to the ferry and then back on the bus again to have lunch on the island of Pellestrina. I promise it is not as complicated as it sounds. You take the Vaporetto from Venice over to Lido and then find the number 11 bus going to Pellestrina. The bus goes to Alberoni at the very end of Lido and then gets on the ferry for a quick hop across the opening where the sea meets the lagoon. Then the same bus drives the 11 kilometer length of the island on the other side. There are 3 villages, Santa Maria del Mare, San Pietro in Volta, and Pellestrina where there is a small church, a few shops and restaurants. Get a spritz bianco at the bar, Chioschetto da Moro in front of the vaporetto stop that goes to Chioggia. Book ahead of you want to sit along the water at the popular Da Celeste. Or try the cozy Osteria il Campiello. The island is very narrow with the lagoon on one side and the Adriatic on the other. Take a walk along the protective sea walls, the Murazzi. Birdwatchers should take a hike in the Ca' Roman nature reserve.

Sant'Erasmo

Sant'Erasmo is the second largest island in the lagoon. (Only Venice is larger) More importantly it is the garden island of Venice. The most famous vegetable grown here is the violet artichoke. If you have eaten a meal at Al Covo or Antiche Carampane you have probably had the vegetables from the project Osti in Orte. When you are walking through the Rialto market look for the signs that say Sant'Erasmo. That means the produce is local. To get to Sant'Erasmo take the vaporetto 13 which leaves once an hour from the Fondamenta Nova to Capannone. Take a walk along the road, (watch out for little Ape trucks) to Al Bacàn, a simple restaurant on the beach. In the summer Venetians bring their boats here and swim in the shallow water. You can spend the night on Sant'Erasmo at Il Lato Azzurro, a bed & breakfast with a restaurant and bike rentals. The seasonal vaporetto line 18 goes from the Bacàn to the San Niccolo area of Lido. The Torre Massimiliana is a round Austrian fortification from the 1800s surrounded by a moat. It is the only one like it in Italy. Maybe someday it will open to the public.

If you are staying in Venice for an extended time and have a kitchen you can order vegetables directly from I Sapporo di Sant'Erasmo and pick them up from their boat in Venice or there is often a small farmstead in front of Al Bacàn.

Lazzeretto dei Armeni

There have been people living on what is now called San Lazzaro degli Armeni on and off since the 9th century. In the 12th century there was a leper colony here. That's where the first part of the name comes from. Lazarus is the patron saint of lepers. In the church you can see the bricked up windows where lepers were given food from. For a few hundred years the island was abandoned until it became a place of refuge for Mkhitar Sebastatsi and his order of monks who were escaping persecution by the Ottoman authorities. A future Doge, Sebastiano Mocenigo, gave the island both as a gift to the fleeing Armenians and as a show of his power to the Ottomans.

San Lazzaro degli Armeni has been dedicated to preserving and sharing Armenian language and culture for centuries. For more than 300 years it has been a center of Armenian cultural scholarship and has hosted many famous visitors including Lord Byron who studied in the extensive library, learning Armenian and translating texts simply as something to do. The museum is filled with eclectic treasure. There is a wonderfully persevered mummy of Nemen Khet Amen, from 800 BC, a plaster cast by Canova, a Tiepolo fresco and a Chagall painting. To preserve Armenian texts and history and culture the monks established their own printing press. In the library there are manuscripts from the 8th century. You can see the typewriters and printing presses as part of the guided visit. Make sure you see the beautiful Khachkar, the basalt stone Armenian cross carved in the 14th century, outside the monastery.

You can plan your trip to this important and tranquil place by calling the monastery to reserve a place on the daily tour at 15:25. There are tours in English, Italian and Armenian. Take the #20 vaporetto that leaves San Marco Zaccaria at 15:10. If you are visiting during the Venice film festival there are more vaporetto crossings but still only one daily tour. Don't skip the gift shop. Buy some rose jam that is made by the monks from roses grown on the island

San Servolo

Over the centuries the island of San Servolo has been home to a Bendedictine monastery. That was in the 8th century. A refuge for nuns escaping from natural disasters and invasions. That was in the 1100s and the 1400 & 1500s. In the 17th century a military hospital was built here. In 1725 it became a psychiatric hospital. Initially it was ill aristocrats and only for men. Women were treated on San Clemente, now a luxury hotel complex. When Napoleon overthrew the republic he decreed that anyone who was deemed insane regardless of class or gender be sent to San Servolo. Many people were actually suffering from pellagra, dementia caused by malnutrition from a diet of mostly nutrient weak polenta. Mussolini had his first wife committed here. The hospital was closed in 1978. Today there is a university, the Venice International University and 5 hectares of green space filled with art installations (there is a fiberglass Pomodoro right when you get off the vaporetto), lots of shady trees to sit under and a few benches. There's a restaurant too!

You can visit the well curated (but not for the faint hearted; There are skulls and straight jackets and brains) Museo del Manicomo. There is also an 18th-century apothecary and a church dedicated to Saint Servolo, a 3rd century martyr from Trieste.

In mid-August there is a usually a sweet island festival with pony's and a puppet show for the kids. We ordered the BBQ ahead of time and beat the lines but we left before the live music. Look for posters at Vaporetto stops around town.

Certosa

If you like Sant'Elena with its green and trees then you will love Certosa. A quick vaporetto stop from Sant'Elena or San Pietro. You need to tell the marinaio that you want to get off at Certosa. Most of the island is a park and is a wonderful place for birdwatching. Bring a picnic and find one of the tables next to the water and then take a long stroll along the path. When you are ready to leave the island press the button at the vaporetto stop and the next boat will stop and pick you up. In the summer there is a cafe run by the Alajmo group and an occasional nightclub. If you happen to be coming to Venice with your own boat, this is a good place to park.

San Michele

Technically two islands, San Michele and San Cristoforo della Pace, now joined into one, **San Michele** is the cemetery for Venice. It is directly across the canal from the hospital, both a ghoulish and a matter of fact reality. The church of San Michele has been here in some form since the 10th century and the island was a Camaldolese monastery. The current building was built in the 1500s and is considered the first Renaissance church in Venice. In 1810 Napoleon closed almost all of the monasteries in Venice and it became a cemetery in 1826. Christian Doppler and Stravinsky are buried here. Another highlight is a rare example of contemporary architecture in Venice. The stark clean lines of David Chipperfield's extension are a sharp contrast to the confection that is most of Venice. Take the Vaporetto 4.1 or 4.2 to/from Fondamente Nove.

Venetians have been savvy merchants for centuries. In the 15th century as plagues were sweeping through Europe they quickly figured out that sickness and disease were bad for business. In 1493 the Senate of the Republic of Venice created the first lazzaretto in the world on the island that was then known as isola di Santa Maria di Nazareth now called Lazzaretto Vecchio to protect the city and the trade that made Venice so powerful. A second island was created in 1468. During times of plague in the 15th and 16th centuries this is where boats and goods and people coming into Venice were isolated. For 40 days. This is where we get the word quarantine from. These two islands are occasionally open to the public.

Lazzerato Nuova offers guided tours on Saturday mornings from March/April - October/November. When we visited we started with a walk along the Path of the Barene. It is one of the prettiest walks in Venice filled with views of the lagoon and birdsong. After our stroll we had a guided tour of the Tezon Grande where we learned about some of the ways the Venetian republic dealt with infection like creating health passes and disinfecting goods and ships with salt water, rosemary, juniper and vinegar. There are cases filled with documents and pottery and items discovered from archeological digs.

Lazzerato Vecchio is rarely open. I found out about an opening last September on their Instagram account and then I signed up through Eventbrite.

This is where people who were infected or thought to be infected were isolated and cared for. Most of them did not survive and in recent years researchers have discovered more than 1500 skeletons of plague victims. In the middle of the 19th century until the 1970's the island was used by the military and some of the original buildings were destroyed. What is left is blackberry brambles, two wellheads and a few buildings and column fragments. In the main building you can see graffiti from the confined.

The difficult to reach without your own boat islands of Poveglia, Sant'Andrea, Vignole, San Francesco del Deserto, and Mazzorbetto are on my lagoon island to-do list.

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If you are interested in spending more time in the lagoon I suggest a private boat tour, or renting your own boat, or dining on a boat. Send me an email at **gillianknowsbest@gmail.com** and I can give you some advice on how to do it.

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