

# A Conversation with Neal E. Robbins, Author of VENICE, AN ODYSSEY

## WHAT'S YOUR PERSONAL HISTORY WITH THE CITY OF VENICE?

I first came to Venice at age 17. For a year, I lived with an Italian family in a traditional palazzo and went to high school. Now I'm 65, and after a lifetime as a journalist, I went back to see what makes Venice tick and what difference it makes to the rest of us that this world heritage city is struggling with global forces like mass tourism and climate change. My book covers all of this and more.

## WHAT ARE THE BIGGEST CHANGES YOU SAW OVER THAT 50-YEAR SPAN?

I see Venice as part of the wider world, and in these years the biggest changes are those affecting us all: globalization that has spawned mass tourism, new politics that has handed leadership to the market, and climate change that has upset the natural order. These forces have changed the community in Venice, most obviously through depopulation, draining half the city's residents since the 1970s. Sitting in the middle of a lagoon, Venice has faced environmental challenges that in that time span have spun out of control. Finally, the politics of Venice have taken a turn that has weakened its ability to respond. This half a century, in short, has brought enormous changes for Venice.

## WHAT IS IT ABOUT VENICE? WHY IS IT SUCH A SOURCE OF ART AND LITERATURE?

From Byron to Wordsworth and from Wagner to current Marvel movies, Venice has provided a fertile inspiration. The city continues to thrive as a locus for art, music and writing despite all the changes. But why? One city resident, Spanish novelist Eugenia Rico, told me: "Writing about Venice is like writing about love. Every important writer has to write about love." Another told me that it is the essential quality of tranquility there, even if that is increasingly threatened. For me the most convincing answer is the place itself, the juxtaposition of urban life lived at the pace of walking and flowing water; these are enduring qualities that set Venice apart and give life there a special character.

## HOW IS VENICE BOTH AN ANCIENT AND A MODERN CITY?

That's an important question and it gets to the heart of Venice's dilemma. On one hand, an urbanologist in my book calls Venice a "cutting edge laboratory of modernity" for its completely pedestrian-focused set up. This is something the most forward-thinking cities of the world – Oslo and Berlin for example – are racing to emulate. But at the same time, Venice is a medieval and Renaissance city, where getting around is done by foot mainly, but it needs to live in a fast-paced, consumer-oriented, digital age. It can't really accommodate both and balancing its modern economy and ancient lifestyle is a dilemma.

## WE KNOW ITALY HAS BEEN HIT HARD BY COVID-19. HAS VENICE ANY LESSONS TO TEACH FROM ITS PAST?

Lots. Venice was where the Black Death entered Europe in the 14th century, and as a port it had to face up to the problems posed by the plague and other diseases. The concept of quarantine hospitals was invented in Venice, which set up quarantine facilities on the islands of Lazzaretto Nuovo and Lazzaretto Vecchio, in the northern and southern Venetian lagoon respectively. The experience there has many parallels with our present-day emergency. The word “quarantine” comes from “quarantia,” or forty, the number of days that those suspected of carrying the disease had to wait before they could go to the city.

## WHAT'S THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN VENICE'S DWINDLING POPULATION AND TOURISM?

There's been an exodus of Venetians, reducing the number from 175,000 in the 1950s to just over 50,000 today. The trend has various causes, but of late the main one is the rise of mass tourism. The surplus of tourists has unbalanced the economy, with souvenir shops, holiday rentals and hotels pushing residents out. UNESCO, the UN body that supports and protects world heritage, is now worried about Venice's safety. There is an enormous depth of feeling among Venetians about excessive tourism, with some residents concerned about the city becoming a "Disneyland" — essentially an open-air museum. But surprisingly, it's not mainly the tourists who are at fault. It's all bound up with the political struggle going on in Venice — a matter of international finance, speculation, and of people fighting to preserve a way of life.

## SO HOW IS THE CITY ATTEMPTING TO MAKE MASS TOURISM A WIN FOR ITS RESIDENTS AND INFRASTRUCTURE?

The first thing is to understand what it *wants* from tourism. Today tourism brings some 30 million people a year, many in a most destructive way, undermining housing for residents, pushing up prices, forcing local shops to close and overstressing the environment. Venice has long relied on tourism, but it has learned that there are limits. It can sustain just half of the current number, and must foster a more cultured, leisurely tourism. The government is taking measures, such as a tourist tax, but it is not yet clear if that will really work. Other efforts have come from the private sector, such as the “community-powered tourism” of FairBnb, which aims to offset the corrosive effects on housing of AirBnBs. Some are working to reorganize tourism itself, dispersing tourists rather than over-focusing attention on a few key sites. A promising drive focuses on seeding new alternative industries in high tech to rebuild the population with new jobs.

## IS VENICE REALLY SINKING?

Venice definitely is sinking, albeit very, very slowly, and it has been sinking for a long, long time, as far back as records go, which is 1872, and probably further. Venice has subsided by 0.33 to 0.34 meters in the past 150 years. A small part of the drop is due to natural geological changes in the earth's surface. The greater part has been caused by man in the last century, and mostly between the 1950s-70s by groundwater extraction. Its real challenge, however, is sea level rise, which is making the normal “acqua alta” flooding worse and promises to overwhelm the city.

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## WHAT IS “ACQUA ALTA” AND WHAT CAUSES IT?

Simply put, it's the occasional flooding of Venice. The Adriatic Sea's tides push up the lagoon water levels that surround the city twice a day. Sometimes they rise too far, causing *acqua alte*, but the flooding is becoming more frequent and more dangerous. It has become clear that this is linked to climate change, especially sea level rise.

## HOW IS VENICE COPING WITH ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Venice has been building a dam infrastructure to combat the flooding, but the effort has been hampered by corruption and delays. Now climate change may force Venice to face unimaginably hard choices, between saving the world heritage city and saving the lagoon that surrounds it. How can you pull apart nature and man thoroughly intertwined for so many centuries without destroying them? A cleanup is also underway of pollution caused mainly by past industry on the borders of the lagoon, which has left mountains of industrial poisons still seeping into the water. But the renewal is taking too long. This all matters – and not just to Venice. The city's fate will be a test for mankind as it strives to save the environment, preserve heritage and assure its own economic well-being. Venice is more delicate than other cities, so, like the caged canary in the mine, whose sensitivity warns miners of poison gas, its fate may be a warning for us all.

## WHAT MAKES VENICE INTERESTING FROM AN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE?

People often forget that Venice was, after Rome and Greece, the earliest form of democracy on earth. But what makes it stand out for me is that this limited popular rule – once much admired by revolutionaries in America who formed the United States, among others – was the longest-surviving government in the history of the world. I think it's really important in these days of weakening government to understand what it was about their system that enabled it to survive for some 900 years. What characteristics gave it the stability that all its rivals – and many modern governments – lack? The answer has to do with how it organized and respected the rule of law, trust and the system of justice.

## YOU WRITE EXTENSIVELY IN YOUR BOOK ABOUT THE LAGOON. WHY FOCUS ON THAT?

The lagoon is Venice and Venice is its lagoon. Tourists visit the city and often do not realize that everything about Venice, its past, its survival and its character depend on the vitality of the crescent-shaped, 552-square kilometer lagoon that surrounds and pervades the city. This is not just an environmental relationship. The lagoon is part of the city's culture, as are the some 60 islands scattered over its surface. Rowing and sailing in the traditional style in particular brings together the city, the water, the islands, and their people. To understand Venice, you need to appreciate the oneness of water and city.

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## WHAT ARE THE CITY'S CHALLENGES, AS YOU SEE THEM?

Beyond environmental issues, the main question is: How can Venice retain its integrity as a city and yet take action to control the ever-growing excessive crowds that are both the root of degradation of residential life and an engine of the economy and key source of employment? A solution is possible, and it requires clear government interventions in things like property speculation, lax controls on renting via AirBnb and other over-exploitation of tourism, but taking these actions will give Venice a future – and that's good for everyone in the long run. It will take political will to take back control, but this has so far been in short supply.

## WHY IS YOUR BOOK'S SUBTITLE

Of course, a city, any city, is its people. Without the Venetians, Venice would be beyond a museum. It would be a hollow shell. The survival of the Venetian cultural traditions is critical to the survival of the city, but the people of Venice are leaving at an alarming rate. Life in the city is not what it once was. Seeing their city slip away makes Venetians sad, angry and fearful. But they are not idle. They see ways to turn things around. They understand that new policies and the political will to implement them could make all the difference. That is a source of hope and motivates activism on behalf of the city.



NEAL E. ROBBINS

A former professor of journalism and foreign correspondent for international news agencies, Neal E. Robbins is an Italian-speaking professional journalist and the author of several books, including *Venice, an Odyssey*. His reporting and writing has appeared in a wide variety of publications, including *The Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Post*, *China Times* (Taiwan) and *The Guardian*, and with National Public Radio and United Press International. A native of Chicago, he has lived in Hong Kong, Taipei and New Delhi, and now resides with his family in Cambridge, England.

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