



# SAVING VENICE

With mass tourism, enormous cruise ships and rising waters threatening Venice, the likes of fashion designer Vivienne Westwood and local action group We Are Here Venice are doing their part in campaigning to save the lagoon city from further destruction. **By Isobel Lee**



**L**AST NOVEMBER, you could have been forgiven for rubbing your eyes and blinking at the sight of six-foot supermodels clambering through a building site in Venice in improbable platforms, while a cruise ship lurched through the lagoon in the background. If you'd stayed a while, all would have been made clear by the sight of British fashion doyenne, Vivienne Westwood, commanding a *chiatta* (transport barge) down the Grand Canal, while

photographer Juergen Teller captured everything for the designer's Spring/Summer 2016 collection. This wasn't just about striking aesthetics for an avant-garde fashion shoot. This was

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an attempt by the UK designer to draw attention to the environmental issues which have brought Venice to the brink of crisis, both in terms of its delicate infrastructure and the biodiversity of its lagoon.

"The problem there is one of repair, mass tourism on cruise ships and of climate change," says Vivienne Westwood. "The scientist Contessa Jane da Mosto has been campaigning to save Venice. In 1966 there was a terrible flood and since then, people have been analysing the problem and proposing solutions. The biggest problem now seems to be the cruise ships which tear up the lagoon. It's a total false economy to allow them. The Contessa says that Venice is 'the canary in the mine'. If we can't save Venice, how do we save the world?"

Jane da Mosto, co-founder and driving force behind local action group We Are Here Venice, is one of the city's most vociferous defenders. Born in South Africa, educated in Oxford, but a resident in Venice since 1995, Jane feels strongly that the city is being brought to its knees by poor quality thinking and greed. "I firmly believe that if you save Venice as a living city, it will be better able to preserve itself," she says. Her charity We Are Here Venice officially came into being



Fashion designer Vivienne Westwood, has named her spring/summer 2016 collection 'Mirror the World', as part of a campaign to save Venice from the effects of climate change.





Locals band together in support of ongoing campaigns to save their precious city.

PHOTO COURTESY OF PHILIPPE APATHIE

last year, from “seeds of ideas which I’ve been cultivating for some time,” she adds.

Currently spearheading a raft of projects to educate, stimulate and address the city’s fragile state, We Are Here Venice is also backing a bid asking UNESCO to place Venice on the list of endangered cities. “If Venice is on the ‘at risk’ list of World Heritage Sites, the government can’t say that mass tourism is good for Venice,” adds Jane.

The sight of cruise ships dwarfing Venice as they chug along the Giudecca Canal and St Mark’s Basin is not a new one. For decades, they have been passing just 300 metres from St Mark’s Square, but their numbers and dimensions have swelled enormously in the past few years. Jane says, “Cruise ships don’t have anything to add to Venice, and the benefits for the local economy are terribly exaggerated.”

The biggest criticism of these floating hotels is that their passengers almost always sleep on board and eat many of their meals on the ship, so contribute little to businesses, while adding to the rubbish that needs to be collected (by hand, in Venice) and to the erosion of its delicate foundations. Jane notes, “This city currently has over 30 million tourists a year, and the cruise ships bring around 2 million passengers, so it’s fairly marginal in terms of the total amount of visitors. Venice already gets too much tourism – so why think about destroying the lagoon still further?”

We Are Here Venice recently coordinated a special working group of independent experts, including the

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local branches of nationally recognised NGOs – Italia Nostra, FAI and WWF – to bring Venice’s plight to the attention of UNESCO. Their subsequent report highlighted the ongoing degradation of the lagoon, the remarkably biodiverse body of salt-water which encircles Venice, as well as the slow death of the city as a community. The bid document noted “saltmarsh erosion, sediment loss, construction of artificial islands, contaminated landfills, erosion caused by port traffic, wave damage and destructive fishing practices, unmonitored changes in tidal currents, systemic trend towards a gulf of the sea”, as well as “damage caused by large cruise ships in Venice and the dangers of current proposals for cruise traffic that involve additional dredging in the lagoon”, plus “alarming data on the falling number of residents, largely caused by transformation of building uses for tourism-related activities”.

The lure of being able to rent out one’s property for a few nights to tourists for much higher sums than traditional rents is threatening to turn Venice into a ghost-town, particularly in the winter, as well as destroying a sense of community and driving small shops out of business.

The Tourism Office of the City of Venice is doing its best to cultivate sustainable tourism, but the majority of its ideas currently offer cosmetic rather than institutional solutions. These range from trying to inspire the individual visitor to think ahead, by booking out of season to reduce pressure on natural environments and communities, and embracing public transport once in Venice. Other requests include asking local hoteliers to green their properties via energy conservation and waste management solutions, and drawing guests’ attention to the precious nature of resources such as water, which is pumped entirely from the mainland. The City of Venice’s ‘detourism’ campaign, a play on words invoking the term detour, advises visitors to get off the beaten track to “stumble upon unique experiences”, providing a thematic map of its less explored *sestieri* called ‘Fuorirotta’ (off-course) and daily tips via social media. In particular, the map shows the location of more than 100 drinking fountains across Venice and encourages the use of tap water and the re-use of water bottles in order to reduce plastic waste and to minimise the environmental impact. Hundreds of plastic containers end up in the canals every week, and those which are disposed of correctly have to be collected by hand.

But Venice’s core problems are even bigger. The city is currently trying to emerge from a political maelstrom which saw the last mayor resign over corruption allegations, when funds for the high profile Mose Flood Barrier project went

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astray. Mose, an underwater engineering solution which is bidding to literally hold back the seas (like its namesake, Moses), risks itself being sucked into a vortex of controversy. Its barriers, which have been designed to protect the city from three-metre-high tides are supposed to solve the *acqua alta* problem, Venice’s winter flooding, but its completion date keeps being put back. “There are questions as to whether Mose is ever going to work, the cost of maintaining it, on top of the costs of completing it. The authorities keep changing the date when it will be finished, and it’s now emerging that some things have gone awry with its construction,” says Jane.

Even if it does work, it might create as many problems as it solves. Roberto Chiarlo, manager of Thetis, the monitoring network and environmental measurements department, told *The Guardian* newspaper last year, “The commercial harbour will be impacted each time the barriers are lifted and there would be thousands of dollars of electricity used. We need to protect Venice but we also have economic activities in Venice and there will be a conflict between the two – there will need to be negotiation on each decision.”

The current mayor, Luigi Brugnaro, has recently weighed in with a proposed solution for the cruise ships issue which



Large cruise ships continue to cause further damage to the Venetian lagoon.

PHOTO COURTESY OF STEVEN WARRN

involves creating a new canal in the lagoon through the artificial island Isole delle Tresse, bringing the liners into port along a route which avoids the Giudecca Canal and St Marks. Brugnaro has gone on record to say that it could be completed in 20 months, creating construction jobs and saving those that work in the cruise industry.

“That would be devastating. That would be really, really tragic,” says Jane. “I went to see that area of the lagoon only yesterday, with the delegation from Europa Nostra that are backing the UNESCO appeal. The lagoon is in a highly fragile condition, and dredging more channels just exacerbates the problem. It doesn’t do anything good for Venice because the cruise ships only cause damage and bring the kind of mass tourism which is killing the city already.”

UNESCO is set to meet in July to consider Venice’s status as an ‘at risk’ World Heritage Site so a race against time has begun. “I’m hoping that the UNESCO commission will understand the necessity of putting Venice on the endangered list so we can address the causes of the damage being done,” Jane says. “And it’s not just this city which is at stake. Venice is so emblematic of a lot of the challenges that are out there on a global scale – helping Venice is really just saving the world.”

#### HOW CAN YOU DO YOUR PART WHEN VISITING VENICE?

- Consider visiting Venice in the ‘slow’ season
- Tour the city on foot or use local transport – *vaporetti* are good value, especially if you purchase a 24, 48 or 72 hour ticket
- Carry rather than drag wheeled luggage over the bridges as the steps and their delicate structures are easily damaged
- Dress in an appropriate manner in churches, bringing a spare skirt or shawl when necessary
- Walk on the right when in narrow alleys and going over bridges, and in single file
- Watch how the locals queue for *vaporetti* boat rides, and keep your backpacks on the floor rather than on your shoulders while travelling on the water
- Reduce plastic waste
- Consult the city’s Fuorirotta map to discover eco-friendly and local-oriented initiatives
- Visit organic and zero kilometre restaurants
- Choose artisan products and fair trade shops