

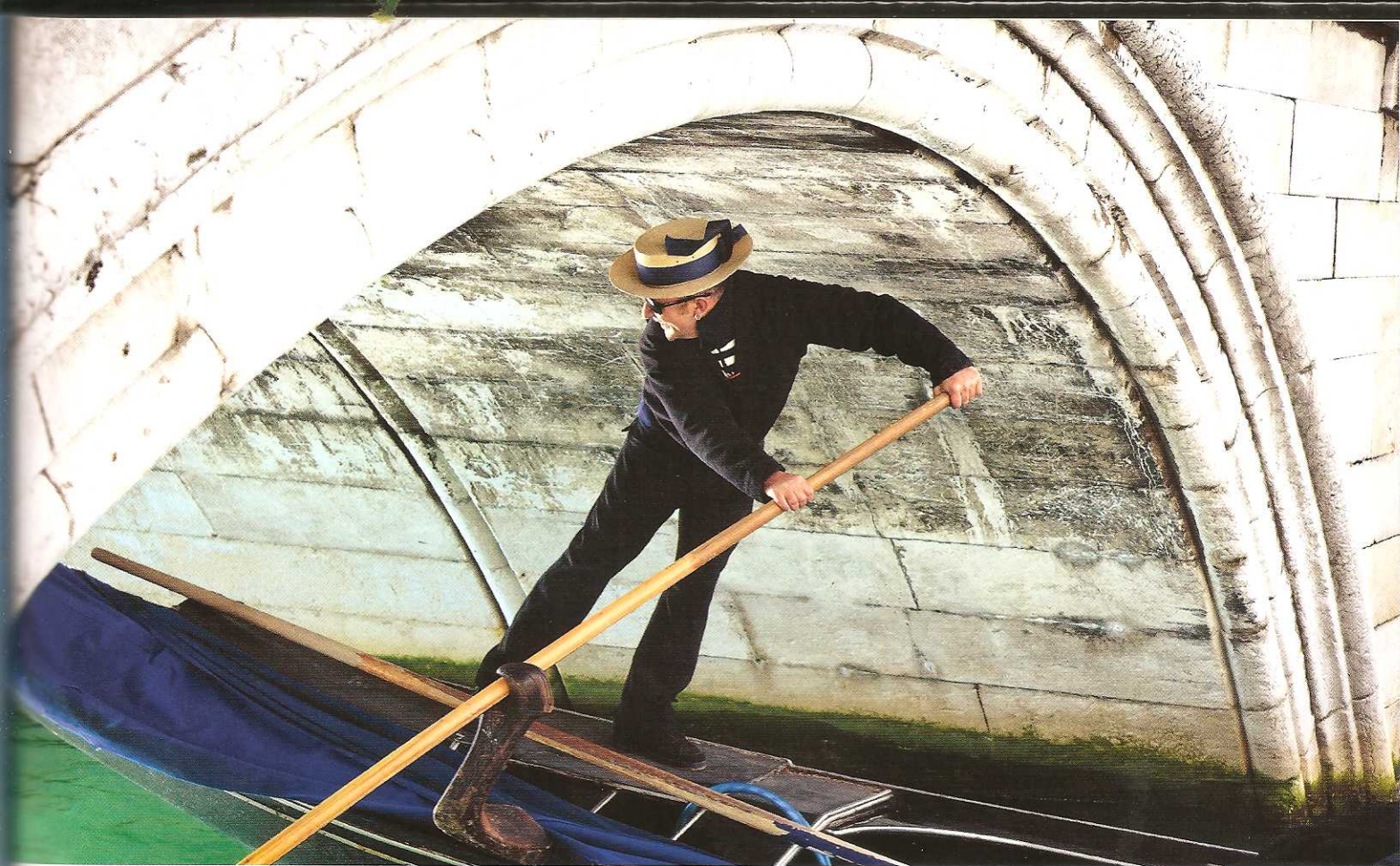
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CANAL CAPTAINS

Gondoliers may well be the best scene-setters in all of Venice, if not the world.

BY RICHARD VARR



They push their single oar with seemingly no effort, propelling their sleek vessels along the narrow canals. There's hardly a wince as they — clad in their classic striped shirts and straw hats circled with a ribbon — duck under low footbridges and sneak around tight corners without a scratch to their shiny black gondolas. And their passengers are in complete awe, comfortably snuggled within plush upholstery as they glide alongside lavish Gothic and Baroque palaces, enjoying the tradition that's uniquely Venetian.

You might consider gondoliers as welcoming ambassadors for the so-called "City of Bridges," keeping alive their millennium-old trade while traversing Venice's cluster of more than 100 sea-level islands. Poised and confident, they stand tall on the back edges of their pleasure craft, enchanting visitors with their knowledge of the city and with their precise maneuvers using the same techniques as in yesteryear.

"It's difficult to describe the feeling when rowing," says Lorenzo Brunello, a Venetian gondolier for more than 20 years. "It's kind of a magical quiet moment, like seeing the sunset in the mountains when you say, 'Ah, it's so beautiful.' I feel the same sensation.

"It's incredible because the gondola goes straight, doesn't make noise and gives the unique feeling to the gondolier of a man with his boat," Brunello adds. "A lot of gondoliers talk to their boat like a man talks to his wife. They're not crazy because they respect the gondola. As I heard one gondolier say, 'Goodbye gondola, see you tomorrow.'"

Gondoliers have been manning their watercraft as far back as the 11th century, having developed skills to make breathtakingly sharp turns along the narrow canals. American author Mark Twain praised their steering precision in his travelogue *The Innocents Abroad*, published in 1869. "I am afraid I study the gondolier's marvelous skill more than I do the sculptured palaces we glide among," he wrote. "He cuts a corner so closely now and then, or misses another gondola by such an imperceptible hairbreadth. ... He never makes a mistake. ... His attitude is stately; he is lithe and supple; all his movements are full of grace."

That description from a century and a half ago is still accurate today.



Peggy Guggenheim leaving her home on the Grand Canal

A closer look at the gondola reveals an asymmetrical shape, with one side narrower than the other, making it easier for one person to row. That's because the wider left side displaces more water, pushing the craft in the opposite direction. To counter this effect, the gondolier's oar pushes from the narrower right side, creating a perfect balance of propulsion and resistance, enabling the gondola to go straight.

In its early history, Venice was dotted with *squeri*, plural for *squero*, which are the small shipyards where craftsmen stretched and carved wood to build the elongated boats. Today only a few have survived, including Squero di San Trovaso, a corner workshop abutting a crisscross of canals along the quiet backstreets of the Dorsoduro neighborhood. Interested visitors can watch craftsmen painting gondolas and sanding the boats' spiny wooden frames from across the canals.

In addition to the carpenters and *squeraroli* who build the boats, craftsmen called *remèri* shape the oars and perhaps the most important feature at the boat's stern, the *fórcola*, the lock from which the gondoliers pivot their oar. Made from walnut, the unique design of the right-angled *fórcola* allows for the oar's many positions to maneuver through the narrow canals.

"There are many different movements that make turning an art — it *is* an art, believe me," Brunello asserts. "Gondoliers can use six or seven different movements to turn right or left without scratching their boat, but only the most expert gondoliers turn with only one movement. It depends on the boat and how it performs. Tourists don't really see what we're doing."

Upwards of 10,000 gondolas once crammed the canals 300 to 400 years ago. Back then, they were a necessary means of transporting passengers and everyday goods. More traditional gondolas can be seen at Ca' Rezzonico, the lavishly furnished Baroque palace along the Grand Canal that now houses the Museum of 18th-Century Venice. At the entrance sits an old-style black gondola, like those captured on canvas by the great Venetian painter Canaletto. Ornately carved patterns decorate its beveled deck, capped with a traditional canopy that once sheltered passengers from cold and blustery weather.

"The gondola has always been a sophisticated boat, and in the past they were often luxury boats for very rich Venetian families," says city tour guide Anna Bigai. "Rich families had many gondolas each and many gondoliers at their service.

"The last person to have such a gondola here was Peggy Guggenheim," she adds, referring to the American art collector and heiress whose former 18th-century palace now houses the Peggy Guggenheim Collection of modern art. "Every single evening, she took a gondola ride with her dogs."

While many gondoliers stem from families with centuries-long traditions, Brunello married into such a family. He says becoming a gondolier is competitive because of rigorous testing and training including learning languages, Venetian history and rules of navigation. Many gondoliers start their training as substitutes before getting licensed and owning their own gondola.

"Mine is 11 years old and in good condition," says Brunello. "After 20 and 25 years, you'll

need a new one as you can feel when it needs changing. When they're in the water so long, they'll have trouble turning. It's like driving a car with more than 100,000 miles."

In Venice today, only 400 or so gondolas are in use for tourist rides, often lined up like taxis along waterways near the pulsing hub of St. Mark's Square or moored along the wide-mouthed Grand Canal. Standard rates for gondola rides during the day and evening vary, so how do tourists pick a gondola and gondolier?

"In my experience, customers normally choose a gondola according to what the husband wants; it's the wife who will choose the gondolier," Brunello explains. "The ladies look for guys about the same age or younger. The second time, however, they'll choose the gondola, one that's beautiful and in perfect condition."

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