

Island hopping

Sant'Andrea

When thinking of Venice, the word ‘secluded’ doesn’t spring to mind. But on the fortified island of Sant’Andrea, only a stone’s throw from St Mark’s Square, it’s a different story.

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It’s only a 12-minute boat ride from Venice’s St Mark’s Square to the island of Sant’Andrea but the two places might as well inhabit different planets. Away from the phalanx of tourists brandishing selfie sticks, Sant’Andrea is remarkable for being, in many ways, unremarkable. There’s no hotel here, no restaurants and no obvious tourist attraction. And our skipper for the day, Paolo Rosso, wants it to stay that way. “There’s a very codified vision of Venice: gondolas, baroque, carnival,” he says from the helm of his Topetta-style wooden motorboat as we pull up to the fortified island. “But if you look at Venice as a whole, you can see it in a different way.”

Rosso has been scratching beneath the surface of Venice since arriving here 16 years ago. A native of Pavia, south of Milan, he has carved out a niche as a leader of some of the city’s more avant garde cultural offerings, including a floating cinema bobbing in the water off the island of Giudecca that shows experimental films alongside Venice Film Festival every September. Slightly unkempt and with a contagious enthusiasm, he answered an open call in 2022 to co-run part of the island.

Sant’Andrea might not be developed but it’s full of history if you know where to look. It was a key defensive outpost during Venice’s days as an independent republic and there’s an impressive brick-and-stone monument that remembers the victory of the Holy League, which included Venice, over the Ottoman Empire in the 1571 Battle of Lepanto. Casanova was imprisoned on the island, Rosso tells us, and it played an important strategic role in the First World War.

We wander inside a church, its door ajar and part of its roof overgrown with creepers, and Rosso points out the naïve frescoes painted during Mussolini’s fascist regime



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– an odd mixture of holy icons alongside military insignia in the bottom corners of a wall. Though the idea is that the clutter inside will be tidied up, it will be done with the lightest touch possible, according to Rosso. “It’s a beautiful place in which to reflect,” he adds.

Two intrigued young men show up at the door, one of the occasional groups of locals that moor their boats next to the island and get off to explore; MONOCLE gets the sense that Sant’Andrea is probably the location of an occasional teenage tryst too. Rosso welcomes the pair, assuming his role as unofficial island tour guide and starts to recount its history.

Not far away, next to the ramparts of the impressive but dilapidated 16th-century fort, marked by elevated walkways, a team from the University of Padua is setting up equipment, including plunging a camera into the water, to map the architecture of the little-known island. One day this part of the island might also be under Rosso’s tutelage and there is talk of cultural activities, including musical performances and guided tours. For now it feels like we’ve been let in on a secret, away from the commodified city centre.

Rosso offers to drop me back at the train station and we motor across the water, picking up artist Giorgio Andreotta Calò along the way. He is a friend of Rosso who is also involved with the Sant’Andrea project and we sit talking on the tied-up boat before leaving. The artist says that he thought about bringing some of his works to the island but then he decided that the place itself was enough. “There’s no longer anywhere in Venice that can be considered authentic – but Sant’Andrea is,” he says. “It’s a spot where you don’t need to build. Instead, you can preserve.” — Ⓜ



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“There’s no longer anywhere in Venice that can be considered authentic – but Sant’Andrea is”



1. Sant’Andrea’s fort
2. Paolo Rosso greeting a visitor at the church
3. Gazing out to the busier side of Venice
4. Inside the fort



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