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HISTORY AND TRADITION ON THE VENICE LIDO

The island of Murano holds many attractions for *Fabrizio Fiorenzano*

MURANO is the largest of the islands in the Venice lagoon. Together with Burano, Mazzorbo, Torcello, Sant'Erasmo, Palestra and Lido, it is one of the obligatory stops for tourists visiting Venice. The island is not an independent local authority, as many people think, but forms part of the Venice comune. With its 7000 inhabitants and 70 factories, palazzi and smaller dwellings, it is located to the north-east of Venice, on the Canale dei Marani. Little remains of its original aspect as nature created it and today it is a bustling, well-to-do and productive place.

Murano was founded before the birth of Christ by the Altinati, who named it 'Amuranium', after one of the gates of their city, Altinia. Over the centuries it increased in importance and in the Middle Ages was famous for its port and watermills. The island is just a few minutes from Venice in one of the many boats run by companies such as ACTV which leave from several departure points every few minutes, stopping at all the larger islands in the archipelago.

In many ways, Murano resembles Venice. It is bisected by a large canal commonly known as the Canal Grande, which is traversed by all the ferries arriving and departing. The canal is crossed by only one large iron bridge, which is thus the essential crossing point for anyone wishing to go from one side of the island to the other. However, unlike Venice the island has no central square or old quarter.

Murano's Famed Factories

But the real symbol of Murano is its glass. Until 1295, glass working took place in Venice but from that date a statute issued by the State, fearing outbreaks of fire within the city, ordered all furnaces to be transferred to Murano. For several centuries, the island's economy has been based on the output of the dozens of small companies with their many master craftsmen, skilled in the ancient art of glass-blowing. The art was handed down over a thousand years ago by the Romans, who in their turn inherited it from the eastern empire. As a result of the barbarian invasions, the Romans were forced to flee their city and found refuge on the islands of the Venice lagoon, bringing with them their skills with glass.

It is a fascinating experience to go into a workshop and see a master craftsman, with apparently effortless dexterity, transform a molten lump of glass into an exquisite work of art, ➤

Opposite:
Artisans of glassware demonstrate ancient techniques

Left:
The Murano Collection showroom

This image:
Murano's 'Grand Canal' with the Venier Foundations to the right as seen from the Vivarini bridge.

MURANO

using techniques invented centuries ago by the early glass-makers. One of the city's canals is actually called *Rio dei Vetrai* (glassblowers' brook) and is lined with workshops. It was here in the distant past that the first ateliers sprang up. The canal is always busy with boats loaded with raw materials and also the many visitors who come to admire the *Faro*, a sturdy cylindrical white tower built entirely from Istrian stone.

Dining in Style

Also on the *Rio dei Vetrai* is one of Murano's most prestigious restaurants, Stefano Scarpa's Ristorante dalla Mora. It opened 40 years ago as a trattoria and, over the years, has developed into one of the island's most exclusive eateries, easily reached by disembarking from the ferry at the *'Faro'* stop. It is an enviable location to sit and dine, either in the cosy dining room or on the terrace, especially at night by candlelight, with the lights reflected in the still waters. The restaurant specialises in fish from the Venice lagoon.

But Murano, as well as being the world capital for the production of fine glassware, is also a place where its long history has left an indelible mark, with many sites to be explored. The Church of Santi Maria e Donato is one of the oldest and most important churches of the whole lagoon, built in the 7th century in typically Byzantine style. Of particular note is the perfectly preserved floor made from marble and glass mosaic, reminiscent of St. Mark's in Venice. Until 999, the church was dedicated to St. Mary but then also took on the name of St. Donato. In 1125 the relics of the Saint of Cefalonia were brought here and can be seen to this day behind the high altar. The church is evidence of the vital importance played by the waters of the lagoon, much more so than the land, in that the most beautiful feature, the apse, faces the sea, where it can be admired by those approaching by boat. The church is one of the finest examples of Venetian-Byzantine architecture, although the façade is in the Basilica style of Ravenna. Beside the building stands the detached campanile, visible from all over Murano. It is in the form of a square tower in three sections, with three orders of columns surmounted by the bellchamber with triple windows, crowned with arches. Close to the church is the San Donato bridge which links the banks of the canal, It is a beautiful structure with a delicately curved brick arch.

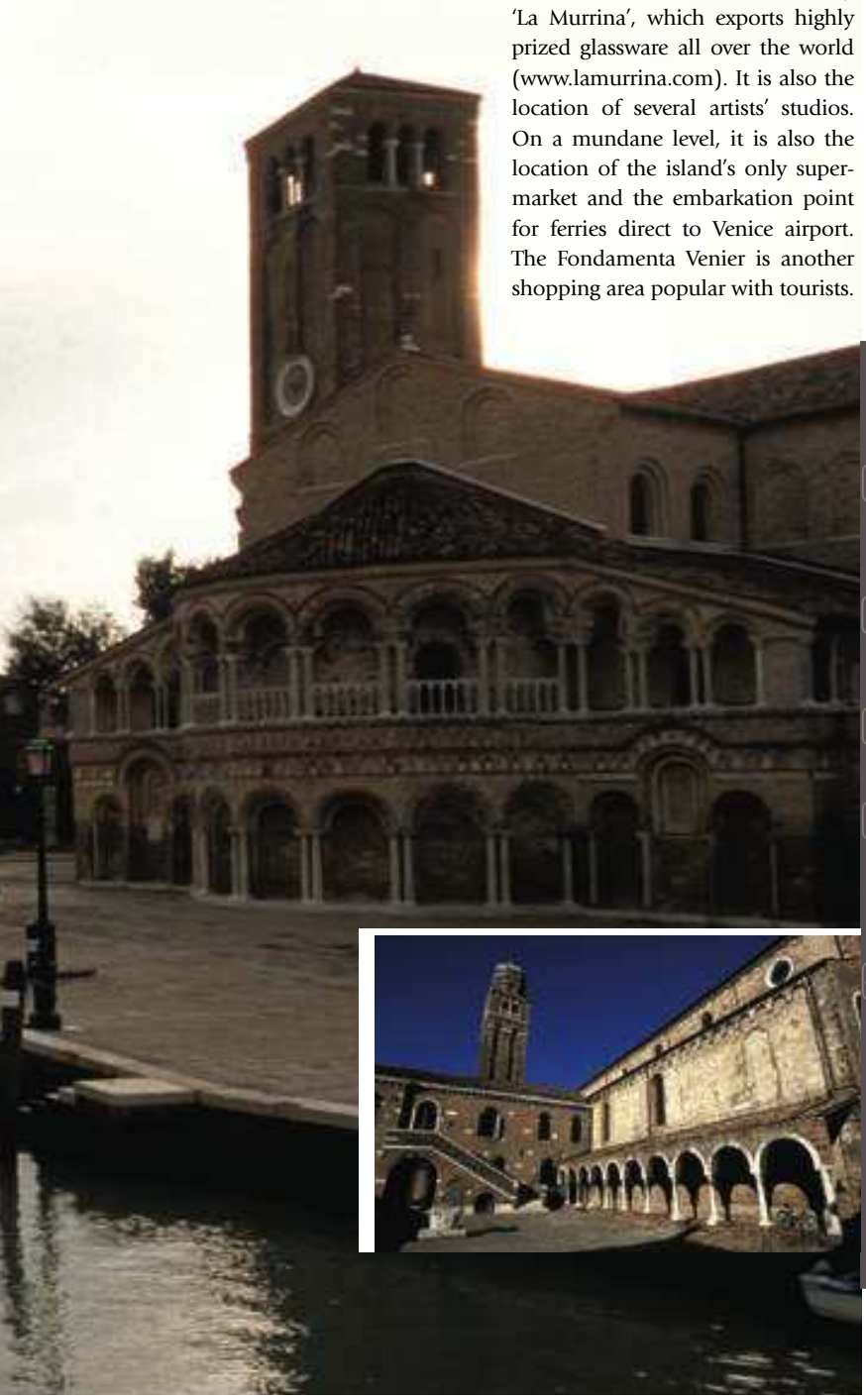
Above: The *Dalla Mora* Restaurant, Fondamenta Manin *This image:* The San Donato Bridge with belltower and Church of St Maria and Donato clearly visible to the right *Opposite, upper:* The mosaic floor with marble and glass inlays *Opposite, right:* Colonnade and courtyard of San Pietro Martire

Strolling by the Shops

Another part of Murano popular with visitors is the Fondamenta Riva Longa, close to the Canal Grande and just 50 metres from the Cathedral. It is known as the *passeggiata di Murano*. The banks have been raised in a project which ended just a year ago, and the Fondamenta is now the most spacious of the island's promenades, where mums bring their toddlers for a walk. Here there are important clothes shops and the headquarters of the famous factory 'La Murrina', which exports highly prized glassware all over the world (www.lamurrina.com). It is also the location of several artists' studios. On a mundane level, it is also the location of the island's only supermarket and the embarkation point for ferries direct to Venice airport. The Fondamenta Venier is another shopping area popular with tourists.

A splendid example of Romanesque architecture is to be found in the Church of San Pietro Martire, built in 1348 in honour of St. John the Evangelist, destroyed in a fire and rebuilt in 1511. After its reconstruction, it was dedicated to St. Peter the Martyr. Its original paintings no longer exist and the present decoration comes from other Murano churches which were demolished or closed over the years. The church contains many valuable works but the two most outstanding are by Giovanni Bellini, The *Assumption of the Virgin and Saints* and *Doge Barbarigo presented to the Virgin and Child*.

When visiting Murano I always ask myself, 'How do the people of the lagoon live with water in place of roads?' It is a question asked by many when they visit Venice and the surrounding islands. The postman arrives by sea, the dust-cart is replaced by a 'dustboat', the merchandise for the shops is unloaded from boats and there are many other examples of this singular way of life. However, it would seem that people live better here than elsewhere and, despite what would seem to be a hindrance, the economy and lifestyle are helped by well-balanced and controlled systems and the waters become a source not only of richness but of protection. Italy



details

information

Azienda di promozione turistica
tel: (+39) 041 5298711 www.turismovenezia.it
The best time to visit is spring or summer, as the winters are very cold with a greater risk of rain.

getting there

BY WATERBUS: From Venice: Alilaguna – **www.alilaguna.it**
It is advisable to use these boats rather than water-taxis which, although smaller and faster, are very expensive.

where to stay

Locanda Conterie **Calle Conterie, 21 www.locandaconterie.com**
Hotel Al Soffiador **viale Bressagio 11**

where to eat

Ristorante dalla Mora **Fondamenta Manin 75**
www.ristorantedallamora.com
Ristorante 'Da Tanduo'
Fondamenta Manin 67/68
www.datanduo.it

what to do

Murano glass:
Glass Museum
www.museicivicveneziani.it

Glass masters:
Barovier & Toso **Palazzo Contarini, Fondamenta Vetrai 28**
www.barovier.com
Venini **Fondamenta Vetrai, 50**
www.venini.it
Vetreria de Majo
Fondamenta Navagero, 29
www.demajomurano.com