The New York Times

‘Little Venice’ Finally Gets its Moment

With a ban on large cruise ships in the waters surrounding Venice, nearby Chioggia is one of the new go-to ports. While many welcome the new visitors, some worry that the tourism boom could turn sour.

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The cruise ship Viking Sea in Chioggia’s port. Following a series of protests from environmental groups last year, the Italian government recently started enforcing a ban on large cruise ships from the portion of the lagoon surrounding Venice’s historic center. Chioggia is now one of the alternative ports. Susan Wright for The New York Times

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On Aug. 4, the Viking Sea, a 930-passenger cruise ship, docked in Italy’s Venetian Lagoon. At first sight, the scene looked familiar: a towering white vessel, loaded with tourists, most of them from North America, making its way past centuries-old buildings and narrow canals. But this time the destination wasn’t Venice, but Chioggia, a smaller, lesser-known city built on a separate cluster of islands about 15 miles away, in the same lagoon.

Following a series of protests from environmental groups last year, the Italian government recently started enforcing a ban on large cruise ships weighing more than 40,000 tons from the San Marco basin, the portion of the lagoon surrounding Venice’s historic center. The ban, originally approved in 2012, was conditional: In order for it to be enforced, alternative ports for cruise lines that promote Venice on their itineraries must be close enough that tourists can actually make an excursion to Venice.

The Vena Canal in Chioggia. For centuries the town has lived in the shadows of its more famous neighbor, Venice. Susan Wright for The New York Times

"If you take Venice away, that will kill the entire Adriatic route," said Francesco Galietti, the national director for the Cruise Lines International Association. It took Italian authorities nine years to allocate the 157million euros (about $159.7million) needed to upgrade other nearby ports so they could host the cruises, which, finally, were rerouted beginning this summer.

Most of them went to Trieste, a city in northeastern Italy outside the Venetian Lagoon, about 72 miles away, while others went to Marghera, the commercial port on Venice's mainland. About a dozen were rerouted to Chioggia, and twice as many are expected next year, the city's mayor, Mauro Armelao, said, with a hint of pride.

For Chioggia, anything taken away from Venice has the taste of an underdog's redemption.

Tourists board a traditional boat called a bragozzo in Chioggia. Susan Wright for The New York Times

For centuries the town, often called Little Venice — a name that infuriates the locals, who insist that it's Venice that should be described as a bigger Chioggia — has lived in the shadows of its more famous neighbor. When Venice was a maritime power, from the 10th to the 17th century, Chioggia fell under its domination, and that legacy led to a power imbalance that can still be felt today. A working-class town traditionally relying on fishing and agriculture, famous both for its radicchio and beets, it has long provided workers for wealthier Venice, where, even today, many of the vaporetto conductors and hotel staff commute from Chioggia.

Looking down on the locals is part of Venice's folklore. The Venetian playwright Carlo Goldoni famously depicted them as quarrelsome, if good-hearted simpletons, getting into brawls for trivial reasons.

Fishing vessels docked in Chioggia, a working-class town that has traditionally relied on fishing and agriculture. Susan Wright for The New York Times

Authentic and a bit rough

But Chioggiotti take great pride in being "veraci" — authentic and a bit rough — in contrast to Venetians' sophistication. Each year, in early August, a local theater company presents Goldoni's play "Baruffe Chiozzotte" in the streets, and tickets get sold out quickly. Venetians mock Chioggia, by calling the city symbol — a lion, the same as Venice's symbol — "el gato," the cat. Chioggia has recently acquired a majestic, full-scale bronze lion statue, from the sculptor Davide Rivalta, partly to "make sure people finally get it's not a cat," the mayor said.

And unlike Venice, which is plagued by overtourism, Chioggia enjoys the extra visitors. "We're so proud that many people are coming. You hear people speaking English in the streets, we weren't used to that," said Alessia Boscolo Nata, a teacher in the local high school. "We used to be the lagoon's children of a lesser god and now we're not," jokes Teresa Bellemo, a Chioggia native who works in the publishing industry in Milan, but returns every summer.

It's not just pride. The arrival of cruises fits into the overall growth of tourism that Chioggia has experienced in the past five years — a trend that seems to have found the right balance, even helping revitalize the city's historical center.

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Chioggia is hardly new to tourism. But it used to be confined to two satellite towns, Isola Verde and Sottomarina, which relied on turismo balneare, family beach vacations. The city's main island, with its fish market, its 17th-century cathedral and the medieval clock tower, was overlooked by tourists.

But in the past few years, a new kind of tourist started showing up: "They weren't just interested in the beach, they saw Chioggia as a città d'arte," an art city, said Giuliano Boscolo Cegion, the head of the local hotel association. That had a positive effect, driving an urban renewal that has become popular with millennial and Gen Z Chioggiotti.

"Just five years ago, everything was so run down and boring, there was nothing for young-ish people to do," said Ms. Bellemo, 39. "Now it's full of life, a great place to hang out."

This renaissance is best embodied by the flourishing of bacari, or cicchetterie, the typical bars that serve wine and fish-based finger food on the Riva Vena, the central canal. Mattia Perini, who runs one of them, the Bacaro Altrove, said that half of its clients are tourists and half of them habitués: "It's the best mix. I have the critical mass to keep this place going and can keep a community alive."

In Chioggia, a view of the Piazzetta Vigo and the Vigo Bridge. Susan Wright for The New York Times

Diego Ardizzon, who runs the Cicchetteria da Nino Fisolo, one of the oldest bacari, said it took years of hard work to make the canal livelier and finally it's paying off.

Bed-and-breakfasts are springing up in the old center. And, for the moment at least, they seem to have a positive effect. “Many of the old buildings were empty, because young people prefer to live in new houses with elevators and other amenities,” said Mr. Perini.

A view of the Torre dell’orologio S. Andrea in Chioggia. Susan Wright for The New York Times

Sounding a note of caution

But many in Chioggia realize that they’re walking a fine line, that the same tourism boom that is helping to revitalize the city, if uncontrolled, could turn sour.

Mr. Armelao, the mayor, said that if the number of vacation rentals grows too much, he might follow the example of Venice, which recently obtained permission from Italy’s central government to put a cap on rentals, which were making it harder for locals to find a home.

A dozen bed-and-breakfast managers have founded a group, Vacanza in Calle, aimed at self-regulating for an ethical tourism: “We put a lot of effort in meeting visitors in person, talking to them, explaining how to live in Chioggia as the locals do, not as intruders,” said one manager, Giorgia Santaterra.

Cruises are also a delicate issue. The environmental group that organized the anti-cruise protests in Venice, the No Big Ships Committee, wants cruises out of the Venetian Lagoon altogether, to protect its frail ecosystem, and thus opposes the rerouting of ships to Marghera and Chioggia, both of which are inside the lagoon. The grassroots group has recently organized new protests in Marghera, which is part of Venice, but not in Chioggia, because it is outside of its jurisdiction.

In Chioggia there’s no visible opposition to cruises, partly because the city enjoys the economic benefit, and partly because the ships that come here are on the smaller end of the spectrum, raising less concern about their environmental impact: The average cruise ship has around 3,000 passengers, while all the ships that are scheduled in Chioggia have less than 1,000.

But some of its residents are cautious. “Let’s see how this evolves,” said Ms. Bellemo. “For the time being, we’ve found a good balance, but if people start chasing too much of the easy money, it won't stay this way."

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