Recently I had the great good fortune to find myself, once again, in Venice.

Historically more of a Sovereign State than a city, Venice is like no other, a City of Stone built across over a hundred islands on a huge shallow Lagoon, a jewel set in the peaceful waters of the Adriatic Sea, now smooth dusky-green and almost flat calm.

The Byzantine title of La Serenissma, or The Most Serene Republic of Venice was bestowed upon the city by one of the Popes at a rare moment when it was at peace with the Papacy, in recognition of its wealth, prosperity and diplomacy, together with its rigorous system of justice making it the envy of many surrounding States. The Republic was to last 1100 years (697 – 1797 AD).

Although the population of Greater Venice, counting Marghera and Mestre on the mainland and all the islands is around 260,000 with an overall area of roughly 400,000 square kilometres, the actual city is tiny, geographically finite at just over 62 square kilometres including Burano, Murano and all the surrounding waters, and a population of around 60,000. What makes the centre so particular is that within its narrow confines there are no cars, buses, trains, motorbikes, trams or even bicycles and never will be, the only possible transport within the city is by boat or on one’s own two feet.

Apart from a small car ferry to the Lido, the only link to the mainland is a 4-kilometre causeway from Marghera in the north coming into the Piazzale Roma. Built first as a railway bridge by the Austrians in the 1840’s, it was enlarged to include a parallel road bridge in the 1930’s. Owing to the tides of the Adriatic Sea there is often flooding at Aqua Alta (High Water) and it is easy to get completely lost. Navigating the complex twists and turns of the narrow streets without encountering a dead end is, as Hemingway says, akin to a game of chess where one false move can lead to Check if not Checkmate!

It is February, and usually the start of the renowned Carnevale di Venezia, a Festival of Indulgence which takes place in the days preceding Lent leading up to Martedi Grasso, Mardi Gras, or for the more sombre British, Shrove Tuesday. This celebration of gaiety, dancing and gratification is said to have begun almost a thousand years ago, its most famous feature being the elaborate decorated Masks worn by the populace and visitors alike,
and the fierce contest for the most beautiful is the Highlight of the Festival. Mask-makers (mascherari) are feted throughout the city and have their own Guild. Interestingly, the origin of mask-wearing began with Doctors trying to prevent the spread of infection of Medieval plagues and many Venetians today wear “I Mascheri della Peste” – most apposite for the Pandemic prevalent this year all over our globe.

Normally three million people descend on Venice for the Carnival festivities, feasting and dancing on the Bridges, the streets and canals alive with extravagantly-dressed people partaking in all manner of pleasure before the deprivations of Lent, but not this year. This year there is almost no traffic on the complexity of waterways criss-crossing this unique city of solid stone palazzos and churches, a mix of architecture from Medieval to Renaissance, linked only by canals and narrow streets with stepped bridges leading onto large open squares.

The restrictions in place in Europe because of the latest Pandemic to hit our planet have been draconian, and Paris my home town was all but closed down with a 6pm curfew and mostly only supermarkets open for essential supplies. No parties, no theatres, no intimate dinners in restaurants or meeting up with friends for a glass of wine and a chat, not even at home, and London was even worse.

My friend and I have taken three days to drive down through France from Paris, stopping at Beaune, a charming town I know well, famous for its wineries and the magnificent Hospices de Beaune, and then near Milan the following day after a wining crossing through Mont Blanc via the 12-kilometre tunnel.

Here however, as we arrive Venice happily moves into “Zona Gialla” which means restaurants, cafés, and some museums are opening up and real normal life beginning to return. With the curfew extended to 10pm, we can entertain friends in the early evening at home or go out to dinner, now a rare joy. At the same time there are no tourists except a few intrepid Italians, which gives a surreal view of the city, empty, cold and in the cool winter sunshine under brilliant blue skies, breathtakingly beautiful.

Founded in 421 AD, during the first 800 years of its history the Venetians evolved their own system of Aristocratic Government by the Patrician families and established their independence and commercial supremacy in the Eastern Mediterranean. The first Doge (an elected Lord or Head of State) to rule over the Maritime Republic was chosen in 697 AD. No enemy ever succeeded in taking Venice, exemplified by the famous rebuff of Pepin, the son of Charlemagne, who had the temerity to attack the Republic in 810 AD, or the raids of the Dalmatians (those Pirates!) who were annihilated by Doge Pietro in 997 AD. This last was the origin of the eight centuries-long custom of Venice’s “Marriage with the Adriatic”, a ceremony that was celebrated annually by the Doge, at the head of his Bucintoro (the official State galley) and surrounded by all kinds of officialdom, throwing a diamond ring into the waters at the Porto on Ascension Day, which came to be symbolic of Venetian Naval power.

St Mark, one of the four Evangelists, became Patron of the City early on with the capture of his body from a tomb in Alexandria around 828 AD. The body was smuggled out of Egypt in a barrel of pork fat to confuse any Muslim pursuers and is said to be preserved under the high altar in the Basilica, the original Church being built to house his bones in 829 AD. Affectionately known as the “Chiesa d’Oro” (Church of Gold) because of its glorious gold mosaic-covered ceilings which took centuries to complete, the beautiful Basilica of San Marco we see today began construction at the end of the 11th century, largely modelled on Agia Sofia in Constantinople.

The Grand Canal
On his travels through Europe, apparently Mark had stopped at the Lagoon of Venice and a vision appeared to him saying: “Pax tibi Marce, evangelista meus. Hic requiescet corpus tuum.” (“Peace be with thee, O Mark, my evangelist. Here thy body will rest.”) This urban legend was used as justification for appropriating his body from the Egyptians. All over the City one can see the Winged Lion, the symbol of St Mark.

Historically Venice has always been a separate entity only becoming part of the Italian Kingdom in the mid 19th century. Divided into six Sestieri early on in its foundation, these districts or wards have quite distinct features. San Marco is the beating heart, surrounding the great Basilica; San Polo over the Rialto Bridge on the Grand Canal is the smallest and oldest of the sestieri; Dorsoduro is located to the south and includes the trendy island of Giudecca; Cannaregio to the north is the most populated area, known for its illustrious inhabitants such as Marco Polo, Titian and Tintoretto; Castello to the east is the largest sestiere ranging from the Palace of the Doges to the great Venetian shipyards of the Arsenal; and lastly Santa Croce in the west of the city, the humblest district where much of the less well-off population and workers live.

Throughout the 14th century Venice was involved in a struggle for dominance with her rival, Genova, before finally triumphing with the surrender of the Genoese in 1380 AD.

As a nation of sailors, during this period Venice inspired many Venetian explorers like Sebastian Cabot and Marco Polo to set off to discover the world, travelling as far as the Americas and the exotic Far East, while the city established itself as the wealthy and powerful crossroads between East and West for traders coming from India, Persia and China into Europe. By the middle of the 15th century the State of Venice had expanded both inland and overseas, establishing a mainland Empire stretching almost as far as Milan and incorporating parts of the Adriatic coast of modern day Croatia, Greece, Montenegro, Slovenia and Albania. However the Fall of Constantinople in 1453 AD to the Turks saw the beginning of its decline, as the Turks sought to enlarge the Ottoman Empire.

Although commercially and politically waning, the next four centuries brought periods of astonishing artistic fertility, with such artists as Giorgione, Tintoretto, Canaletto, Palladio, Veronese, Tiepolo, Cima, Titian and Canova to name but a few, all prominent sons of the city, not forgetting Giovanni Bellini, the inspiration for the delicious Venetian cocktail made famous by Harry’s Bar, which is a must for any visitor to Venice. Then came various assaults, from the French, from the Austrians, until it was finally wrested from the last Doge (the 120th) by Napoleon and handed over to the Austrians before the eventual Unification of Italy in 1866.

Since 1895 the Biennale di Venezia has drawn artists from the world over by invitation to partake in the twin celebrations of Architecture and the Fine Arts, which take place on alternate years. Cinema, music, sculpture, painting, design, dance and theatre are all featured and many participating countries set up their own Pavilions to exhibit works by their national artists. The main aim of the Biennale is to promote art and artists and the sales of their works.

Alongside the unchallenged beauty and romance of Venice, long time favourite of honeymooners and lovers the world over, there is an underlying sense of deep mystery, of suspense, of dark menacing alleyways shrouded in the swirling mists rising off the canals, of threatening cloaked figures and elusive grey shadows lurking round corners. Countless classic novels, films and plays have been set here. From Shakespeare’s “Othello” and “The Merchant of Venice” to films such as Nicholas Roeg’s sinister “Don’t Look Now” and Fellini’s “Casanova”...
to novels like Thomas Mann’s “Death in Venice”, or Evelyn Waugh’s “Brideshead Revisited”, Venice has been the backdrop for so much drama. For me, Hemingway’s haunting novel “Across the River and into the Trees” perfectly encapsulates both the mysterious darkness and the romance of Venice.

Venice is not known as La Serenissima for nothing. It exudes serenity, peacefulness and calm, an escape from the way we live today in our modern cities. Although in high season the canals can be hectic, right now the only traffic to be heard from the window is the regular thrum of the Vaporetti, the discreet engines of motor launches, or the swish of oars from small rowing boats, (rowing is a popular Venetian sport), and passing Gondolas, with the Gondolieri singing softly to their clients.

In the second of these articles we will discuss the highly developed Culture of Venice, and explore the outlying Islands … and more besides!