

# VENICE MOSAICS

Millions of visitors travel to Venice every year to marvel at its ancient buildings and works of art. Sadly, centuries after its first pilings were sunk into the lagoon, it seems Venice is crumbling. Locals are now doing all they can to save this beautiful city. **By Jean Di Marino**



Guido is one of the 20 restorers working to bring St Mark's Basilica back to its original beauty.



**C**ONSERVATIONISTS SAY THE sheer volume of tourist traffic and the increased development it entails, together with the rising water levels, are endangering Venice like never before.

Still, residents are refusing to give in without a fight. As well as large engineering works, restorers are working tirelessly to preserve the treasures of the city and return them to their original splendour.

One landmark where the restoration work has been going on for decades is St Mark's Basilica. The city's main

cathedral was built about a thousand years ago, on the site of an older church constructed in the ninth century. When Venice was a major crossroad between the east and west, its rulers or 'Doges' held their coronations inside.

But the monument – the symbol of a once powerful city state – is decaying.

"The main enemy of the Basilica is water," explains Ettore Vio, the 'Proto' of St Mark's Basilica. The 'Proto' is the architect in charge of all restoration work at St Mark's. There have been 'Protos' at the Basilica for centuries.

"The high tides enter the atrium 200 times a year – even if only a little bit," he says. "So, all of the masonry or stonework is soaked with water."

This has a devastating effect on one of the main features of the Basilica – its mosaics. Eight thousand square metres of priceless mosaics, decorated in gold and other precious stones, cover the ceilings, walls and facade of St Mark's. Dating from the 11th to 13th centuries, they depict scenes from the Old and New Testaments, and events from the lives of several Christian Saints.





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“The water soaking the masonry is salt water,” says Ettore. “The salt grows in volume when it crystallises. When it expands inside the brick, it cracks the brick. So, little pieces of brick keep falling down. If there’s a mosaic over the brick, the mosaic falls too.”

Ettore employs 20 restorers, including six mosaics experts, to tackle

the ravages that salt water and time have wreaked on the Basilica.

He leads me through winding corridors, up and down stone staircases, to a workshop behind the Basilica, where, at a table in the far corner, two of those restorers are hard at work.

They pore over hundreds of tiny ‘tesserae’ – or coloured cube-shaped

stones that make up the mosaics. Each is carefully arranged on a piece of fabric in a pattern that duplicates its placement in the Basilica.

“This is a floor mosaic,” Ettore says. “It’s the decoration in front of the entrance to the Basilica’s Treasury. This is ancient. It’s a pavement that dates back to the twelfth century.”

Some ‘tesserae’ are cleaned and then repaired. Every effort is made to preserve them and only a few are replaced outright.

“The work has to be done in the least





Tourists caught by high tide in front of St Mark's Basilica.

intrusive way possible,” explains Ettore. “They can’t change them. They must respect the antiquity of the pieces, even the smallest of them.”

One of the restorers, Guido, says each square metre of mosaic takes two craftsmen close to a year to return to its original state.

“We took seven years to restore the Baptistry – reinforcing and cleaning it,” he says. “We’ve been working on this pavement here for more than 5 years, probably seven years. This is not work that you can hurry.”

In Ettore’s thirty years as Proto, his staff has restored various cupolas and chapels in the Basilica. The 76-year old says their most difficult task was the crypt beneath the altar – where the remains of Saint Mark, the patron Saint of Venice, once lay.

“We injected resin into the walls to close all the holes through which the water passed, then we repaired the stone work and treated it, so that it could exist with the least salt possible.”

“The high tides came into the crypt. Now nothing comes into it any more. It was ten years of work,” Ettore says proudly.

But it’s a never-ending job. To repeat an old proverb, time and tide wait for no man.

The Italian city is sinking. It is estimated to have lost 23cm of land over the past 100 years. The high tides or ‘acqua

alta’, as the residents call it, inundate the older and lower parts of Venice more frequently than ever before.







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The Tide Monitoring and Forecast Centre in Venice ('l'Istituzione Centro Previsioni e Segnalazioni Maree') records the water levels, and forecasts and warns of exceptionally high tides. Its Director, Paolo Canestrelli, says 2010 brought the worst flooding in more than a century.

"High tides washed over Piazza San Marco more than 200 times," he says. "They topped 110cm (and so invaded large parts of the city) 16 times. They reached 140cm (flooding the whole city) twice."

In the decades since Venice began officially recording the 'acqua alta' in the early twentieth century, tides of greater than 110cm occurred on average just three to four times a year.

"The years 2009 and 2010 were characterised by lower atmospheric pressure levels practically all around Europe. Low pressure produces an expansion of the seas and so a rise in average sea level," explains Paolo.

He says 2011 was better, with tides topping 110cm only once, raising hopes of a reversal of this trend. Nonetheless, sea levels are still rising.

And the city remains substantially unprotected. Flood gates meant to protect Venice won't be ready until 2015 - at the earliest. Many question whether the gates will actually hold back the rising tides.

Still the restorers work on faithfully - trusting that their skill will be enough to keep ahead of the tides.

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