

VENICE WITHOUT CRUISE SHIPS: HARD FACTS OR FAKE NEWS?

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ABSTRACT: For over a decade, social movements campaigning for the safeguarding of Venice and its lagoon have pointed out the many risks and negative impacts of cruise tourism, which include the potential collision with the historic city, water contamination, air pollution, underwater noise, erosion and the ‘touristification’ of the city space and local identity. Although several solutions have been proposed over the years, ranging from infrastructure projects to legal proceedings, in practice, ‘big cruises’ transited across Venice uninterruptedly. While, for some, cruise tourism meant economic growth and job creation, for others, the ‘big cruises’ were symbols of excessive consumption and environmental destruction. After the Covid-19 pandemic forced the industry to an unexpected impasse, resistance against cruises has gone global, and strong social movements have emerged in Mexico, United States, Canada, The Bahamas and Spain. In Italy, a new decree has banned the transit of ‘big cruises’ across the San Marco and Giudecca canals since August 1st, 2021. This essay reviews the events that led to this ban and examines the challenges that Venice still faces in relation to both mass tourism and cruise tourism.

KEYWORDS: cruise tourism, global dissent, pandemic, heritage, infrastructure

A grim year for the global cruise tourism industry started in February 2020 when the first passenger was confirmed positive for Covid-19 on the *Diamond Princess* cruise ship, docked at the port of Yokohama, which later became the biggest outbreak outside China at the time. An estimated of 13 people lost their life and more than 700 people tested positive for the virus (World Health Organization, 2020, p.8). Documentary films reconstructing what happened inside the *Diamond Princess* narrate the stories of both passengers and crewmembers, and various academic studies have tried to understand how the virus spread within the ship (Kakimoto et. al., 2020; Baraniuk, 2020). In a matter of days, other cruise ships experienced outbreaks all over the world, including the *Ruby Princess* which had docked in Sydney and was then considered the deadliest cruise ship, with 28 fatalities. After the industry was forced to shut down all its upcoming journeys, the nightmare of thousands of crewmembers trapped inside the ships was widely reported by global media outlets, including stories about suicides among those unable to return home (Carr, 2020).

According to the Cruise Line International Association (CLIA), the suspension of cruise operations due to Covid-19 represented a loss of about “\$50 billion USD in economic activity, 334,000 jobs and \$15 billion USD in wages” worldwide (2022). Since the beginning of the pandemic, the hope in a future vaccine was paired with the idea of the ‘return to normal’, and cruise companies planned for the post-pandemic scenario, drafting their own

security and mitigation protocols while collaborating with official institutions such as the Center for Disease Control and Prevention or the respective national health authorities. In this statement by the CLIA, global cruise tourism is reaffirmed as “an important contributor to fueling the global economic and societal recovery”.

The ‘return to normal’ of both cruise tourism and global mass tourism was a major concern for the inhabitants of many cities that have been ‘commodified’ and ‘touristified’ to serve the needs of a highly mobile leisure class. During the first days of the pandemic, people living at these travel destinations shared videos and images of unimaginably empty streets and deserted Instagrammable hotspots. In June 2020 in Venice, locals took part in a protest named *Venezia Fu-Turistica*, a play on words that means both ‘futuristic’ and ‘was touristic’. One of the main motives behind this protest act was to demand a new Venice tailored for the needs of its inhabitants, instead of a city that is gradually becoming a ‘theme park’.

It was after the mass production of a series of effective vaccines that some domestic and international travel started to be allowed by national governments (which varied according to their own degree of cautiousness). In social media, people began to share photos and videos of their first trips after the long year of social distancing, being labeled by some as ‘covidiot’ while celebrated by others. Undoubtedly, global tourism is an economic force that local and national governments consider essential for the post-pandemic recovery, and the plethora of ‘externalities’ both directly and indirectly linked to this massive industry started to make a comeback, from the ‘unruly’ – and maybe unsanitary – behavior of tourists in the cities to the aircraft noise of re-opening airports.

In relation to cruise tourism, this expected ‘return to normal’ has not necessarily been smooth. Cruise companies and their clients have been facing a wide diversity of obstacles, including outbreaks, port denials, ‘misbehaving’ passengers and disrupted itineraries (Golden, 2021). In Barcelona, the groups *Assemblea de Barris pel Decreixement Turístic* (‘Assembly of Neighbourhoods for Tourism Degrowth’) and *Zeroport* returned to their campaigning against cruise ships as soon as the new itineraries were announced. Before the pandemic, one of these protest acts included a replica of a cruise ship ironically named *The Cruise of Troy* (Sayavera, 2016), a creative political statement that suggested that cruises bring the ‘enemy’ inside. Recently, a similar cruise ship has been spotted in protests at the Port of Seattle, where *The Defiler of the Seas* (Berner, 2021) not only mocks the ‘poetic’ names of cruise ships but also has become a symbol in the struggle for a #CruiseFreeSalishSea, as demanded by the local collective Seattle Cruise Control.

In Lisbon, Zero has denounced both the excessive energy consumption of cruise ships and air pollution expected from the recovery of the industry (Zero, 2022), while also asserting that the promises to provide shore-to-ship power to the cruise ships were broken, with port authorities losing the opportunity opened by the pandemic. In Sydney, the protection of the Yarra Bay has become the main goal of the group *Save Yarra Bay*, which campaigns on Twitter against the construction of a new cruise ship terminal. For this grassroots group, this is a “vanity project for the cruise industry” that “has been hanging over us like a dark cloud” (O’Sullivan 2020). Another massive terminal has been planned in Pichilingue, Baja California, Mexico, a concession won by the ITM group and Carnival (Rebolledo Ramírez, 2021), with an activist performing a protest swimming to campaign against the presence of cruise ships in The Bay of the Paz (Márquez, 2021), arguing that local species such as whale sharks have been affected by the industry. More recently in Cozumel, at the other side of the country, another project for the cruise industry has been met with resistance from No

al Cuarto Muelle ('No to the fourth pier') activists, mainly due to the impact of that the ships have on the coral reefs (McGillivray, 2022).

Local groups in Bahamas have campaigned against the new Disney Cruise Line project at Lighthouse Point South Eleuthera (Bahamas), highlighting both the destruction of pristine natural environments (Robards, 2021) and the risks that the excessive air pollution brings for those who reside near the ports. In Key West, Florida, after a local referendum effectively limited the presence of cruise ships in the city, the liners are returning thanks to a bill signed by Florida Governor Ron DeSantis overriding this democratic decision (McGillivray, 2021). The local group Safer, Cleaner Ships continues to keep pressure on the many impacts of cruise tourism, both online and with massive demonstrations at the port (Filosa, 2021). As part of their activism, the group produced aerial footage to show the disturbance that the Royal Caribbean cruise ship *Serenade of the Seas* was causing in the quiet waters, home of the world's third-largest barrier reef (Safer, Cleaner Ships, 2021).

While all these local collectives were campaigning against the many impacts of the global cruise industry, Richard Branson announced that Virgin Voyages was hoping to redefine the meaning of luxury cruise tourism (Hirsch, 2021), with its first liner, *Scarlet Lady*, sailing the Caribbean since October 2021. In February 2022, Royal Caribbean and Norwegian Cruise Lines decided to drop their onboard mask mandates, "returning to a pre-omicron policy in which passengers could go without face coverings in areas designated for fully vaccinated people" (Diller and Sampson, 2022).

Protests and counterprotests

Since 2012, the local group No Grandi Navi has denounced the presence of 'big' cruise ships within the protected Venetian lagoon, which is included in the UNESCO World Heritage status along with the historical city. As I have discussed elsewhere (Araya López, 2021), there is a wide variety of groups that have campaigned to create awareness about the impact of big cruises in Venice, including the local NGO We Are Here Venice and student organizations such as Collettivo Universitario Li.S.C. The decree Clini Passera (passed in 2012), which banned the transit of cruise ships over 40,000 tons through the San Marco and Giudecca canals, was a legal attempt to regulate the industry, although the ships continued to transit due to the lack of an alternative route. In the view of local environmentalist groups, the presence of cruise ships in the lagoon, independently of the route taken to reach the Marittima, is considered a threat for both human and non-human bodies and the environment. More specifically, the removal of cruises from the Giudecca canal does not prevent other side-effects of the industry such as changes in the morphology of the Venetian lagoon resulting from excavation of new routes (Fabbri et al., 2019) or health issues associated to microparticles released during their transit and at the docks. Cruise companies have allegedly collaborated with local authorities to minimise some of these negative outcomes of their routine functioning in Venice, including the signature of the Venice Blue Flag agreement in 2007 (in which they agreed to use a less polluting type of fuel when in proximity of the city) (Porto di Venezia, 2021a) or the implementation of security measures such as additional ship druggers to prevent future accidents (Ordinanza N°79/2019, a protocol set in place after the *MSC Opera* collision against another vessel and the wharf in June 2019). In the past, cruise companies have also supported local campaigns to promote respectful behaviour towards the city, with Costa Cruises (Carnival Corporation) sponsoring a group of guardians at Saint Mark's Square in 2012 (ANSA, 2012), and major corporations such as Royal Caribbean, MSC Cruises and Norwegian Cruise Lines

supporting the official campaign #EnjoyRespectVenezia as part of the Venice Blue Flag agreement in 2021.

For centuries, Venice has had a complex relationship with tourism (Davis and Marvin, 2004), with local inhabitants both profiting and suffering from the uninterrupted tourist flows. Before the pandemic, the discussion on ‘overtourism’ included serious issues such as the expulsion of residents from the city centre, the monoculture of tourism businesses that substituted local-oriented commerce, the lack of alternative job markets, the physical pressure of massive tourism numbers in the shared infrastructure, the environmental impacts of mass tourism and the future risks that climate change means for the city. On the cultural dimension, the risk of turning Venice into a type of Disneyland was ever present, with local inhabitants decrying the loss of authenticity and the extractivist nature of the tourism industry. UNESCO, threatening to include the city in the World Heritage in Danger list, demanded concrete measures to protect Venice in the long-term, explicitly including the need for a permanent solution for the ‘big cruises’.

Once the pandemic hit Italy with brutal force, and after the early cancellation of the famous Venice Carnival, the future of tourism in the city was uncertain. The affected workers of the tourism industry protested for their right to work, asking the national government to allow a speedy recovery. Some of these protests took place at Saint Mark’s Square, including the participation of Mayor Luigi Brugnaro (Billato, 2020), who warned that people in Venice were not dying of the virus, but were in danger of dying of hunger. On May 3rd, 2021, after 15 months of inactivity, a group of workers from the Port of Venice protested at Campo San Maurizio, near Venice’s prefectural offices. Their speeches highlighted the urgency of their professional and personal crisis, demanding the return of cruise ships while symbolically performing ‘the funeral of the port’. With the help of suitcases and their own underwear, the group chanted *siamo in mutande*, (effectively, ‘We are down to our underpants’) to emphasise the economic hardship imposed upon them (Tagliapietra, 2021). The protesters carried two banners with the inscriptions “Venice = Port” and “Port = Life”, while waving flags from the local collective Venezia Lavora.



Figure 1. A banner from cruise supporters stating that 4000 families are dependent on the industry (June 5th, 2021 – author’s photo).

After the first cruise ships were scheduled to arrive in Venice on June 5th, 2021, officially ending the forced impasse of the pandemic, both those in support and in opposition to the cruise industry announced political demonstrations. In the case of the port workers, the demonstration was planned near Saint Mark's Square, at Riva degli Schiavoni. For those campaigning for the protection of the Venetian lagoon and the city, and against the presence of 'big cruises', the demonstration was planned in Zattere, along the Giudecca Canal. Carrying No Grandi Navi flags and red flares, the protesters sent the message that 'big cruises' are not welcomed in the city and the lagoon, with port authorities allegedly hurrying the departure of the *MSC Orchestra* so as to minimise controversy (Fullin, 2021). On the water, activists from No Grandi Navi swarmed around the cruise ship, and at some point, the fear of direct confrontation between protesters and counter-protesters was evident, since port workers approached the No Grandi Navi activists on their own vessels (Mantengoli, 2021), with some police boats keeping the groups apart.

On June 29th, 2021, the national Italian government announced a competition for ideas for an offshore project for big cruises (Porto di Venezia, 2021b). In the media articles, local, regional and national politicians extensively discussed the future of 'big cruises', blaming each other for years of inaction while also praising themselves for their own actions to safeguard Venice. The Port of Marghera, which was chosen as a temporary solution to relocate the ships, needed to be repurposed for cruise tourism, and the Genoa-based Rina Consulting won the tender for the project, which is expected to cost around 60 million Euro (Vitucci, 2021).



Figure 2 - The protest against the return of big cruise ships to Venice at the Giudecca Canal. *The MSC Orchestra*, which has a 92,409 gross tonnage, was the first departure after the impasse caused by the pandemic (June 5th, 2021 – author's photo).

On July 13th, 2021, the Minister of Cultural Heritage, Activities and Tourism, Dario Franceschini, announced on Twitter the approval of a new decree in the Council of Ministers that would ban the transit of cruises in front of San Mark's Square and through the Giudecca Canal from August onwards (Franceschini, 2021). It is significant that both

the official accounts of UNESCO and of its Director General Audrey Azoulay were tagged in the tweet. As reported later by Italian media, the ban applied for cruise ships that fulfill any of the following conditions: a) those with a gross tonnage of more than 25,000 tons, b) those with a waterline hull length of more than 180 metres or c) those with an air draft of over 35 meters. Additionally, to minimise pollution, any ships that require fuel with a sulfur content equal to or greater than 0.1% to maneuver were also subject to the ban (Pietrobelli, 2021a).

For local activists campaigning for the protection of Venice and the lagoon, the news was received with a certain degree of caution. While the new decree was beyond the scope of the former decree Clini-Passera, there were concerns that new excavations would be needed to secure the use of the Port of Marghera as a temporary solution, or that the authorities and cruise companies would find a way to bring the cruises back to the Marittima. The time required for the construction of a permanent alternative offshore has been estimated at about 10 years (for the most optimistic scenario), which raised concerns about how 'temporary' solutions oftentimes become permanent in Italy. A major reason for concerns was the subject of compensation, which included not only the affected port workers and local businesses, but also major cruise ship corporations (Pietrobelli 2021b).

On July 22nd, local news reported that UNESCO decided to keep Venice out of the list of endangered sites, after considering the recent ban on 'big cruise ships'. The decision was celebrated by some and lamented by others (Pietrobelli, 2021c). Another assessment on the city status is expected in the UNESCO meeting in 2023.

An uncertain future for the city and the lagoon

In recent years, the worldwide resistance against cruise tourism has gained visibility, but at the same time there is an expectation that the cruise industry will recover after the pandemic, with new companies such as Virgin Voyages and massive investments in new port infrastructure, from Cozumel, Mexico to Venice, Italy. Although 'big cruises' are not transiting across the Giudecca Canal and therefore are not eclipsing the magnificence of the historical centre with their 'gigantism', their presence within the Venetian lagoon is still a cause of concern for local environmental groups and international observers. In the search for both temporary and permanent solutions, old controversial projects are resurrected in the public debate, with endless discussions about the viability of the Contorta, delle Tresse and Vittorio Emanuele III canals, which would allow the Marittima to remain in service. The complexity of each of these projects requires its own discussion, both at the political level and in terms of environmental impact. In relation to the relocation of cruises, the 'solutions' have included the offshore projects near Lido, and the ports of Chioggia, Fusina, and even Trieste. The winner of the competition for ideas will be known in 2023, but in the meanwhile projects such as Duferco-De Piccoli have gained notoriety in the local press once again (Capuzzo, 2021).

Since November 2019, when the *acqua grande* caused massive destruction in various parts of the city and temporarily paralysed tourism flows, and in the context of the pandemic, with its many lockdowns and restrictions, the inhabitants and workers of Venice discovered the risk of relying on global tourism as the principal source of income. The main externalities of the industry are far from solved: the lack of affordable housing and the exodus of residents, the spatial challenges of limited infrastructure and massive numbers of visitors, or the substitution of local commerce for tourism-oriented shops. Disrespectful

behaviour that varies from a minority of tourists jumping off bridges, to lovelocks being affixed to bridges or excessive noise also continues to disturb local residents. Even in Mestre, a city that has become a dormitory satellite for Venice, new skyscraper projects are causing massive discontent. Some of the proposed 'solutions' have also angered the local population, including the use of turnstiles to regulate tourist flows and the *contributo di accesso* (*Venezia Today*, 2021), a sort of entry tax that would allegedly help to reduce the number of visitors (combined with apps and technological surveillance via the Venice Control Room [Bubola, 2021]). In the lagoon, the *moto ondosso* (ground swell) and the excavations needed to maintain the traffic to the port (both for cargo ships and cruise liners), as well as the impact of the MOSE in the local environment, are also causes for concern. The future of Venice and the lagoon is debated every day, and these is indeed good news because it is a city that is alive, that is protected by politically engaged inhabitants and its many defenders all over the world. But with tourism as both a curse and a blessing, many questions remain open. In the meantime, Venice both sinks and waits.

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