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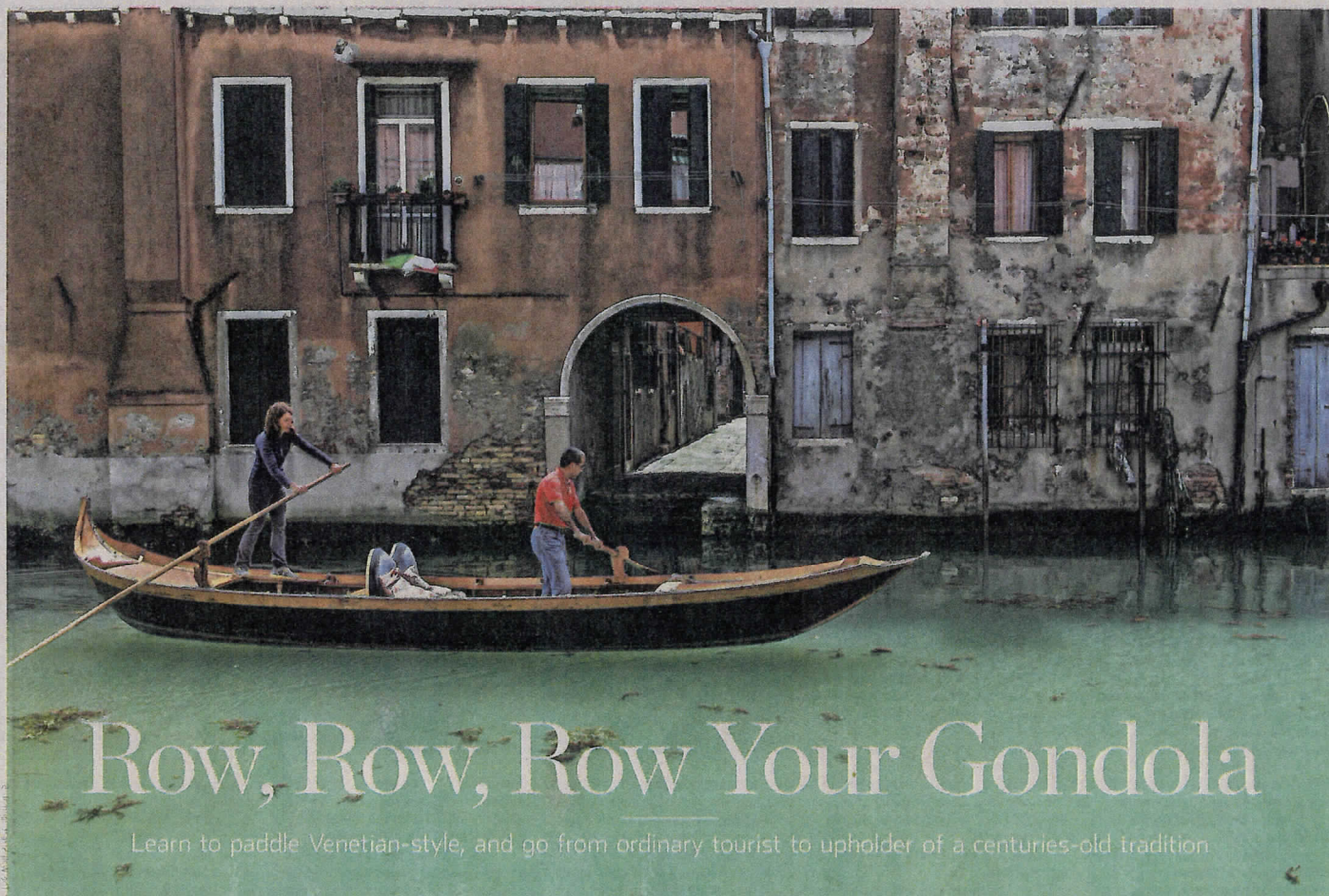
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Set Sail Inside

Take a cue from
designers who are
steering the
nautical look into
more sophisticated
waters



ADVENTURE & TRAVEL



Row, Row, Row Your Gondola

Learn to paddle Venetian-style, and go from ordinary tourist to upholder of a centuries-old tradition



SHIP SHAPES Clockwise from top: The author paddling down a canal in Venice; learning to grip the oar; the Società Canottieri Francesco Querini; in the club's boat house; on Venice's lagoon.

Stefano Sisti for The Wall Street Journal (6)

ROWING A GONDOLA sounds very simple.

You stand facing the front of the boat, one foot parallel to the oarlock that juts from its hull and the other set back a bit for stability. Then you push the shaft of the oar forward, moving the narrow blade back through the water. When your arm is as outstretched as it can get, rotate the shaft, lift the oar out of the water and swing it forward for another stroke.

But as I learned during my first lesson, it is far easier said than done.

I wasn't technically in a gondola but a four-person sandolo, a similarly flat-bottomed boat that is thicker in the middle and therefore more stable. My instructor, Paolo Marchetti, and I were in Venice's lagoon, which seemed to extend around us for miles. Through the mist, I could just make out the domes of the Basilica di San Marco. On the other side, perhaps a half mile away, were the pale walls of the cemetery on Isola San Michele. Occasionally, a boat chugged past us.

All was romance and tranquillity—except for me. Every time a wave struck the boat, I crouched down for fear of tipping into the lagoon. The current tugged relentlessly at my oar, causing me to hug it so it wouldn't be yanked from my grasp.

"You row the oar!" Mr. Marchetti yelled from the other side of the boat.

"What?" I shouted. It had begun to rain, fogging my glasses so I could hardly see.

"You row the oar," he repeated, with an existential ring. "The oar doesn't row you."

The 70-year-old Venice native crossed the boat and adjusted my grip so my hand rested on top of the shaft instead of strangling it lower down. The new position would enable me to roll my oar out of the water without fighting the current, he explained: "Like throttling a Vespa."

Perhaps nothing symbolizes Venice more than the slender black boats that ply its waterways and the gondoliers who propel them. While a gondola ride does involve being floated through narrow canals, past

has it that standing and seeing where you are going is the rowing of free men, while paddling seated and going backward is the lot of slaves.

Various travel agencies arrange group classes in gondoliering for tourists, but the teachers can be of poor quality and the instruction so hurried that it seems the whole point is to part you from your money as swiftly as possible. A vastly better route is to take lessons from one of Venice's rowing clubs. The clubs are part of the city's dazzle, much like the krewes responsible for New Orleans's Mardi Gras parades and balls. When Venice wants to mark an event, it asks the

an English-speaking instructor with Reale Società Canottieri Francesco Querini, one of the city's oldest clubs.

One Sunday morning in May, I arrived at the club's boat house, an old hangar-like space near the marina that was stacked floor to ceiling with traditional Venetian boats. Mr. Marchetti shook my hand and told me I would be taking part in something Venetians had been doing for centuries. We went out onto the pier and he handed me an oar and mimed how I should hold the paddle and push it. I did this for a few minutes, and then we climbed down a ladder into the sandolo.

We rowed through the rain to a jetty, where an older woman waited beside a man in a suit wearing a wreath of roses on his head. Apparently, she liked to decorate club boats with flowers on holidays. Mr. Marchetti explained that it would not be worth the effort; the weather was so unpleasant, we would not be out for long. Disappointed, she settled for giving us wreaths for our heads.

As we pulled away, I asked whether this happened often.

"It is Italy," Mr. Marchetti said. "We have festivals once or twice a month."

We headed toward Santiago Calatrava's sinuous Constitution Bridge, paddled under it and emerged into the Grand Canal. The water was crowded with vaporettos, water taxis and gondolas. It felt like being in a painting. We passed the train station, slid beneath Rialto Bridge, slipped alongside crumbling palazzos—all the while being photographed by tourists

in every vaporetto and taxi we passed. My strokes became smoother as we rowed, and I felt less and less like a visitor and more like a little bit of Venice belonged to me.

Later that day, I received a lesson from Jane Caporal, a slender 50-year-old who runs Row Venice, an organization devoted to preserving Venetian rowing. Arranging the lesson took a few brief emails.

Ms. Caporal met me by the side of a narrow canal with her two-person sandolo tied nearby. As she checked my grip and adjusted my stance, having me set one leg farther back—"Better for the back," she said—she explained that Venetian rowing has been fading because motorboats are so popular and video games much more appealing to young people.

Ms. Caporal had me stroke along the canal, one of Venice's least trafficked areas. Here, ordinary life was taking place: laundry drying on balconies; a man walking behind his young son, who was pedaling a yellow tricycle; a middle-aged couple lowering patio furniture onto a boat.

We began weaving through canals. The sun was out and the old stone buildings looked warm and golden. Sometimes my paddle struck the water and I saw small fishes shoot off.

An hour went by, then two. Going down a canal I saw a gondolier with customers approaching. As we neared, he pulled to the side to let me by. When we passed, I looked at him, he looked at me, and I nodded.

► See more photos from Venice at WSJ.com/Travel.

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ancient palazzos and under historic bridges, it is also a thoroughly clichéd activity that inevitably includes a gondolier gabbing on his cellphone and periodic traffic jams with other tourist-laden boats.

But there is a way to experience Venice's waterways without the tourist trappings: Become your own gondolier, by taking lessons in Venetian rowing.

The local style of rowing involves standing and facing the direction the boat is moving (especially useful for tight channels) and differs from punting in that the paddle does not touch bottom. Because this type of rowing is seen as particular to Venice, it has great meaning there. An old saying

clubs to bring out their ornate boats, some almost a century old, deck them in club colors and flags, and promenade them down the Grand Canal.

Nearly all rowing clubs provide lessons to the public, some as cheaply as 10 two-hour lessons for about \$125. The clubs are so well regarded that many professional gondoliers first learned with them, and the instructors are Venetians, most of them lifelong rowers who are deeply concerned with protecting their heritage. Arranging lessons from abroad can be challenging thanks to time differences, language barriers and the fact that day-to-day operations are run by members. But the concierge at my hotel, Splendid Venice, managed to book



THE LOWDOWN: VENICE

Getting There: Several airlines fly directly from the East Coast to Venice Marco Polo Airport.

Staying There: Splendid Venice is a quiet, recently renovated four-star hotel between Piazza San Marco and Rialto Bridge (from about \$440 per night, splendidvenice.starhotels.com). Clean and simple, Hotel Antiche Figure is an easy vaporetto ride to most sites (from about \$115 per night, hotelantichefigure.it).

Eating There: Ristorante Biennale, right next to the Grand Canal, offers good, simple food and charges locals and tourists the same prices (Via Giuseppe Caribaldi). Ostaria Il Milion (right), in a



small courtyard across from Marco Polo's home, is magical at night (Campo San Giovanni Grisostomo, ilmilion.com).

Rowing Lessons: Reale Società Canottieri Francesco Querini offers lessons to nonmembers (about \$25 for two-hours, old.canottieriquerini.it). Row Venice provides lessons in English and classes are relatively easy to schedule (about \$75 for two hours, rowvenice.com).

Learning More: Context Travel (context-travel.com) has scholars lead walking tours of Venice; the tour of the Dorsoduro neighborhood takes visitors into gondola-making workshops as well as a rowing club.