

All photos by Laura Morelli



Squero San Trovaso

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The Last Gondola Makers of Venice

In the heyday of the Venetian Republic, some 10,000 gondolas transported dignitaries, merchants, and goods through the crowded canals and lagoons of the water-logged city. Today, only about 400 *gondole* glide through the waterways of Venice, and each year, fewer are turned out by hand. A small group of specialized master boat builders working in historic boatyards now holds the craft—literally—in its hands.



Squero San Trovaso

Historically, the Venetian gondola boatyard, or *squero*, was a family enterprise. Fathers passed on techniques to their sons, who in turn, passed them on to their own sons and grandsons. Each workshop carefully

guarded its own secrets for varnish recipes, types of wood used for the decks, and tools used in specific parts of the production.

Gondola makers, *squerarióli*, formed a tight-knit social group. The boat-making guilds abided by a set of strict codes that governed integral aspects of its members' lives, everything from regulating their apprentices and salaries to dowering their daughters, ministering to their sick, providing for their retired, and burying their dead. Above all, it was expected that a son would follow in his father's footsteps, and pass the torch of the gondola-building tradition to the next generation.

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All photos by Elisabeth Crawford



Capraia's port

Capraia, by Land and Sea

Legend says that when the goddess Venus emerged from the waves of the Tyrrhenian Sea, she dropped her necklace, and those gemstones became the seven islands of the Tuscan Archipelago. Many visitors would declare *Capraia* to be the most stunning of these islands, with its dramatic cliffs, pristine waters, and wild, uninhabited interior.



Forte San Giorgio

While the island is a popular summertime destination for Italians, it still has much to offer during all but perhaps the coldest winter months. I traveled to Capraia in mid-June, when the crowds had not yet peaked, but the weather was still warm enough to enjoy a refreshing dip in the sea.

I arrive by ferry, a three-hour journey from *Livorno*, accompanied partway by a pod of dolphins riding the bow wave. As we disembark, an orange bus waits to shuttle many passengers to lodgings across the bay in Capraia's only village, perched on a hilly promontory dominated by the imposing *Forte San Giorgio*. Others, including myself, are staying at *Albergo Da*

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Venice has 425 licensed gondoliers.

Beppone, a modestly priced hotel located just footsteps from the quay.

Aside from these two areas, *porto* (port) and *paese* (village), the rest of the seven-square-mile island is uninhabited, a nature reserve split down the middle by a crest of mountains, the highest peak rising 1,460 feet above sea level.

With a landscape swathed in Mediterranean *macchia* shrubs, Capraia's backcountry offers a true escape from civilization. Its hiking trails traverse the island, leading to ancient watchtowers, panoramic vistas, and rocky coves at the water's edge.

Natural Beauty

On my first day on Capraia, I embark on a hike to the island's only lake, a pool formed in the crater of an extinct volcano and referred to alternately as *il laghetto* (small lake) and *lo stagnone* (large pond). Beginning in the village's *Piazza Milano*, to the left of the yellow *Chiesa di San Nicola*, the stone path

initially ascends on a gentle incline but soon becomes steeper, narrower, and increasingly more strenuous.

The low brush on either side rises every now and then, creating a tunnel-like canopy of branches overhead. Underfoot, the rocks were pointy and sharp, not having weathered enough traffic to smooth down their surfaces. Occasionally, I catch a glimpse of a lizard sunning itself on one of these stones, slithering into the shade to disappear upon my approach.



Hiking trail

Coming to a crossroads, I turn onto a dirt path that wound up and down hills, climbing higher into the island's desolate hinterland. Having encountered only a couple of other hikers along the way,

the feeling here is of complete isolation—silent except for the sweet chirping of birds and faint

rustle of hidden reptiles.

Eventually, the path flattens out, coarse *macchia* giving way to soft grass and wildflowers. At last, I reached the *laghetto*, which was camouflaged by a swampy carpet of rushes. This, as I later learned, was merely one of its many veils: in spring, the shallow lake may become blanketed with white aquatic buttercups, while other times, its limpid water reflects the ever-changing blues of the sky.

Already over two hours into my hike, I contemplate turning back, but the hill ahead promised views of a sapphire horizon. I climb to the next vantage



Torretta del Bagno

point, where a tiny triangle of sea appeared through the craggy ravine. In the distance, I can clearly see the outline of *Corsica*. Capraia, in fact, lies closer to this French island than to Italy's mainland.

If I had the stamina to continue north a little further, I would find even more breathtaking views from the jagged summit of *Monte Le Penne*. To the south, the trail climbs another peak, *Monte Arpagna*—home to the *Semaforo*, a rusty iron structure that was once used as a lookout point by the Italian Navy—before coming to an end at the watchtower *Torre dello Zenobito* on Capraia's southernmost promontory.

On my return hike from the lake, as the distant village come into view, I spy *Forte San Giorgio* directly ahead atop its massive fortification walls.

How to Get There

Take the Toremar ferry from Livorno's Porto Mediceo. www.toremar.it
Round trip ticket is 42€



The population of Cap

www.dreamofitaly.com April 2014

Like three of the island's four towers, the castle was built in the 16th century by the Genovese to defend against Saracen pirate raids.

A relic of somewhat more recent history is nestled in the hills northwest of the port: the *Colonia Penale Agricola*, closed since 1986. Reachable via a trail starting behind the *Chiesa di Santa Maria Assunta*, the former penal colony's cells and other abandoned buildings stand in a haunting state of disrepair.

Giro dell'Isola

Having now explored Capraia by land, the following day I set out on a *giro dell'isola* to survey the island by sea. An absolute requisite for all visitors, this boat excursion lasted around two hours, circumnavigating the island for a spectacular view of its coastline.

We leave the harbor heading south, the morning sun casts a warm glow along Capraia's eastern coast, where rolling green and brown slopes tumbled down toward rugged sea cliffs. Directly below Forte San Giorgio, at the stone watchtower *Torretta del Bagno*, a group of sunbathers had already gathered on the flat rocks. Nearby, we pass some swimmers in *Cala dello Zurletto*, a cove marked by a tower-like outcropping of rock. (Each of these spots is accessible down a steep, narrow path from the village.)

As we cruise along, our captain points out numerous local and migratory marine birds, including ospreys, European shags, and several species of

seagulls. Colonies of those gulls make their nests on the small islets off the coast, as well as along the sheer cliffs pockmarked by erosion.

Along the southeastern coast, the landscape hints at an impending change of hue—evidence of the volcanic eruptions that gave birth to Capraia nine million years ago. Here, the cliff face revealed striations of dark gray and rust red, with patches of green shrubbery and golden wildflowers dotting the stone ridges like Impressionist brush strokes.



Santa Maria Assunta

Then, just after the Torre dello Zenobito comes into view, we turn the corner into Capraia's most magnificent natural landmark, the *Cala Rossa*. Cliffs of white granite and fire red rock joined along a starkly defined diagonal, plunging dramatically into the clear, turquoise waters below. Amid divers, kayakers, and a handful of other boats in the cove, we lingered awhile in awed silence.



Cala Rossa

Heading north along Capraia's west coast, we passed several caves, including the dark, dank *Grotta della Foca*. After rounding the island's northernmost point by the tiny islets called *Le Formiche*, we reach the ephemeral *Cala della Mortola*.

Beaches and Diving

Capraia's only sandy beach, *La Mortola* typically emerges in June or July,

cloaked in sand or pebbles, depending on the whim of the tide, only to vanish by summer's end. No trails lead to this beach, though many people still come by boat. Ours anchored offshore, so



that we could slip into the clear, buoyant water for a swim.

During the excursion, we spot several Capraia Diving boats, whose recreational scuba diving trips cater to all levels of experience. As

part of the *Parco Nazionale Arcipelago Toscano's* largest marine sanctuary, the sea around Capraia is protected by environmental laws, which serve to preserve its rich, abundant marine life.

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raia is a mere 400 souls.

A gondola has no straight lines or edges, so everything must be formed with hand tools and warped with water and torches made of marsh reeds set ablaze.

Across the city a cadre of specialized artisans—ironsmiths, upholsterers, and makers of everything from oarlocks to hats—supplied their gondola-making colleagues with elaborate passenger compartments (*felze*), engraved prow and stern forks (*ferri*), row locks (*fórcole*), oars, upholstery and other ornaments of steel and brass.

Eventually, the gondola became a status symbol much as an expensive car, with custom fittings and seasonal fabrics. Even after 1562, when authorities banned ostentatious ornamentation and decreed that all but ceremonial gondolas be painted black, some wealthy Venetians chose to pay the fines.

Today as in the past, the craft of the *squerariólo* begins with a wooden frame or template called a *cantier*, sometimes hammered into the dirt floor of the workspace generations earlier. From there, nine different kinds of wood—beech, cherry, elm, fir, larch, lime, mahogany, oak and walnut—are shaped to form the distinctive boat designed to glide through shallow water.

The oak is the most critical, for the planks run the entire length of the boat, about thirty feet. A gondola has no straight lines or edges, so everything must be formed with hand tools and warped with water and torches made of marsh reeds set

ablaze. A special mix of varnish coats the boat and makes it watertight. After some 500 hours of labor, the boat slides down the ramp of the squero and into the canal.

Where to See Gondolas Being Made

Today's remaining gondola makers, and artisans in related trades, cluster in the quiet section of town known as *Dorsoduro*, with a few more scattered across the other sestieri of Venice and its outlying islands.

Visiting these workshops is not the same as visiting a museum or even, let's say, a mask-maker's shop or a glass-making factory, where you are much more likely to leave with a souvenir. It is important to reserve in advance and be respectful of the artisans' time and the important work they are doing in preserving Venice's maritime history.

Operating Squeri

Squero San Trovaso
Dorsoduro, 1097
www.squerosantrovaso.com
info@squerosantrovaso.com

San Trovaso is the city's longest

continually operating squero, documented as far back as the late 1600s. Today it is owned by the city of Venice and operated by a co-op of specialized artisans who make new gondolas and refurbish old ones. The boatyard takes its name from the San Trovaso church that stands alongside of it. An unusual feature is the architecture of the main squero residence, which is more typical of buildings in the mountainous *Cadore* region, the area from which seasoned wood was once shipped for use in constructing gondolas. Group visits may be arranged in advance via the website.

Squero Tramontin

Dorsoduro 1542
www.tramontingondole.it
tramontingondole@alice.it
(39) 041 5237762

While there are a handful of family-owned squeri in Venice and its outlying islands still making and repairing gondolas using modern power tools, the *Tramontin* family has distinguished itself for preserving an essentially handmade process. *Roberto Tramontin* learned the gondola-building trade from his father, *Nedis*, who inherited a family business begun in 1884 on the site of a historic squero. You can appreciate the setting of the squero from the water, but visits should be arranged in advance.



San Trovaso

In 2010, the first woman be

Former Squeri

The famous “*Barbari map*,” an enormous woodcut by *Jacopo de Barbari* dating from 1500, shows an aerial view of Venice that gives us an appreciation of the huge number of squeri in the city at that time. No longer used as boatyards, most of these historic squeri have become residences, storage facilities, and commercial spaces. However, if you know how to spot the characteristic features of the squero—the boathouse open to the canal, and the ramp leading gradually into the waters—you’ll begin to recognize these disused squeri all over town.

The best way to appreciate them is by boat. Look for them along the waterways of *Canareggio* and *Dorsoduro*, and also along the *Zattere*. Here are a couple of notable former squeri that are easy to spot:

Squero Dal Mistro

Corte dei Muti
Canareggio

If you take a boat ride along the *Rio della Sensa*, you can see the ramp leading into the canal from the old *Squero Dal Mistro*. No longer operating as a squero, some of its boats and artifacts have been preserved by the nonprofit organization Arzanà.

Squero ai Servi

Calle delle Pignatte, 1936/d
Canareggio

In existence for some 500 years, the *Squero ai Servi* is no longer making boats. However, you can still recognize the squero from the canal side. Today it is the headquarters of the nonprofit association Arzanà (see page 6), which

seeks to preserve historic Venetian boats.

Makers of Oars and Oarlocks (*Remeri*)

Makers of oars (*remi*) and oarlocks (*fórcole*) were integral partners to the gondola makers, as steering a gondola without the characteristic oarlock would be nearly impossible.



Venetian oarlock

Originally a simple wooden fork, the Venetian *fórcola* evolved over the centuries into a complex, high-precision instrument that allows the gondolier to maneuver the single oar into countless different positions, and easily navigate narrow,

crowded canals by rowing from one side. *Fórcola* makers, or *remeri*, developed as specialized craftspeople apart from the other trades. Today some connoisseurs collect and display these elegant sculptural works as standalone art objects.

Paolo Brandolisio

Castello 4725
www.paolobrandolisio.altervista.org
paolobrandolisio@yahoo.it
(39) 041 5224155

Brandolisio occupies in an evocative old workshop that once belonged to *Giuseppe Carli*, a celebrated Venetian oar maker who passed away in the late 1990s. In addition to standard oars and oarlocks, *Brandolisio* also crafts beautiful wooden sculptures and takes on commissioned work. His studio is located to the east of the *Basilica San Marco*, just a stone’s throw away from the *Piazza San Marco*.

Franco Furlanetto

San Polo, 2768/B
www.ffurlanetto.com

ffranco01@libero.it
(39) 041 5209544

Furlanetto has mastered the sculptural possibilities of this uniquely Venetian form. *Furlanetto* follows traditional methods of carving Venetian oarlocks from seasoned trunks of walnut, cherry, or pear wood, releasing their curvilinear forms and polishing the finished pieces to a high sheen.

Saverio Pastor

Fondamenta Soranzo
Dorsoduro, 341
www.forcole.com
savepastor@libero.it
(39) 041 5225699

At *Saverio Pastor’s* workshop near the Guggenheim Museum, you can not only watch the master work, but you can also purchase a scale model of an authentic *fórcola* (or even a *fórcola* bookmark), or spend much more for a larger-than-life *fórcola* sculpture to display in your home or garden.

Other Gondola Experiences

Gilberto Penzo

Calle Seconda dei Saoneri
San Polo 2651
www.veniceboats.com
veniceboats@gmail.com
(39) 041 5246139

An historian of Venetian boats, *Gilberto Penzo* makes intricate small-scale models of gondolas and other types of historic lagoon boats. His studio is a fascinating jumble of books, documents, boat models, blueprints, and other maritime paraphernalia that any boat enthusiast will appreciate. His *laboratorio* is located between the *Campo San Polo* and the church of the *Frari*. This is a great place to pick up an authentic gondola souvenir, more portably sized.

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came a licensed gondolier.

Many street names in Venice contain the words squero, squeri, remer, felzi or traghetto (ferry station), a potent reminder of the boatbuilding trades that once kept life in the Most Serene Republic gliding along at a steady clip.

Museo Correr

Piazza San Marco, 52
www.correr.visitmuve.it
info@fmcvenezia.it
(39) 041 2405211

Years ago several gondola prow forks, dating probably from the 1600s, were pulled from the canal waters. You can admire their beautiful curvilinear profiles at one of the main civic museums of Venice, the *Museo Correr*. This intriguing museum began with the private collection of *Teodoro Correr*, a member of an old Venetian family and a passionate collector of Venetian historical objects—everything from paintings to coins, nautical instruments, arms and armor, and other fascinating miscellanea.

Museo Storico Navale

Castello 2148
www.bit.ly/mccorrer
(39) 041 2441399

In addition to impressive collections related to the history of the Venetian state shipyard, the *Arsenale*, this maritime museum also includes a gallery dedicated to the history of the gondola. It displays the gondola that Peggy Guggenheim used as her preferred mode of transportation around the city.

Church of San Trovaso

Dorsoduro

Inside the Church of San Trovaso stands an altar completed in 1628 and

dedicated to the gondola makers' guild. If you look carefully you will see a carved image of a gondola, complete with its prow forks (*ferri*) and passenger compartment (*felze*).

Arzana

Calle delle Pignatte, 1936/d
Canareggio
www.arzana.org
associazionearzana@gmail.com

Arzana is a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation and restoration of historic Venetian boats, including gondolas. They have a fascinating collection of boats and gondola fittings, including oarlocks, ropes, oars, upholstery, *ferri* and other vestiges. The offices and collections are not open to the public on a regular basis, but private visits may be arranged in advance by email.

El Fèlze

www.elfelze.org
info@elfelze.org

Founded in 2002 by the oarmaker Saverio Pastor, *El Fèlze* is an association of artisans involved in the various gondola-making trades. Although they do not have an office open to the public, *El Fèlze* can provide information and help facilitate visits to specific studios.

Opportunities to See Historic Gondolas

Feast of the Redeemer (Il Redentore)
Third Sunday in July

This procession of the city's historic gondolas commemorates the end of a plague epidemic that struck Venice in the 16th century. The boats and their rowers parade through the canals bedecked in finery, and it's a great chance to see a large number of historic lagoon craft.

Regatta (Regatta Storica)

First Sunday in September

This popular race includes four categories of rowers—youths, women, rowers of a canoe-like craft called a *caorlina*, and gondoliers. Prior to the race you can watch a procession of historic gondolas with rowers dressed in Renaissance costume.

Finally, as you wend your way through the narrow alleys of Venice, keep your eyes out for street signs that recall the historic locations of gondola-makers and their related tradesmen. Many street names in Venice contain the words *squero, squeri, remer, felzi* or *traghetto* (ferry station), a potent reminder of the boatbuilding trades that once kept life in the Most Serene Republic gliding along at a steady clip.

—Laura Morelli

Laura Morelli is an art historian and the author of Made in Italy. Her latest book, a work of historical fiction set in 16th-century Venice, is entitled The Gondola Maker. Find out more at www.lauramorelli.com

1€ = \$1.38 at press time

Gondolas are composed

Divers will encounter a variety of fish, including barracudas, scorpion fish, and John Dory. The reefs offshore provide shelter for moray eels and spiny spider crabs, and are home to plenty of colorful corals, sponges, and sea urchins.

As I tour the island's perimeter, it became clear that land access to the sea is fairly limited. Some coves require a long trek down to sea level; others, like La Mortola, can be reached only by rented boat or *barca taxi* (both available in the port).

Only one beach is easily accessible from the village: *La Grotta*. Located across from the harbor below the resort *La Mandola*, this rocky bathing area sits atop a wooden platform and is fully equipped with umbrellas, lounge chairs, and snack bar, its shallows protected by a short breakwater.

Of course, a day by the sea must conclude with a meal of freshly caught seafood, and there is no better place than *Ristorante Al Vecchio Scorfano*. Overlooking the harbor, this restaurant has been run by the same family for three generations. On my first evening, I ordered their signature dish, *zuppa di pesce* (fish soup). In a style unique to Capraia, it was served in two dishes: a bowl of savory tomato broth with

toasted garlic bread and a platter containing mussels, clams, calamari,

octopus, langoustines, and an assortment of fish that naturally included *scorfano* (scorpionfish).

Other house specialties are *bocconi di rana pescatrice*

(monkfish rolled in speck), *risotto al nero di seppia* (cuttlefish ink risotto), *spaghetti con scampi e limone* (spaghetti with langoustines and lemon), and *garganelli al ragù di polpo rosso* (pasta with octopus ragù).

My final day arrives with that sense of poignancy that often accompanies the end of a journey, the realization that no amount of time is ever adequate. From the

wild inland terrain to the sea's crystal depths, there was still plenty more to be discovered. As my ferry pulls out of port, on its way back to the mainland, I gaze longingly at Capraia's retreating silhouette—and keep my eyes peeled for those dolphins.

—Elisabeth Antoine Crawford

Elisabeth Antoine Crawford wrote about the island of Elba in the May 2011 issue of Dream of Italy. A former modern dancer and Pilates instructor, she is also the author of Flavors of Friuli: A Culinary Journey through Northeastern Italy. Read her blog at www.FlavorsofFriuli-blog.com



Al Vecchio Scorfano

What to Do

Giro dell'Isola

Rais Dragut II

Via Umberto I, 29

(39) 345 4104238

www.raisdragut.it

Excursions year round.

Two-hour trip is 20 to 25€.

Capraia Diving Service

Via Assunzione, 100

(39) 0586 905137

www.capraia diving.it

Open year round.

Introductory lesson 80€; week-long beginning course is 390€.



Spiaggia La Grotta

Where to Stay

MAX Resort La Mandola

Via della Mandola, 1

(39) 0586 905300

www.maxhotels.it/max-resort-la-mandola

Open Easter through early October.

Rates: Standard double rooms

80 to 190€, with breakfast.

Hotel Il Saracino

Via Lamberto Cibo, 30

(39) 0586 905018

www.hotelsaracino.com

Open May through September.

Rates: Double rooms 100 to 160€, with breakfast.

Residence La Vela

Via Genova, 46

(39) 0586 905098

www.residencelavela.it

Open March through November.

Rates: Double rooms 80 to 95€.

Albergo Da Beppone

Via Assunzione, 68

(39) 0586 905001

www.dabeppone.it

Open March through December.

Rates: Double rooms, 60 to 95€, with breakfast.

While hotel rooms are limited, many apartments are available to rent. Contact the following agencies:

Agenzia Viaggi Parco

(39) 0586 905071

www.isoladicapraia.it

They also handle boat rentals and the barca taxi service.

Agenzia Della Rosa

(39) 0586 905266

www.capraia vacanze.it

Where to Eat

Ristorante Al Vecchio Scorfano

Via Assunzione, 44

(39) 0586 905132

www.ristorantecapraiaalvecchioscorfano.it

Open daily mid-March through October.

of 280 individual pieces.

7 Quick Tips for A Better Italy Trip

Editor's Note: After writing about Italy full-time for nearly 12 years (and helping numerous people plan their trips), I've learned a thing or two about how to make an already good trip a great one. Here are seven ideas for making your next journey to Italy more interesting and relaxing:

Ask a local.

Want to know the best place to eat or any local must-sees (a food producer or local museum)? Ask a shop keeper, taxi driver or just someone walking down the street where you should go. The result might direct you to a hidden treasure. Hotel concierges don't quite fall in this category as they usually receive a commission for recommendations.

Go into that church.

You can become blinded to the number of churches you pass while visiting Italy; after all, there are 26,000 across the country. But every so often, just pop into one. The art is usually unparalleled, there's always a story behind the founding of the building and there's a good chance you will find interesting relics from saint's blood to the bones of the martyred. Plus, as my mother always says, you get to make a wish every time you enter a church for the first time.

Be prepared with GPS.

If you're driving in Italy, you need to either use the GPS function on your smartphone or rent a GPS device from your car rental agency. There's just no

question that it comes in handy. But here's the flip side, don't be surprised, as it has happened to me on some country roads, that the GPS is wrong which is why you should...

Leave enough time to get there.

I've heard it more than once — travelers missing a tour or a much-anticipated visit to a site because they arrived there too late. While traveling in Italy, make it a rule of thumb to leave extra time (maybe 25



erikwestrum, flickr.com

Country road in Tuscany



Teatro di San Carlo, Naples



Credit: David Chimer, flickr.com

Villa Borghese, Rome

to 30% over the estimated travel time) to get where you are going. This is especially true when you are traveling between vineyards for wine tasting as some of traveling some of the country roads takes longer than you imagine.

Explore local products.

Before you head to Italy, research the food and crafts made in the cities and regions where you are going. (Since

this is one of our favorite things in the pages of *Dream of Italy*, start with our archive). Find out where you can see these items being produced and book a visit or tour. Whether it is ceramics in *Deruta* or licorice in *Calabria*, these hand-crafted delights can teach you much about the history and culture of the area you are visiting.

Add in some live music.

Italy should have a soundtrack. Well, it already does. There is beautiful music being made all over the country and to come to Italy without hearing some might considered a crime. Take in an opera or a classical music performance — sure, it is great to see one in a big, famous venue, but even a local performance (and the passion of the Italians performing) will knock your socks off...

Build in quiet time.

It is so tempting to feel like you need to go, go, go when you're visiting Italy, but take a page from the Italians and learn the art of *dolce far niente* which means "sweet doing nothing" or "carefree idleness." Visit one of Italy's beautiful parks (*Villa Borghese* is a must in Rome) or buy some picnic supplies and find a spot of grass on a Tuscan hillside where you can sit on the grass and take in a stunning vista. Being in Italy is just as much about stopping and taking a deep breath (literally and figuratively) as it is checking the next must-see off the list.



Buon viaggio!

46 million people visit Italy each year.