

quaderni delle regaste

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Regaste is an old Veronese term for a tract of the Adige riverbank
that has been built up and is protected by a wall.
From the Regaste one has an excellent view of the city.

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DONATELLA CALABI

THE RIALTO, VENICE'S ISLAND
MARKET

A walk through art and history

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CIERRE EDIZIONI

Translator's note

Venice's unique network of alleyways (*calle/calli*) and squares-that-were-once-fields (*campo/campi*) have no equivalent in English and so, particularly when dealing with place names, I have used the Italian (or Venetian) original, not least as it makes finding one's way around this labyrinthine city a little easier. While getting lost is always a pleasure in Venice, nonetheless a guide book should at least attempt to do what it says on the cover. In similar vein *palazzo* does not really translate as 'palace'. Other terms which are easily understandable in English — such as *campanile* — have also been retained, and churches generally keep their Venetian names.

PD Venice, June 2021

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THE OPPOSITE BANK OF THE GRAND CANAL
(THE SAN MARCO SIDE)

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DONATELLA CALABI
THE RIALTO

To my favourite collaborator: Nicolò
and to my promising future helpers: Olivia,
Leo and Giorgio
Here's to the joy of strolling through art,
history and . . .
cicheti . . .
together, and as soon as possible!



1. Awning shading the Pescheria, spray-painted with an impassioned plea from market workers, 'the heart is not for sale'. The heart referred to is the Rialto itself as noted by Salvatore Settis in 2014, at the Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista, on the launch of his book *If Venice Dies*.

Foreword

The island known as the Rialto, made up of canals, alleyways, open spaces, quays and buildings appropriate to a working market, does not have the profile of a traditional tourist destination. Guide-books necessarily include the highlights: the iconic Rialto Bridge (the classic postcard view of Venice sent in its millions across the world), the huge sixteenth-century building fronting the Grand Canal known as the Fabbriche Nuove — until recently serving as Venice’s civil and criminal courts — as well as the ‘little’ church of San Giacomo said to be the oldest in the city, emblem of its legendary origins. But as is so often the case with historic cities, the visitor is steered towards the major heritage sites, buildings designed by great architects, important art collections and other cultural must-sees.

In Venice, the sheer quantity of palazzi, public and private, of churches and museums is simply staggering, encompassing a vast range of different historical periods, both in the centre and on outlying islands. There are centuries-old travellers’ accounts — those well-heeled milords for whom Venice was a key stop on the Grand Tour, and even earlier. There is the romantic city of popular imagination, focusing largely on spectacle and artifice, whether Byzantine architecture or decadent theatrical guise. More recently the city has become a film-location staple where St Mark’s Square or the Grand Canal are hi-jacked for their instantly recognisable charm, serving merely as a backdrop to the action in which our super-hero leaps insouciantly from the roof of the Doge’s Palace on to a waiting motorboat, or sprints across an atmospheric campo complete with dilapidated church and crumbling bell tower. To further adulterate the legacy, TV documentaries use cunning camera angles to present a city made up solely of gondolas captured in the red glow of sunset, a city whose culture is seemingly based entirely on Vivaldi, Goldoni, Thomas Mann and . . . carnival masks.

As a result, Venice's thousand-year history as a trading powerhouse for everyday and exotic goods — whether from close by or the far side of the earth — that for centuries has attracted travellers from across the globe leading to encounters between people of the most diverse origins, has been relegated to academic study rather than stimulating popular interest and curiosity.

However, despite the herds of tourists clustered around listless tour guides — complete with lacklustre flags — the Rialto is worth visiting. It is still possible to make new discoveries here, still possible to meet skilled craftsmen practised in age-old techniques, the living embodiment of an artisan culture that has been taken up and embraced by succeeding generations.

What follows in these pages is a series of walks of discovery, starting with an account of how it is now — or at least how it was at the start of 2020 — looking at the arduous daily lives of those who have resisted the assault of mass tourism, including the often unthinking conversion of ancient buildings into tourist accommodation, and who instead continue to offer high-quality food, mostly linked to local traditions (fig. 1).

With the arrival of Covid-19 in March 2020, and the consequent safety and distancing measures imposed by both national and local government, the look and feel of the Rialto rapidly changed, to the extent that some of the open spaces described within these pages felt 'empty' in a way that was almost disorientating (fig. 2). Equally unsettling were those areas fenced off to comply with health protocols, both for market workers and their customers. The research for this book began long before the pandemic arrived to disrupt all our lives. Undaunted, we decided to carry on because what we wanted to say had become, if anything, more relevant than ever. We resolved to view the emergency as a blip, a short if dark parenthesis in the long life of the city. As a result, this guide is fired by the hope that it could actually help by making us reflect more consciously on how to revitalise — or relaunch — some of the places most beloved by Venetians. This aspiration is central to a much-needed review of strategic planning for Venice, that of an economy no longer based on the monoculture of tourism.

This book seeks to trace the role of the Rialto in the life of the city. It explores those trades that have evolved and thrived over the



2. Calle degli Spezieri (Spice Row) in April 2020. Customers queue to enter a grocery shop following 'social distancing' measures taken by the government to prevent the spread of Covid 19.

last thousand years, seeking to address the problem of bringing in jobs compatible with the island's fragile eco-system, its residents and their everyday needs.

We will examine how the Rialto has functioned over the centuries, looking at the unsung backwaters and unlisted buildings, keeping in sight the complexities of city life, the interweaving of passageways, the overlapping of crafts and trades, the difficulties inherent in living in such close proximity, and the constraints imposed by those ancient magistracies who designated the Rialto the 'heart' of the city, which it is still felt to be, both by its residents and its workers. While descriptions of the Rialto's architectural riches and cultural treasures are included within these pages, this is not simply a guide to historically important monuments. However, the location of both is shown in the plan printed on the inner flap corresponding to the numbers in the text.