

THE METAMORPHOSIS OF VENICE

The fortunes of the world's oldest city are on the rise. Thanks to a wave of new cultural spaces and luxury hotels, there's never been a better time to experience the Water City beyond the Biennale.

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In 2019, Venice experienced one of its worst floods on record. The high tide peaked at more than 6 feet, leaving more than 80 percent of the city submerged and resulting in an estimated 1 billion euros in damage to homes, shops and historic sites.

At the time, it seemed those who had been catastrophising about the lagoon city's grim future were right. On top of the environmental disaster, the government was already grappling with the headache of low-quality tourism, driven by cheap flights and cruise ships, with fears that Venice was becoming a "Disneyland on Sea".

But fast forward to 2026: a new tourist tax, MOSE flood defence system and an influx of new cultural spaces are changing the Lagoon City's reputation.

Of the millions of tourists Venice welcomes each year, the culture crowd has historically been concentrated into the seven months of the Biennale – the preeminent global art showcase, which opened in May. Today, however, a new cohort of collectors,

philanthropists and entrepreneurs has inaugurated museums and foundations with year-round programming.

Recent openings include institutions like SMAC (San Marco Arts Centre), Ama Venezia and foundations from sculptor Anish Kapoor and fashion designer Dries Van Noten. These figures join a lineage of collectors such as Peggy Guggenheim, François Pinault and Miuccia Prada who have all added their mark to the water city, fostering a dialogue between past and present.

Over in hospitality, too, a record number of new hotels is arriving this year, with architects having overcome the city's notoriously strict logistical and bureaucratic constraints to create modern masterpieces fit to weather the next century and beyond.

We were told that Venice was sinking, both literally and metaphorically, it seems an awful lot of people might disagree. Here's our guide to experiencing the best of the city right now.

EXHIBITIONS AND CULTURAL SPACES

The best new shows and art spaces to have on your Venice itinerary.

FOUNDATION DRIES VAN NOTEN

Since stepping back from his namesake brand after 40 years at the helm, Van Noten announced last year his next act would be running an arts foundation within Venice's Palazzo Pisani Moretta. Debuting in May, the inaugural exhibition, *The Only True Protest is Beauty*, is a dialogue of more than 200 objects – from garments to design and ceramics to glasswork – connecting different disciplines through craft.

FONDAZIONE SANDRETTO RE REBAUDENGO

Another 2026 high-profile opening comes from renowned Italian art collector Patrizia Sandretto Re Rebaudengo, who unveiled her second contemporary art foundation on Venice's Island of San Giacomo in Paludo in May. The new foundation hosts exhibitions, an artist-in-residence programme and site-specific installations, including sculptor Hugh Hayden's dramatic 40-degree slanted Huff and Puff Chapel.

ALCHEMICAL UNIVERSE, PALAZZO SORANZO VAN AXEL

Chinese lacquer artist Su Xiaobai has long been a fixture of art fairs across Asia thanks to representation by Pearl Lam Projects. This year, however, the artist gets the spotlight in Venice with a career-defining show at the Palazzo Soranzo Van Axel in Cannaregio. Curated by the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's Stephen Little, it brings together 35 works spanning two decades of practice.

AMA VENEZIA

Prolific Belgian collector Laurent Asscher opened Ama Venezia in 2025, a new 1,000-square-metre contemporary art space in a restored soap factory in Cannaregio. The current show, *Aura*, coincides with the Venice Biennale and features site specific works from the likes of Jenny Saville, Ed Ruscha and Tino Sehgal.



BIENNALE HIGHLIGHTS

Centred on this year's theme of 'In Minor Keys' and with 80 countries participating, the 2026 Biennale runs until November 22. The following are our picks for the best national pavilions to see.

AUSTRIAN PAVILION

Undoubtedly the most talked about showcase of the year is Austrian artist and choreographer Florentina Holzinger's *Seaworld Venice*. Featuring portable loos draining into tanks with scuba divers, nude jet-ski riders and a performance artist dangling as the clapper of a giant church bell, this extraordinary spectacle tackles themes of climate catastrophe and over tourism.

JAPAN PAVILION

Takahashi Mizuki, named *Prestige's* woman of Power in 2023, co-curates this year's Japan Pavilion which presents, *Grass Babies*, *Moon Babies* by artist Ei Arakawa Nash. Inspired by Nash's recent experience of becoming a father to twins, visitors are invited to carry a replica of a four-month-old baby around the installation, examining the emotional labour of caregiving.

HOLY SEE PAVILION

Patti Smith, Brian Eno and FKA Twigs – punk rock, electronica and pop stars, respectively – aren't the typical Venice Biennale collaborators. The musicians participate in the Vatican's pavilion curated by Hans Ulrich Obrist. Visitors to the city's Giardini Mistico are given headphones and invited to walk in nature while listening to sound bites from a diverse mix of artists inspired by 12th century mystic and composer Hildegard von Bingen.

HONG KONG PAVILION

Titled *Fermata: Hong Kong in Venice*, this year's pavilion is curated by the Hong Kong Museum of Art and features five installations by local artists Kingsley Ng and Angel Hui. Centring on Fermata, a musical symbol meaning pause, the show invites viewers to slow down and notice the quiet rhythms of daily life.



Installation view
of the Japan
Pavilion's Grass
Babies, Moon Babies

STAY

2026 is shaping up to be a record year for hotel openings in Venice with a spate of new properties set to rival the Belmond's Hotel Cipriani, Venice; The Gritti Palace and Aman Venice, which long held the titles of the city's best luxury stays. Hot openings from Airelles Palladio, Venice and Orient Express Venezia will be joined by Rosewood Hotel Bauer and Danieli, Venezia, A Four Seasons Hotel later this year. 2027 will also see The Langham open a 133-room property on Murano.



This page and above:
inside the new
Airelles Palladio



Installation view
of Florentina
Holzinger's
Seaworld Venice

*We were told that Venice was sinking –
both literally and metaphorically – it seems
an awful lot of people might disagree*

*Clockwise from right:
The Venice Venice Hotel;
Vino Vero wine bar;
All'Arco snack bar*



VENICE VENICE HOTEL

Dries isn't the only fashion designer looking to cement his legacy in the City of Canals. In 2022, Francesca Rinaldo and Alessandro Gallo – founders of Italian apparel label Golden Goose – threw their hats into the hospitality ring with the opening of The Venice Venice Hotel. The ultra-contemporary 43-room property is located in the renovated Palazzo Ca' Da Mosto, one of the oldest buildings along the Grand Canal. For the project, the entrepreneurs balanced restoration with experimentation – in what they've dubbed 'Post-Venetian style' – reflecting the forward-thinking and innovative Venetian spirit. Eclectic yet high-end art and design furnishings deck out the suites, of which no two are alike. Some boast balconies overlooking the Grand Canal, and one has a private indoor pool. Breakfast through dinner is served on the canal-side terrace; but for late-night drinks, guests should head to the private members' The Venice Bitter Club, an invite to which might be the city's most coveted.



*A view of the city
from the Venice
Venice hotel rooftop*



*The façade of trattoria
La Colonna*



CA' PISANI

The first Venetian hotel to eschew typical furnishings of Murano glass and heavy Rubelli fabrics, Ca' Pisani was a welcome breath of modernity when it first opened in 2000. Following a subtle renovation in 2024 by the new owners, Planetaria hotel group, the 29-room property remains a favourite among the art and design crowd seeking lodging without the fuss, frills and fandango of the city's other luxury stays. Situated in the Dorsoduro district in an old merchant townhouse, Ca' Pisani features clean and contemporary décor, melding art deco furnishings, retro colours and walnut bed frames. The hotel also boasts one of the city's loveliest rooftop terraces, from where you can glimpse the nearby Peggy Guggenheim Collection.

EAT AND DRINK

While change is certainly afoot in Venice, some things – like the allure of the city's best traditional trattorias, charming wine bars and grand cocktail bars – never change.

ART CAFÉ VENEZIA

In the quiet Campo Santa Maria Nova, Art Café Venezia is the perfect resting spot for a morning coffee overlooking the Santa Maria dei Miracoli – the white-marbled Renaissance church every architecture lover should have on their list.

ALL'ARCO

Cicchetti is to Venice what pizza is to Naples, or cannoli to Sicily. This watering hole in San Polo has long been a favourite among visitors looking to sample the Venetian snack. And if you've never associated speed and efficiency with Italy, come here to be proven wrong.

TRATTORIA LA COLONNA

Recognised for the thick green vines that decorate its façade, La Colonna is a much-loved traditional Venetian trattoria specialising in seafood pastas. With both indoor and outdoor seating, it's an all-year-round spot that locals keep coming back to.

OSTERIA AL MILION

This charming tavern-style restaurant, clad with wooden chairs and gingham tablecloths, holds a special place in the hearts of true Venetians. Tucked away on a quiet square near the Rialto Bridge, it claims to be the city's oldest family-run establishment.

VINO VERO

In a city practically drowning in wine bars, what makes VINO VERO stand out is that it feels like a true local secret. Crowds mingle at the bar or spill out onto the canal-side banks to sample natural and biodynamic vinos from the rotating wine list.

HARRY'S BAR

No visit to Venice would be complete without a drink at Harry's Bar, which is now a government-declared national landmark. With past regulars such as Ernest Hemingway and Peggy Guggenheim, today the 1930s haunt is run by wait staff in bow ties who serve the drink it's famous for inventing: the Bellini, alongside gleaming green olives.

THE RIVA LOUNGE

With its prime position on the Grand Canal, the Riva Lounge at The Gritti Palace is possibly the city's most photogenic spot for sundowners. Famous for its Martini trolley, or the vermouth-heavy Gritti Special, drinking in Venice doesn't get better than this.

EXPERIMENTAL COCKTAIL CLUB

With locations in the world's coolest cities, it was only a matter of time before speakeasy Experimental Club turned its sights to Venice, opening in Dorsoduro in 2019. A hidden entrance door inside Il Palazzo Experimental hotel leads to the intimate, jewel-hued bar where you'll find creative concoctions made with local ingredients. 📍



*Above and left:
The Experimental
Cocktail Club Venice*

KAREL BALAS