

Voga alla Veneta – Jon Gerrard. Photos Jon Gerrard and Lucy Hyde

When Boatie Blest travelled to Venice in 2014 to take part alongside some twelve hundred other boats in the Vogalonga – an annual thirty-kilometre trip around the Venetian Lagoon in human-powered craft - we were fascinated to see how many people were taking part rowing in the traditional Venetian style, *voga alla veneta*: standing up, facing forwards and pushing the oar or oars away from the body. Wouldn't it be great to have a go, we thought.

So it is that on our next trip to Venice in June this year, my partner Lucy and I find ourselves waiting outside the Sacca Misericordia marina on the northwest side of the city, waiting for a rowing lesson from Row Venice, a non-profit organisation dedicated to the traditional Venetian water culture.

We are met by our instructor, Nausicaa, a twenty-something from Sant'Erasmus, one of Venice's outlying islands. She asks if we have rowed before, "maybe sitting down, looking the wrong way, no?" We laugh and say yes, we have.

"OK, good," she says, "Forget everything. It's totally different", and leads us to the canal side.

Our wooden boat is new but of a traditional style, a *batellina coda di gambero* or shrimp-tail, named for its up-curving stern. Now rare, this was once one of the most popular styles in the city, used for transport of both people and goods and easily spotted in paintings by Canaletto and other Venetian masters. It is long, curving elegantly, tapering at both ends, relatively flat-bottomed and varnished to a rich sheen. If the gondola is the swan of Venice's boats, stately and splendid in its sedate progress through the canals, this is perhaps a mallard: smaller and sturdy, less concerned with its own magnificence, but still with its own cheeky charm and very much at home in this city.



Batellina coda di gambero in a painting by Canaletto

Nausicaa shows us how to stand: inside foot forward, weight even. Move forward or backward of the *forcola* to adjust for ease or power. Push out to take a stroke, then extract, feather and rock back to recover for the next catch. We will be rowing as a pair at first, Nausicaa at the stern rowing and steering while Lucy and I take turns in the bow attempting to get the hang of the strange technique.



There is no oarlock but rather, slotted into a hole in the gunwale, a *forcola*, carved by hand by a master *forcolaio* from a single piece of walnut and arguably a beautiful work of art in itself. The *forcola*, developed over many centuries, is essential to Venetian rowing. In solo rowing the oar may be used in at least seven positions, held against the various notches and elbows of the *forcola* to manoeuvre the boat forwards, backwards, sideways or in rotation. Ideally, both oar and *forcola* are unique to each rower, allowing for their height, weight, style and the side of the boat on which they usually row.

Left: simple port-side forcola for rowing. Right: starboard-side forcola for rowing in pair (lower notch) or solo (upper notch)

The oar is not secured in place and so can be quickly slid in to the boat when needed to avoid other boats, mooring posts, buildings or the knees of bar customers sitting on the canalside. It pays to be crisp with catch and extraction too as any backward pressure from moving water against the oar can easily dislodge it from its *forcola*, as we will soon discover.



In the canals: oar pulled in at narrow passage, Nausicaa pushing off with foot

A few practice strokes and we're off along Rio della Madonna dell'Orto, quickly adjusting to the stroke. It's not too hard after all once we've got the hang of the attention required to stop the oar popping out of the *forcola* and we're soon gliding happily along. Our apartment is in this district, so we are familiar with the paths and canals, but the perspective from the boat and the feeling of slipping through the silvery-green water of this most beautiful of cities is quite unlike walking. Then, too, there are canals bounded not by walkways but only by buildings, inaccessible except by water. Venice is a city of two networks superimposed: land and water, the two overlapping, crossing and meeting in some places, but distinct in others; so this chance to explore by water seems an important one to take up.

We pass other boats: rowing boats similar to ours with one or two rowers; the omnipresent modern Venetian tin-bath-with-an-outboard; the bin boat; even a gondola, black and glossy, surprising in this district tucked away from the main tourist sites. Passing is to port and before turning a blind corner Nausicaa lets out an "Oh-eh!" call which has surely been heard a great many times around here over the last few hundred years. From time to time she uses her feet to push off from buildings, as we have seen *gondolieri* do elsewhere.

Before long we emerge from the busy but untroubled waters of the canal into the open Lagoon. The difference is immediately noticeable: there are more delivery boats and taxis, released from the canal speed limit, sending their bow-waves to add to the slight swell and wind-chased chop and setting our little *batellina* rolling and pitching. It is now that we first really notice that we are less stable standing up and start to think what might happen if we were to topple over the side, especially as we have no buoyancy aid. In reality, with the average depth of the Lagoon being a mere one metre, we could probably just stand up with our heads clear of the surface and wait to be pulled back into the boat.

We've obviously rowed well enough to this point to convince Nausicaa we can be allowed to try rowing solo rather than heading straight back into the canal system to continue rowing in pairs through the calmer ways of the city. Solo rowing is much more complex than what we have been doing and depends on two things: the distinctive figure-eight stroke of the gondolier, the oar staying at all times in the water; plus the special attributes of the Venetian oar itself.

The oar is curved in section like an aircraft wing, with one flat face and one which curves steeply at the leading edge then tapers to the trailing edge (this means that looking at an oar you can tell whether it is to be used on the port or starboard side of the boat). When the blade is left in the water during the recovery, the water is forced to flow more quickly around the curved side than around the flat side, creating a pressure difference which may be used to steer the boat and, when rowing solo, to correct the natural tendency to veer to port caused by rowing only on the starboard side of the boat.

In theory this sounds simple. Watching Nausicaa or a gondolier casually doing it with one hand while texting, it looks very simple. In practice, however, it is baffling. The forward stroke is fine: we've managed to get the boat here after all. The steering recovery though; keeping the oar in its notch while twisting it to direct the



Lucy with Nausicaa, attempting to row solo

boat, simultaneously pushing the oar onto the *forcola* while allowing it to move forward through the water for the next stroke, is another matter. I step up onto the platform at the stern of the boat, more aware than ever of the water's movement, Nausicaa in front of me and below, both our hands on the oar. She takes me through the movement: "This... this... like this... yes. No. This... yes" At times I feel I'm getting it: the boat is steady, keeps pointing towards the church spire I'm aiming at, and moves forward. Then, suddenly, it's gone: my wrist turns the wrong way, the water treacherously dislodges the oar from the

forcola and the boat is twisting in the tide. We each take our turn trying solo, with similar results. "Don't worry," says Nausicaa, "You won't learn in five minutes. Normally takes ten lessons". We feel reassured.

All too soon it is time to return to pairs rowing, make our way back into the city and return to our meeting point. We take a different route home, under bridges and along one-way canals with signs indicating they are open to rowing boats only, at one point ducking under a line of washing strung up to dry across the water. Nausicaa points out a bar we may like to visit later for some of their own-brew beer or an *ombra* – a small glass of local wine. A final corner, a last "Oh-eh!" and we are back at the Sacco where we started an hour ago: excited, exhilarated and with a new respect for the skills of the *gondolieri* and the other rowers who pilot these beautiful boats around the city.



Rowing boats only

Back on land and before goodbyes follow thanks, Nausicaa tells us there is a regatta off her home island of Sant'Erasmus at the weekend: we should go to see the racing. Sadly we will be gone by then; maybe next time.