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Venice Sinks Amid Monster Cruise Ships, Kitchen Ads: Manuela Hoelterhoff

By Manuela Hoelterhoff - Jun 11, 2011 5:01 AM GMT+0100

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As I talk to Anna Somers Cocks on a terrace overlooking a trio of 16th-century churches by Andrea Palladio, a cruise ship the size of a [New York](#) City block floats surreally through the Giudecca Canal right in front of us.

So big are these ships, they could serve Moby Dick for lunch in one sitting as they slowly move toward the Lido and beyond.

A few passengers wave boisterously in our direction, without falling overboard, however. Others shoot hoops in the glassed-in basketball court glittering high above the deck.

Somers Cocks is chairman of British charity [Venice in Peril](#) and the editorial founder of the Art Newspaper, an influential monthly covering the visual arts.

We were both in Venice to attend the Biennale, where she presided over “Real Venice,” an exhibition of photographs designed to raise money for a town that has too much water.

The show, featuring donated photographs by such prominent artists as Candida Hofer, Philip-Lorca diCorcia and Matthias Schaller, is on view at the basilica of San Giorgio Maggiore, which just then was obscured by the monster boat.



A massive Mediterranean cruise ship dwarfs the delicate fabric of the city in the Giudecca Canal, Venice.

Photographer: Marilyn Perry via Bloomberg



A cruise ship in the Giudecca Canal, Venice. The size and numbers of these monster ships have sparked outrage

and fear. Photographer:
Marilyn Perry via Bloomberg



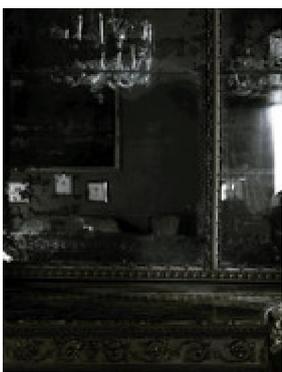
Anna Somers Cocks, chairman of the British charity Venice in Peril. Source: Venice in Peril via Bloomberg



The Sansovino Library obliterated by a car ad in Venice, opposite the Doge's Palace in St. Mark's Square. Photographer: Marilyn Perry via Bloomberg



The Bridge of Sighs in Venice. "I stood in Venice on the Bridge of Sighs, a palace and a prison on each hand," wrote Lord Byron in his poem "Childe Harold's Pilgrimage." Now a kitchen ad separates the Doge's Palace from the dungeon. Photographer: Manuela Hoelterhoff/Bloomberg



Scary Thought

Hoelterhoff: That's one scary sight. If that tug leading it gives out?

Somers Cocks: Goodbye, San Giorgio! The motors are idling, but, even so, these ships displace a vast amount of water into the surrounding canals, which then rushes out. It's hard to think this doesn't affect the foundations of the buildings.

Hoelterhoff: I have never seen so many people stepping over each other in St. Mark's Square. What's the latest statistic on annual visitors?

Somers Cocks: [Venice](#) has 17.5 million visitors, counting [cruise ships](#). But only about four million actually sleep in Venice. The rest come for the day or stay on the boats and spend little money.

Hoelterhoff: Maybe Venice could charge admission like Disneyland?

Somers Cocks: It's entirely doable for groups, which should have to book for a certain day. There are about seven entry points into Venice.

There should be a charge which would go entirely toward financing its protection against the water.

Hoelterhoff: So is the city still sinking?

Still Sinking

Somers Cocks: The mean water level is about 11 inches higher than it was in 1897, when they started measuring from a fixed point by the Punta della Dogana.

This is partly due to a rise in water level and partly because the city is sinking an average of 2 inches per century. The buildings are all on stone bases, and on top of that is brick, which absorbs water. The damp has now risen to the third floor in some instances. The bricks are crumbling and the iron tie rods holding together the walls are beginning to fail.

"Lorenzo L" by Matthias Schaller. The work refers to the painter Lorenzo Lotto, one of several Venetian personalities who inspired the photographer's new series. The photograph is in "Real Venice," an exhibition at San Giorgio Maggiore that benefits Venice in Peril. Source: Venice in Peril via Bloomberg



Candida Hofer photographed the Fenice opera house for "Real Venice," now on view at the basilica of San Giorgio Maggiore. Source: Venice in Peril via Bloomberg

The 1,000-year-old mosaics in the entrance of St. Mark's are falling off because of the damp.

We are in a situation that is completely unprecedented and the water is going to keep rising.

Hoelterhoff: But I thought billions of euros are being spent on protecting Venice from flooding -- there are those MOSE contraptions that can close the mouths of the lagoon.

Really Sickly

Somers Cocks: Think of Venice as an old, sick patient with fever spikes -- that's the acqua alta, the exceptional high tides. By 2014, MOSE will be in place at a cost of five billion euros and you should not have to wear gumboots any more.

But that doesn't cure the chronic disease, the rising water level.

Hoelterhoff: I'm glad Lord Byron wasn't with me this morning when I looked at his Bridge of Sighs and saw it covered with a plug for kitchens. There was another ad on the Doge's Palace.

There's got to be a better way to raise money than to deface the monuments people are coming to see.

Somers Cocks: They are outrageous! Venice in Peril and the world's top museum directors appealed to the ministry of culture. The mayor just denounced us. "You are stupid," he said. "You don't understand our problems."

He suggested people buy picture books if they want to see the buildings without ads.

Aria Dell'Acqua

Hoelterhoff: I once heard your riff on the Venetian water bureaucracy. Could you repeat it?

Somers Cocks: The canals are the responsibility of the city council, except for the one that goes through the Guidecca, a native deep-water canal, which is the responsibility of the port authority, a quasi-autonomous state body.

The overall health of the lagoon is in the hands of the magistrato alle acque.

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The water coming down into the lagoon is the responsibility of the regional government of the Veneto.

Another body does the tides and weather forecasts.

Add to that the soprintendenza of architecture, a state body, which supervises important historical buildings, while the rest are overseen by the city council.

All respond to the "big committee" consisting of the prime minister, various other ministers, the mayors of Venice and Chioggia, and the president of the Veneto region and some other people.

Hoelterhoff: I get the sense they don't meet regularly.

Somers Cocks: As the Italians joke: whenever the Pope dies.

The photographs in "Real Venice" are for sale, entirely for the benefit of Venice in Peril. "The Venice Report," a study prepared by Venice in Peril and [Cambridge University](#), is available on the website, [veniceinperil.org](#).

(Manuela Hoelterhoff is executive editor of Muse, Bloomberg's arts and culture section. Any opinions are her own. This interview was adapted from a longer conversation.)

To contact the writer on the story: Manuela Hoelterhoff in New York at mhoelterhoff@bloomberg.net.

To contact the editor responsible for this story: Mark Beech at mbeech@bloomberg.net.

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