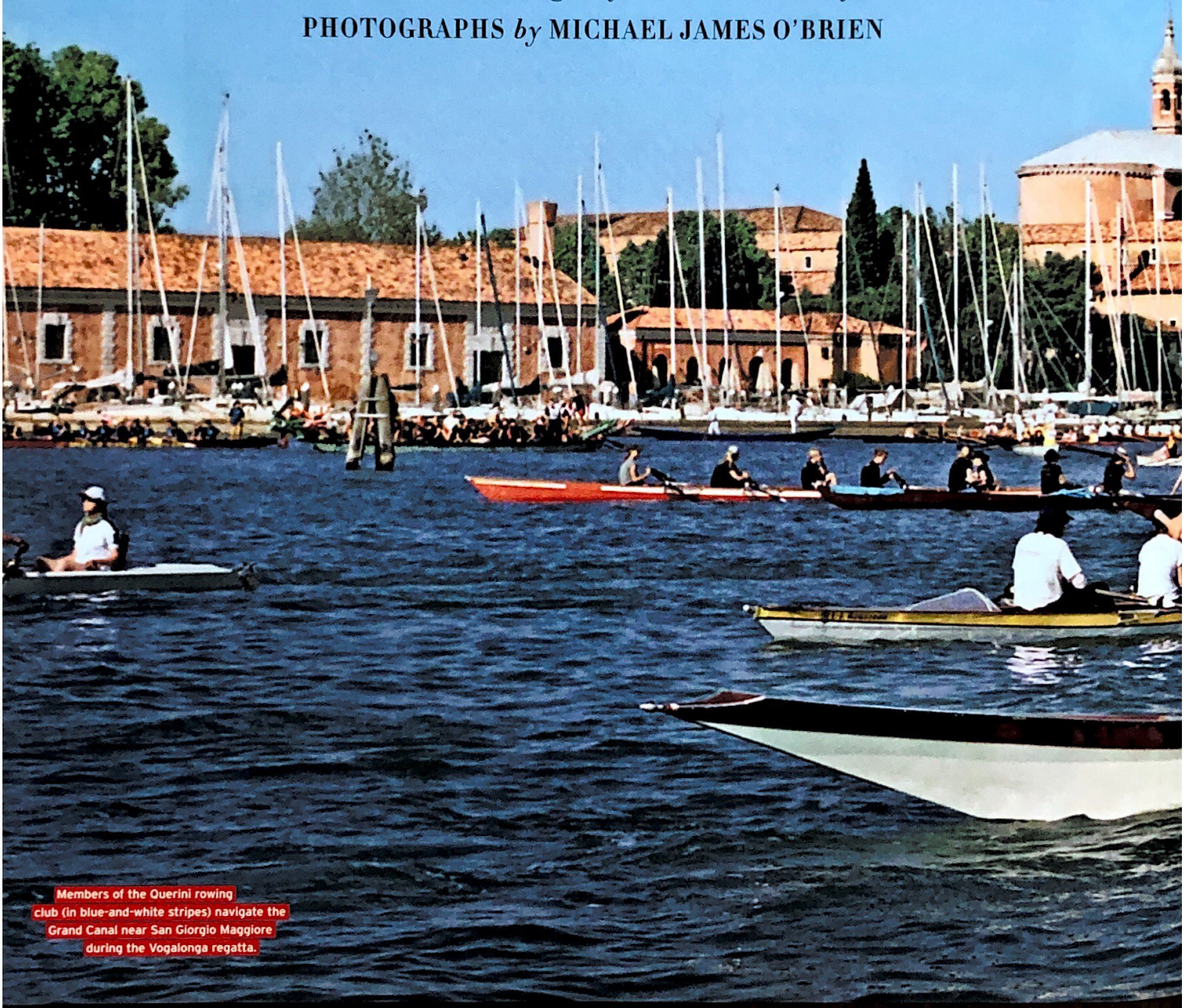


# Fantastic

The rowing traditions that once defined the daily rhythms of Venice are still very much alive. **MICHAEL HAINEY** reports from the floating city, oar at the ready.

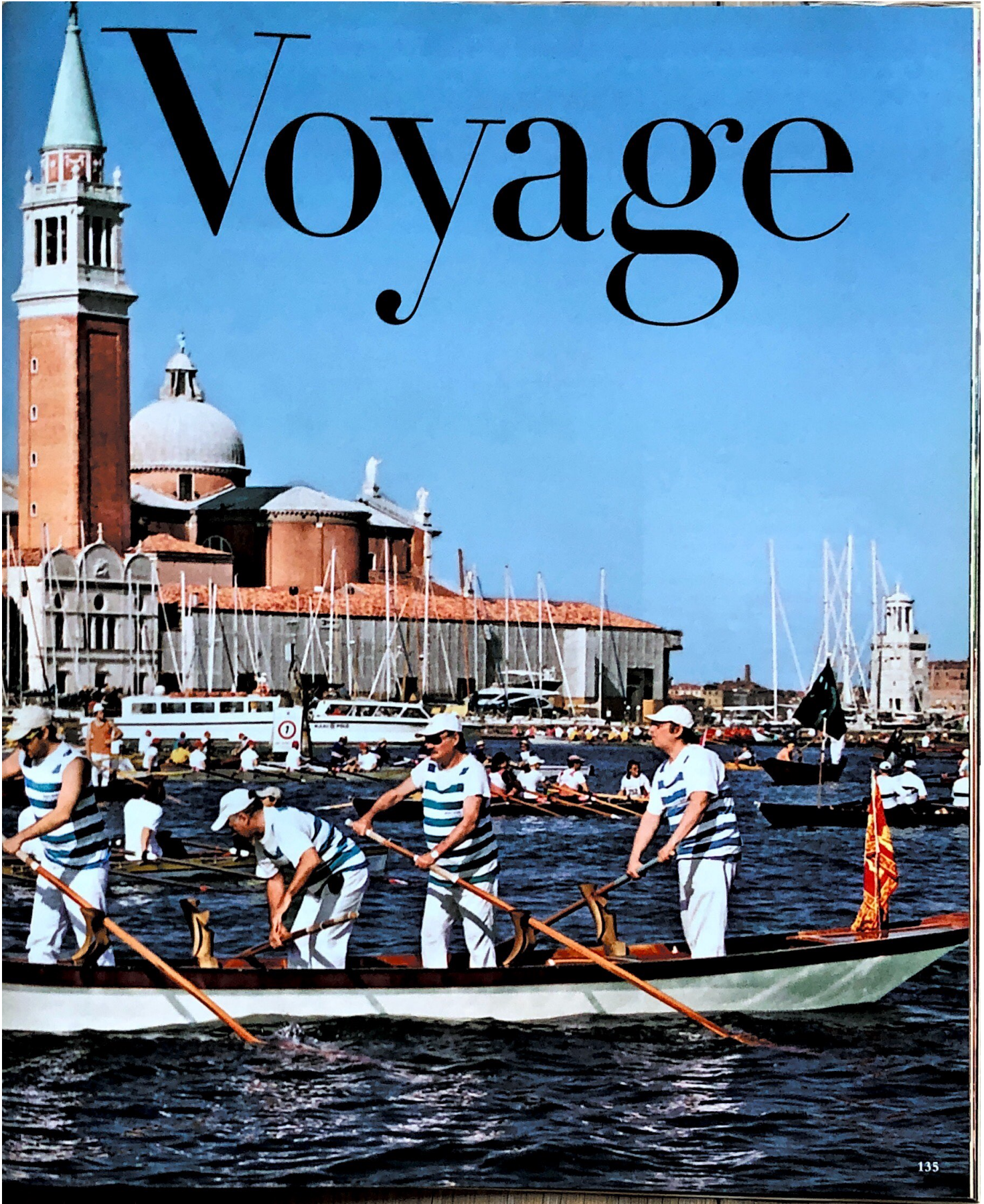
PHOTOGRAPHS *by* MICHAEL JAMES O'BRIEN



Members of the Querini rowing club (in blue-and-white stripes) navigate the Grand Canal near San Giorgio Maggiore during the Vogalonga regatta.



# Voyage





## “Streets full of water. Please advise.”

—CABLE FROM ROBERT BENCHLEY ON FIRST ARRIVING IN VENICE, 1930s

**P**aolo handed me the oar. We were standing on a *sandolo*—a traditional Venetian flat-bottomed boat made for two—a few yards off the pier, bobbing in the lagoon’s dark waters. I dipped the oar and tried a few strokes. I flailed. The boat listed. I squeezed the oar tighter. The boat stalled.

Paolo took the oar. “Look at my fingers,” he said. Immediately he was propelling us forward with seemingly zero effort, gripping the ten-foot beech oar with only the thumb and index finger of each hand, as lightly as if he were Georg Solti holding his baton and conducting an orchestra.

“When you are in true equilibrium,” Paolo said, “you can row with just two fingers.” He pushed the oar toward me. “A light touch is sometimes strongest.”

I’d come to learn the Venetian style of rowing, which—like so many things in this city that is half-land, half-sea—is counterintuitive. I’d imagined it to be *Ben Hur*-ish: lots of heaving and groaning, an aching back and blistered hands. In fact, it’s about lightness of touch. Consider the gondolier: his nonchalance, the ease with which he plies the canals, seemingly never breaking a sweat. It’s not deception; it’s rowing done well. As Paolo said to me, “Venetian rowing is equilibrium. Like Venice, a perfect balance. How do you think we have a city that floats on water?”

Ever since my first visit to Venice, years ago, I’d been drawn to its canals, its sprawling lagoon. Time and time again, walking the narrow streets, I found myself at the end of a small *calle* or quay, staring at the water with an empty feeling—that I hadn’t tapped into the deepest, truest part of this city that is proudly and uncompromisingly of the sea. I may be an American who can barely swim, but I grew determined to row, even for a day, its ubiquitous, churning waterways. It may sound like a strange desire, but is it any stranger than going to Paris to learn to make the perfect croissant? Or to Tuscany to help harvest grapes? What better way to get inside Venice, to enter its bloodstream, its very life force? To experience this amphibious city by boat, oar in hand, seemed natural and right.

And so here I was, receiving my instruction from Paolo Marchetto, a longtime member of Venice’s legendary Querini rowing club who, with his squat build and balding head, resembles a slightly fitter version of Alfred Hitchcock. The next day, I’d have the privilege

of joining Paolo and other club members on Il Vogalonga, “The Long Row,” a breathtaking—and, strangely, little-known—regatta covering 18 miles through the canals and lagoon of greater Venice. (Think of it as the NYC Marathon: Instead of the five boroughs, participants pass the islands of San Giorgio Maggiore, Sant’Erasmus, Burano and Murano.) The Querini are famous for racing their *disdotona*—a spectacular, one-of-a-kind, custom gondola that requires 18 (that’s right, 18) men. But at the moment I was determined to maneuver our little two-man boat using Paolo’s light touch.

After a few minutes, I’m proud to say, I got it. It was indeed all about equilibrium. When you row correctly, you’re standing on the balls of your feet, almost as a fighter does, and your legs do the work. Before I knew it, I’d rowed 10, 20, 50 yards, toward the Rio di Santa Giustina Canal. Motorboats and water taxis zoomed by.

From the Querini’s small pier, a few old-timers who had been watching called out, “*La barca virgine!*” (Roughly translated: “The

maiden voyage!”) Paolo waved at them in a gesture I took to be Italian for “Please go dismiss yourselves” and told me to turn the boat around. It was a challenge at first, especially because there’s only one oar, which sits in a *forcole*—the oar holder that has four positions on it and serves as a kind of gearshift. But then Paolo reached over and adjusted it (like when you were 16 and the driver’s-ed instructor had to put the car in reverse for you). After a bit of strain, we made it back to the dock—to the applause of the old-timers.



*Close to 150 canals crisscross Venice. Add them up and they run roughly 28 miles in length. Some were built as far back as the ninth century. The longest is the Grand Canal, which stretches two miles and, at its widest point, spans 76 yards. It isn’t very deep—only about six feet on average.*

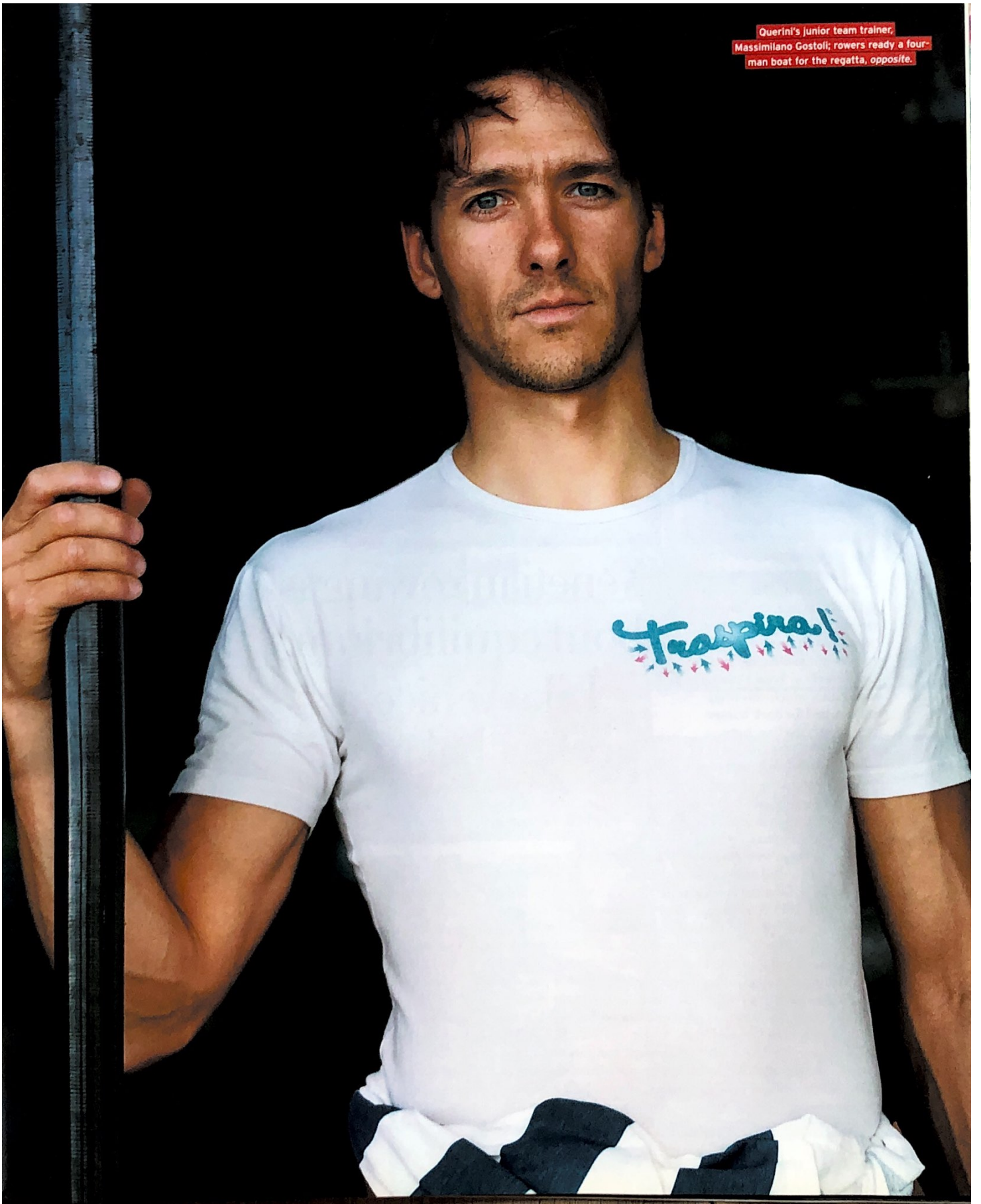
*Many of the canals are so shallow, a tall man could stand up in them. Not that he’d want to, as the muck on the bottom is something to contend with. Every so often, canals are drained and dredged. Only the Grand Canal has never been dredged. It’s been drained, though, once: when an earthquake in the 14th century sucked out all the water and it remained dry for two weeks.*

**F**ounded more than a century ago, the Reale Società Canottieri Francesco Querini—named after an Italian explorer who died on a 1900 expedition to the North Pole—is one of ten rowing clubs in Venice. Among the other best known clubs are the Associazione Canottieri Giudecca, the Società Canottieri Diadora and the Reale Società Canottieri Bucintoro, which is the oldest, dating back to 1882. And this being Italy, they are all rivals. The Querini, in fact, splintered off from the Bucintoro. When I asked Paolo why, he said, simply, “It’s Italy.”

Equal parts social club, athletic club and boat garage, Venice’s rowing clubs are also cultural preservation societies of sorts. What



Querini's junior team trainer,  
Massimiliano Gostoli; rowers ready a four-  
man boat for the regatta, opposite.





football is to small Texas towns or soccer is to boys all over the world, rowing has long been to Venice and Venetian boys. As one Querini member I met—a man I guessed to be around 70—told me. “Rowing is all we have. From the time we are boys, what can we do? Ride a bike? Kick a ball? Run? Look around you, all we have is water. So our fathers send us out on the water and we learn to row. This is what we do. For us it is riding a bike.”

Or was like riding a bike. Venice is no different from much of the world: It’s hard to compete with computers and video games today. Though there were a few young boys taking lessons at the Querini club when I was there, longtime members say the number drops each year.

It’s sad. Until the gasoline engine was invented, rowing was central to life in Venice. Oars set the rhythm of the city. Time was measured by how long it took a man to row somewhere, and an entire subspecies of boat was invented here that was suited not only to Venice but also to the uniqueness of upright, Venetian rowing. There is the *caorlina*, a flat-bottomed boat developed to transport fruit and vegetables and rowed by a six-man crew; there is the *gondolini*, a slightly smaller version of the *caorlina* that can be rowed by four people; there is the *sandalo*, the two-to-four-person boat I rowed with Paolo, which was originally created for duck hunters to navigate shallow lagoons; and there is the *mascareta*, for two people only. Then, of course, there’s the creature that is the very symbol and soul of Venice, the gondola. Or, as one of the Querini said to me, “The gondola is not a boat. For us, it is *la cosa strana* [the strange thing].”

Where to begin with the gondola? The fact that it is asymmetrical? (One side is nine inches broader than the other; the off-balance shape makes it easier for the gondolier to row from one side.) The fact that it is fabricated from five woods? That its hull is 36 feet long and only five feet wide, but only half its bows are actually in contact with the water? That there are at least seven coats of black paint on each gondola? That, according to some gondoliers, there are just two bridges in the entire city under which a gondola cannot pass: one near the Church of San Stae, the other near La Fenice, the theater?

One could go on. What you need to know is the gondola is the building block of all Venetian boats. And it was with the gondola that the Querini decided to make their mark, transforming it from a humble one-man boat to the massive 18-man *disdotona*. It was an idea born of pride: The rival Bucintoro club had built a gondola for 12 men, so in 1903 the Querini decided to make a bigger one. “We figured if we were going to beat them, we had better beat

them big,” said Guido Sesani, president of the Querini. “Can you imagine the majesty of all those men rowing at once?”

*It’s easy to forget that water is the reason Venice exists. For centuries, the city dominated Mediterranean commerce. It was also a great sea power, and its legendary Arsenale was, until the fall of the Republic, the supreme shipyard in Europe. At its height, more than 16,000 craftsmen worked there; during the 1500s, it built 100 warships in 50 days.*



“Venetian rowing is about equilibrium. Like Venice, a perfect balance.”

Aside from the gondoliers, rowing has faded from its central place in the daily life of Venice. These days the city’s waters churn with countless vaporetti shuttling flocks of tourists, and the *ka-thwack! ka-thwack! ka-thwack!* of speedboats helmed by playboys and plutocrats zip-zooming back and forth from the Grand Canal to Cip’s, the Rialto and points in between.

It was this cluttered, noisy reality that inspired a group of Venetians in 1975 to create the Vogalonga. Their dream was that even for a few hours the city’s waterways would be silenced of motorboats, and the only sound would be the original, true sound of oars touching water. Any boat would be welcome at the noncompetitive regatta, so long as it was man-powered. They decided it would be held near the Feast of the Ascension, when the doge was traditionally “married” to Venice’s most important re-

source, the sea. That first year, 500 or so boats showed up. Like any original—and of course crazy—idea, no one knew what to expect. But the city was thrilled by it. Older Venetians loved it for the tradition, and young people were glad to have another reason to party.

The Vogalonga has grown since then. Last year more than 1,600 craft participated—the same year about 40 rowers had to be pulled from the water after a storm with 30-mile-per-hour winds descended and swamped their boats. “It was raining so hard,” Guido told me the evening before the race, “that the man in the back of the *disdotona* could not see the man in the front.”

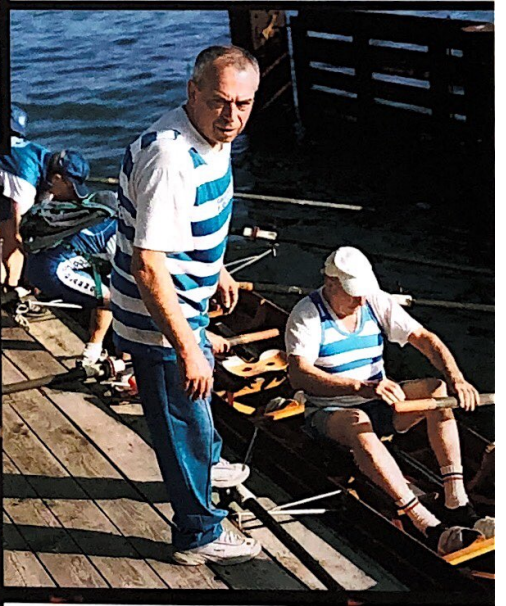
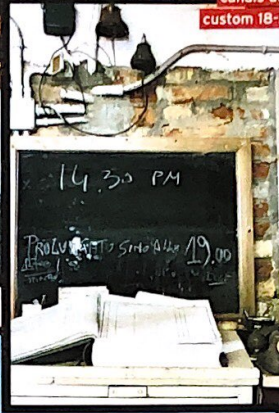
Unable to sleep that night, I was up at first light, peering out my window. I was lucky. The day dawned bright and blue as a ceiling of a Venetian chapel. The Querini rowers planned to leave the club for the Vogalonga at 8 A.M., and Paolo had urged me to get there by 7.

The Querini club is on Venice’s melancholic north side, along the Fondamenta Nuove, far from wandering crowds. On a clear day you can stand on its pier and see the snow-topped foothills of the Alps. Housed in a crumbling stone building held together with jerry-rigged beams and bolts drilled into its ancient walls, the





Scenes from the Querini club and on the canals during the Vogalonga; the Querini's custom 18-man disdotona, opposite.





club is wedged between a municipal hospital and a little grocery store. Inside, painted on one of those listing walls, is the Querini motto: *Andarsi e Sperare* (Try Your Best and Hope to Succeed). If you go looking for the club, the simplest way to get there is by taking a *motoscafo* to the Ospedale stop. After you disembark, turn left and walk a hundred yards along the *fondamenta*. When you get to the old iron gate painted blue, push it open and you're there.

When I arrived, the place was already swirling with activity. Not only were most of the club's 280 or so members taking out their boats, but the place was also buzzing with Brits, Danes, Germans, Hungarians and a few Americans who had arranged to borrow a boat from the Querini through their hometown rowing clubs. There was traffic on the pier as people waited to drop their boats in the water; it was like the assemblage of a small, multinational armada.

At the end of the pier sat the *disdotona* as the 18 rowers, all wearing the Querini's blue-and-white stripes, prepared for the race. I stood watching them, including a bandy-legged little man handing out oars who, I was shocked to learn, was 88 years old.

Then I felt a hand on my shoulder. It was Guido and Paolo.

"Today, the place of honor will be yours," Guido said. He gestured toward the stern. "We never allow anyone to sit here, but I think today we will."

I looked at them. No words came from my mouth.

"Hurry!" Paolo said. "Please."

The *disdotona* was untying.

Guido called for them to wait, and before I knew it, I was in my perch—not as a rower but as a passenger—a doge for a day. A big man named Sergio turned, shook my hand and smiled. "Is nice, right?"

"Sì," I said.

Making our way to the Basin of San Marco, where the boats gather for the start of the Vogalonga, we slipped through the Arsenal, the foundry of Venice's ancient naval prowess, empty now save for a few officers who let down a chain across the canal so we could pass. As we rowed, I was startled by a sudden clanking and someone overhead yelling, "Brava! Brava!" I looked up and saw a gray-haired woman leaning out her window, banging a pot lid with a wooden spoon and smiling.

Nothing could have prepared me for the surprise as we emerged onto the Grand Canal: oared boats of every kind, as far as the eye could see. Gondolas, *caorolinas*, kayaks, catamarans and canoes, even a Chinese dragon boat, complete with drummer. It was a glorious assembly. Overhead a helicopter hovered and dipped, a cameraman hanging from its door. It was like the opening of *La Dolce Vita*. All that was missing was Mastroianni and a dangling statue of Jesus.

Then, *boom!*—from somewhere a canon was fired, signaling the start. Obeying tradition, the Querini raised their oars overhead all at once, in the *alza remi*, the ancient salute to crowds and VIPs. They held them high and proud until Sergio shouted, "Vòlga!" then dropped them smoothly into the water as Sergio repeated, "Vòlga, ragazzi! Vòlga!"

I felt a surge. We moved swiftly out of San Marco's basin, toward the tip of Venice. For the next three hours it was a blur of beauty.



## The crowds erupt when they see our boat, yelling, "La barca! La barca!"

Venice, natives will tell you, is not an island but fish, or two fish, locked together. "Look at the map," they tell you, fingers pointing. "Two fish, mouth to mouth, swimming up and down." Others will overhear and interrupt, "Venice is a ship, forever in motion."

All those boats, masses of them, of colors, of oars touching the water. Alongside us, a father and mother and their two sons, no older than ten years, are rowing a *sandalo*. A man in an orange kayak drafts in our wake. We pass a *caorolina* filled with rowers wearing the red-and-white of the Giudecca club. Six women, all barefoot and in white dresses, have adorned their boat with bouquets of tea roses. Lovely. They look like Roman goddesses on their way to a temple, and I stare at them with what I'm sure is a lunatic's grin until they disappear into the crowd.

Spish-splash...the dip and rise of the oars....Then a steady

*thung-thung-thung-thung* of the drummer on the dragon boat, with an all-Hungarian crew wearing white bandanas around their heads. As we pass a lonely stretch of Sant'Erasmus, where three old men have docked a boat and are sitting on white plastic chairs, watching us, some members of the Voga Veneta Mestre rowing club appear off our bow, identified by their orange and blue jerseys. One of them yells, "La barca!" ("The boat!"), and everyone smiles. No one breaks rank or rhythm. *Is this really happening?* I think to myself.

Everything gets quiet—just the splash of the oars hitting the water and the occasional creak of a gondola or an oar against a *forcola*. In the marsh, near Murano, a magnificent white egret stands, ignoring us. We pass a young woman rowing solo. She smiles and says, "Ciao, ragazzi," without breaking her cadence. "Ciao, bellissima," one of the Querini replies. She laughs.

Pulling into a narrow canal on Burano, we scramble off the *disdotona* and head for a little café nearby. Small glasses of red wine and espressos are ordered and quaffed. None of the men has even broken a sweat. Ten minutes, no more, and we are on **CONTINUED ON PAGE 170 >>**

### THE DETAILS

More than 1,600 boats participate in *Il Vogalonga*, "The Long Row," covering 18 miles of Venice's waterways. The next will be held in May 2011. [vogalonga.com](http://vogalonga.com).



Special Promotion

# noteworthy



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DEPARTURES

## FANTASTIC VOYAGE

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 141 »

our way again. I see, for the first time, that we have a bouquet of white and blue flowers tied to our bow.

As we make the turn toward Murano, everything is silent, even in the thick of all the boats. Venice looms in the distance. Floating. Shimmering. Approaching Murano and its furnaces, we come around the Riva dei Zattere, and the weathered lighthouse pops into view. We enter Murano, and the Ponte Longo Bridge is crowded with people. They cry out, "La barca!" and whistle and holler. I see a man raise a glass of red wine. A four-man skull, its rowers all blond and smiling, passes us. A Danish flag flies from its stern.

Soon we are at the mouth of the Grand Canal. Slowly, we position ourselves, with Sergio giving orders: "Volga, polpe. Volga." Venetians through the Fondamenta di Cannaregio. Cheers erupt when they see us. "La barca! La barca!" they yell, until the crew greets them with the *alza remi* salute. The crowd roars louder. Somewhere I hear church bells tolling over and over. I'm craning my neck for the Rialto. I hear trumpets playing the Beatles "Michelle" and see three old men on chairs on the side of the canal, all blowing horns. I have tears in my eyes.

The Rialto appears, the applause echoing off its old walls. More cheers. Another *alza remi*. Then there's a stretch of silence—for a brief moment we are the only boat in view on the Grand Canal. I don't want this to end.

There's the Accademia Bridge. I see a little boy jumping up and down, throwing confetti in the air and smiling as it falls all around him. His mother's hand is on his shoulder. Outside the Guggenheim, people are on the terrace, flutes of Champagne in hand. And then, all at once, we are finished. Back in the basin and Piazza San Marco. The crew, for a moment, lets their oars go still.

Sergio turns to me, a huge smile on his face. "Is nice, yes? For one morning, everything is good."

All I can do is smile and say, "Yes." ■

*Want to row the canals of Venice? If you are an experienced kayaker, canoe or sculler, most clubs will rent boats for a modest fee. Most also offer lessons. In addition to Querini (6576B Con sede a Castello; 39-041/522-2039; canottierquerini.it), Bucintoro (263 Dorsoduro, Zattere ai Saloni; 39-041/520-5630 or 39-335/667-3851 for lessons; bucintoro.org) and Diadora (136B Via Sandro Gallo, Lido di Venezia; 39-041/526-5742; vogaveneta.it) are good options.*

## WHERE TO BUY



### THE JEWELER'S ART

**PAGE 158** Attilio Codognato diamond and vintage ivory skull ring, price upon request, at Attilio Codognato, 39-041/522-5042. **PAGE 159** Nardi diamond and white gold Albero della Vita moretto, \$25,000; pink sapphire and rose gold Paola moretto, \$7,150, at Nardi, 39-041/522-5733; [nardi-venezia.com](http://nardi-venezia.com). **PAGE 160** Antonia Miletto metacrylic resin fish rings, \$3,250-\$4,550, at Antonia Miletto, 39-041/520-5177; [antoniamiletto.com](http://antoniamiletto.com). **PAGE 161** Carla C cornelian intaglio and diamond bracelet, \$20,800, at Antiquus, 39-041/241-3725; [antiquusvenice.com](http://antiquusvenice.com).



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