

**ARMCHAIR TRAVELLER**

• **Selling Houses Australia:** Episode two of a new series of this popular property show hosted by straight-talking agent Andrew Winter. With the expertise of an interior designer and clever garden landscaper, Winter masterminds makeovers of daggy dumps into saleable homes. Tonight the team attends to an ugly duckling in Newcastle, NSW. Wednesday, 8.30pm, LifeStyle  
• **Man vs Wild:** The improbably named Bear Grylls is back, tackling the most extreme climates (and climbs) imaginable; when this mountaineer and ex-British Special Forces hero-man is not stranded in deserts or on ice caps, he's face to face with predators of the totally scary kind. Thursday, 8.30pm, Discovery.  
Susan Kurosawa

**WHAT IN THE WORLD**

• July is festival time in Mongolia. The Naadam festival features traditional horse riding, wrestling and archery and educational travel specialist Odyssey (odysseytravel.com.au) will be there to catch the action; its 21-day Mongolian & Russian Ed-Ventur spends four days at the festival and three nights in traditional Mongolian yurts before heading off to Russia. Departs July 4; from \$12,800 a person twin-share  
• The Canberra District Wine Industry Association Wine Harvest Festival (canberrawines.com.au) will be held next weekend. Sample award-winning reds and whites at 25 participating vineyards, all within an hour's drive of the capital. There'll be gourmet food, live music, wine tours and an opportunity to meet Canberra's passionate vignerons  
• Intimate Whitsundays hideaway Peppers Palm Bay (peppers.com.au) is offering an indulgent yoga retreat that includes instruction from beginner to advanced, vegetarian cuisine and plenty of relaxation. May 21-23; from \$660 a person twin-share, \$800 single occupancy  
• Scienceworks in Melbourne (museumvictoria.com.au) has a lively school holiday program from March 27-April 11 that includes the Circus of Spin, presented by CircaNICA. Expect dizzying displays of twisting and twirling, make a tumbling toy and experiment with spin.  
Pauline Webber

**ACCESSORY OF THE WEEK**

TRAVELLING with children and their accompanying luggage can be a juggling act. Combi prams are perfect for parents who find they're always struggling with nappy bags, bottles, toys and the like as they can be opened in seconds with just one hand. Available in six designs, the prams weigh no more than 6.5kg, making them light and easy to lift in and out of the car boot and up and down stairs. They're compact enough to negotiate shopping aisles and checkouts with ease, too. From \$449.99 and available in various colours. More: combi.com.au.  
Cassandra Murnieks



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{ JOURNEYS: THE SPIRIT OF DISCOVERY }

The search for John Ruskin's Venice begins in Torcello

IAN COCHRANE

BROKEN walls topple, taking their last defenders with them. Canal bridges, city gates and the cathedral burn. Steel clashes with steel, horses' hoofs pound stone roads and women drag screaming children, the old and infirm towards the hills and mountains. Columns groan and collapse in an apocalypse of billowing dust and smoke.

But some are lucky, floating silently away in the darkness down the Grand Canal into the harbour. Hauling their boats on to the mud of the nearest islands, they hide among the marshes of the Venetian lagoon.

The year is AD452 and a ruthless Hungarian king has arrived at the bustling port of Altinum. Attila the Hun does a thorough job and departs, only to die a year later on his wedding night.

During 1500 years, the rising water and lagoon mud swallow the ruins until stones and masonry are discovered under farmland. I am standing near Marco Polo airport, 12km north of Venice, with my girlfriend. It is April last year, at the site of Altinum city, a little bigger than Pompeii, now rolling fields of soybeans and corn. We are following in the steps of John Ruskin — English writer, philosopher, art theorist and a fine draughtsman — to another city of ghosts, Torcello, named after one of the burned towers of Altinum.

We change ferries at Murano and finally spy the belltower, then some pines and scattered buildings, in Ruskin's words, "like a little company of ships becalmed on a faraway sea".

Hedges of honeysuckle and briar are unchanged in more than a century since Ruskin's day. Locanda Cipriani, our cream two-storey doll's-house hotel, over a canal bridge, has stairs up to our quaint room. A balcony overlooks the bridge and the floorboards squeak. The six guestrooms have hosted the likes of Nancy Mitford and Ernest Hemingway. Ruskin, born in 1819, had two great loves: his second wife, Rose, who died at 27, and the Venetian lagoon.

Shadows lengthen. We bask in the early spring sun and the bubbles from a bottle of Veneto prosecco. Drifting across the lawns, jonquils, tulips and espaliered vines is the hypnotic click of garden shears.

"You will be taking dinner, sir?" Our waiter stands at attention, cloth over arm.  
Ahem.  
He is wide-eyed. "It is just, sir,



IGOR SAKTOR

# Ghosts in the murk and mist

that the chef, he leaves after dinner. Everyone leaves the island to return in the morning. It is the way here."

Although surprised, I answer that 8pm would be fine.

We are both tired after a romantic late lunch. Upstairs, our dreams are fractured and I stumble across piles of discarded clothes in the dark to realise the offending noise is a telephone ringing. We've slept for five hours and it's 9pm.

Downstairs, in a forest of white linen, our waiter seems to smile knowingly, resplendent in white jacket and black bow tie.

After dinner, a blanket of milky constellations stretches across the

moonless sky outside. In the shadowy piazza, a cat lazing on a stone chair stretches to its full height.

Legend says this carved rock is Attila's throne and anyone who sits here will be married within the year. How it got to this island of mud is anyone's guess.

Fuzzy yellow lamps on tall posts guide us to the pier, past a jumble of artichoke paddocks. At the deserted ferry hut, we are mesmerised by shimmering silver reflections and lapping water that drifts between rows of wooden navigation posts tottering like drunken sentries. Ruskin's Venetian tower lights flicker 8km to the south, mingling with floating stars. I smell brackish water,

cut grass and an inkling of my girlfriend's perfume.

Next day at Attila's throne it is difficult to believe this once-city held 20,000 souls. By the 12th century, the canals fill with silt, the water stagnates and malaria is rife. A portico connects the larger cathedral of Santa Maria dell'Assunta with a belltower shrouded in scaffolded renovation cladding the Baptistery, and the oldest church in the Venetian lagoon, the octagonal Santa Fosca.

Crumbling, ragged bricks leave orange dust on my fingers. The ethereal light of Santa Maria dell'Assunta shows the finest serrated acanthus carved into the white marble capitals on the taller colonnades. Ruskin thought them "the best I have ever seen, as examples of perfectly calculated effect from every touch of the chisel". A startling Byzantine mosaic of the Last Judgment warns us to contemplate the future but address our actions now.

We save the redbrick belltower until last, clambering to a height of 60m. It's doubtful Ruskin had any renovations to deal with. But between inconveniently placed scaffolding is the same wild sea wasteland of lurid ashen grey that greeted him, and north, the same purple snowcapped mountains. I imagine new arrivals gazing northward with every snowy sun-

set, heartbroken, remembering the flames devouring their homes.

Back at the ferry hut I step on the gangplank, turn and take one last, late-afternoon look.

The belltower appears desolate, caged in scaffold. A lone seagull wheels overhead in the grey air. The bow washes in time with my breathing. My tattered copy of Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice* opens at page 19: "The glacier torrent and the lava stream: they met and contended over the wreck of the Roman empire; and the very centre of the struggle, the point of pause for both, the dead water of the opposite eddies, charged with embayed fragments of the Roman wreck, is VENICE."

Disembarking at St Marks, we push past the African bag-sellers, the pickpockets and tour groups. At our heavy cast-iron gate I look back over my girlfriend's shoulder to the far colonnades of the piazza. There, under the portico arches, I imagine Ruskin. He looks frail, not imposing at all, with a tatty grey beard, buttoned vest and oversized coat, his movements disconnected and urgent, a wild look in his eye as he bickers and haggles with himself.

After 11 visits, Ruskin knew every corner of this city and considered himself an adopted son. He first suffered mental illness in 1886, completing his autobiogra-

phy and the fig-tree sketch in the same year, before following his wife into the abyss of insanity and dying of influenza in 1900.

Turning, I push open the squeaky gate into our deserted hotel courtyard. In the dusty air, I run my hand over the cold dome of yet another ancient wellhead. The sounds of St Marks have evaporated and a lamp beckons beneath a white awning.

Early next morning we drink strong black coffee on our balcony above the Orseolo canal.

Gondoliers call, mist hangs above the water and we smell freshly baked pastries.

A man in a leather apron and floppy tweed cap lugs groceries from a barge below, while a black Labrador sits up front.

Both draughtsmen, we are admiring a sketch of Ruskin's: *The Fig-tree Angle of the Ducal Palace* from 1869, all light and shade, eastern arches and colonnades.

So Venice is both East and West, but she is only the daughter, and it all began with another place just north of here: "Mother and daughter, you behold them both in their widowhood, TORCELLO and VENICE."

• locandacipriani.com  
• italiantourism.com.au  
Susan Kurosawa's *Departure Lounge column* returns next week.

## A new age of prosperity

Continued from Page 1

Seamus Heaney, Van Morrison and Wings guitarist Henry McCullough. It is also perhaps the only city in Britain or Ireland where the good times are set to keep on rolling this year, aided and abetted by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's recent announcement that the New York Stock Exchange is to open a service centre in the city, with the creation of 400 jobs. The message is that Belfast is a rock-solid place to invest.

Back in 1798, when McCracken was hiding from the British redcoats behind the bar in Kelly's, Belfast was little more than a village, picturesquely nestled between a bowl of hills and the sea. In 1800, the Irish parliament in Dublin ignorantly voted itself out of existence and, as Dublin's economy tanked, so Belfast picked up the torch and became the wealthiest urban sprawl on the island.

In the early decades, the linen industry boomed as more than 100,000ha of Ulster was given over to linen. Belfast's Linen Hall Library has an unexpectedly good exhibition on this era and is one of the city's hidden gems.

When the linen industry faltered, many Ulstermen migrated abroad. Among these was solicitor James Atkinson, who moved to Australia in 1843, purchased a whaling station on the coast of Victoria and called it Belfast. In 1887, that port town was renamed Port Fairy.

By the late 19th century, Belfast boasted one of the biggest ship-building industries in the world. Two enormous yellow gantry cranes known as Samson and Goliath still brood above the old Harland and Wolff shipyards on the banks of the River Lagan, testament to an age when more than 35,000 people worked in these yards. The Titanic was one of many cruise liners built here and the city has its own Titanic Quarter along the docks where it was built.

Several of the Royal Navy ships that served in the Dardanelles

were also Belfast-built. So were the Guinness barges that sailed up Dublin's River Liffey.

As Ireland's Catholic majority struggled for independence during and immediately after World War I, it became apparent that the British government had little desire to lose control of Belfast and its mighty ship-building industry. The city was run by a tight group of prosperous, non-nonsense Protestant merchants devoted to the British crown and utterly opposed to becoming part of a new Catholic Ireland. The dissatisfying solution was the partition of Ireland.

In 1921, Belfast became the capital of a new Protestant-dominated country called Northern Ireland. For many of the Catholics living in and around Belfast, this situation became unbearable, particularly with the hideous pogroms in which nearly 500 people, mostly civilians, were murdered between 1920 and 1922. This was the world into which Mighty Quinn was born.

The city muddled on through the 1920s and 30s, and seemed to have established itself by Easter Tuesday 1941 when nearly 200 German bombers struck the city in an assault that lasted 5½ hours. More than 900 people died and 35,000 houses were damaged. The chief casualty officer for Belfast at this time was Theodore Thomson Flynn, an Australian biologist who served as the chairman of zoology at Queen's University from 1931 to 1948. He was also the father of Errol Flynn, whom he outlived by nine years.

One hundred years after the Titanic was launched, Belfast is on its feet again and the sense of optimism can be found all across the city. Take a ride in one of the gondolas on the Big Wheel to get a true sense of the cityscape. The hills around Belfast inspired Jonathan Swift's description of the landscape through which his hero walked in *Gulliver's Travels*, while Belfast-born C. S. Lewis likewise used the Mountains of Mourne to the south as the magical setting for his *Narnia* novels.

As evening falls, the sunset

strikes upon the city centre's impressive Victorian buildings and a new rumble begins to resound from the buzzing hub of Donegall Square, through the historic Cathedral Quarter to the new glassy riverside promenade where the Belfast Waterfront and the Odyssey Arena draw theatre and music-loving crowds.

Many of those enjoying Belfast's vibrant social life are students from Queen's University. The number of visitors from the Republic of Ireland has also shot up since the peace process began. For many Irish citizens, this is probably their first visit to Belfast. There are also huge numbers of descendants of Belfast emigres visiting from Britain, the US and, increasingly, Australia. It is perhaps no surprise that Belfast's airport, named for footballing great George Best, is the fastest growing airport in the kingdom.

Belfast has risen to the occasion with a perennial calendar of events, such as fashion weeks, film festivals, gourmet bonanzas, St Patrick's Day carnivals and seemingly every type of musical extravaganza, from bluegrass and traditional Irish to thrash punk and old-time jazz. There are stacks of eateries, delis, wine bars and restaurants, such as the Cafe Vaudeville and Michelin-starred Restaurant Michael Deane.

Belfast is also home to some of the finest pubs in the northern hemisphere. Nearly 300 years after it was founded, Kelly's Cellars manages to find its feet somewhere between everyman drinking pub, political meeting hall and historic museum. Folk music is a regular fare at weekends. As the pints and shorts slide across the bar, so the session players gather momentum by a roaring turf fire, a riot of button accordions, banjos, bodhrans, tin whistles, concertinas, flutes and fiddles. Between the reels, the Irish language is heard throughout the bar, used by staff and customers alike, and Mighty Quinn himself might even sing you a rebel song.

If Kelly's sounds a little rough-shod, try The Crown on Great

Victoria Street with its fabulously gilded interior created by Italian craftsmen in the 1860s. Between 1970 and 1976, 28 bombs exploded in the 12-storey Europa Hotel across the road. Not surprisingly, the collateral damage was considerable, even if the bar stools continued to be defiantly occupied by the same neutrally minded drinkers who had always frequented the pub. The National Trust has restored the bar, which is as glistening and majestic as it ever was. If opportunity knocks, be sure to grab a seat in one of the elaborately carved wooden snugs.

At night's end there are no shortage of options for places to stay but, if you've come this far, you really ought to treat yourself to a night at the Merchant Hotel, the stunning Italianate former headquarters of the Ulster Bank, which is undergoing an art deco-style expansion due for completion this northern summer.

And if you're looking for a brief respite from urban chaos, then zip north to the Galgorm Spa Hotel, a private retreat on the River Maine set within 66ha of private parkland. The hotel is situated beside the village of Gracehill, rather bizarrely founded by Moravian refugees from Bohemia in 1759.

Walking through Belfast City during the fireworks display that accompanied the arrival of the Tall Ships last year, one of the most remarkable factors was the huge numbers of young people out and about. These are the first generations to have been reared in a time of peace. And, as any one of them will tell you, they have no intention of having it any other way. Northern Ireland has learned how to be happy again and the city that stands on the shimmering shores of Belfast Lough is leading the way for this brave new age.

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Turtle Bunbury's most recent book is *Vanishing Ireland: Further Chronicles of a Disappearing World*.

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