

IDEAL WORLD



Palpable charm

Instead of visiting the tourist-swamped city of Venice, spend a day at the two beautiful islands of Murano and Burano located nearby, suggests **KALPANA SUNDER**

Melting into the bright skies, the pearly lagoons of Venice are a surreal Salvador Dali landscape. Several islands hide out here in the calm sections of the Adriatic, like Burano, Murano and Torcello. At one time, there were 39 lagoon islands, which were densely inhabited. But now, all but a few have been abandoned. For a change of scene from the palazzos and the tourist-swamped city centre of Venice, we decide to take a vaporetto — the public waterbus to the islands of Murano and Burano and spend a lazy day there.

We cruise the green waters of the lagoon, past the apricot brick walls of San Michele Island, Venice's cemetery fringed by a line of cypress trees, where famous citizens were laid to rest. Grave space has been used up here and Venice's dead have to be buried now in the mainland cemetery. All along the waters, we see taciturn cormorants sitting on wooden posts, topped by orange lamps, used by the Venetians to navigate the treacherous seas. Herons and sea-birds pick their way through the rushes in the watery sunlight.

Venetian glass
We get off after a ride of 40 minutes, at the island of Murano, known as the glass island. In 1292, the production of the famous Venetian glass was shifted here due to a fear of fires in the kilns, in the city centre. We hear that in yesteryears, the glassmakers were even allowed to marry into Venice's blue-blooded families, but they were never allowed to leave the republic. If they tried to escape, they had their hands cut off by the secret police!

We get off the vaporetto and are accosted by many representatives of glass factories, who indulge in a high-pressure sales pitch, to view their kiln and of course enter their shops. We choose to walk into one that is open to the public, and watch the expert glass-blowers fashion works of art in glass from raging furnaces. We watch entranced as the handsome glass-blower nips, tucks and fashions a flower with practiced hands in a most theatrical performance. As he catches sight of us, he says, "There is no time to think because the glass cools rapidly!"

There is a glass museum here that houses about 4,000 pieces and shows the development of the glass blowing industry over time. We see a colourful glass Christmas tree which is made of blown glass and is said to have 1,000 blown glass tubes! A little distance away, we see a fountain resembling a human figure made of blown glass. Behind it is a typical Venetian canal lined with quaint shops selling lamps, beads, goblets, vases and over-the-top chandeliers. I rue the fact that some of these fragile masterpieces are so expensive that they may be locked up forever in a glass-case without being used for a really special occasion.

Taking a break from glass, we visit the Church of San Pietro where there is exquisite art on display — masterpieces by Tintoretto, Bellini and Veronese. We catch up with an Italian student at a café over a Tiramisu gelato, and he says that Casanova, the notorious philanderer and womaniser (a resident of Venice), used to visit the convents and churches on this island, though he was not a pious man. Lore has it that a young nun on this island fell in love with him.

Back on the vaporetto, we traverse the lagoon this time visiting Burano. We are awestruck by the sight of some fisherman walking on water! They were actually walking on sand flats, digging for clams and crabs. Chugging past some uninhabited islands with abandoned towers and villas, indicating grand pasts, we reach Burano, which has been inhabited since Roman times and has been known as a centre for lace-making. Fishermen have lived in Burano since the 7th century because the marshland has been excellent for the anchovies, sardines and mackerel.

Legend has it that a Venetian sailor brought an exquisite sea-weed from remote seas for his sweetheart. This was preserved on fishing net by her for eternal remembrance — a masterpiece of perfection — and was the origin of the lace trade that has brought fame to this isolated community.

As we get off at Burano, we see benches lining a green promenade. Burano looks like Lego land at first glance. Everything here, the houses, the bridges, are painted in brilliant, vivid colours of blue, hot pinks,

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green, lavender, ochre and terracotta. I am told that the fishermen painted their houses in these colours so that they could identify them when they were returning home (and perhaps a little inebriated) in the thick Venetian mist. We hear that if someone wants to paint his home, he has to apply to the government for permission.

There is a small two-storey lace museum here, where you see old pieces of lace and women wielding their needles in this ancient tradition, oblivious to tourists watching them. We try hard not to spend our souvenir budget on the exquisite doilies and tablecloths here (though I suspect a great deal of it is machine-made in Taiwan!). In the central square devoted to Galuppi, the local luminary of Burano (who was famous for comic opera), we see the 16th century Church of San Marino lined with Tiepolo's Crucifixion. This has what the locals call the drunken tower or the leaning bell-tower.

A little further away is the most brightly painted Bepe's house — an eclectic mix of colours and geometrical shapes of diamond, triangles and bars. We see tourists seeking inspiration, staring at menus outside restaurants, offering a plethora of seafood and ogling lace-trimmed tableware and parasols. We wander to the quietest corners and shady parks. We see fishing nets hang drying in yards while small boats dawdle along the banks of the canals.

Burano is said to have a vibrant artistic community and noted French designer Philippe Starck is said to have invested in three colourful houses here (which are now a fashion statement). We amble through workshops of local artists, listening to the sounds of their mellifluous local dialect, and succumb to the temptation of a water-colour painting of the local multi-hued houses. We have lunch at Alfresco Café, which consists of trofie pasta in pesto sauce, washed down with carafes of crisp white wine. We also taste the Bussola Buranello which, when translated, means the compass of Burano. This organic cookie looks like an outline of a circle and can be had dunked in local wine. As we chug through the waters of the lagoon back towards Venice, I wonder whether the colourful houses, foundries and forsaken churches were just misty figments of my imagination.

Eco tourism village in Indonesia
According to a report, Indonesia will soon have the first eco tourism village in the world. It will be located in a village called Soran, near Prambanan Temple, a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

SERENITY BECKONS

Spiritual and artistic grandeur

He is Lord's lone servant in the wilderness. Hailing from Kerala, Reverend K J Kunjumon is the pastor, gardener, sweeper and watchman — all turned into one — at St John's Church in the Wilderness, the 158-year-old Gothic-style church in McLeodganj, also called Upper Dharamshala in Himachal Pradesh.

McLeodganj was known as the Ghost Town after the British left India in 1947. This little hilly town came into prominence after the world famous Tibetan spiritual leader and Noble Peace Prize winner, Dalai Lama, settled here with thousands of his followers, after fleeing from Tibet in 1959.

The historical cathedral here, which was once an Army Church for the British soldiers, today, attracts a large number of local tourists and foreign travellers. As many as 500 visitors come to see this artistic wonder every day. The official visiting hours are from 10 am to 5 pm, but the pastor often keeps the church open from early mornings to late evenings.

The church is also renowned for its artistic design and its Belgian stained glass windows, painted by an Italian artist from the 18th century. These stained glass windows were donated to the church by Countess Elgin. Her husband, Lord Elgin, Viceroy and Governor-General of India, died in 1863 and was buried next to the church.

Colonial past
The cathedral nestles amid thick pine and deodar tress and is a place of serenity. "It's always calm and quiet here. Everything about the place is special — the trees, mountains and snow in the winters. Everything around reflects the beauty of God's creation," extols Kunjumon. Scenes from the life of St John the Baptist are depicted on a pair of stained glass windows. As the sun's rays filter through the deodar and cedar trees surrounding this gray-stone church, the colourful stained-glass paintings light up in all their brilliance.

Outside the church is a beautiful and impressive memorial of Lord Elgin, which has been declared a protected monument of national importance by local authorities. McLeodganj reminded Lord Elgin of

his native Scotland. It is said that had he lived longer, then Dharamshala, and not Shimla, would have become the summer capital of the *Raj*.

The church is named as St John's Church because the place was located in the midst of complete wilderness when it was built in 1852, says pastor Kunjumon. Incidentally, a brass plaque in the church reads that a man was mauled to death by a bear in 1883. The vast cemetery around the church compound also reveals similar incidents through their epitaphs.

A devastating earthquake in 1905 struck the Kangra Valley, razing most of the buildings to the ground, but the church remained unaffected. It was just the spire and the bell that suffered some damage. However, its stone-slatted roof is often damaged by monkeys, which abound the area.

A new bell, weighing about 600 quintals, and made of nine different metals, was brought from London in 1915. Some burglars once made an attempt to steal the bell, but apparently called off the task considering its heavy weight. They could barely manage to lug it up to the nearby road. Since then, the pastor has put this bell along with the brass reading stand (weighing 150 kilograms) and the oil lamps under lock and key. The oil lamps, imported from Germany, used to illuminate the church instead of the candles.

Ask the pastor for any interesting experiences in this wilderness and he recalls amusingly, "Once on a moon-lit winter night, I was taking a walk around the church with my dog. I suddenly saw a huge dog-like figure blocking our path at a distance. My usually shy dog started barking. The figure menacingly started moving towards us. To my utter shock, I discovered that it was a leopard. On instinct, I threw the torch at him with full force and it vanished into the deep, dark forests."

The 55-year-old jovial pastor Kunjumon continues to follow God's will and is happy serving this wonder for the last 20 years now. Twice every year, he offers a feast of chicken curry with rice to several beggars living in the area.

MANPREET SINGH



WHITE BEAUTY

Warm soul and a colourful character

There was seamless white landscape as far as my eyes could see. The sheer whiteness of the land, which made me a little cautious about leaving my footprints behind, the sparkling salt frozen under my feet, the wild expanse which bears no vegetation and that was suddenly transformed into an enthralling sight with the sunrise, left every one of us in awe. The White Rann in Gujarat, an incredible sight, is a salty marsh that has been left behind by the receding seas.

Stretches of *jungle* babool that dot the landscape, rows of castor fields, sunflower beds, saltpans on either side of the road, herds of camel carts transporting men and goods, *chihakada* (improvised motorcycles), a popular means of transportation, cattle grazing in the vast expanse of land tended by herdsmen, women in their traditional *chaniya choli* moving in groups, cattle crossing the road that can bring the traffic to a halt, is what defines Kutch.



Kutch brings to mind embroidered, bright-hued fabric with intricate hand-woven patterns, inimitable jewellery and a wide range of handcrafted articles. The sight of cattle grazing in large tracts of land is an indispensable part of the Kutch landscape, which boasts of a huge livestock population, and is one of the main sources of their livelihood for the locals.

The place is home to nomadic tribes of *Rabaris*, *Ahirs*, *Jats*, *Maaldharis* and the *Meghwal* community. The picturesque artisan villages of Banni, a traditional Rabari house called *Bhunga*, the market area in Bhuj district, rich and vivid colours of tie-dye fabric that form the tapestry of Dhamadaka village, Kachchi pots with its distinct patterns — all make Kutch picture perfect.

Local textiles and costumes lend Kutch its character. Intricate embroidery and mirror work, which is distinct to each community in the region, helps distinguish Kachchi

people. For, Jat women wear only red or black *chunis*, while the women from Rabari community dress up with open blouses or *cholis* with *odhanis* to cover their head. *Chaniya choli* is what women wear here throughout the year, and they come in myriad designs and a wide spectrum of colours. *Abha* and *kanjari* complete the Kachchhi costume. *Abha* is the typical *choli* worn by women folk. It is a top garment or a mantle. A long blouse with beautiful sequins and mirror work is *kanjari*.

Large stretches of saline expanses, hills of moderate height, sandy plains and mud flats, which form the predominant terrain of the Kutch region, is home to a variety of wild fauna. Wild ass, which is not to be mistaken with ordinary domesticated donkey, is found only in Little Rann. It is taller than the ordinary donkey and mightier than many species of racehorses. A herbivore, it has the features of a majestic race ass and can never be domesticated. Kutch is also

home to the great Indian bustard, leopards, hyenas, jackals, chinkaras, flamingoes and a variety of bird species which are mainly migratory.

In addition to its interesting landscapes, colourful fairs, and rare species of animals and birds, Kutch is a treasure trove of rich culture, art and heritage. The district produces salt in large quantities and has the distinction of housing the first general free trade zone of the country — Kandla.

Home to world famous embroidery, art and handcrafted works, block printed fabric, leather work, silverware, ornaments, incomparable natural phenomena interesting geographical locations, the district offers tremendous potential for tourism.

The annual *Kachehh Ranotsav*, the desert festival, is a step in the right direction to boost tourism in the state. Also, it is an ingenious way of showcasing Kutch's rich culture to the world — a place where art is

an integral part of human existence.

It is a place where world-class art blooms beautifully against the background of a harsh physical environment.

R S RANJEETHA URS

Travel tips

Travel junkies can also explore the following places which are in and around Kutch:

- Dholavira
- Swaminarayan Temple in Bhuj
- Koteswar
- Mandvi Palace
- Roha Fort
- Kera Temple
- Lakhpatri
- Mundra port
- Pingleshwar Beach
- Mandvi Beach
- Tapakeshwari