

LXV – 65@65

Stanley Ulijaszek - 65 outdoor swims at the age of 65

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Swim #22, Lido in Venezia



Since I am including the Lido in my list of permissible places to do '65@65', the opportunity to do '65@65' at the world's very first lido was not to be missed. Pauline was coming to Venice to row. I was her drag-along. I could only slow her down, as ballast. Lovely to have time, share breakfast and dinner at the start and the end of the day, things get serious when the call of the Venetian rowing comes, usually by 9am, then oars and forclas at the ready, it is time for serious physical work and pleasure to begin. My intention on this trip – to go to the Venice Biennale, and hopefully swim. The lido called me on the first night. Yes there was dinner, but yes there was the lido, and the sun setting and the moon rising. 'Save me pudding' I said, and to the river / lagoon sea bus / vaporetto I went. The sun going down, the sea becoming a very Venice / Turner sky, every Venice sunset cliché played out on the boat ride. Every cliché justified when seen in real life. But the idea of real life is problematic in a crumbly disintegrating and marvellous chalk and pink and grey and blue way – what you see is wonderful while at the same time sad, decaying. Life and death again. Death in Venice – the book, by Thomas Mann, the movie of the book, directed by Visconti, both set on the Lido de Venezia. All in mind as the boat berthed at the Lido. My plan was not to die, nor to contract the plague, or cholera, or any of the diseases known to have ravaged the city. I was here to swim.

And swim I did. A short walk across what seems to be the main street of the lido, lined with expensive shops, cheap as chip shops, pizza and ice cream to go, some decent looking restaurants and art nouveau hotels and houses. To the Lido – a wide beach stretching for miles, and more hotels, top of the range for the 1920s, not so much now. The once fabulous Hotel De Bains, is boarded up, not so fabulous now. It will be turned into luxury apartments; Thomas Mann stayed regularly, and made the Des Bains the setting for *Death In Venice*. What will happen to all the art nouveau in this building? Not a question I can answer; water calls. A short walk along the Marconi Waterfront (named after a famous electric Italian – did he stay there too? Don't know) to a nicely appointed jetty / waterbreak, after walking over a sand bank (artificial, maintained to protect against the tidal surges, especially in Springtime). Spring time surges bring our last visit to Venice to mind – last Springtime, indeed. The striking image I have is of being in the Gran Caffè Lavena, where Wagner liked to hang out when in Venice. Aperol spritz time – people in fine clothes and wearing gum boots to protect their clothes from the 3 inches of water that covered the marble floor of very finely decorated café. Doesn't seem right to me. The sand bank was maybe 5 high, and I would guess it did the job, at least for now.

Some history - in 1177, the Treaty of Venice was signed here between Emperor Frederick Barbarossa and Pope Alexander the Third here, after Fredericks' Lombard League was defeated by the Holy Roman Empire in 1176 – 'don't mess with Catholicism' I thought. The Lombards got on with the Pope at the First Crusade (1095-1099), but fell out after the second (11045 to 1149). How The lido must have seemed then, I cannot imagine. Venice was an important port of call and billeting place for the crusades, and crusaders in their thousands camped at the lido. Again, a far cry from the playground of the leisure classes of the early twentieth century. The rise of the leisure classes and their ready money was a prime reason for developing the Lido as a playground for adults (and their children, if they had them). The first sea bathing facility was established here in 1857, the first in the world. The lido soon became "The Lido", a term for a beach resort much more broadly, but especially in the United Kingdom.

Lots of fun things have happened at the Venice Lido, and to some extent still do – the Venice Film Festival, for example. It is still a place to visit from the main island of Venice, but also a place where many Venetians live. Hence the really good river / lagoon sea bus / vaporetto service. I was at the jetty, changing, talking to people, in a rush, 'mustn't miss the twilight / twi-night'. I love the twilight for swimming, for me it is very special, where ever I might be, swimming. This was a very special twi-night, the best time to swim out, as the sun was setting and moon rising, swimming not just in water but in Venice light. Very special, Venice twi-night swim. Very privileged to be here. Doing 65@65 has again taken me somewhere I would perhaps not have striven to go to, and the outcome has been a very special evening indeed.