

Venice, Italy

By Tom Kirvan

Vogalonga

ANNUAL ROWING EVENT CELEBRATES HERITAGE OF AN EXTRAORDINARY CITY

Each spring, as the canals of Venice shimmer under the early summer sun, thousands of rowers from around the world gather for one of the city's most beloved traditions: the Vogalonga.

Scheduled this year for Sunday, May 24, the event is far more than a rowing regatta – it is a vibrant celebration of Venetian heritage, community, and the enduring relationship between the city and its waterways.

Unlike competitive races driven by speed and medals, the Vogalonga is a non-competitive procession that emphasizes participation over victory. First held in 1974, the event was created as a response to the growing number of motorboats in Venice's canals, which were causing damaging waves and eroding the city's fragile foundations. What began as a protest has since evolved into an annual festival that champions human-powered boating and preserves the traditions of Venetian rowing.

The course stretches approximately 18 miles, winding through the Venetian Lagoon, around nearby islands, and back into the heart of the city. Participants set off from the iconic St. Mark's Basin, passing landmarks such as the Doge's Palace and the Campanile before heading out toward Burano, Murano, and other picturesque islands. The route offers a rare and breathtaking perspective of Venice, one that blends its architectural grandeur with the serene beauty of the lagoon.

What truly sets the Vogalonga apart is its inclusivity. There are no restrictions on boat types, aside from not being motorized, and the event welcomes everything from traditional Venetian gondolas and sandolos to kayaks, dragon boats, and even elaborate homemade vessels. Rowers of all ages and skill levels take part, united by a shared appreciation for the city and its maritime culture. The diversity of boats creates a colorful and eclectic flotilla that stretches for miles, turning the lagoon into a medley of shapes, sounds, and stories.

The pageantry, while less formal than that of events like Royal Ascot in Great Britain, is no less captivating. Many participants embrace the festive spirit by dressing in costumes, flying flags, or decorating their boats. Spectators line the canals, cheering on rowers as they glide past historic palaces and under centuries-old bridges. The atmosphere is both celebratory and deeply communal, reflecting the unique character of Venice itself.

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Beyond its cultural significance, the Vogalonga plays an important role in raising awareness about environmental preservation. By promoting rowing and discouraging motorized traffic – if only for a day – the event highlights the impact of boat-generated waves on Venice's delicate infrastructure. It serves as a reminder of the need to protect the city's waterways, which are not only central to its identity but also vital to its survival.

Economically, the Vogalonga provides a meaningful boost to Venice and the surrounding region. The influx of participants and visitors supports local hotels, restaurants, and small businesses, particularly in the days leading up to the event. Artisans, boat-makers, and rowing clubs also benefit from increased interest in traditional crafts and equipment. While it may not carry the same level of global commercial attention as larger sporting events, its impact is felt deeply within the local community.

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of the Vogalonga is its ability to connect past and present. In a city often defined by its history, the event keeps Italian traditions alive, allowing both residents and visitors to experience Venice as it once was – quiet, rhythmic, and powered by human effort rather than engines.

As rowers dip their oars into the lagoon this May, they will be participating in more than just a journey through water. They will be part of a movement that celebrates heritage, fosters community, and advocates for the preservation of one of the world's most extraordinary cities.

