

# CHARTER

# Venice BY WATER TAXI

Elegant, traditional, yet essentially practical, Venice's water taxis not only provide luxurious transport around the city but also enhance its unique style, especially at carnival time. *Gary Blake* takes a trip and visits Serenella island to meet a craftsman boatbuilder



Masks are said to save revellers from embarrassment



The best-kept taxis get the most lucrative work



The sliding roof allows passengers a grand view of the city

Despite probably the highest fares in Europe – €1.30 per minute plus a €10 starting tariff, and about to go up – Venice's water taxis are the city's preferred means of travel, and never more so than in February during its carnival. Abolished by Napoleon Bonaparte in 1797, the pre-Lenten carnival with its elaborate masks has become a major tourist event since its reintroduction in the 1980s.

And it's Venice's popularity among tourists that has caused the city's water taxi to become a cult. For instance, when Elton John leaves his mansion on the Lido di Venezia, he likes to travel traditionally, and for many years he has always ordered the same water taxi.

Conceptually somewhere between a captain's tender and an old Riva, they have changed as little as Venice itself over the years. The hard-chine hull shape with vee in front, flattening out to a planing hull aft, has evolved to suit Venetian conditions.

Famously, the most beautiful taxis come from one of the oldest shipyards, Serenella, based on an island of the same name just a mile away from the city. In the Serenella yard, modern times are still years away. The finish and coatings are one of 63-year-old yard owner Elio Salvagno's secrets. The hulls are built from three cold-moulded layers, the last of immaculate sapele mahogany laminated lengthwise in order to create the impression of a traditionally-planked boat.

The flanks of the cabin are sawn, again from sapele, and to prevent bleaching in the sun every piece of wood receives firstly two layers of epoxy resin then nine layers of two-component lacquer, finally followed by a single layer of Epifanes.

Only Serenella and a handful of other yards are still building water taxis, and from concept they are intended as classic tenders with a driver. Passengers enter over steps from either side into the cockpit,

which is situated well forward, so that the driver can assist without leaving the wheel. To the rear the small cabin extends with a back window, which can be lowered, and a glass roof which can be slid forward – in former times by hand, but today electrically. Thus, one travels as in a landaulet from the 50s through the city in the lagoon, passing rows of palaces. A closed world, despite the proximity of the houses and people reflected in the immaculate brightwork. For those outside, the taxi is part of the attraction, constantly photographed, but inside one can close the windows, still seeing the city, but leaving it remote.

With these boats one can travel in a way that is prevented by modern taxis with their engines at the rear. With the engine located next to the driver in the forepeak of the boat, the cabin aft is left free for the passengers, together with a small cockpit in the stern from which one can observe the city. One such boat is the *Lajpi Milano*,

built in 1963, classically planked and equipped with a cantankerous 200hp, four-cylinder petrol engine which enables her to creep through the city. High speeds are in any event forbidden in order to reduce wave impact.

The old lady is rarely used even though the *piave mastacafiora* – the skipper – Maurizio Rossi is permanently on hand. It is a popular vehicle with ministers from Rome who are attending meetings in Venice. This city treasure, though, is lacking cash for a professional restoration. The interior, with its scruffy lounge chairs, still originates from the 1960s.

Such neglect would be inconceivable to Elio Salvagno: the best-maintained boats will get the most lucrative jobs. On the quiet, taxi drivers talk about turning over €200,000 a year. This should guarantee demand for Serenella's taxis for the next few decades – by when Elio's son Andrea will have taken over the yard.