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Travel

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Venice's Redentore Church Opens its Garden to the Public

The once closed-off space opened on October 31st, with the authorization of the Holy See



Italian Hours

Lucy Gordan



The "Garden's" fountain, featuring papyrus stalks (Photo: Lucy Gordan)

Because Venice was dependent on trade, usually by sea, its inhabitants were frequent victims of the bubonic plague. The worst outbreaks occurred in 1348, from 1575-77, and in 1630.

In 1575 the city was caught unprepared because the small number of early cases unexpectedly arrived from the mainland, not the sea. Family physicians correctly diagnosed these, but professors of medicine in nearby Padua and the city Government denied they were the plague until a year later, when, on July 31st, it finally declared the first lockdown ever. When the situation didn't improve, the Doge and the Senate vowed to erect "a temple in the name of Christ" and miraculously the epidemic ended, but only after killing 50,726 Venetians or one third of the population.

The architect of this votive church on the large island "Giudecca", *La Chiesa del Santissimo Redentore* (Church of the Most Holy Redeemer) was the widely-esteemed Andrea Palladio. Its façade was inspired by the Pantheon in Rome, the 15 steps to reach the church's entrance a direct reference to the Temple of Jerusalem.

Giovanni Trevisan, the Patriarch of Venice, laid the cornerstone on May 3, 1577, but the church wasn't consecrated until 1592, when Pope Gregory XIII entrusted it to the Order of Friars Minor Capuchin, which since 1539 had officiated a small church, *Santa Maria degli Angeli* nearby, today part of the *Redentore* complex.



A view of the Redentore from the "garden". (Photo: Lucy Gordan)

The "Giudecca" had always been Venice's garden and farm island, so the Capuchins planted their own "garden". They kept it for themselves for over 400 years opening it to the public for the first time on October 31. For now open until March 31, 2025 on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays from 10 AM to 4:30 PM, the entrance fees are 12 euros for tourists, 6 euros for residents of Venice and children from 6 to 12 years old. Otherwise, residents of Venice can choose to pay 30 euros a year for an unlimited entrance card. It's free for clergy, children under 5 years old and the disabled plus helper. The best way to reach *Il Redentore* by public transportation is via the *vaporetto* 2, which stops just outside.

The 1-hectare garden runs from the church's apse to the lagoon. Over the centuries its several buildings: meditation chapels, workshops, a greenhouse, and an apiary had gradually fallen into disrepair, but the garden suffered devastating damage from the "acqua alta", the record 187cm (6 feet, 2 inches) high tide on November 12, 2019.

To remedy this disaster, on May 19, 2021 the Friars, with the authorization of the Holy See and of the Superintendency of Archeology, Fine Arts and Landscape for Venice and its Lagoon, entrusted the garden's restoration to the Venice Gardens Foundation Project. Created in 2014 by the *torinese* once practicing lawyer Adele Re Rebaudengo "to

restore and conserve parks, gardens, and places of historic and cultural interest", the Foundation's first project had been the restoration of the *Giardini Reali* (Royal Gardens) in *Piazza San Marco*.

"Less than two weeks after the completion of the Royal Gardens project in 2019", Re Rebaudengo recounted at the opening's press preview, "I rang the *Redentore* monastery's doorbell to propose this second project. I was sure they'd judge me crazy, but instead after long discussions, and bureaucratic and legal negotiations, the Holy See gave the Foundation a 22-year concession."

Although open to the public, this garden isn't your usual park with playgrounds. Rather it's a place to meditate and find inner peace. Future planned activities include concerts, poetry readings, book presentations, art and photographic exhibitions, and a café with dishes prepared from the garden's seasonal produce.



Adele Re Rebaudengo with Paolo Pejrone. (Photo courtesy of the Venetian Gardens Foundation)

Archival research, predominantly in the *Redentore*'s archive and Venice's library *La Marciana*, uncovered documentation and drawings of the original garden, so the project was entrusted to the world-famous landscape architect Paolo Pejrone, who'd, for examples, restored the gardens of the Roman church *Santa Croce in Gerusalemme* and the *Giardini Reali*, and to architect Alessandra Raso for the buildings' reconstruction.

The project cost approximately EUR 5,500,000 or c. 6 million dollars. Europe's PNRR (National Recovery and Resilience Plan), Next Generation EU provided EUROS 2,200,000; cultural foundations, businesses, and generous private benefactors donated the remaining funds; many individuals adopted trees and benches.

The garden accommodates 2,504 plants: 52 trees, thirty being cypresses purposefully brought here from Tuscany; 240 shrubs; 684 herbaceous, 1,520 flowering, and 8 aquatic plants. These include an olive grove, an orchard of fruit trees, a fountain with water lilies, seasonal vegetable plots, an arbor, and an herb garden also with medicinal plants once the source of the *Redentore*'s pharmacy, as well as a pittosporum garden essential for the garden's honey production.

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Lucy Gordan
Italian Hours

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