

# Hemingway's Italy

TEXT: RICHARD CARRIERO | PHOTOS: LEE COURSEY AND CORBIS

Ernest Hemingway was the first writer to make me care about literature. I sensed in his clean prose a worldview with which I could immediately identify. He loved sports; he loved the beauty of nature; he had a dreadful fascination with war.

I wanted to be just like him. When I began traveling in Europe, I brought along his novels. I compared what his work made me see with what I could see for myself.

In no place have I felt closer to Hemingway's vision than in Italy. It was in Italy that he received his formative experiences, and about Italy that he wrote some of his best work. He came to Milan just as his career was beginning, and had his youthful illusions ripped away by life's harshest realities. Many years later, by a riverbank in the Veneto, he made peace with his war.

After a brief career writing for the *Kansas City Star*, Hemingway left the United States in 1918 to volunteer as an ambulance driver on the Italian front. He was only eighteen. When he arrived in Europe, the titanic struggle between Italy and Austria was finally nearing its end. The year before, the Austrians, reinforced by Germany, had driven the Italian army back to a defensive position along the Piave River, just outside of Venice. But by 1918, the Italians, supplied by the allies, were just gearing up for the offensive that would finally win the war.

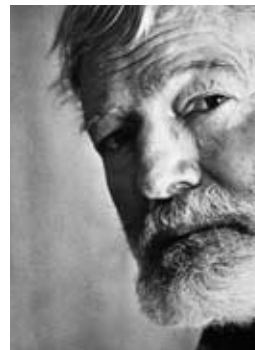
I read Hemingway's great war novel, *A Farewell to Arms*, when I was sixteen; it was my first Hemingway. The novel tells the story of Frederick Henry, an American who joins the Italian ambulance corps in 1916. Henry meets and falls in love with the beautiful nurse, Catherine Barkley. He is badly wounded by mortar fire during a major offensive and is later taken to Milan, where Catherine helps him recuperate. Eventually, transferred back to the front, he becomes separated from his unit during the massive defeat of 1917 and is almost executed for desertion. Henry escapes Italy with Catherine, who is now pregnant, into Switzerland, where she later dies in childbirth.

*A Farewell to Arms* is largely based on Hemingway's life.

Through the chaotic fighting against the Austrians, the author underwent a number of profound psychological shocks. He disembarked in Paris in June of 1918, while German artillery shells were falling on the city. Soon after he came to Milan, a munitions factory exploded and the young ambulance driver was pulling bodies, many of them women, from the rubble.

On July 8, 1918, while delivering supplies to men at the front, Hemingway was struck by mortar fire. Though injured, he carried a soldier to safety and was wounded again by machine gun fire. Like his character, Hemingway had a short-lived affair with an American nurse, Agnes Von Kurowsky, while convalescing in a Milan hospital. Hemingway's love affair, however, did not end with the death of his lover in childbirth; rather, after planning their engagement, she left him for an Italian officer. The vignette "A Very Short Story" offers a brutally succinct account of his relationship with Agnes.

I first visited Milan in December of 2008, determined to contrast the city with what I saw in the novel. The wealth



**Ernest Hemingway, american writer and journalist, whose works are classics of American literature:**

*The Sun Also Rises*

*A Farewell to Arms*

*The Old Man and the Sea*

*For Whom the Bell Tolls*

[www.hemingwayhome.com](http://www.hemingwayhome.com)



Hotel Gritti Palace



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and high fashion of Milan is immediately palpable, but the city itself is a neat and rather staid metropolis, reminiscent of Munich or Vienna. Milano Centrale, the most dominant landmark in Milan, is a soaring structure on par with a cathedral, but Hemingway never saw it, as the station was built by Mussolini as part of the dictator's vision of a new Roman Empire. Hemingway's Milan does, however, linger in a few buildings. The Red Cross Hospital, at Via Alessandro Manzoni 10, still stands. It's a nondescript brownish-grey three story structure on a fashionable street boasting boutiques, cobblestones, and a streetcar. The building, with a security camera monitoring the vaulted entryway, is actually perfectly suited to its current existence as a Banco Popolare, and doesn't strongly resonate with images of wartime and romance. As his surgically repaired knee improved, Hemingway would go for walks with Agnes at the Galleria Vittorio Emanuele II. This prototype of the modern shopping mall was erected in 1877. From a distance, it looks like a museum with massive archways at the entrance. Once inside, however, you get the feeling of being in a greenhouse, an effect created by the soaring glass and cast-iron vaulted ceiling. The "streets" are lined with ornate street lamps and some of the finest fashion boutiques Milan has to offer. It's easy to imagine Hemingway, the nineteen-year-old decorated war hero (and the first American wounded in World War I) walking along with his girl, giddy from his first real romance and Italy's infectious charm. Ninety years later, browsing Prada and Versace's finery or sipping espresso at one of the Galleria's "outdoor" cafes, visitors can poignantly tap into the opulent magnificence of Milan. Hemingway did not return to Italy until September of 1948. He visited Fossalta di Piave, a village in the Veneto about 40 miles from Venice, where he was wounded during the war. After some searching, the author was able to locate the place along a bend of the Piave where the mortar shell struck.

From that time, Hemingway became a frequent visitor to Venice. Most of *Across the River and Into the Trees* takes place in the city. The story, set shortly after World War II, is about a U.S. Army colonel who spends his final hours—before a strongly foreshadowed death from a heart ailment—frequenting the city's luxurious hotels, bars, and restaurants along with his love, a young Venetian countess. The novel partly chronicles Hemingway's recollections as an embedded journalist with the U.S. Army during the liberation of Europe, and partly describes the author's impressions of Venice.

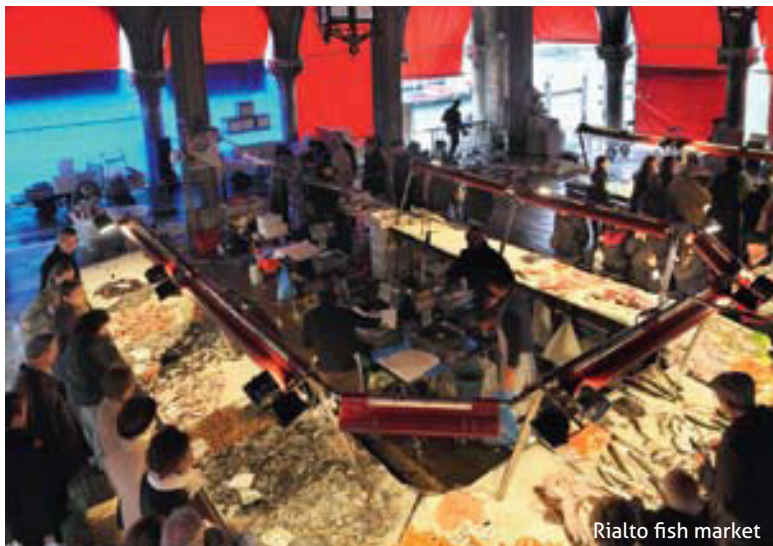
*Across the River and Into the Trees* names several of Hemingway's favorite Venetian haunts. Harry's Bar figures prominently in the story; in an interview, Hemingway claimed that the plot of the novel came to him in a haze one day while he was drinking at Harry's. Opened in 1931, the small bar has attracted Italian literati and prominent expats from Toscanini to Woody Allen. Although Harry's has become a global franchise with locations in Paris, Rome, New York, and Amsterdam, the original is an unassuming corner saloon located in a small white building on the corner of Calle Vallaresso, near the San Marco vaporetto station. The interior has a short, granite topped bar and only a few tables and booths. Without Hemingway's influence, it's doubtful whether anybody would have ever noticed the place. Today, Harry's is famous for inventing beef carpaccio, the Bellini, and the extra dry Montgomery martini—fifteen parts Gordon's gin to one part Noilly Prat vermouth—which Hemingway formulated and named after the British general Bernard Montgomery (who preferred a 15:1 advantage in troop strength before battle).

Another landmark is the Hotel Gritti Palace. Built during the sixteenth century for a Venetian Doge, the five-star *albergo* on the Grand Canal serves as a luxurious backdrop for many of the scenes in *Across the River and Into the Trees*. Hemingway's time in Venice could not contrast more





Harry's Bar



Rialto fish market

## OUTLOOK / TRAVEL

markedly with his youth in Milan. By 1948 the author was middle aged, wealthy, and world-famous. He had served in one war and covered three others as a reporter. He was thrice divorced and drank too much. *Across the River and Into the Trees* was actually his first novel to receive bad reviews. At the same time, this book is a great piece of travel writing: Hemingway's descriptions of the Rialto fish market, for example, have a vivid crispness that beats looking back at my own catalogue of digital photos. He writes, "A market is the closest thing to a good museum like the Prado or as the Accademia is now. ...spread on the slippery stone floor, were the heavy, gray-green lobsters with their magenta overtones that presaged their death in boiling water... The small soles looked like boat-tailed bullets, dignified in death, and with the huge eye of the pelagic fish."

Hemingway's Venice shimmers like sunlight reflected off the Grand Canal. His lean, visual style has always been something to strive for every time I put pen to paper. However, Hemingway did more than just describe.

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