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Gondolas and Gondoliers

The gondola is an ancient boat native to Venice and it is the only ancient style of boat still commonly used today. The gondola is designed for the transportation of people and can typically fit a maximum of six passengers. Traditionally, a family owned a gondola for personal usage. Today the most widespread usage of the gondola is for small groups of tourists to sightsee in Venice.¹

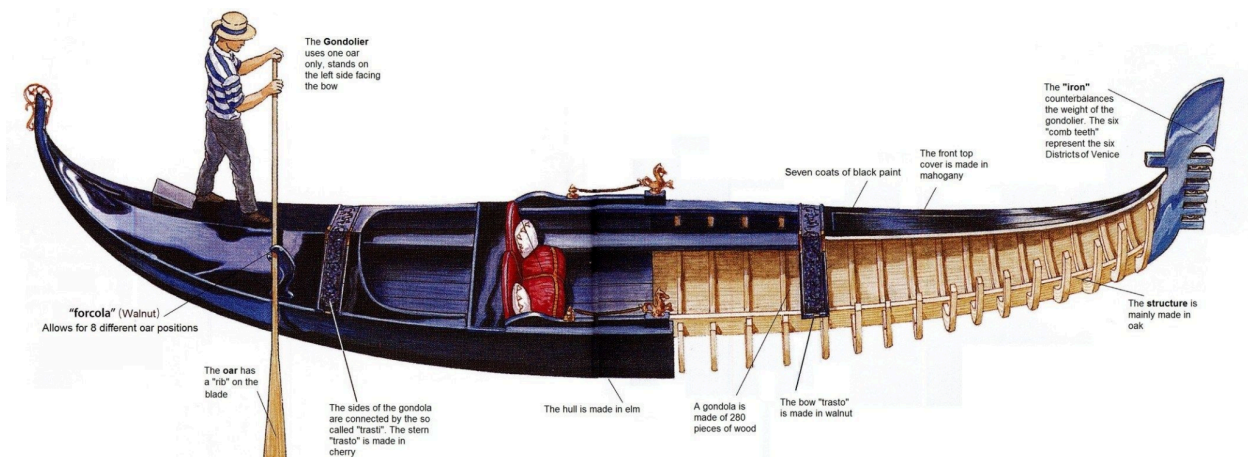


Figure 1. A diagram of a gondola, including the position in which the gondolier stands and where different woods are used in the boat.

Each gondola is made for the height and weight of its gondolier, causing deviations between gondolas. They are up to 11m (36ft) long and 1.6m (5.25ft) wide, they weigh 500-700 kg (1102-1543 lbs). Gondolas are flat-bottomed with long banana-like curves. They are hand-made using eight types of wood: lime, oak, mahogany, walnut, cherry, fir, larch, and elm.

¹ Piero Pazzi, *Gondole & Gondolieri*. Venice, 2005.

In 2013 the production of a gondola cost 38,000 euros and the oars cost up to 1,000 euros.²

Gondolas seat up to six, with a small loveseat in front of the gondolier, moveable wooden chairs in the middle, and a small seat facing the gondolier.

At the front of the ship there is an iron pronged prow, built to serve as a counterweight to the gondolier. There are many contradicting theories about what this symbol may mean, with no official consensus. The six comb teeth on the iron represent the six districts of Venice. The symbol of the iron now stands on its own as a symbol of Venice itself.

As of April 18, 1633 gondolas are standardized to be a black. This decision followed the plague of 1630 and was implemented to get rid of excessive decorations. An exception to this rule is made for the Patriarch who is allowed to use a gondola with a golden *felze*.³ *Felze* are a cabin for the gondola that provide privacy to those traveling. They became unpopular following the 1633 ruling, but still appear in winter to protect passengers from harsh weather.

To row, gondoliers stand on a raised platform at the back of the boat and both steer and propel the boat with the single oar. The gondolier keeps the oar at their right side and rows with the full force of their body. Gondoliers are able to rest their oar in the *fôrcola*, a small wooden notch that allows different rowing and steering positions. Larger gondolas known as *traghetti* (ferries) are used to cross the grand canal. Two rowers are employed and the second rows from the front, while the rower on the stern acts as a propeller or helmsman. This dual method of rowing may be used on a typical gondola for faster transportation.⁴

² Isla Binnie, "Venice gondola builders strive to keep tradition alive," *Reuters*, October 22, 2013. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-italy-gondolas-idUSBRE99L0GH20131022/>.

³ Piero Pazzi, *Gondole & Gondolieri*. 300.

⁴ Dario Camuffo, "The Gondola: a boat to respond to the history, and the morpho-dynamics of the Venice Lagoon," *Méditerranée*, 122 (2014): <https://doi.org/10.4000/mediterranee.14364>.



Figure 2. Giorgia Boscolo, the first fully licensed female gondolier of Venice rows a traghetto full of passengers.

The modern gondolier uniform consists of a red or blue striped t-shirt or polo in the summer, the winter uniform consists of a sweater with the same stripes. Gondoliers wear black pants and may wear a mariners jacket and a straw hat in the summer or beret in the winter.⁵

Historically gondoliers were men or slaves. Alex Hai is regarded as the first female gondolier, and began as an apprentice in 1996. Hai failed to pass licensing tests, and began to offer services privately. Hai came out as a transgender male in 2017 and is the first openly transgender gondolier. In 2010 Giorgia Boscolo became the first fully licensed female gondolier.⁶

⁵Piero Pazzi, *Gondole & Gondolieri*. 310.

⁶ Angela Giuffrida, "Patriarchy on the canal: why is there only one female gondolier in Venice?" *The Guardian*, June 29, 2017. <https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/jun/29/venice-female-gondolier-patriarchy-canal>.

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