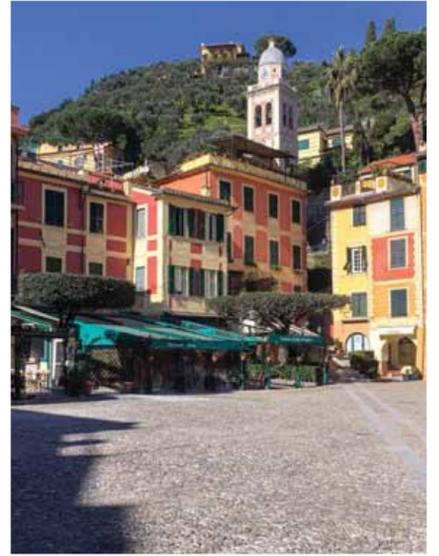




File photo shows boats and houses in the city of Varenna, on Lake Como in Lombardy. — AFP photos



File photo shows boats and houses in the city of Varenna, on Lake Como in Lombardy.



File photo shows a deserted Piazza Martiri dell'Olivetta in Portofino, south of Genoa.

FROM VENICE TO LAKE COMO, ITALY'S TOURIST GEMS FIGHT TO STAY AFLOAT

Just over a year into the pandemic, Venice remains a ghost town. Portofino, a colorful playground for the jet-set on the Ligurian coast, and Varenna on the shores of Lake Como are also deserted. The coronavirus has taken a heavy toll on tourism in Italy, the world's fifth-most visited destination—and with a third wave now under way, there is no obvious end in sight. The collapse in the number of tourists to Italy was jaw-dropping last year, with only 25.5 million foreign visitors spending at least one night in the peninsula, versus 65 million in 2019 — a drop of more than 60 percent.

That corresponded to revenue of only 17.45 billion euros (\$20.6 billion), 26.85 billion euros less than the prior year, according to new figures from the Bank of Italy. "The situation is really dramatic and everything must be done to revive a sector so vital for our country," said the president of the Italian Union of Chambers of Commerce, Carlo Sangalli. Nearly 100,000 companies in Italy's tourism sector are at risk of bankruptcy, according to the research institute Demoskopika, with a potential loss of 440,000 jobs.

'No George Clooney'

"The year 2020 was catastrophic for



File photo shows the Grand Canal is pictured from the Accademia bridge in Venice, as the carnival is being cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

us," said Marina Denti, owner of a leather store in Varenna, a picturesque fishing village on Lake Como. She is still sorely lacking in foreign customers, especially big-spending Americans, an absence that saw her turnover drop by 80 percent last year. "Even George Clooney doesn't

come anymore with this pandemic," she said, referring to the area's most famous homeowner, proprietor of an opulent villa on the other side of the lake, in Laglio. Before coronavirus swept across the country and beyond, tourism accounted for nearly 14 percent of gross domestic

product for Italy, the eurozone's third-largest economy.

The collapse of this key economic driver, with hotels and restaurants closed for months on end, helped plunge the country last year into the worst recession since World War II. To try to get things moving again, Italian railroads are offering "COVID free" high-speed rail links between Rome and Milan beginning in early April, a first in Europe. All staff and passengers will be tested before boarding. The airline Alitalia launched a similar initiative last year on some domestic and international flights. The mayors of Venice and Florence, cradles of art and history, meanwhile have joined forces to demand urgent aid from the government, claiming that without these two cities back on their feet, Italy will not recover.

Bleak outlook -

"Deprived of tourists, Venice has become a dead city like Pompeii, it's sad when you walk down the street," said Anna Bigai, one of the city's tour guides, who has only done a dozen guided tours over the past year. Throughout Italy, overnight stays of foreign tourists fell by 54 percent to 184.1 million in 2020 and the outlook for 2021 remains bleak.

"International tourism in Italy should not return to pre-pandemic levels before 2023," warned the director of the national tourism agency, Giorgio Palmucci. Even Portofino, a popular destination for celebrities and billionaires from all over the world, has not been spared. Its Rolex and Christian Dior stores remain desperately empty, waiting for the return of rich foreign customers. "In 2020, we had the worst year in a decade," sighed Emanuela Cattaneo, owner of a wine bar on the port, lamenting the absence of American and English customers. Still, a few rare foreign tourists have enjoyed the unusual calm. Rainer Lippert from Heidelberg, Germany, came to Milan, where he and his family were admiring the view from the roof of the city's Gothic Duomo.

"It's fantastic to be here when there are not so many people around," he said. "Given the circumstances it's the best choice we could make." As if to hammer home the challenges faced by Italy's tourist sites, within days of Lippert's visit, the Duomo was once again closed for coronavirus restrictions. — AFP



Musicians make a Manhattan storefront their stage

After a year that saw concert venues go dark and stages moved online, an empty storefront in New York has offered a glimmer of hope to artists and audiences ravenous for live music. Musicians across the genres are performing pop-up concerts on Manhattan's Upper West Side for lucky passersby: on a recent morning it was Beethoven and Debussy that harmonized with a city soundscape normally dominated by car horns, construction work and pigeon coos. It marked the first time Michael Katz, a cellist, was able to play with piano accompaniment in a year; Spencer Myer performed on a white Steinway in an experience he said musicians worldwide have been "starved for."

Perhaps more importantly, the "Musical Storefronts" shows provide an opportunity to interact with an audience, even if they're watching through a window from the sidewalk instead of seated in any number of the city's storied halls. "It's really a reciprocal relationship that we need," Katz said. "Being able to bring the music to people like we did today is really something unique and special." The location of performances isn't broadcast-organizers don't want large crowds gathering for social-distancing reasons—but the series, which began in late winter, will run through the spring, offering ample opportunity to catch a show.

Runners with dogs, parents pushing strollers and elder New Yorkers out for afternoon walks were among the audience members who stopped by for the recent program that also included Mendelssohn

and Boulanger. "We're trying to have some of everything... from classical musicians to people from Broadway, jazz; we've had experimental improvisers," said Kate Sheeran, who directs the Kaufman Music Center behind the series. Along with entertainment, the project aims "to really showcase the artistic engine of New York City, and shed light on the fact that artists need work, and this issue needs attention."

Food, water and music

The rapid spread of Covid-19 gripped the largest US city more than a year ago, leaving more than 30,000 residents dead and crippling the livelihoods of many more. Musicians were among those hard-hit, reduced to virtual performances and online lessons as the viral spread grounded tours and closed venues—some forever. "Our industry has been really devastated, and especially performing artists; lives have been impacted severely," Sheeran told AFP.

"We hope that this sheds a light on that, in addition to providing joy for both the artists and the audience." A few months after New York's vaccination campaign kicked off, more than a third of adults have received at least one dose—and there's hope in the air for musicians eager to get back onstage. "One of the lessons from the pandemic is just how much people just hunger for and need music and theater and dance and any sort of live art that you can encounter personally," Katz said.

"It's something people need, the same way that they need food and water. It's not just entertainment. It's not just a commodity." For Terry Lieberman, who stopped by to soak in the classical show, the series is a balm as the pandemic slogs on—and a testament to New York's resilience. "New York is always like that—they always improvise when something bad happens," Lieberman said from behind her floral mask. "They always rally, and they come back, and this is just wonderful." — AFP

BELARUS BLASTS EUROVISION BAN AS 'POLITICALLY MOTIVATED'

Belarus has been rejected from participating in this year's Eurovision Song Contest in the Netherlands, with Minsk denouncing the decision as "politically motivated." The European Broadcasting Union said late Friday that "regrettably, Belarus will not be participating" in the May contest in the Dutch city of Rotterdam even after it had submitted a new entry following problems with the original. "It was concluded that the new submission was also in breach of the rules of the competition that ensure the Contest is not instrumentalized or brought into disrepute," the EBU said in a statement on its website, without elaborating.

The group selected to represent Belarus, Galasy Zmesta, offered a first song titled "I Will Teach You," which had prompted a backlash from the Belarus opposition for featuring lyrics like "I will teach you to toe the line". Belarus has been gripped by political unrest since last August, after its strongman leader Alexander Lukashenko claimed a sixth presidential term in a vote the opposition and Western diplomats said was rigged. The election results triggered mass street protests which were met with a violent crackdown that resulted in thousands of protesters detained, at least several protesters killed, and hundreds sentenced to lengthy prison terms.



The European Union then imposed sanctions on Lukashenko and his allies. While Galasy Zmesta's second song was more nuanced, the group's leader was cited as saying by RIA Novosti early Saturday morning that the meaning of its fable about a bunny rabbit, domestic chickens and a fox "is very obvious". This came after Belarus's national broadcaster slammed Eurovision on its Telegram channel late Friday. — AFP



Thailand to lift tourist quarantine for popular beach island

Thailand on Friday announced plans for an experimental quarantine-free model in ultra-popular beach destination Phuket, as the kingdom attempts to resuscitate its pandemic-battered economy. Thailand has imposed massive restrictions visitor arrivals in order to stem coronavirus, but discouraging tourism has led to its economy recording the worst performance since the 1997 Asian financial crisis. The impact has reverberated across the country's services sectors—bruiser entertainment, retail, hotels and restaurants.

Thailand's tourism tsar announced Friday that Phuket—renowned for its sandy beaches and sapphire waters—will be used as a test. Tourists who have been vaccinated will be allowed to travel there without mandatory hotel quarantine. Yuthasak Supasorn, governor of the Tourism Authority of Thailand, said the "Phuket sandbox model" would begin some time from July onwards. Foreign visitors will be required to have had two doses of a COVID-19 vaccine,

a certificate signifying negative test results, and to download a mobile tracking application.

Yuthasak also confirmed that six tourism-reliant cities will have slashed quarantine times for vaccinated travellers beginning next month—including beach resorts Krabi, Ko Samui and Pattaya. Arrivals will undergo a seven-day quarantine period and will be permitted in areas around their hotels—a marked difference for current visitors who are required to stay confined to their rooms for two weeks. The plans still require final approval by the government. Some 40 million tourists were expected to arrive in 2020, but only 6.7 million managed to enter the kingdom, according to data from the Ministry of Tourism and Sports. Thailand's tough approach has kept the coronavirus largely in check—the kingdom has registered about 28,500 cases in a population of 70 million. — AFP