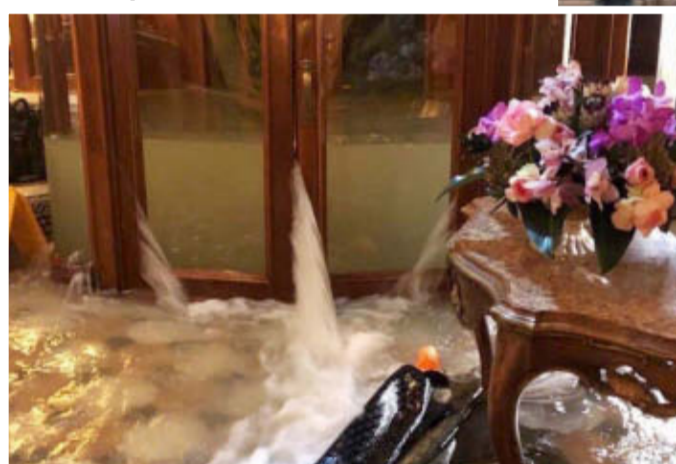


DAY VENICE WENT UNDER

Priceless treasures at risk as highest tide for 53 years hits historic city



Washed up: A water taxi in a side street



Inundated: Water gushes in through the doors of the Gritti Palace luxury hotel

From **Samantha Lock** in Venice

MUCH of Venice was submerged yesterday by the worst floods to hit the historic Italian city for 53 years.

A 6ft tide sent waves surging along the famous canals, inundating streets, squares and centuries-old buildings, including many tourist attractions.

Authorities said the 'apocalyptic' flood, which began on Tuesday night and resulted in at least two deaths, had caused hundreds of millions of euros of damage.

The tide – the highest since 1966 and the second-worst since records began in 1923 – washed gondolas and waterbuses into thoroughfares, wrecked hotels and sent tourists fleeing through rapidly rising waters, floating suitcases in front of them as they went.

Sewage-laden water filled the 12th-century crypt of St Mark's Basilica, swamping priceless

mosaics. Outside in St Mark's Square, tourists waded through waist-high water.

Hotels including the €500-a-night Gritti Palace, known for hosting royals and celebrities, were flooded and the Venice Biennale art exhibition was forced to close.

The body of a man was found in his home and another man, aged 78, was electrocuted on the island of Pellestrina while using an elec-

tric water pump. City mayor Luigi Brugnaro declared a state of disaster, blaming climate change for the catastrophe.

'Venice is on its knees,' he said. 'St Mark's Basilica has sustained serious damage, like the entire city and its islands.'

'We are not just talking about calculating the damages, but of the very future of the city.' He said the flood would leave a

'permanent mark – now the government must listen, these are the effects of climate change'.

Basilica managing director Pierpaolo Camprotrini said: 'We were just a breath away from the apocalypse. The water could have imperilled the columns that hold up the basilica.'

As pumps cleared water from around the altar and under the pink and white stone arches, Carlo

Alberto Tesserin, president of a team that manages the site, said: 'We're talking about millions of euros worth of damage.'

The waters surged into the basilica with a force 'never seen before, not even in the 1966 flood', he said.

Barista Linda Poli, 21, described waking to the sound of water gushing around her bed in her ground-floor apartment. 'I woke up to see my clothes floating next

to me. I took my bag, my ID, my cards and my boots and left.'

Hotel receptionist Isabella Russo, 32, said: 'The whole city has been damaged... not just for tourists but for our businesses, houses and community. It's a global emergency.'

The city stands on thousands of wooden piles. Rising sea levels and heavy cruise ship traffic have eaten away at the surrounding marshes and mudbanks, leaving La Serenis-

sima, as Italians refer to Venice, to sink gradually into the Adriatic.

A 2003 project to protect the city has been plagued by cost overruns, corruption and delays.

The plan involves 78 gates that can be raised to protect Venice's lagoon during high tides – but a recent test caused worrying vibrations, and engineers discovered parts of the barrier had rusted.

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Climate change warning: Venice mayor Luigi Brugnaro wades from St Mark's Square yesterday



Stranded: A vaporetto – one of the city's waterbuses – was swept on to the promenade



Catastrophe: A tourist outside St Mark's Basilica, where damage is estimated at millions of euros

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