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Cultural philanthropy: The new merchants of Venice

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The despoliation of Venice by tourism is well-documented. But, hopes Christopher Wilmot-Sitwell of Cazenove+Loyd, in future the way for tourists to give something back to places such as Venice will lie in cultural philanthropy – in travellers who seek exclusive access giving to people of influence who care about a place passionately. “That’s the expensive but ethically sound alternative to bribing the gatekeeper,” he says. “Track down the world authority and identify the foundation closest to his or her heart.”

In Guatemala, this might mean calling upon archaeologist Dr Richard Hansen to act as a guide to the ruins of El Mirador; in return, the client is asked to donate (\$2,000 per small group) to the El Mirador archaeological programme. For those with deeper pockets, Cazenove+Loyd can arrange helicopter access to hard-to-reach Mayan sites again on the promise of a donation to the relevant foundation.

In this context, some of what happens in Venice during the carnival makes sense. In my time there, I attended two private parties involving the Comité Français pour la Sauvegarde de Venise (the French equivalent to Britain’s Venice in Peril Fund). It had brought in 200 wealthy French and Genevans with the purpose of raising funds to renovate the Royal Palace at a cost of €3m. The Comité also supports the big charity ball known as Cavalchina, held on the final Saturday night. This costumed event began four years ago in an attempt to raise money for the city’s opera house, La Fenice. Fortunato Ortombina, artistic director of La Fenice, says: “Cavalchina now has the status of an institution.”

The guests, who pay €600-€650 a person to attend, are turned out in astonishing costumes, from birds and beasts to beautiful men in frock coats. Grace Jones is present, and a handful of Americans, with proceeds from the ticket sales given over to an opera house that, as a tick-box on every tourist’s itinerary, deserves to be protected.

“Everyone, rich or poor, has a right to see Venice,” says Jérôme-François Zieseniss, the Comité’s president. “The Cavalcina is something we feel we must do to show wealthy donors how Venice remains elegant and privileged and to inspire them to keep coming.”