

Where the Runway was a Beach



EARLY AVIATION IN VENICE Airmail and the Birth of Air Tourism by Pietro Lando, translated by Elisabetta Lando

The Hotel Excelsior forms the background as one of the planes takes off for Rimini on 20 September 1911. On the right was the hotel pier. :Caproni family

LIKE MOST AVIATION STORIES worth their salt, this one begins on a beach; in Venice, on 19 February 1911. Here there were no dunes, like in North Carolina where brothers Wilbur and Orville Wright undertook their first powered flight on 17 December 1903, but instead this story begins on the smooth shoreline of the Hotel Excelsior in Venice Lido.¹ This 'lagoon' flight took place when Umberto Cagno took off and flew over the hotel with his aircraft, a Henry Farman, though fog prevented him from actually getting to Venice itself.

This novel aviation stunt had been organised by CIGA, the Italian Grand Hotels Company, to advertise their brand new hotel and it proved to be a great success in creating a buzz of interest and, even though the appointed day was a bit of a disappointment because of the fog, the pilot had managed a few sallies around the hotel and over the heads of a paying public on the beach. Some of the more affluent, and possibly braver, spectators then also had the opportunity to experience for themselves the thrill of flight.

11 February 1911; the pilot Umberto Cagno with his Henri Farman on the beach in front of the Hotel Excelsior, preparing for the first historic flight over the lagoon of Venice. Clearly visible is the 50hp Gnôme engine.

:Postcard Collection Paolo Zanetti – Milan



However, it took almost two weeks for the weather conditions to finally settle, allowing Umberto Cagno to fly over the city of Venice and, this time, he did it with no prior announcement. So local bystanders, who were in St Mark's Square on Thursday 2 March, were taken unawares when, at around 15.45, an unfamiliar sound came roaring overhead, scaring off the pigeons and making everyone stop and look up.² For a moment the crowd fell silent and even the square's cafe orchestra stopped mid tune; then there was a roar of enthusiasm and the musicians gleefully struck up again, playing the Royal March in honour of the pilot.

Another image of the Farman on the beach of the Lido. This shows the very basic passenger seat behind the pilot's seat, as well as the fuel and oil tanks.

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