

A Return to Athens
and
A Week On Board the Galileo



As you set out for Ithaka
hope your road is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.....

When most people think of Greece, they think of Athens, the Peloponnese, the popular islands of Santorini and Mykonos and are pretty convinced that the country is swarming with tourists. Well, think again! With over 6,000 islands there are so many places to enjoy the “real” Greece with its local, laid-back and charming way of life.

I signed up for “Ancient Greece” with Elderteks (Canada) almost two years ago. It is a 17 day itinerary concentrating on southern Greece. I also want to visit some of the smaller islands. Way back, in 1990, along with friends Hanna, Bette and Carol, we visited Greece during our Spring Break and cruised to the biggies of Santorini, Mykonos, Crete, Rhodes, Kusadasi, Turkey (for Ephesus) and lovely little Patmos. So been ther - done that on a big-ship cruise, I wanted a small-ship experience.

I contacted Sophia, my guide for OAT’s Northern Greece, Albania and Macedonia trip in 2016 and ask if she could put me in touch with a local travel agent or if she could recommend a small-ship cruise outfit that visits smaller islands. Her answer comes back -- “Variety Cruises.” As it turns out, her recommendation is perfect and I am forever grateful!

In Athens...

So off I go to Athens, with a short layover in Vienna. I’ve come to enjoy traveling on Austrian Airlines as they carry a chef on board who customizes our meals. Though it is a night flight, I try to get a movie in, then sleep the rest of the way hoping that just maybe, this one time, I can beat jetlag. (it doesn’t work!)

In Athens my transfer waits holding a sign with my name. I'm gifted with a carry-bag (which turns out to be very useful), a bottle of water, and candy and we talk all the way in to central Athens and the Phillippos Hotel. This is the joining hotel for the Eldertreks trip and it is just easier to spend my extra days here.



Thank goodness for travel friends who warn me about the standard rooms at this hotel, as well as tripadvisor reviews where I find out about Room 603 - the only "suite" in the hotel. I have two bedrooms, a small,

strangely configured bathroom, a large balcony with table/chairs and two loungers, and a straight-on view of the Acropolis. Though some other rooms in the hotel have balconies, mine is double in size and has sliding glass doors from each bedroom. I chose wisely.



Acropolis view from my balcony

With just one full day in Athens, and being jetlagged, I know I can't tackle too much. So a walk along the pedestrian street surrounding the Parthenon is perfect. It is just 1 1/2 blocks from the hotel with restaurants and shops at one end, then street artists and street musicians all along the way to the other end.

How lucky can I be that within 5 minutes of walking, I notice signs for the Ilias Lalaounis Jewelry Museum. Being one of the best known jewelers in Greece, he took inspiration from archaeological finds and translated it into jewelry. His chunky gold and silver pieces are famous and often copied. The free museum is spectacular with millions of dollars/euros of jewelry on display from his earliest collections on. Its gift shop is small (thank goodness) and VERY expensive. This is the kind of place where, if you have to ask the price, you can't afford it.



I feel so good after being out in the light and walking that I decide to visit the Museum of Cycladic Art. The cruise starting tomorrow visits the Cycladic islands, so it is a good choice.

I should have walked, but Athens is brain-frazzling hot and steamy. It takes three attempts discussing prices with taxi drivers to find a ride to the museum. The first claims all rides are "fixed price" and quotes 20 euro (\$1.15 = 1 euro so about \$23.50); the second claims his meter is broken and quotes 10 euro; and the third (surely the most honest man in Athens) quotes a reasonable 5 euro.

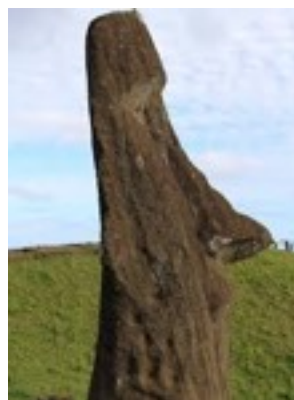
One very nice thing about museums here is that they offer a senior rate - usually around half price. This is a great saving as some admissions can be as much as 20 euro!

The museum is beautiful and well organized. I start on the top floor with exhibits and films on daily life in antiquity, next floor down has Cypriot antiquities (lots of bits of pottery), followed by Greek treasures including statuary and gold pieces.

The focus of my visit is to view items attributed to the mysterious Cycladic culture that left no written record. Their main emphasis seems to be a fertility symbol - a tall, stylized female, standing straight, with elongated head. This figure is seen in different incantations - standing, sitting, different arm placements, pregnant (or not), etc.



Actually the Cycladic exhibition is a bit of a disappointment as the idols are basically the same, though I did notice that when viewed from the side, its head is reminiscent of the Moai of Easter Island. Or this might just be a jet-lag induced overactive imagination!



Hmmm ... could there be a connection???

The museum's restaurant is excellent and I enjoy my first Greek salad in Greece in honor of those who have advised and helped me get ready for this trip. I munch on the crispy vegetables along with home-made breads and a yummy yogurt-mint spread. For a small restaurant it has an expansive menu from omelets at 8 euro to roasted squid for 19.

Oh yes - a little about shopping First, know that I am trying not to shop and am even in the process of decluttering. But there are some things I just can't resist.

A few years ago, at an antique shop in a small town, OAT guide Sophia found a magnificent piece of jewelry - a reproduction of a 5th century BC ram head bracelet - a Hellenistic design. In ancient Greek mythology, the ram is symbol of energy, power, and strength. I was so envious! Well, guess what..... I find a contemporary one at a shop called Greek Roots. I can't resist and it is my favorite purchase of the trip so far.



Aboard The Galileo ...

Finally the big day arrives. I leave my OK room with its spectacular view and the transfer agent drives me to Zea Port to embark The Galileo. Oops, I am half hour early, but they take my luggage and suggest I go to the nearby Bouboulina Restaurant for coffee. Thank goodness I decide to have a light lunch -- as dinner isn't until 7pm that night.



Of course its mostly couples on board, with one large family group and another group of eight life-long friends. The large groups sit at separate tables and pretty much keep to themselves. Others are from Germany, France, Ireland, Australia, and the US -- a great mix. The average age is probably mid 70's and the demographic is couples. Luckily I meet Yvette, Joan and Christa - also on their own and we hang together throughout.

Hotel manager Yannis greets everyone warmly and solves problems with his bare hands.

The beauty of this itinerary is visiting smaller islands of the Cyclades group including Poliegos, Poros, Paros, Folegandros Syros, Delos and Kythnos and the larger Santorini and Mykonos. We stop in secluded coves for swimming and visit pleasant

villages, where the pace of life is slow. Many days we enjoy lunch or dinner at a seaside taverna as the meal plan on the ship is half-board (two meals a day) as we spend time ashore. But just in case we start feeling peckish, there is 24 hour coffee/cookie/fruit/cake/baklava buffet available as well as an a la carte menu.

In Poliegos we run in to a Big Fat Greek Wedding!



My cabin is teeny - but I expect that. It is comfortable, with good air-conditioning. The ship has only 25 cabins, and charges a hefty single supplement, so I booked Category C, the lowest category, fully aware of the implications.

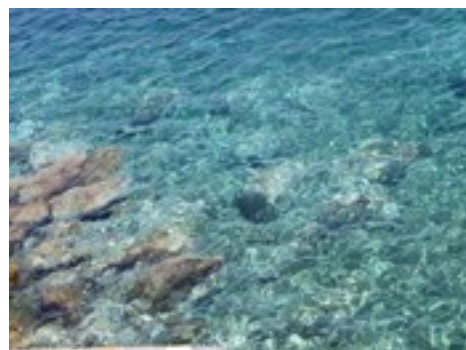
Being aboard a boat like this is a perfect way to conquer jetlag as well as to ease in to Greece. So it is a fabulous week aboard the Galileo - in summary:

Day 1 - Embarkation goes smoothly, though my transfer gets me to Zea Port a half-hour early. Luckily there is a restaurant nearby so I grab a little lunch - Spinach Pie and a Greek Salad. Yum!

Then to the cabin. Ohmygosh -- it is teeny, and not only that, it is wall-to wall bed. I ask the ships hotel manager about separating the beds in order to have more of a surface area for "stuff." Impossible. But he moves me across the hall to a slightly bigger room, with a slightly smaller bed, so all turns out fairly well.

If I am very neat and put things away, the room is fine. I love my two portholes and somehow whenever the ship docks, I am always on the "view" side!

Day 2- How about a morning swim in the Aegean Sea with its crystal clear blue waters? Our boat anchors in a sleepy cove off the island of Poliegos, we have stairs to the water and can plunge off the side. There are lots of "toys" available for our use, including fins, snorkels, noodles and even life jackets for those wary of open water.



After a BBQ on deck, we sail to Folegandros which, though I didn't realize it at the time, turns out to be our best shopping stop. Because it is nearing the end of the tourist season, people are anxious to sell their wares, close up shop and go on a much needed vacation. At one jewelry workshop, the owner has a extensive inventory of silver jewelry and wants to wheel and deal. Four of us buy from her and are thrilled with her prices.



Day 3 - Ah Santorini! Probably the most picturesque of the islands as the cities of Fira (main city) and Oia (of Mama Mia! fame) are perched at the top of the caldrea with their white-washed cube buildings tumbling down the side. Pictures of its blue-domed churches are classics. And yes, as a popular cruise stop, it is crowded.

Joseph, our capable cruise director leads us on a day tour which includes a quick orientation walk in Fira, a visit to Akrotiri, and a walk around Oia where Yvette and I stop for a salad lunch at Joseph-recommended Thalami Restaurant.

Ever-friendly, yet professional, Joseph our cruise director does the daily briefings, hands out maps, answers all our (my!) many questions and makes sure everyone is happy. His background is history and archaeology -- perfect for this job!



The days highlight is visiting the archaeological site of Akrotiri. Think of it as a bronze-age Pompeii, except that no human remains or treasures have been found. Due to a cataclysmic volcano eruption in 1500BC, it was buried in over 30 feet of ash for three millenia and only discovered in the 1960's.

This ancient, yet very advanced and sophisticated settlement, had 3 storey tall buildings, toilets connected to sewers, colorful wall frescoes, clay pipes bringing hot and cold water (the hot coming from thermal springs) and cooking utensils made of iron.



Hora, our excellent local guide (who wears the cutest sandals) not only tells us about the site, but shows renderings on her iPad and details of the elegant frescoes from books. It is so important to have a guide/interpreter at a site as important as Akroteri otherwise you are just looking at a pile of rocks.

I apologize for this out-of-focus photo of the fresco detail!

Day 4 - The morning swim stop at Antiparos is a little rough for me. I'm not that confident in open water, much less with strong currents - so only the hardy go out. We continue to Paros, with its marble-sidewalks and narrow lanes filled with boutiques and cafes. The highlight is its 10th century Church of Ekatontapiliani - one of the most important Byzantine monuments in Greece. But wait, there's more! The foundation of the church is 3rd century and visible thru the glass floor!

And here I suffer a crisis! The zipper on my backpack purse decides to break. Knowing how many purses I have at home, the last thing I want is to buy another one. So I decide to sew up the broken section and carry on using the "good" side. It is inconvenient, but manageable.

Day 5 - Mykonos! This morning most passengers take the tour to Delos - the ancient spiritual and commercial center of the Aegean and a UNESCO site. Joseph has them up and out early in order to beat the cruise crowd as there are six behemoth ships in port today. I will visit the site with the Eldertreks group in about two weeks.

I sleep in and later mosey in to Mykonos for a wander about. My goal is to go on pilgrimage to the Illias Lalaounis jewelry store to see the latest collection. What a

disappointment! This branch concentrates on gold pieces, not silver. And some of the bracelets are so unimaginatively designed that I could probably string them up with beads I have at home. I console myself with a little amble thru the picturesque backstreets, then take the sea-bus back to the ship for lunch. I had hoped to return and explore more of Mykonos in the afternoon, but it is just too hot.

By now I've discovered Valeria's (ship's bartender) iced cappuchinos, which are excellent, thirst-quenching and perfect on a hot day. I enjoy one every afternoon from here on.



Later Joan and I have dinner across the street from the port at the Olia Hotel and Restaurant and make use of their free wi-fi while taking in the magnificent view and lights of the marina.



There's an alligator on my bed! This cruise has so many nice touches from twice a day room services, ample bottled water available, nice bathroom amenities, great food and friendly staff.

Day 6

Another chance to swim in the Aegean near an uninhabited island. The water is the bluest blue and is as still as glass. I bob along on a noodle and drift out so far, the ship's lifeguard zips over in his zodiac, and gently requests that I swim closer to the boat!

A short sail and we moor at Ermoupolis in beautiful Syros -- with its elegant Neoclassic, Byzantine and Venetian style buildings, old mansions and streets paved with marble. It is the legal and administrative center of the entire Cyclades archipelago.

Joseph leads us on a walking tour, then the group has lunch at an outdoor taverna, where we sit under a ceiling of leafy bougainvillea. Yvette and I walk around but, alas, most stores close for "siesta," only to re-open at 7pm, the same time as our Captains dinner. So in this town, with its cute boutiques stuffed with imaginative clothes, jewelry, shoes and even books, there is no after-lunch shopping for us.



Syros is so artsy, as evidenced by a selection of boutique jewelry: chunky turquoise necklace and 7 inch long earrings.

Later that night, Joan, Christa, Yvette and I decide to walk off some of the multi-calories from tonight's festive dinner and return to town and find it is a much different place than this afternoon. Sidewalk cafes spill out from every hole-in-the-wall restaurant, almost all stores are open displaying their artistic and imaginative wares. The boutique jewelry pieces are magnificent.

Day 7 - today it's time to relax. We moor at Kithnos for our last swim, then with our sails up, we catch the wind to Cape Sounion, noted for its temple of Poseidon, the god of the sea. All too soon, we are back at Zea Port for our last night on the ship.

Day 8 - The well-organized disembarkation goes smoothly and I meet my transfer agent on the dock. With jetlag behind me and already brown as a berry, I return to the Phillippos Hotel and join the Eldertreks group.

A new adventure awaits!



Variety Cruises "Jewels of the Cyclades" Route

September, 2018