

Cradled by Triton

- Dr. Jharna Chatterjee

Our first delightful acquaintance with Greece started with a jovial street scene: just in front of our modest hotel, small square tables and a number of chairs were placed right on the street. The guests were obviously having a good time. Some of them – mostly men – were holding each other's hands or shoulders, and dancing to the tune of bazooka and a drum, while others were watching them and enjoying their drinks and food. The music was happy and loud, the crowd friendly and appreciative. I had to grab my camera to capture this extra-ordinary experience (for a Canadian citizen). It was Easter time in Athens, according to the Greek Orthodox Church; festive decorations of lights shaded by glossy red half-circles adorned the streetscape, laced across the streets on top, and the Athenians were in mood to celebrate. The street parties continued into the evening.

The next morning we took a sight-seeing tour of Athens. Hundreds of open-air theaters were built throughout Greece, usually on hill sides to take advantage of the natural slope. One such theater is in Athens with excellent acoustic properties. The highlight of our city-tour, however, was the Acropolis, a wonderful architectural specimen of Mycenaean civilization (1,600 to 1,200 B.C.) and a UNESCO world heritage site. The history of Acropolis goes back to 6th century B.C. when a temple of "Athena Polias" (Protectress of the City) was built. The ruins of the present Acropolis too, have a temple of Athena Parthenos (Athena the Virgin) at the center. Unfortunately, a massive, soaking thundershower decided to visit the Acropolis at the same time we did, and provided us with a formidable challenge – so our sight-seeing at this location was rather incomplete. We were able to see the "Tomb of Unknown Soldiers" on our last day in Athens, after we came back from our Greek island cruise.



Above: Street dancing in Athens Below: Acropolis under a cloudy sky



Above: An ancient open-air theater in Athens; Below: Passengers enjoying a Greek dance lesson on "Triton"

The following morning we took the subway to the quay to begin our much-anticipated, first-ever island cruise. While trying to find the subway station, we had an interesting interaction with some pedestrians: we asked for direction, and they unhesitatingly pointed in the wrong direction – not intentionally, of course, I am sure because they had difficulty in understanding our question. Anyway, somehow we succeeded in reaching the harbor, Piraeus, where we snaked our way to the "Triton", the large ship that was going to be our home for the next few days. In Greek mythology, Triton is a sea god, son of Poseidon and Amphitrite, and is represented as having the upper body of a human and the tail of a fish, and a conch-shell trumpet.

As soon as we checked in, we were asked to participate in a mandatory lifejacket/lifeboat exercise on an upper deck. The ship had wide sun decks, comfortable, if rather small but self-sufficient rooms (at the modest price we had paid), a swimming pool, casino and a theater where they entertained us every night. During afternoons, there were Greek dance lessons for interested passengers. Our teenage daughter quickly picked up the steps and easily danced with the group as we watched and enjoyed the fun. We had lots of apprehension about sea-sickness which, somehow we escaped for the most part. But to tell you the truth, the first night I could not sleep very well because the sea was rough and I was scared.... eventually I told myself to calm down – it was no riskier than air-travel! During the rest of our stay, however, due to the day-long hikes up and down the hills and roaming the streets on various islands, the thought of "how scared I was" was replaced by "how tired I was".

The meals on board deserve a special mention, I believe. There was a sit-down breakfast in the large dining room, as well as buffets every morning with the usual items.... porridge, plain and French toast, fruit juice, hash-brown, eggs any style, tea or coffee etc. Then there were two luncheon buffets on two open decks, and a sit-down luncheon in the dining room. There were various kinds of luncheon meat, chicken, fish, pasta, salad, dinner rolls, three or four types of desserts/cakes, always whole fresh fruits (oranges, apples and pears mostly) and of course, tea or coffee. At four o'clock you could have tea or coffee and biscuits. At night, either at seven or nine, you could dine elegantly in the dining room. There was at least one birthday celebration every night. The last night was announced to be the Captain's night and formal attire was recommended. The menu was especially tempting, and included a spectacular presentation of a 'flambé' dessert by two long lines of suitably attired waiters. Even for a picky eater like me, there was always a vegetarian or fish dish that I could enjoy. The first evening they offered us a cup of 'ouzo' – a local alcoholic drink that seemed to have a flavor like anise seed. It was at one of these buffets that I discovered a dish made of cream of wheat which was exactly like Indian style cream of wheat (suji halwa). Either Alexander the Greek Emperor had a special weakness for suji halwa, so he took this dish to India during his expeditions, or vice versa, he tasted it in India and liked it so much that he brought it back to Greece. Anyway, I was happy.

During the second last night's entertainment session, the hostess invited an American, a Canadian and a Japanese gentleman to participate in a game. One part of the game was a "kissing competition": each participant had to kiss as many ladies in the audience as possible within one minute. The gentlemen were enthusiastic, no doubt! The last part of the game involved getting a female partner from the audience, with a condition that she had to be of a different nationality than his own. There were about 1000 people on board – tourists and crew, and included quite a few organized tour groups from various nationalities. The Japanese gentleman picked our daughter. Each pair of players had to burst a balloon by their joint effort without using their hands, by pressing their bodies together against the balloon in various positions. Our daughter and her shy middle-aged partner had the most trouble accomplishing this task, with hilarious consequences. The audience, including ourselves was rolling with laughter.



Above: Change of Guards at the "Tomb of Unknown Soldiers" in Athens; Below: Entertainment on "Triton" at night- dancers in Greek outfits

We stopped at five Greek islands: Mykonos, Crete, Santorini, Rhodes and Patmos, and one in Turkey – Kusadasi. We used to leave the ship after breakfast, toured each island throughout the morning and came back for lunch, and left again for the rest of the day. Alternatively, we spent the entire day on the island either with an organized tour group or on our own and returned to the ship in the evening. I will talk about these islands in my next article.

(Photos by the author)