



My experience of the Cruise of Eastern Mediterranean

- Jaswant Rai Jindia

This travel account reflects only my personal experience on this cruise vacation taken in the month of July 2008. It is not intended as a guide for cruising or a travel guide. However, I will be very happy if it helps the readers in any way.

My journey started on July 6, 2008, when I caught the Delta flight from Atlanta airport. My son Sanjiv, daughter-in-law Debbie and my five grand kids were already at the airport. They had flown in from Lafayette Louisiana. It was a long but comfortable flight and we reached Venice (Aeroporto Marco Polo) about 2.00 PM on July 7. We were picked up by Holland America bus and brought to their ship named Zuiderdam. This was a huge ship having 12 floors above the water level, served by 20 elevators. After we got in the ship and rested a while in our rooms, we spent some time exploring the beautiful ship where we will be spending the next 12 days.



Holland America ship, Zuiderdam

At 6.00 PM we had our dinner reservation at the Vista dining room. Sanjiv ordered a bottle of red wine. It was a five-course dinner with appetizers, soup, entrée, coffee and dessert. Every thing was of excellent quality. I felt as if I am in heaven, and remembered Omar Khayyam, the 11th century Persian philosopher and poet, who wrote “There in front of me lies a jug full of wine and both the worlds are under my control”. Except in my

case the similar feeling was not due to the bottle of wine, but had more to do with the environment, the service, and the presence of five smiling grand kids.

Next day all eight of us came out of the ship at 9.00 AM and met our tour director Sarah. She was a university graduate and was fluent in Italian, French and English. This excursion was to take us to three islands in the vicinity of Venice (which itself is composed of several islands). While we waited for the water taxi to arrive Sarah told us the history of Venice and these islands. According to the historical records most of the population of Venice and the surrounding islands came as refugees fleeing from the barbarians, particularly the Italian invasion by Atilla the Hun, in 452. These islands were considered uninhabitable at that time, but the refugees, against all odds, created the world's most beautiful city over there.

Our first visit was to the island of Murano famous for its glass. Venetian glass has been made on this island since 1291, when the furnaces were moved away from Venice to avoid the constant danger of fire. We visited a glass factory where glass was blown by hand, without the use of any moulds. Our second stop was in Burano which is famous for lace making. This island's colorful houses, narrow streets and sun splashed squares are very picturesque. Our third stop was at the island named Torcello which was the Venetian lagoon's first settled area, and once had fine buildings and palaces. Outbreak of malaria in the 12th century caused it to decline. We saw the cathedral of Santa Maria Assunta and the adjacent church, Santa Fosca. The guide showed us a stone chair called Atilla's throne. Atilla, she said, was so brutal that wherever he went he burnt every thing down so that not even grass would grow there. As we were going around this island we saw a house on sale. My grand daughter Lauren saw the house and immediately fell in love with it.

At night the ship departed Venice and sailed south east across the Adriatic Sea and arrived in Split Croatia at 8:00 AM. Split is the second largest city in Croatia (first being Dubrovnik). In the heart of the city of Split lies the Diocletian's Palace, now a UNESCO World Heritage site. This palace was built by the Roman Emperor Diocletian in 295 AD as his summer residence. Just outside the north gate of the palace stands a very tall statue of a catholic saint named Gregory of Nin. People touch its toe and make wishes. It is widely believed that the wishes made here come true. Split is a cute little city with narrow cobblestone streets with shops on both sides. We tried the local food at an unpretentious restaurant named Buffet Fife. It was good local food, relatively cheap, but because we had a heavy breakfast at the ship, we were not hungry at all and so did not enjoy it very much.



Gregory of Nin

Our next stop was Athens. We came out of the ship at about 8:30 AM. Our guide was ready for us waiting outside the customs area. We first went to Acropolis. This naturally defensible rock was the sacred focal point of ancient Athens. We reached the summit through a magnificent stepped gateway and saw the Athena Nike temple and then went up to the world famous Parthenon. The columns of this building are not exactly vertical but taper. To the left of Parthenon stands the shrine to Athena and Poseidon. It was here that the goddess is said to have created the first olive tree. We then saw the Agora from a distance. In ancient Greece this was a market place and a civic center. People gathered here to buy and sell all kinds of merchandise. It was also a place where people discussed business, politics, current events, the nature of the universe and divine, etc. The guide then brought us to Plaka, the oldest section of Athens. This place is full of jewelry stores, tourist shops and cafes. We ate at a nice restaurant in Plaka area. We ordered chicken and lamb souvlaki, Mousaka, Greek salad and Haloumi cheese. All dishes were very tasty and had much better taste compared to what we get here in the USA.



Parthenon, Athens, Greece

From Athens the ship sailed through the strait of Dardanelles. This strait is 38 miles long and is never more than 4 miles wide. It divides Europe from Asia. The northern side of this strait is the Gallipoli peninsula which is part of European Turkey and the southern side is Asia. This is the only route connecting Mediterranean Sea with Istanbul and the Black Sea. Many disputes have arisen over it in human history, the most recent being the WW1 Battle of Gallipoli where thousands of young soldiers from both sides died. Allied soldiers were mostly from France, Australia and New Zealand. From Dardanelles the ship came into the Sea of Marmara (Marble), and then reached Istanbul.



Istanbul seen from our ship

The strait of Bosphorus which connects the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea, divides Istanbul into two parts. The European part, which is the bulk of the city, is to the west of this strait and the Asian part is to the East. Most of the important landmarks and monuments, including Grand Bazaar, are located in the European part. Our guide in Istanbul first took us to Hagia Sophia (Holy wisdom) which was first constructed as a church by Byzantine emperor Justinian between AD 532 and 537. This church remained the religious focal point of Eastern Orthodox Church for nearly a thousand years. In 1453 Istanbul, then known as Constantinople was conquered by Ottoman Turks, and Sultan Mehmed II ordered the building to be converted into a mosque. Christian features like altar, bells etc were removed and Christian mosaics were plastered over. Islamic features like Mehrab, minbar and four minarets were added over time. It remained as a mosque until 1935 when it was converted into a museum by the Republic of Turkey. Efforts are now being made to restore the original church mosaics, but the task is extremely difficult.



Hagia Sophia, exterior view



Hagia Sophia as a church



Hagia Sophia as a mosque

Then we saw the Blue Mosque, so called because its interior is lined with blue ceramic tiles. It was built between 1609 and 1616 on the site of the palace of Byzantine emperors, and is now the biggest attraction of Istanbul. The mosque has 6 minarets instead of the normal four. Our next visit was to the Hippodrome which was the sporting and social center of Constantinople under the Byzantine rulers. It was inspired by Rome's Circus Maximus and was used for horse racing, chariot racing and other sporting events that were popular pastimes of the ancient world. We also saw the Topkapi (Cannon gate) Palace: this was also begun by Sultan Mehmed II, in 1459. This palace served as a home to the sultans and the royal court until the mid 19th century. It is now a museum housing the prized possessions of the sultans, including kitchen utensils, Chinese porcelain and priceless jewelry.



Blue Mosque; guide explaining features



Blue Mosque interior

The ship then sailed to a Greek island named Mykonos, which is a small, picturesque and Artsy Island in the Cyclades. After this we went to the Turkish port of Kusadasi from where the historical site of Ephesus is only 20 miles. Ephesus is one of the most renowned of the ancient towns. It is believed to be founded around 11th century BC. Here we saw the Roman Theater with a capacity of 24000 spectators, built in the 3rd century BC, the Roman baths, and the façade of Celsus Library, also built around that time. The temple of Hadrian and the Fountain of Trajan, was built in 2nd century AD. We also saw the House of Virgin Mary and Basilica of St. John.



Celsus Library, Ephesus Turkey

Our next stop was another Greek island named Santorini. Here we saw the town named Fira located on a steep cliff. Sam and I went up the cliff in a cable car while others either walked up the stairs or took a donkey ride. The town had the usual souvenir shops on both sides of the narrow and winding streets.

Our last stop was a Greek port named Katakolon, a short distance away from Olympia where the first Olympic Games were held in 776 BC. The events included foot races, wrestling, discus, javelin, long jump and horse and chariot racing. There were non-athletic events like poetry reading, business transactions and political treaties between leaders. The games were banned in 426 AD by emperor Theodosius II, because they were considered pagan by early Christians and the temples associated with the games were destroyed. There is therefore not much left of the buildings except foundations, steps and columns. The most outstanding building in Olympia was the Temple of Zeus, which used to have a 15 meter high statue of Zeus, one of the seven wonders of ancient world. The stadium which could seat 20,000 people was the largest of its kind. We saw the ruins of the Temple of Hera, where the Olympic torch is now lit by focusing sunlight and then taken by runners to wherever the Olympics are being held.



Torch lighting ceremony, Olympia, Greece

The ship then brought us back to Venice and we stayed one night there in Bauer Hotel, San Marco. The most famous place, Piazza San Marco, was only a short walk from the hotel. Venice is a very beautiful city but this sight comes at a very steep price. Every thing in this city is extremely expensive. The price for one person for the Feast of the Redeemer, held in this hotel was 425 Euro i.e. \$700/-. On a more mundane level, I noticed that the cost of Big Mac combo in Venice was 7.60 euro, which is equivalent to US \$12/-. The same Big Mac combo in Atlanta goes for \$4.80. So you be the judge of relative prices.



Piazza San Marco, Venice

Editor's note: With the exception of one, the photos in this article were taken by the author or his family members. The photo of the Olympic Flame Ceremony was purchased from the market, published by the Olympic Publications.