

# MEDITERRANEAN

## *Magic*

There's nothing quite like the thrill of boarding the cruise ship that's about to take you on a dazzling adventure, says VERNE MAREE, or the childlike fun of ensconcing yourself in the stateroom – they don't call them cabins anymore – that will be your home for the next week.

Whether new or familiar, each stop holds the promise of fresh experiences and unforeseen encounters. Our summertime Adriatic Antiquities voyage on the *Crystal Serenity* took us from the Athens port of Piraeus to Kusadasi, Turkey, and to the Greek isles of Santorini and Corfu. From there we sailed to the Croatian city of Dubrovnik, and the cruise ended in Venice.

Serendipitously, it turned out that friends of ours from Singapore were going to be honeymooning on the same cruise. Paul and Salinah have been together for a couple of decades, so didn't mind keeping us company for cocktails and dinner each night. And my ever-so-slightly grumpy Roy was delighted not to have to make any new friends. Happiness all round, then.





### Accommodation

One of the basic staterooms would have been more than fine, but we did love our penthouse suite with verandah. It was perfection, from the queen-sized bed, walk-in wardrobe and separate bathtub and shower to the elegant living and dining area – easily big enough to host our friends in.

On the verandah, I sun-basked in privacy and revelled in the ocean view. I could gaze down at the 480-metre promenade on Deck 7 and ponder whether I was sober enough – or my hangover light enough – to permit jogging a few gentle circuits.

But the real wow factor, one that has spoiled me forever, came in the tall and handsome form of our own personal butler. All Deck 10 and 11 passengers have one, but none so impressive as Alexander from Belgrade. Sartorially distinguished in black tie and tails, like something from *The Addams Family* – though infinitely cleaner and suaver than Lurch – he was a delight.

Our friends are coming over for a pre-dinner drink? “I’ll bring extra glasses. And here’s a little spread of Russian caviar, fresh-poached lobster and crab claws.”

You like single malt whisky? “Do accept this bottle of The Glenlivet, sir.”

More Champagne? “For madam, a bottle of vintage Louis Roederer.” Astonishing.

### The Crystal Serenity

Crystal Cruises’ two ships – *Crystal Serenity* and *Crystal Symphony* – are consistently rated by *Condé Nast Traveller* as the world’s most popular mid-sized cruise ships.

They’re beautiful vessels with splendid facilities, superbly managed. And though I’m biased here, I find the high proportion of young South African crew members, second in number only to the friendly Filipino contingent, a big plus.

As is often the case, you generally sail all night and wake up each morning in a different port. Our shorter seven-day cruise includes only one day at sea, and that’s when you get a better idea of the mix of passengers and what they like to do. There are quite a number of Asians, including Singaporeans, and a younger demographic; the longer the cruise, the higher the average age, they say.

On our day at sea, cruising the southern coastline of mainland Greece, large numbers disport themselves in and around the two-pool area of Lido Deck 12, quaffing multiple cocktails as the Filipino band plays *La Bamba* and the like. Feeling worthy, I join a yoga session; there’s also bingo going on, a Photoshop class at the Internet Café and feverish email catching-up in the Computer University @ Sea.

Various shops are holding sales, too: Apropos is doing a brisk trade in tuxedo hire for tonight’s Captain’s Dinner, the only formal night of this cruise. I suspect the Crystal Spa and Salon are well booked up.

Every night, a different live Broadway-style show based on *Cats*, *Les Misérables*, *A Chorus Line* and *Evita*, for example, is staged in the Galaxy Lounge by the resident entertainment troupe. A brilliant piano man plays and sings nightly in the Piano Bar, or you can catch a movie at the cinema.

There’s far more going on than you could possibly hope to do. If my next cruise with Crystal includes more days at sea, I’m determined to join the bridge classes... as long as that doesn’t interfere with cocktail hour at The Cove.

### Food and Drink

A sign on the wall of the gym warns that passengers gain an average of nearly a kilogram for each day they cruise. That's shocking, but not surprising.

From our first deck-side burgers washed down with Champagne just after we boarded, to our last cocktail as we sailed into Venice at noon, it was impossible to fault the catering. Best of all – especially for those who like a drink or three – it's all included, whether you're in your stateroom, in a restaurant or bar, or at the poolside: wine, spirits, Champagne, the lot. Imagine a free-flow Champagne brunch that lasts for a week.

Breakfast is a varied, help-yourself affair at the Lido Café on Deck 12, or at a number of other venues, where the passengers get their blood-sugar levels up for whatever on-shore sightseeing trips they have planned.

For dinner, you need to reserve your table. Being by far the largest, the splendid Crystal Dining Room is the default. Most memorable of a series of excellent meals there was our French dinner: a choice of caviar, live oysters or chicken liver parfait; heavenly wild mushroom soup; and we all chose the Maine lobster on truffle risotto – maybe the best lobster I've ever tasted.

The smaller Prego (Italian) or Silk Road (Japanese) are less easy to get into, so it's best to book them online even before you board.

### Onshore Highlights

Crystal Serenity's excursion manager, Daniel Steyn, and his team facilitate a wide range of shore outings to suit all tastes, ages and levels of mobility. At each Greek stop, the charming landside agent from Stathellas, Petros Voulgaropoulos, was on the quay to oversee smooth and efficient operations. You can also opt to make your own arrangements, especially if you do some homework beforehand.



## 1. The Parthenon and the Acropolis Museum

On previous visits to the Acropolis I've taken the scenic route through the Plaka and up treacherously slippery slopes to reach this Sacred Rock of the Athenians. I'm not sure why. It's much more pleasant to stroll up from the Acropolis Metro station, along pedestrianised Dionisiou Areopagitou all the way to the main entrance. If you're staying in the Plaka, as we do, you're already almost there.

Along the way, you must visit the wonderful new Acropolis Museum, preferably before you visit the temples. Inside the museum, I watch high-tech restorers using lasers to clean centuries of grime off one of the six *koria* (or caryatids) from the exquisite Erechtheion temple. Another highlight is the third-level Pantheon Gallery, a magnificent space lined with reconstructions of sculptural friezes from the Parthenon and floor-to-ceiling glass walls so you can simultaneously gaze across at the real thing.

Don't miss the film; it gives a good idea of the Parthenon's original structure and appearance, its chequered history (Christian church, mosque!) and its violent decay.

Which was worse, early Christians deliberately hacking off and smashing monumental sculptures on the front pediment, or the ham-fisted 1687 Venetians bombarding the largely-intact Parthenon in an attempt to oust the ruling Ottoman Turks, and thereby setting off a powder-store explosion that almost destroyed it? Or the reviled British diplomat Lord Elgin, who early in the 19th century either broke or looted the remaining marbles? Not very diplomatic, what.



### View on Athens

What has the Euro-crisis done to debt-ridden Greece, the pariah of Europe?

- Except perhaps for cruise visitors, tourist numbers have noticeably plummeted. Americans especially are put off by news of civil disobedience protesting the harsh austerity measures. (For us, it's actually more orderly than usual: at least the garbage collectors and public transport workers aren't striking as they so frequently do.) Arriving at the entrance to the Acropolis at 8am as it opens, we're almost the first in, and even later on there are nothing like the queues there used to be. Good news for visitors, bad news for the Greek economy.

- Prices don't seem to have gone down; they seldom do anywhere. But a summer exchange rate of S\$1.60 to the euro, down from \$2, makes for a satisfying Zara and Ray-Bans shopping spree in Ermou Street.
- There's more ugly graffiti, and more beggars and homeless people: young gypsy girls, and hundreds of skinny Bangladeshi men each clutching a little stapler-like sewing device – are they offering to mend the non-existent hem of my shorts? I'm baffled.

- Insistent restaurant touts have long been a feature of the seafood joints that line the wharf at Mikrolimano ("little harbour") in Piraeus, the port of Athens. But now even some of the popular Plaka eateries accost you as you pass, clearly desperate for business. What's more, it's become general practice for them to throw in dessert free of charge as a way of adding value. We experience this a number of times.

## 2. Akrotiri Antiquities

On the picture-postcard-perfect Greek island of Santorini is Akrotiri, the excavation site of a Minoan city that, about 3,500 years ago, was both destroyed and preserved by ash from a volcano off Santorini. Unlike Pompeii in Italy, an absence of skeletons indicates an orderly evacuation of the townsfolk.

A bio-protective roof covers the area. Meander through ancient streets and marvel at the remains of three-storey homes with indoor sewerage systems, wood-framed beds, delicate artwork, and earthenware pots *in situ* that still bear traces of the fava beans, cereal grains and olive oil they once stored.

Following an accident with the roof, the site was closed for six years and reopened to the public in April 2012. See more extraordinary artefacts at the Museum of Prehistoric Thira, such as volcanic ash casts of household implements, including a wooden table with remarkably contemporary-looking ball-and-claw feet!

## 3. Santorini Views

Despite the incessant flow of tourists – most of them from cruise ships like ours – a wander along the cobbled paths of Fira (or Thira) town is a must. Every stretch reveals a new halcyon vista beyond blue church domes and sparkling white walls, every lane, another photogenic taverna.

Watch out for the occasional skittering hooves of tourist luggage-laden donkeys that have made the steep ascent to Fira from the wharveside. To avoid long queues in the hot sun for the cable car, you could brave the ordure of the donkey path, either on foot or on the back of one of these smelly and unfortunate beasts.

We enjoy the view from Fira over a heart-lurching freddo cappuccino (Greek iced coffee) at one of the tavernas. Lunch is at the traditional, family-run Katina Psaros Taverna (fish restaurant) right on the little fishing harbour of Amoudi: *horiatiki* (Greek salad), calamari, octopus, crisp-fried red mullet and fava-bean salad. Washed down with ouzo and the local Mythos beer, what could be better?





#### 4. Corfu by 4X4

Instead of the organised option of exploring the emerald isle of Corfu in a cute convoy of 4X4s, you can head off in your own vehicle with a map – and, I suggest, the mutually sworn intention not to argue about navigational trifles. (I state here, for the record, that the tourist map was nowhere near to scale.)

Driving in spectacularly hilly Corfu is not for the faint of heart. After winding northeast up the coast, past Dassia, Nissaki and more, we stop at pretty seaside town Kassiopi for an English breakfast – next to us is a family from Essex – then hair-pin our way west across the island through a string of quaint, cobble-stoned villages to Makrades, Lakones and the aptly named Bella Vista.

From there, it's a hair-raising descent to Paleokastritsa beach, where one of a bevy of little boats takes us on a cruise to view craggy rock formations and grottoes.

Lingering too long over a magnificent lunch at Pelagos – a notable exception to the general rule that incredible views mean mediocre food – we don't mind not having time to visit Kerkyra, the main town, before our 5pm sailing. All the more reason to return to Corfu, the most beautiful of the half-dozen Greek islands I've visited.

#### 5. Ephesus Concert

Kusadasi's being the gateway to Ephesus is the main reason for stopping in at this undeniably picturesque Turkish bazaar of a town. Considered the best-preserved Aegean antiquity – a principal port of the Mediterranean an unbelievable four millennia ago (that's 2,000 years B.C.) – Ephesus is just a 20-minute drive away through pretty countryside.

Alexander the Great governed Ephesus until he died in 323 B.C.; the Romans ruled it for centuries, and St Paul lived here and was jailed for attempting to convert the citizens away from their goddess Artemis. In the third century, the Goths destroyed its magnificent temples; looters completed the destruction.

Excavations began in 1863, unearthing important sites such as the Temple of Artemis – one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World – the Arcadian Way, which Anthony and Cleopatra are said to have trod, the Harbour Thermal Baths, the Roman Forum and the Theatre.

On occasion, specially for Crystal Cruise passengers and only about 30 of them at a time, the local cultural authorities put on a sunset concert at Ephesus's spectacular Library of Celsus. As the shadows lengthen, young men and women serve us local wines, nuts and the summer fruit that this area is famous for: nectarines, apricots and cherries. As the accomplished Aegean String Quintet plays a repertoire of Haydn, Bach, Mozart and more, the sun sets behind the façade of the Library and candlelight takes over.

At US\$500 a head, this was an expensive outing. On the other hand, the ticket price goes towards the site's development fund, and we will never forget this experience. If pressed to choose one highlight of the cruise, this would be mine.





## 6. Dubrovnik's 13th-century Walls

Easily done sans guide, the walk around the old town of Dubrovnik's wonderfully intact 13th-century city walls is a must. There are plenty of other excursion opportunities to nearby villages, cultural sites, islands and beaches.

Viewing the red-roofed Venetian villas from these massive walls, with not a vehicle in sight, is like stepping back in time – except for the occasional ancient café selling overpriced orange juice and milkshakes and blaring Europop.

We descend to the shady portico of a likely looking restaurant to lunch on calamari, mussels, potatoes and the local chard swimming in olive oil. A good choice: next to us, a pair of beefy policemen resembling extras from a Fox Channel movie impassively sip large goblets of white wine supplied by the jovial patron.

Then a leisurely look at the Maritime Museum, located in a massive fortress; and the 18th-century baroque Church of St Blaise, patron saint and protector of Dubrovnik. St Blaise was martyred by being attacked with iron wool-carding combs, and beheaded.

The cult of St Blaise spread as far as the UK, with eponymous churches in Cornwall, Oxford and Lancashire, a well in Bromley, Kent – and the road in Sutton Coldfield, Warwickshire, where my husband grew up.

Famous for helping those with fish-bones stuck in their gullets, St Blaise is also the patron saint of sore throats, ENT specialists and vets. With his blessing, we'll be back in Dubrovnik before long. Its exquisite scenery, great culture and charming, friendly people shot it to the top of my bucket-list.



## 7. Sailing into Venice

Forget the indifferent gondoliers and overpriced water-taxis – this is the way to see Venice, sipping a series of icy Bellinis on the Lido Deck of the Crystal Serenity. The onboard sextet plays as we cruise past the city's famously crumbling edifices, affording splendid views of the Grand Canal, St Mark's Square, the Doge's Palace and more.

To me, rather than being a living, working city like Rome or Milan, Venice feels like a big tourist site. Tourism industry workers seem to be its only citizens, while weary budget travellers lug backpacks over inconvenient bridges, crowd the *vaporetti*

(water buses) and sit on the floors of the grubby train station.

That's why I prefer to remember Venice as a shimmering view from the luxurious deck of one of the world's favourite cruise ships. 📸

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