

Venice to Istanbul October 2007

As many of my trips do, this one started with an e-mail. While on our Tahiti trip, we were in the computer room checking our e-mail, and I got one from Oceania Cruises about a cruise from Venice to Istanbul.

To explain further, I have been seeing a wonderful lady named Kathy, and some time ago she said she had wanted to go to Tahiti since she was 17. Well, that trip is now history, and we have fulfilled that dream. She is a wonderful person and a great traveling companion. She also said she really wanted to go to Venice, so when we got back from our Tahiti trip I called my travel agent and booked the cruise.

I called her and gave her my famous phrase, "pack your bags" you are going to Venice. It is a fantastic itinerary- Venice, Dubrovnik, Kotor, Athens, Mykonos, Sicily, Delos, Rhodes, Santorini, Kusadasi, and ending up in Istanbul. I have been to some of the places, but look forward to going back to them with Kathy, to see them through another set of eyes and share her reactions.

I did my normal half day of work, and then headed home to get my bags. I met Kathy at the Flyaway terminal and we took the bus down to LAX. We flew Lufthansa to Frankfurt, and the legroom was so bad that Kathy bruised her knees. We then flew to Venice to catch the ship.

VENICE

We got to the ship at 7 PM, and were told our gondola ride was at 7:15!! We told them to hold it for us and went to our suite to dump our carry on luggage. The problem I had was I had packed my jacket, and it was chilly that night. One of the guides loaned me his vest, and it was enough for that night. We boarded the gondolas, and headed for the Bridge of Sighs, which connected the Doge's palace with the prison.

There was a cute movie some years ago called "A Little Romance" with Diane Ladd as a teenager running away to Venice with her boyfriend. They wanted to kiss under the Bridge of Sighs as that was a sign of true love.

Well, as we went under the bridge, we kissed too. There were 6 gondolas going together, and there was an accordionist and a singer in one of the gondolas. It was night and all the little canals we went through had some lights and we could also look into some of the windows of houses along the canal. It was a magical experience!

After the gondola ride, we found a beautiful carnival mask for Kathy's granddaughter. There was a painting on the mask of a young girl that resembled her granddaughter. We also realized we were starving, having only had lunch on the airplane. Fortunately, Kathy found a large chocolate chip cookie in her purse she brought from home.



The next morning we took the Vaporetto (water taxi) down the Grand Canal to the church of Santa Maria Della Salute, which was built in gratitude of the survival from a plague. As we walked in, there was an Organ concert in progress featuring one of my favorite pieces by Bach. There were paintings around the church by the great masters of the time.



We then continued on to St. Mark's Square, but there was a marathon going on, and the streets were jammed. We were able to make our way into the Basilica, in spite of the crowds. Unfortunately, there was some water damage on the main floor, so we could only go up to the second level. We were not allowed to take pictures inside, but there was a fresco over the entrance I that could photograph.



From the balcony outside the basilica, I got a shot of the clock tower with the 2 figures striking the bell. I also got a picture of St. Mark's Square with all the people and pigeons.



On our way back up the Grand Canal to catch the shuttle to the ship, we passed some people in gondolas doing what we had done the previous night. However, there is nothing like the magic of a gondola ride at night through the little canals of Venice.



DUBROVNIK

Our first stop was Dubrovnik in Croatia, and we were taken to an overlook to see the old walled city.



We entered the main gate, that was next to a moat and a drawbridge then toured the city.



We were then taken to the rector's house, which was a museum containing all manner of artifacts, including an 18th century spinet piano



After the tour was over, we had some free time to wander the city. We heard some music playing and followed it to a jazz café patronized by the locals. There was a quartet playing, and the guitarist looked like a young Jack Nicholson, the sax player looked like Charlie Chaplin, and the piano player looked like Telly Savalas.



We sat there for a while and had a glass or 2 of wine, and just enjoyed the music. We then did a little window shopping, and I bought a small bottle of Maraschino, which is a local liqueur, and a charm of St. Blaise, the patron saint of the city for Kathy's charm bracelet.

KOTOR

Kotor is a city in Montenegro, which was part of the old Yugoslavian nation prior to the breakup. It was also a walled city, and had a fort at the top of the mountain, and a church half way up. I thought about climbing to the church, but the way was not marked and the footing was uneven, so I passed.



We visited a Roman Catholic Church, and an Eastern Orthodox Church, and were struck by the differences.



On the way out of the harbor, there were 2 little churches built on separate islands. Legend has it that when each fisherman came back into port safely, he threw a stone into the water, and after a time, the island appeared. These are St. Nikolas and St. George respectively.



SICILY

Our next stop was Sicily, and Kathy took a tour of Taormina, which I had seen on a previous cruise, and I went up to Mt. Etna, which I missed on that cruise. I explored a number of the craters, and I stopped at a house that just escaped the lava.



At the same time, Kathy was taken to Taormina. . The traffic was just like Sorrento, with cars, motor scooters and motor bikes whizzing every which way. There were no sidewalks on part of the climb to the city, so we really had to be careful. The road to the Greco-Roman theatre and the main street of Taormina were just like any tourist stop, with



souvenir and jewelry shops lining both sides. The theatre dated back to the Greek times, but had fallen into disrepair, especially after the local residents started taking pieces to build their homes. The marble slabs were used for floors, and the columns were used to decorate their houses. The theatre was rebuilt in 1869, and is in use today for concerts and live performances. It holds about 3500 people in a semicircular arrangement.

AMALFI

The Amalfi Coast of Italy is beautiful, but we were struck by the way the houses were built up the hills! They would never allow that in California!



We did quite a lot of shopping in Amalfi, We picked up a bottle of limoncello, which is a lemon based liqueur from a shop where they made it, a few bottles of the local wine, plus a third of a pound of dried porcini mushrooms!

ATHENS

Athens was sort of a disappointment. We did a lot of driving around, and the tour we were on did not go up to the top of the Acropolis. We found out later that the tour that did only allowed 20 minutes on top. When I did it on a previous cruise, I spent a good 2 hours on top walking around and visiting the museum there.



SANTORINI

We were watching the Food Channel one day, and were watching Rachel Raye. Kathy happened to mention that Rachel got married on the Greek island of Santorini. I said, "Hey! We are going to go to Santorini on this cruise!"

Well, that got my wheels turning, and I Googled Santorini Weddings. It turns out it is a very popular place for weddings, and there are a number of wedding coordinators on the island. I e-mailed one named Anna, and she was very helpful with the information.

I then called Kathy, and told her my suggestion, and she started laughing. I asked what was so funny, and she said, "Do you know what my first thought was?" I said yes, I do, you thought, "What will I wear?" because you are a woman. And Kathy said, laughing, "You are absolutely right".

After a flurry of e-mails, all the arrangements were made, and we will be met at the top of the tram by the wedding arranger and a car.

There have been more e-mails, and Anna suggested we take a private tour after our wedding. The cost was about \$300, but we would be saving \$200 by canceling the ship's tour. I remember when I took a private tour in Lisbon, I saw more in a half day than I could have seen in 2 days on a group tour. Kathy, bless her heart, went to the ship's web site, and said they wanted \$950 for a private tour!

She also told us the ceremony would take place in the veranda of the St. Irene church, so I went to the internet and downloaded some pictures and sent them to Kathy. It is a magnificent site!

While all of this was going on, I had a flash of inspiration! We would need wedding rings, so I went on the internet and Googled Greek Key wedding rings. The first site I hit had a beautiful ring with the Greek key design. I printed out the picture, and showed it to Kathy. She thought it was beautiful, so I ordered a set for us after we got our fingers sized at a local jewelry store. The rings arrived, and I tried them on, and much to my dismay, they were too tight! I have jewelry store near my office, and I took the rings in to be resized. The lady explained that the other store used the wrong ring sizer to measure our fingers. They should have used a wide ring sizer rather than the narrow one they used. Fortunately, the rings are quite heavy and the jeweler was able to resize them up so they fit comfortably. I told Kathy that we would have to eat the light meals for a week so they would still fit!

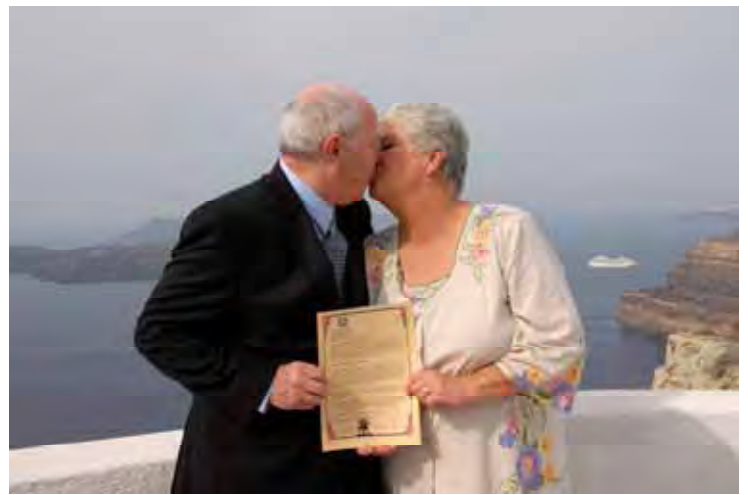
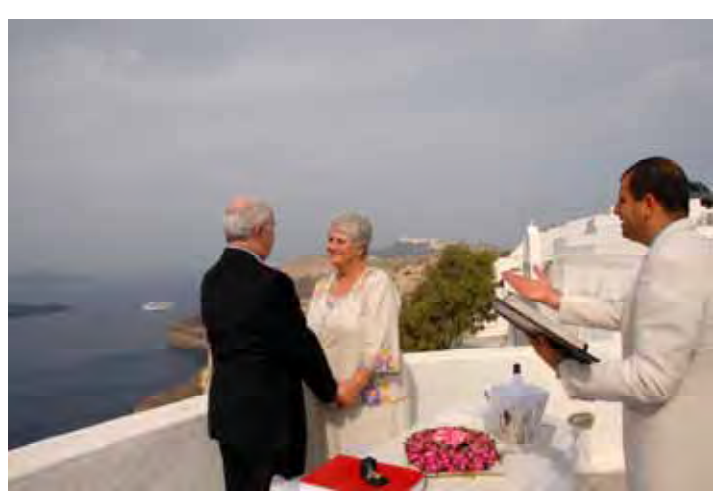
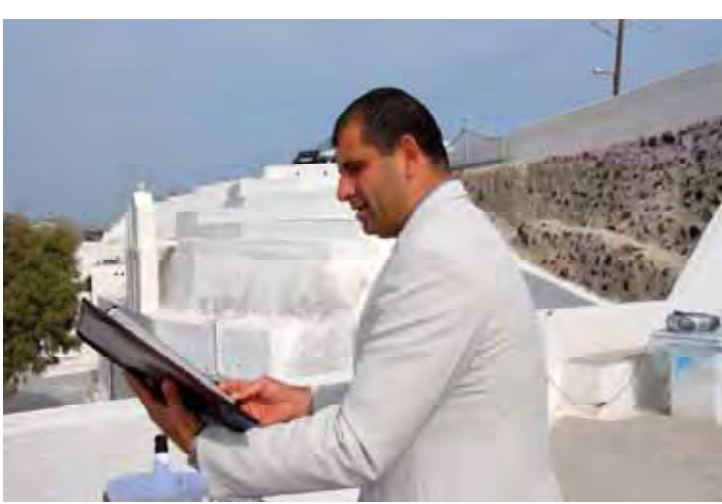
We anchored off the island of Santorini, and took the tender in to the dock. The dock was at sea level, but the towns were on the top of the island. There were 2 ways to get there, a zigzag route by donkey, or by cable car.



Our appointment was at 11, but we were not sure of how long the wait would be for the cable car. We arrived at the top in plenty of time, and looked around at some of the shops.

At 11 sharp, a lady showed up with a sign with our names on it and escorted us to the car. We were driven to the church of St. Irene, and waiting there was the photographer, the videographer, and the official who conducted the ceremony.







After the ceremony, we were taken back to the office, and shown to a room above the office where we could change into “knock around” clothes for our tour. Our tour guide was a young lady named Diana, who grew up in New York. She took us to the North end of the island to a town called Oia. It was classic, with blue domes and whitewashed walls. There were some houses that were built into the sides of the hills, also.



She told us some very interesting stories about local weddings in Santorini and how the different towns react. They actually have shotguns at the weddings! Her husband is a carpenter, and as a hobby makes black powder bombs they set off during celebrations. One bomb was so big it blew the windows out of a local church!



Well, after all that walking, and the excitement, we were getting hungry. We told Diana we wanted to go to a place where she ate, not some tourist trap. She took us to a restaurant named Gallini, where they do not allow either coaches or minivans! It was filled with Greek families, and real Greek music playing in the background. There were tables set out on the beach, and Kathy just loved it!



Diana suggested we try the tomato croquettes, which were excellent, and we ordered a fish plate and a liter of local wine. The fish plate arrived, and had red snapper, sea bream, and calamari on it. I was totally impressed with the way Kathy boned the fish. She explained her father taught her to do it at a young age! After lunch we were taken back to the cable car to get the tender back to the ship. We got a pleasant surprise when we returned, however. There was a section of the pool deck where a group of us hung out, and they had it decorated with signs and balloons!



DELOS

The island is just a few miles off the coast of Mykonos, and the archeological and historical significance of the island is huge. The Greeks considered it a sacred land, and to this day, no one can be born or die on the island. The Greeks built wonderful temples, sanctuaries, and numerous statues of the Gods in the Greek mythology.

On our visit we saw the remains of shops, including one that had a low table with raised edges and a drain for cleaning fish.



There were some beautiful mosaics on the floors, and a water cistern where you could actually see the grooves worn in the edges by the ropes pulling the buckets.



There was a temple of Poseidon that was fairly intact, and had a mosaic of a fish in front of it.



One of the most interesting sights was a row of she lions that reminded me of the row of sphinxes in Karnack, Egypt.



MYKONOS

Following our visit to Delos, we crossed the channel to Mykonos. We were offered a walking tour from the ship, but decided to do it on our own. Kathy found a beautiful icon of St. Irene, the patron saint of Santorini in a beautiful little shop that had all sorts of items. We also went into a little chapel at the end of the pier, which I assume was for fisherman to pray at before they left to go to sea.



We found a jeweler that had a miniature donkey charm, which symbolized the donkey on Santorini, and we bought it for Kathy's charm bracelet. We then headed for a local taverna and had a glass of wine and people watched.

RHODES

Rhodes was a fascinating island that I had never been to. It was the place that the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the 7 wonders of the ancient world stood, at the harbor. It was also another one of the many walled and fortified cities in the Mediterranean.



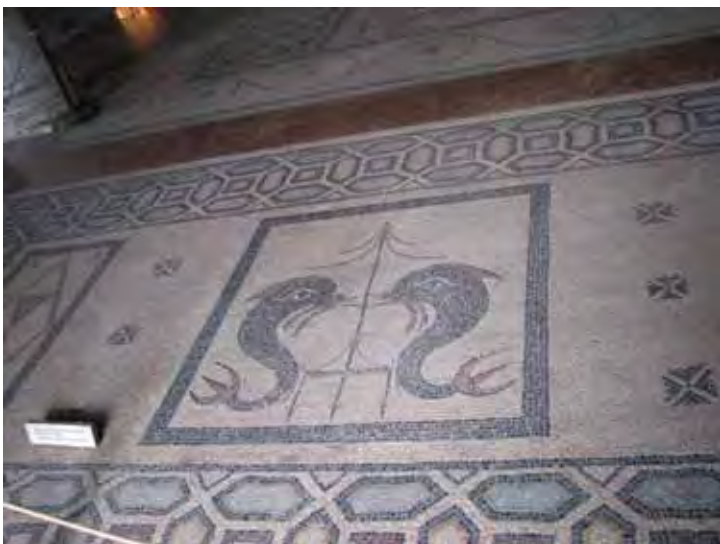
We were first taken to the church of the Virgin of Phileromos that had some beautiful grounds around it. I noticed the guide picking up things from the ground, and I asked her what she was doing. It turned out there were pinon pines all around and she was picking up pine nuts. Well, as the hunter and gatherer, I also picked some up. I found a large rock with a small depression in it, and used it along with my trusty Swiss Army knife to open them. They were very tasty, and this was the first time I ever got them in the wild!



We were then taken to the Palace of the Grand Masters, which dates back to the 14th century. We entered at the D'Ambrose gate, and were taken to the inner courtyard.



Upstairs in the Palace were a series of rooms with beautiful mosaics on the floors.





After the tour, we found a nice restaurant named Sarris, and ordered some Greek food and a bottle of their local wine. It was nice to sit in the outdoor café and watch the people passing by.

After lunch, we wandered around and did some shopping. In a jewelry store I spotted a beautiful charm for Kathy. It has a cameo of a dolphin in the center and the Greek key design around the outside. In another shop I spotted a small globe made from semiprecious stones. I had seen them on a number of cruise ships, and they were terribly expensive. This one was reasonably priced, and Kathy told me that one of her favorite things as a child was a globe. I am keeping it my place until she moves into our new house so it does not have to get moved twice.

KUSADASI

Well we had a little excitement coming into Kusadasi. I had misread the ship's schedule, and thought today was a day at sea. We looked on the TV set that had the ship's bow camera, and it looked like we were pulling into a port. I rechecked the schedule, and sure enough we were to be in port that day! We hurriedly got dressed and grabbed a quick breakfast before our tour left.

We were taken to Ephesus, which is where St. Paul preached to the Ephesians. We first saw the small Odeon where the council met, and a sculpture of Nike, the goddess of victory holding a laurel wreath.



We walked down through Curate's way, and there were 2 pillars close together. I asked Kathy to put a hand on each one and wish for good health. Our guide said that was a legend, but I figured it could not hurt. Further down the path, we saw the Fountain of Trajan and the Temple of Hadrian



One of the highlights of the tour was the Library of Celsus. This scene is one of the stock shots in travel catalogs. The statues in the niches represent different virtues.



Another highlight was to enter the amphitheater where St. Paul actually preached. The last time I was here it was closed to the public. On the stage two men, one with a guitar and the other with a Pan flute were playing. They played Amazing Grace, and then played How Great Thou Art, which really got to Kathy. It turns out her grandmother used to sing that to her. It was a very moving experience for her.



MT. ATHOS

The next day was a sea day, but we entered a bay bounded on one side by Mt. Athos. The entire peninsula was set aside for monasteries for men only. In fact, the ship had to stay 1500 yards off shore because there were women on board the ship!

There were all manner of buildings with all different styles of architecture.



ISTANBUL

This was another highlight of the cruise. Istanbul is on two continents: Europe and Asia separated by the Sea of Marmora. There were all kinds of ferries sailing back and forth between the two sides, which made for some interesting navigation by our ship.

Our tour included all the most interesting sites in Istanbul. Our first stop was at the Blue Mosque, so named because of the more than 20,000 Iznik tiles in sea and sky colors. Outside the mosque was an obelisk marking the site of the old Hippodrome, or race course. At the base of the obelisk was a carving representing the old Sultan and his advisors.



Prior to entering the mosque, we were required to remove our shoes. In the Muslim religion, shoes are the dirtiest part of a person. In fact, a severe insult to a person is to point the sole of a shoe at them. We were supplied small plastic bags in which to put our shoes, and carried them with us until we left the mosque.

The mosque was built in the early 17th century by Sultan Ahmet I, who wanted a place of Islamic worship to rival the Haghia Sophia. One of its unusual features is that it has 6 minarets, rather than the usual 4 of a large mosque.

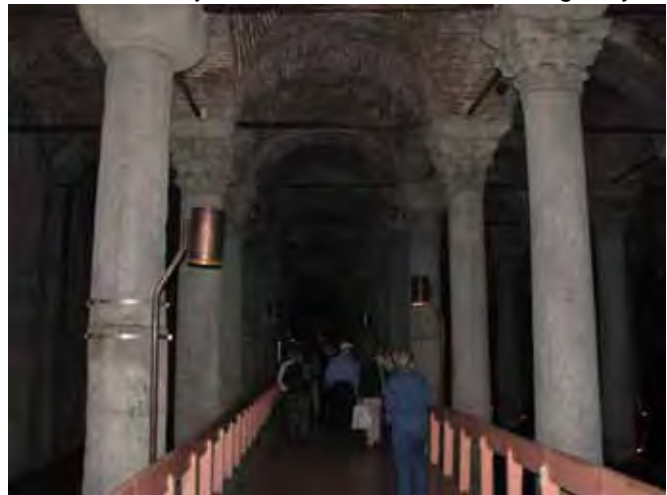


Inside, facing East toward Mecca was the mehrab, where the Imam would stand. The dome was decorated with Arabic calligraphy.



We were supposed to go to the Haghia Sophia next, but our guide asked if we wanted to visit the cisterns. We all said yes, and the guide asked us not to tell anyone in the other tour groups.

The cisterns were built in AD 532 to supply water to the Great Palace and the people of Istanbul. It is cavernous, pillared, and vaulted and is under the city. It is now a museum and holds just a fraction of the water it originally did.



Interestingly enough, there were all manner of fish in there, and under one pillar, lying on its side, was the head of Medusa.



Our next stop was at the Hagia Sophia, which was built in the 6th century. It was originally a church, then a mosque, and is now a museum. I will let the pictures of the interior speak for themselves.



It is the custom in Islam to wash before prayer, and there was a huge stone urn that was used for that purpose. It did not hold enough water, so a fountain was built outside for the people to wash.



Our last stop before lunch was at the Topkapi museum. I was excited that I could finally see the jeweled dagger. The last time I was here there was a “vidiot” standing in front of it with his video camera and would not move. Unfortunately, or fortunately, we were not allowed to take pictures of any of the jewels. We were allowed to take pictures of the kitchens, however. They were designed to feed hundreds of people.



On our way out, a beautiful butterfly landed on Kathy's shoulder, and I just had to take a picture of it! We were taken to a restaurant for lunch, and afterwards went to the Grand Bazaar. We stayed on the main street, and I believe I saw more gold there than at Fort Knox!



After visiting the Grand Bazaar, we went back to the ship to freshen up and have dinner. While we were eating dinner on the veranda of the restaurant, we looked at the suspension bridge behind us. They were putting on a light show that was fantastic! What a perfect sendoff for us!

