



Louis Cruises
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Travel Journal
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Day One – Morning

It's a thrill when the ship's horn blasts and the Olympia pulls away from her dock in Piraeus and begins her restrained, steady progress across the harbor. Even here, barely out of port, the blue before and beyond us is staggering, glazed with a sunlight more brilliant than any I've seen before. This part of the Mediterranean has been traversed for millennia. By now these routes have seen millions of passengers – sailors, soldiers, fishermen, merchants, crusaders, pleasure-seekers...today, however, the surface of the sea looks brand new, a shimmering gift, a mirror held up to the sun, which seems to pause a bit, high above us in the azure Grecian sky. An invitation. My wife and I climb the stairs to Deck 9 and stand at the prow. I feel like I've been waiting for this breeze all summer.

"This is perfect!" my wife says. "I could sleep up here!"

We park ourselves at a table near the Pool Grill and wait for it to open. We're pretty beat up after a rather overheated morning spent racing from Venizelos Airport to Piraeus, but we're not too tired to pull two chairs up to one of the windows and slide it open. Either on Deck 9 or below, it doesn't matter, that breeze is still miraculous. I watch a gull glide beneath the bow of the ship, inches above the surface of the water. I feel like a clock that's let itself stop for a moment. I look over at my wife and she smiles.

"You look like a kid," she says. Like the Olympia *Daily News* says, happy cruising. I ask my wife what she wants to do before we arrive at Mykonos.

"There's aqua-aerobics at 2:00 pm, and at 2:30 you have a choice, an origami lesson or a Greek language lesson. There's also a Greek mythology quiz at 3:30."

"Let's start with lunch," my wife says, and we do. It's perfect. I treat myself to a double cheddar cheeseburger with slices of fresh tomato as red as strawberries while my wife tucks into a plate she's piled with salads and fresh bread. We sit beside our open window, accompanied by our breeze and a selection of songs played by a guitarist and a keyboardist who have set up between the buffet and the pool – they play The Beatles, Jobim, Bob Marley...it's a perfect summer vacation soundtrack. I order a cold Mythos, a Greek lager I've never tried before, and it's delicious, cold and smooth. We stuff ourselves and stumble off to our cozy cabin on Deck 5, where our window looks out to the sea. We sleep through some of the exquisite, sunny miles between Piraeus and Mykonos, which means, unfortunately, that we miss a Zumba class, a cocktail demonstration and Name That Tune in the Oklahoma Lounge. I wish we could do it all.



Day One – Evening

I wake before my wife and sneak over to Sana Spa and Beauty Salon, which is between the Fiesta Casino and the Oklahoma Lounge. There's a fifteen percent discount today on all spa services, including massages, and I hand over my magnetic card to the lovely girl at the desk and purchase a 20 minute massage for my wife. I can use the card for everything – drinks, snacks and toiletries in the shop next door to the Duty Free Shop, to purchase portraits...there's actually a professional photographer on board.

The Olympia is a grande dame, regal and charming. Some of the larger cruise ships seem like floating cities, but this feels like a floating hotel – it reminds me of some of the places I stayed with my parents when I was a kid, mirrored elevators and the quiet roar of a vacuum cleaner from somewhere down a carpeted hallway. The wooden decks and railings evoke the glamour and grandeur of a bygone era, when you booked passage on a steamship, when travel was elegant and luxurious, something beyond the everyday. That's how it feels on the Olympia – singular.

When I get back to the cabin my wife is awake, unpacking our clothes. It's amazing we'll visit six islands, but we only have to unpack once.

"Where've you been?" she asks me.

"Why don't you pop up to Sana and find out?"

"You're kidding!" She kisses me. "Can I shower? Do I have enough time? When do we land at Mykonos?" Yes, yes and yes, I tell her. She jumps into the shower while I finish unpacking. "The water pressure is fantastic!" she calls from the bathroom.

The cocktail of the day is a Mediterranean Greek Mojito, which is Skinis, soda, basil and lemon wedges, and I am again standing on the prow of the ship, now with a Mediterranean Greek Mojito in each hand, waiting for my wife to join me as we approach Mykonos. She walks toward me looking refreshed and lovely. She takes her mojito.

"I feel like a different person," she says. We sip our drinks and watch the Olympia dock. The island is splendid, bare rock save for the white buildings climbing the hills like steps. From the deck they are bright and brittle icons, daring to defy the sun which, even at 6:00 pm, seems to drench every inch of the world. We disembark and board the bus to Mykonos Town as scooters zip by us and up the hills.

How can a place visited by so many people be so quiet? We find a small taverna on the outskirts of town right on the water with a view of the harbor and the setting sun, which turns a fleshly pink as it bids us "kali nichta" and disappears into the sea. On the small beach beside the taverna, within arm's length of our table, I find a few pieces of beach glass. I used to collect it when I was a kid, walking along the beach with my mom, and I remember a line from ee



cummings, “it’s always ourselves we find in the sea.” After a plate of grilled octopus, we leave the taverna and stroll toward the center of town, where it seems a magic switch has been flicked and every light has come up at once. My wife and I walk the narrow streets, past shoebox ice cream parlors and jewelers, beneath boughs of bougainvillea, then along the placid harbor and back to the buses, the final pink sheen of sunset fading from the surface of the sea.

We return to the Olympia so tired we are bleary. Our bed has been turned down, and our pool towels have been folded into the shape of a lily. Our bathroom is spotless and now home to a small platoon of shampoos, bath gels and skin creams standing in formation beside our sink. Even the end of each roll of toilet paper has been folded into a triangle, like a sail, and tucked beneath the bottom of the roll. Kali nichta.

Day Two – Morning

These guys are serious about showing us everything. We’re up at 6:30 am to shower and dress – we have to be in the Can Can Lounge by 7:10 am. “I love this shower!” my wife says in the bathroom. “The water is so hot!” I sit up in bed and look out the window – blue sky, blue sea. I’m reminded of a poem by Cavafy, the great Greek poet, “Morning Sea”: “Here let me stop. Let me too look at nature...the morning sea and cloudless sky.” We arrive at Kusadasi, on the Turkish coast, within the hour.

Today’s *Daily News* has already been slipped under our door. It includes a concise description of each excursion, the schedule for the gym, the pool, the sauna, the hours for each restaurant and every activity on the ship between 7:10 am and midnight (Latin line dancing in the Oklahoma Lounge). I’m starting to feel torn between the excursions and the onboard activities, and we’ve barely been at sea for 24 hours. Today there’s an afternoon tea at 4:00 pm, and the recipe of the day is spanakopita – I’m saving all of the recipes, so my wife and I can attempt them back home. We are of course going to try to make it to the Greek cooking demonstration in the Lido Bar, at 1:45, but there’s also a 2:00 pm Greek Dance class in the Oklahoma Lounge. Since we’re off to Ephesus, once the mightiest city in Asia Minor, we won’t be able to participate in the 9:00 am walkathon, on Deck 9, nor will we be able to make it to “Wake-Up and Stretch” in the Oklahoma Lounge. Our excursion to Patmos, to see the Cave of the Apocalypse and the Monastery of St. John, begins at 4:15 pm, so we have some time on the ship this afternoon. My plan is to send my wife to the Greek Cooking demonstration while I sneak off to the Clipper Bar for Team Trivia and an ice-cold Mythos, my new favorite lager.

We leave the room with just enough time to pick up some “Grab & Go” coffee at the Clipper Bar. Our cabin steward and stewardess, who seem to be patrolling our hallway at all hours of the day and night, greet us with a bright “kalimera!” I have no idea how anyone can be



so sunny and genuinely cheery at this hour, especially since they've probably been up since dawn.

We sit down with our coffees on a banquette in the Can Can Lounge and await our bus assignments. The Shore Excursion team has the entire disembarkation process completely organized, and we soon descend to Deck 1 to get on our buses to Ephesus. It's another glorious morning.

Kusadasi is a lovely little beach town. It seems to be rousing itself from sleep as we drive away from the port toward Ephesus. My wife turns to me and says, "I can't believe we're in Turkey." It's the first time we've ever set foot in Asia.

Ephesus is a stunning marvel in the hills above the Aegean coast. It was founded by the ancient Greeks and became the first and most significant city in the Roman province of Asia and one of its key ports. At one time home to a quarter-million people, it is believed the Virgin Mary lived and died here, and that Paul wrote his Corinthian letters here. Millennia ago the Aegean receded west, stranding the city on its sun-seared hillsides.

Our guide, an affable, charming local, does his best to keep us in the shade as much as possible as we begin our tour. Many of the city's columns are still standing, as are the terrace houses and the magnificent Library of Celsus which, along with the 25,000-seat amphitheater built by the Greeks, is the centerpiece of the site. We stroll down the Arcadian road through the center of the city; we run our fingers over the ancient Greek inscriptions on the columns as we pass.

In the Terrace Houses we climb every staircase to the top of the structure, stopping to peer agape into homes from centuries ago – the mosaic of a lion on the floor of one of the houses, still in perfect condition, is worth every flight of steps. From the Terrace Houses we approach the Library. We climb the stairs and spend some time inside the structure, for a bit of shade and to wonder at how so much of it – including its façade, two stories of columns – has remained intact for so many centuries. I have never seen anything like this, with the exception of the Coliseum, the Forum and the Parthenon – these are the only ruins that rival Ephesus, in terms of scale and preservation. I am again reminded of Cavafy: "If there's something more you seek, then simply look. The city is our teacher, the acme of what is Greek, of every discipline, of every art the peak."

Day Two – Afternoon

Welcome to the Dodecanese. I hate to leave the air conditioned splendor of the Olympia, but we are now on our way to Patmos to visit the Cave of the Apocalypse and the Monastery of St. John, both important pilgrimage sites, and the tender boats are waiting to take us to the port at Skala. From there our bus wends its way up the pine-blanketed mountain high above Skala,



toward the Cave, where it is believed St. John, the Theologian, wrote the Book of Revelation after the risen Christ appeared to him. Looking through the rear window of our air conditioned bus, Skala occupies an isthmus connecting the two larger, mountainous segments of Patmos – you can walk east from the harbor at Skala to the beach at Hokhlakás Bay. It's funny how Patmos, so far, has been an experience in varying scale – it appears on the horizon, massive and imposing, then shrinks to the harbor at Skala, with its quaint tavernas and cafes and souvenir kiosks, then expands again, filling the frame as our bus climbs toward the Cave. As we park and leave the bus to walk down the path toward the Cave, I think this might be a decent explanation of faith, and perhaps of love: it's an endless variation of scale, a journey back and forth between the miniature and the immeasurable.

The Cave is at the bottom of a long, twisting stairway. It was certainly a beautiful place to write anything, even the Book of Revelations – it's now a chapel with a view down to Skala and the sea. I'm convinced Greece is so beautiful it must be blessed, and that we humble travelers, awed by her splendor, are the lucky beneficiaries of her largesse. Regardless of our faith we are all pilgrims, here to surrender ourselves to her dazzling beauty, her pine-scented breezes, her blazing sun, the sweet blue hues of her seas...

We leave the Cave for Chora, the walled city at the island's highest point and home to the St. John Monastery, founded by Ioannis "the Blessed" Christodoulos in 1088. We again climb, this time up a cobblestone path with a view down to Skala, past boutiques and souvenir shops and galleries toward the monastery. We enter its courtyard, which houses the Chapel of the Virgin and a museum. I walk behind the Chapel to a smaller courtyard, lured to repose for a few moments by the quiet, which has a sweetness to it.

Day Two – Evening

Tonight we finally make it to the Seven Seas, the a la carte restaurant on Deck 4. Outside the entrance there's a small band, five members of the Olympia staff, one of them with an acoustic guitar, and they're serenading the diners with their rendition of The Beatles' "You've Got to Hide Your Love Away." This is another thing I love about this cruise, there's music everywhere. The maitre d'hôtel greets us with a warm "Kalispera!" and shows us to our table which, like every other table, is laid with crisp white linen and sparkling silverware and, best of all, has a view of the Aegean. My wife, a committed oenophile, picks up the wine list straightaway.

"Wow!" she says. "They have so many Greek wines, it's amazing. They have wines from Santorini, from the Peloponnese, from western Greece, from Macedonia...let's try the Roditis." We have left the harbor at Skala. "I'll read you the description." My wife loves menus and, when ordering a dish, she likes to read the entire menu entry to our waiter or waitress. "As the name implies, this is a rose colored grape that produces an elegant dry white and light wine with citrus flavors and a pleasant aftertaste."



“Order us two glasses,” I say. Fresh bread arrives, and glasses full of ice water, both wonderful after such a hot and hectic day. I pour some of the Greek olive oil on our table into a dish and push a piece of bread through it. It’s delicious, golden and sweet. We order our wine and open our menus. I don’t know where to start. The inside covers of the menu provide descriptions of the core ingredients of Greek cuisine and how they are used: olives and olive oil, onions and garlic, artichokes, tomatoes, eggplant and, of course, feta cheese. It turns out, according to my menu, that saffron was used by the ancient Greeks. “I’m learning something new every day.”

“What are you having? There are so many Greek dishes I’ve never had before, and they all sound delicious. I’m going to try the fasolia mavromatika.”

“What is it?” The light and healthy dishes are designated as such, and I’m planning on sailing around them. Come on, I’m on vacation.

“It’s black-eyed peas with herbs and a mint vinaigrette. For my main dish I’m going to have the psari plaki, fish fillet baked in a white wine broth topped with onion, celery and tomatoes. What about you?” I swallow a mouthful of oil-drenched bread.

“Kotopoulo Arachova!” It’s chicken stuffed with cheeses, tomatoes and herbs.

“I figured as much.”

After such an adventurous day we are ready to eat, and we do. The appetizers appear and, almost immediately after, the plates on which they arrived disappear. This might have something to do with how hungry we are, but it also seems as if there are about ten people waiting on us. My water glass is always full, more fresh bread arrives...we feel like royalty. Our main courses arrive, and we dive in.

“This is lovely,” my wife says. “I have to find this recipe online.”

“Can you find this one online, too?” My chicken is incredibly rich – it says ‘stuffed’ with cheeses in the menu, and they’re not kidding. We devour our meals. Our dessert arrives, something called “galaktoboureko,” milk and semolina pudding with zest of lemon. The maitre d’hôtel seats an American gentleman at our table, and we of course ask him where he’s from and how he’s enjoying his cruise, what he does for work. He tells us he’s just retired from his second career as a certified Lexus mechanic.

“I used to manage restaurants and nightclubs,” he tells us. “I retired and moved to Florida, but I couldn’t just sit around, so I went through the Lexus training program. At fifty!” It’s only the end of the second day, but our cruise is starting to feel like a floating party, one at which we know all the other guests.

There’s a show called “A Capella” in the Can Can Lounge at 10:00 pm featuring performances of classic Greek songs. “Disco! Disco!” starts at the same time in the Oklahoma Lounge, and there’s Latin Line Dancing at 11:30, and Happy Hour, but I just can’t do it. I’m sun-baked and stuffed like...well, like a Kotopoulo Arachova. My wife obliges me.



"It's hard getting old," she says. "I understand." We return to our cabin, where our pool towels have been folded into the shape of a snake. I shuck my clothes and fall into bed. I can't keep my eyes open.

"I love all the stories," I mumble to my wife, and I fall asleep. We sail toward Rhodes.

Day 3 – Morning

We are gently prodded awake as the crew ties the Olympia to the dock in the harbor at Rhodes Town, which is good, since we have to be in the Can Can Lounge at 7:15 am. Another quick shower, another hot Grab & Go coffee from the Clipper Lounge, and we're seated in the Can Can Lounge, ready to roll. Our cruise director greets us with a hearty "Kalimera!" She gives us our bus assignments, and we're off to Deck 1 to disembark, the walled medieval city beckoning from across the harbor.

Our bus whisks us south to Lindos with our guide, another informative and gracious host. Like our previous guides, she lives here, and her knowledge of Rhodes is evident within moments of our departure. As with our other guides, it's like she's taking us on a tour of her home, which she is.

Ancient Lindos was one of world's great cities, a harbor on a peninsula on the southeastern coast of Rhodes. We park and walk down to the entrance to the village of Lindos, a series of winding and, thankfully, shaded alleys that ribbon their way, seemingly without rhyme or reason, between the whitewashed walls of the village's myriad cafes, jewelers, juice bars and t-shirt shops. Lindos is delightfully free of cars, but there are donkeys for hire, should you decide you're not up for the climb to the Acropolis. My wife and I decide to challenge ourselves, and we hoof it up the mountain, more than 120 meters. Our guide tells us the original temple at Lindos was built in 1100 BC, but the ruins we will visit today date from the sixth century BC.

It's a serious climb, and just before we arrive at the entrance to the Knights' Castle we find a snack bar with a view up the coast. We take a table beneath an umbrella beside a low retaining wall. Far below us a few isolated yachts sit motionless upon the surface of the Aegean. My wife orders a frappe for herself and a fresh-squeezed orange juice for me. I take a mouthful of it and close my eyes. I listen to my wife sip her frappe, the song of the crickets beyond the wall, the soft hum of the snack bar's freezer.

Refreshed, we tackle the innumerable steps leading up to the Temple of Athena at the summit. It's a steep ascent, and hot, and I'm happy we have water with us. The *Olympia Excursion Magazine* describes the view as "breathtaking," and I can't disagree.

"It *is* breathtaking," my wife says. As with Ephesus, it's incredible how much of the Temple is still intact. We wander amongst the magnificent columns, down the stone staircase...we take a few moments to hide from the sun in the shadow of one of the columns,



which tower into the sky, and look out at an endless sea. I wonder if the ancient Greeks felt the way up here that I do. Stilled. Unconquerable. On top of the world.

After Lindos we spend some time in the Old Town of Rhodes, where we find ourselves amidst quaint pedestrian streets lined with jewelers and ceramics shops. The main square is surrounded by busy cafes, but the side streets, where the locals live, are quiet and lightly-trafficked. We walk by an elderly woman enjoying a coffee on her veranda, and she invites us up to join her. She speaks very little English, but she pours us two strong Greek coffees and nods, again and again, as we tell her, at an ever-increasing volume, how much we love Rhodes.

We tour the Palace of the Grand Masters at the top of the Street of the Knights, Ippoton, which is home to a number of foreign consulates. My wife loves the Palace, particularly the juxtaposition of the Hellenistic and Roman mosaics on its floors with its 18th century furniture. The massive grand staircase is dark and cool beneath a long vaulted ceiling.

“It reminds me of the Beast’s castle in *Beauty and the Beast*,” my wife says. We return to the courtyard, which comprises long rows of gray squares with thick wheat-colored borders. The squares have been laid equidistantly from each other, giving the impression of a giant, somewhat monochromatic checkerboard on which the squares have paused in a synchronized separation from each other. The entire courtyard is flooded with sunlight.

We may be far more technologically advanced than our medieval forebears, but I’m not certain our world is better designed.

Day 3 – Afternoon

It’s bright and hot and we’re ready to spend some time swimming in the Aegean, as opposed to sailing upon it, and we take a cab from Rhodes Town to Tsampika for lunch and a swim. On the way, our cab driver tells us Rhodes is one of seven cities claiming to be the birthplace of Homer.

Tsampika Beach is a small crescent of sand beneath rocky sun-scorched cliffs and rolling hills. Our driver leaves us near a taverna across from the beach, where we pick up two gyros to go and some cold sodas and a bottle of water. We rent two sunbeds and an umbrella, unwrap our gyros, and settle in for a long afternoon of absolutely nothing.

The water at Tsampika is impossibly clear, a blue I’ve only seen unwrapping a hard candy, and I spend most of the afternoon simply lolling in it. My wife walks into the water and kisses me on the cheek.

“This is absolutely splendid,” she says. She looks back toward the cliffs to the north, toward the low hills behind the car park. “I love it.” I’m reminded again of Cavafy poem, “Voice From the Sea”: “The sea exhales a hidden voice – a voice that enters into our heart and gladdens it.” We spend the next few hours in the water, listening to that hidden voice, letting it gladden our hearts.



Day 3 – Evening

Just about 6:00 pm, as we're sailing from Rhodes, we're racing through the casino. The whole room seems to chime behind us as we roll past Sana, where the girl who booked my wife's massage gives us a quick wave. We step into the Oklahoma Lounge for a classical concert with Stan and Yuri on piano and violin, respectively. What a perfect way to start the evening, with a cold Mythos and an hour of live, uninterrupted classical favorites. My wife orders the cocktail of the day, a Cosmopolis, which is Skinos, vodka, cranberry juice and fresh-squeezed lemon juice. The bar menu explains everything, and includes color photographs.

"I love this mastiha stuff," she says. Unfortunately we're missing Bingo in the Clipper Bar and "Sail-away music" with the Plug N'Play Duo on the Lido Pool Bar Deck, but you can only ride one donkey at a time.

The staff at the Seven Seas makes us feel like we're regulars the moment we show up for dinner. The boys out front are tearing through The Beatles' "All My Loving," and we stop so I can harmonize with them at the chorus.

"Why don't you try some fish, Honey," my wife says, "since we're at sea." Tonight's menu is fantastic, as expected, and includes a number of Greek dishes I've never tried.

"Sorry to disappoint you, but I'm going to start with the savory boureki, move on to the Pork Gordon Blue, then I'm going to finish with Greek yogurt with honey and walnuts." The boureki is filo dough stuffed with mince meat and chopped vegetables and deep fried, and the Pork Gordon Blue is pan fried tenderloin stuffed with Anthotyro cheese and smoked bacon!

"Why don't you have some meat with your meat?" Our water glasses are full, again.

"Come on, Baby! I'm on vacation." My wife smiles. She turns to the waiter, who has just set a fresh loaf of bread on our table. "Good evening, sir."

"Good evening, madam. How was your day on Rhodes?"

"Fantastic!"

"I'm very happy to hear it. What can I get for you?"

"I'll have the variety of cold Greek appetizers, tzatziki, stuffed grape leaves, olives, fava and white taramosalata, followed by the Mpourdeto of Corfu, Corfu style sole fillet in a light spicy tomato and paprika sauce with the krokos kozanis rice pilaf." Our waiter grins at my wife.

"Does it actually say all that?" he says.

"I was thinking the same thing," I say. He laughs. "I'll have the boureki and the pork, please," I tell him.

"Very good, sir." He takes our menus. My wife picks up her water glass.

"Do you think the kids are having a good time with your parents?" she asks me. I reach for another piece of bread.



“We have kids?”

After dinner we are more stuffed than bourekis. We stroll out of the Seven Seas, completely sated.

“Let’s get our picture taken,” my wife says. “Come on. We don’t have any pictures of the two of us together from this trip.” We walk over to the photographer, who’s got a small studio, replete with a backdrop and professional lighting, set up just outside the Seven Seas. He greets us with a warm smile and positions us in front of the backdrop.

“What a beautiful couple,” he says.

“That’s thanks to my gorgeous wife,” I tell him. “Without her, we’re not so easy on the eyes.”

Later, as night arrives in the Aegean, we walk up to the top deck. The waning moon glitters on the surface of the sea. We put our fingers, still wrinkled from so many hours in the water at Tsampika, to the stars.

Day 4 – Morning

Today is our final day at sea. We will spend the morning on mighty Crete, the afternoon on Santorini. It’s just after 6:00 am, God help me, and we’ve already docked in Heraklion – I have no idea how the staff does it. Why am I awake so early? We have to be in the Can Can Lounge at 7:00 am for our excursion to the Minoan Palace of Knossos, and my wife wants breakfast. I pull back the curtains and wish the sun “Kalimera.”

Writer Laurence Durrell spent a number of years in the Hellenic Mediterranean, in Alexandria, Athens, Corfu, Cyprus and Rhodes – this is what he wrote about morning in this part of the world: “...you rise each morning to a new day, a new world, which has to be created from scratch. Each day is a brilliant improvisation with full orchestra – the light on the sea, the foliage, the stabbing cypresses, the silver spindrift olives...” I drag myself out of bed for a quick shower. I ready myself for a new day, a new world, created from scratch.

Standing at the beginning of the breakfast buffet at the Seven Seas, which seems about a mile long, I want to kick myself for not making it out of bed for this on Tuesday and Wednesday. It starts with fresh bread, croissants and pastries, including the pastries with a circle of jam at the center, which are my favorite. There are eggs, sunny-side up and scrambled, piles of bacon, sausages, a pantheon of cereals, yogurt, vanilla French toast and cooked-to-order waffles! A storm of waiters has just finished refilling our coffee mugs and our water glasses as I sit down at our table. My wife has already procured orange juice for me – there’s a constellation of three full glasses beside my place setting. She looks at my plate.

“We’re touring Knossos today, my love. We’re not laying siege to it.”



Our brilliant improvisation with full orchestra on Crete begins as we leave behind the bustle of Heraklion, the city of Hercules and the resting place of Nikos Kazantzakis, Crete's most famous son and the author of *Zorba the Greek*. It's a short, air-conditioned bus ride to Knossos, the capital of the Minoan civilization, the first in Europe. The hill of Kephala, which hoists the Palace above a valley of pines a few miles outside Heraklion, has been continuously inhabited since 7000 BC. We park outside the site and enter through the West Court, the ancient ceremonial entrance to the Palace, which was the grandest in the Minoan world. Our guide leads us to a shady spot beneath a pine bough, heavy with pine cones, to introduce us to Knossos.

The Minoan civilization, which endured for about 2000 years, was one of the most advanced in the ancient world, and Knossos is one of the instances in which Greek mythology might dovetail with archeological fact. According to *Bullfinch's Mythology*, Minos, a legendary king and lawgiver of Crete, was one of Europa's three sons, all born after her tryst with Zeus, who appeared to Europa as a white bull and carried her off to Crete. The frescoed Palace at Knossos, which comprises more than 1500 rooms, may have been the mythical labyrinth designed by Daedalus wherein Minos imprisoned the Minotaur, a monstrous half-bull, half man born to his wife, Pasiphaë, who was impregnated by a bull sent by Poseidon. The bull had been bequeathed to Minos, who was supposed to sacrifice it in Poseidon's honor, but Minos thought the bull so exquisite he couldn't part with it, so Poseidon punished him with a hideous, man-eating stepson. Theseus, the prince of Athens, slew the Minotaur and escaped from the labyrinth thanks to the "sword and the clew of thread" given him by Ariadne: one of the daughters of Minos, a princess of Crete and the Minotaur's half-sister, she had fallen in love with Theseus soon after he arrived on the island.

"I love the stories," I tell my wife. Thanks to our guide we don't need Ariadne's clew to find our way beneath the pines to the Hall of the Royal Guard, the Hall of the Double Axes, the Queen's Apartment, and the King Chamber and its alabaster throne, the oldest throne in Europe, which our guide tells us is the model for the seat of the President of the International Court of Justice at the Hague. We stroll through the Palace for a short while after our tour concludes, admiring the massive columns which, unlike the columns at Ephesus and Lindos, are perfectly smooth and slightly attenuated toward their bases.

A Portuguese poet, Affonso Romano De Sant'Anna, once wrote that every generation believes it lives at the summit of history, and this is what I think of our cruise so far, that we are traveling from our current summit, the summer of 2013, to those far more ancient and, perhaps, far more lasting. We stop at the bookstore, where my wife purchases a single postcard of the Dolphins Fresco.

"It's from 1600 BC," she says. "I'd love to see the original. It's in the Heraklion Museum."

"We can only ride one donkey at a time," I tell her.



“We’ll have to come back,” she says.

Day 4 – Afternoon

It seems as if the entire ship is leaning against the railing on the foredeck and quite abuzz as we approach magnificent Santorini. We are all braving the wind to gaze in awe at its sheer cliffs, which tower above the deep blue Caldera. The wind racing over the bow is powerful, and a bunch of kids are running at the wind, pausing, letting it push them backwards, laughing, their hair blown back. The houses upon the highest ridges look like fistfuls of white chalk, like snow. We are sailing into a postcard.

Our afternoon thus far has been packed, of course. On our return from Crete we attended a disembarkation meeting in the Can Can Lounge, and we’re all set for tomorrow, when we return to the bustle of Piraeus. The cruise director explained the entire procedure, including customs and cab fare to Athens and Venizelos Airport. All we have to do is tag our bags and leave them outside the door to our cabin before we fall asleep. Following the meeting I raced over to the gym, which is brand new and air conditioned. I treated myself to an hour on an elliptical trainer, with a view of the Aegean to my right, followed by a sauna, while my wife attended the Greek dance class in the Oklahoma Lounge, in preparation for “Spotlight on Greece” in the Can Can Lounge tonight. Opa!

Our tour guides are waiting for us as the tender boats arrive at the dock in Athiniós, each of them holding up a bright yellow sign in the shape of a circle with the number of each bus in the middle. High above us the cliffs seem to scrape against the blue sky. As we board our bus I watch a few buses and trucks creep along the narrow roads that thread their way up toward Fira, the largest village on Santorini. We follow a semi, slowly, up the mountain, higher and higher above the Caldera, its surface silvered by the late afternoon sun. This is hands-down one of the most incredible places I’ve ever seen.

“It’s unbelievable, isn’t it?” my wife says. We are on our way to Oia Village, where we arrive after a drive over the rolling hills inland from the rim of the Caldera. As soon as we step off the bus, some shopkeepers approach us with samples: a basket of pastelaki, peanuts coated with honey and sesame seeds, and small plastic cups of mastiha. Welcome to Oia.

It is as we imagined, white buildings with blue shutters and doors lined up along the edge of the cliff, staring back at the blazing sun. We have two hours to stroll, shop, drink coffee, dream...we fall into a café and sit down for a coffee on the veranda, which juts out over the Jacuzzi and sunbeds and kidney-shaped pools of the villas beneath us like a playing card trying to flee its deck. It feels like we are in mid-air. We can see the Olympia off in the distance. My wife orders a frappe and looks out toward the Caldera.

“This is jaw-dropping,” she says.



On our way back to Athiniós we drive south, toward Fira, through the valleys of northern Santorini on the island's eastern slope. They are flooded with white houses, as if they had been poured there, like syrup. Here and there they are punctuated by the cerulean domes of small churches.

We make it to Athiniós after a careful crawl down from Fira. The tender boats are waiting for us, and my wife and I sit up on the top deck of our boat for the short ride back to the Olympia, which waits for us below Oia, which I now see is home to a number of brown, pink and sand-colored buildings, some of them folded into its clusters of bright white houses. There is perhaps an hour of daylight left. I take my wife's hand and close my eyes for a moment. I surrender to the fading sunlight upon the Caldera.

On our return to the ship we purchase a bottle of olive oil, oregano, and a copy of the Louis Cruises DVD, "Jewels of the Aegean."

"So we don't forget any of it," my wife says.

"We won't," I tell her. When we arrive at our cabin, to shower and dress for dinner, and to pack, we find our pool towels folded in the shape of an elephant.

Day 4 – Evening

It's Greek night tonight, and the Can Can Lounge is packed. The stage is set like a taverna, and the burgundy curtain at the back of the stage is dotted with little blue lights, like stars. After a performance of traditional Greek dances, a blond girl, resplendent in heels and a white miniskirt, takes the stage and starts singing, to the accompaniment of a rather skillful bouzouki player, and the Olympia entertainment team begins pulling people from the audience to dance, even the kids, who join the singer on stage, and pretty soon the Can Can Lounge dance floor is full. It's the music of the islands, bright and lively. Is that dry ice? Yes, it is. They don't hold back on the Olympia. Not in the least.

The atmosphere is absolutely festive. A few male singers take the stage and tear into a series of Greek songs. The Greeks in the audience know every word, and they sing along, while the rest of us clap our hands, tap our feet and bob our sunburned heads up and down. The Can Can Lounge, where we have been receiving our bus assignments, is now a raucous Greek taverna, and as of 11:00 pm passengers of all ages are still pouring into the room. My wife loves it. She leans over and tells me, "this is the most fun I've ever had on a vacation!" The night ends, of course, with Mikis Theodorakis and "Zorba's Dance" from *Zorba the Greek*. Opa!

Later that evening, as we fall into bed in our cabin, our four very intense days upon the historic waters of the Aegean come to an end. We are the richer for them.

Kali nichta.