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A Little Taste of the Mediterranean

A Travel Log by Tracie Merrill



This past January, I went on a 12 night Eastern Mediterranean cruise on board the ship, the *Norwegian Jade*, with my mother and two uncles. In case you are wondering, it was a good time of year to go – mid 60’s, mostly sunny, and no other cruise ships docking in the ports. We departed from Barcelona, Spain, then proceeded to Rome, Italy; Piraeus (Athens), Greece; Izmir, Turkey; Alexandria, Egypt and Valletta, Malta.

I found Barcelona to be very beautiful, modern, clean and slow-paced despite the hustle and bustle of cars and scooters. Amazing architecture (both modern and gothic) abounded in this city (including two impressive cathedrals). Many of the buildings had unique and detailed designs as well as picturesque balconies. Visiting a park (Park Güell), filled with fun, modern architectural elements, was a favorite for me in this city.





In contrast to Barcelona, peaceful vineyards greeted us as we drove into Rome. Rome, though, was anything but tranquil. This city was crowded, busy and a bit overwhelming. Ornate sculptures, fountains, ruins and monuments (arches, columns, etc.) could be found everywhere and were mixed in with modern architecture and neighborhoods. Narrow streets were very common as well as scooters. The three highlights of Rome were going to the Coliseum, the Vatican and St. Peter's Basilica. I found myself marveling at the impressive size and engineering of the Coliseum while the beautiful ceilings, domes, paintings and lavish interiors of the Vatican and St. Peter's Basilica leaves a visitor daunted by the task of fully absorbing their surroundings.

Athens was similar to Barcelona in that the "old" parts of the city were generally separated from the modern. As in some old Roman buildings, clay roof tiling could be seen on top of homes. My family visited the Acropolis and the [Parthenon](#) as well as viewed the remains of several ancient temples and monuments. The ruins of the Acropolis were a bit disappointing since much of the original buildings and statues were not preserved. However, I really enjoyed the bird's eye view of the city from the Acropolis since it was so beautiful. I would also highly recommend trying the Greek dessert, Baklava.



Ephesus, Turkey, was my favorite place to visit on this trip. The landscape on our drive from Izmir to Ephesus consisted of lush green hills, fields and vineyards. Ephesus is an ancient greek city and much of the original city is still intact, including the library, bath houses, fountains, streets, torch holders, and terrace houses filled with mosaics and painted tiles. The Temple of Artemis, though, was a let down since only one pillar remains of this monument (one of the seven wonders of the ancient world). Just outside Ephesus, The House of the Virgin Mary, situated on top of a mountain and surrounded in forest, was serene and charming as befitting the former home of Mary, the mother of Jesus. We also visited a nearby carpet weaving academy, where I saw silk worms and learned about the process of extracting silk and making Turkish carpets.

Like Rome, Cairo was extremely crowded and busy but with a large security presence. The smog and motor vehicle traffic (mixed in with camels, donkeys and horses) combined with the sound of honking horns was horrendous (don't ever drive yourself). We drank only bottled water while there. Cultural differences were most apparent in this city. For instance, my mother and I had to wear scarves over our heads and long sleeve shirts when visiting a mosque and had to walk behind my uncles when entering. Egypt was well worth visiting, though. The pyramids of Giza and the Sphinx left me in awe of their size and in the mystery of how they were built while the sheer volume and lavishness of King Tutankhamen's treasures amazed me.



The final cities we visited on this cruise were Valletta and Mdina, Malta. Both Maltese cities have a large medieval "flare" to them since Malta was a stopping/training ground for knights on their way to the crusades. The fortifications of these cities, particularly Valletta, is very noticeable. Streets were very narrow and buildings tended to be rather plain on the outside while the interiors contained beautiful courtyards, gardens and richly decorated rooms. While there, my family and I enjoyed touring palaces, gardens where knights used to practice, and viewing the tombs of knights in St. John's Co-Cathedral.

If you would like to hear more about these adventures, see pictures or have any questions, feel free to stop me on the street sometime or e-mail me at tmerrill@svt.org. I also work as the Environmental Assistant for Seldovia Village Tribe so you can find me in my office there Monday through Friday, 9:00 am-5:00 pm.

