

FALL 2009 Contents



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Most days, I open my eyes around 8 a.m., but today, I rose with the sun and scurried to the bow of the ship, *Cristal*. A stiff wind feels like chilled water pouring across my face, but I don't mind. I am a passenger on a cruise ship, and we departed Athens last night on a seven-day expedition to the Greek Islands and Turkey. For me, this voyage is a one-way ticket to bliss.

I chose this particular cruise for the well-planned itinerary—we sail at night and explore a new destination each day. I'm ready to shop my way through Greece and Turkey, with the goal of finding a small souvenir at each port. Our stops include Mykonos, Patmos, Kusadasi, Rhodes, Crete and Santorini.

As we steam toward our first destination, Istanbul, wispy clouds trace lines above the horizon in a cerulean sky. The sun, rising higher, spills its shimmering warmth across the slate blue Aegean Sea. As the ship rounds Seraglio Point, the upper deck fills with fellow travelers snapping photos of the minaret-strewn city above the crescent-shaped harbor. I've visited Istanbul before, so when the gangplanks unfurl, I already know my destination—the Spice Market.

An indoor mall with vaulted ceilings and decoratively painted archways, the market offers wonders for all senses. Among the spices,

Ports of Call

Story and photos by Necee Regis

I find silk scarves, cashmere pashminas, intricately woven textiles, boxes of tea with small glass cups and glass lanterns suspended like a rainbow of teardrops from a wire across the ceiling. I smile as I overhear the merchants flirt while selling their wares.

I find the freshly ground cumin and almonds that I want to take home from here, but what will be my souvenir? I spy a shop filled with bright, hand-painted ceramics. I choose two tiny orange bowls—the clerk says they’re for serving nuts or holding salt. I envision them in my kitchen holding my Istanbul cumin and almonds. Perfect!

Port 2

In Mykonos, the ship provides buses to shuttle us a stone’s throw from the landmark windmills near the half-moon beach of bustling Little Venice. The narrow, winding streets of Chora—as the town is called—are like a maze within a maze. I lose my sense of direction as the bright sun bounces off the whitewashed walls, passing brightly painted shutters and doors that match the intensity of the indigo sky and serendipitously wander into a shop selling locally made honey.

The salesclerk cheerfully invites me to sample their varieties of honey—exotic flavors, including thyme, eucalyptus, fir and mountain tea. She extols the health benefits of each and tells me about who makes it. The 200-year-old family-run business, Nectar & Ambrosia, maintains hives on 80 acres abloom with more than 1,000 varieties of wildflowers. For my island memento, I choose a jar of thyme honey with a fragrant honeycomb seal. Before heading back to the ship, I can’t resist a grilled sausage gyro, filled to brimming with tomatoes, onions, and—unexpectedly—French fries drizzled with piquant yogurt sauce. I’m in heaven.

Port 3

On to Patmos! The smallest island on



Port 2



Port 1



Port 3

our cruise agenda, Patmos is home to the Monastery of Saint John that, according to oral traditions, contains the cave where Saint John wrote the book of Revelation. Lucky for me, the intimate cruise ship—with about 500 cabins—can access smaller harbors that giant mega-ships cannot.

The mountaintop sanctuary overlooks terraced hills, pure white houses and a few 18th century windmills. I sit on a cool stone wall in the warming morning breeze while birds trill among the pine and eucalyptus trees. Along the streets beneath the monastery, I see a curious collection of silver

metal strips, each with an image hammered into the surface: a horse, an ear, a young child, a lung, a car, a baby, a cow. These are *tamata*—true lucky charms—that originated from an ancient Greek tradition of buying one as an offering to a saint. I purchase one *tama* with an image of two arms. It will be gloriously displayed in my kitchen, guarding my spices, nuts and honey.

Port 4

In Kusadasi we are back on Turkish soil and visit the archaeological wonder that is Ephesus. The port of Kusadasi is also worth exploring, with its broad avenue along the sea and pedestrian-only shopping district. I buy a pick-me-up cone of creamy coffee gelato that I consume before it has a chance to melt. In the main bazaar, I find a simple silver ring, locally crafted, that will always remind me of salty breezes and friendly merchants calling hello—*merhaba!*



Port 7

Port 5

The following morning we arrive in Rhodes, where the crenellated walls of the old town have survived since the 15th century. The pomegranate flower is the symbol of this island, which also grows olives, peaches, citrus trees, sage, thyme and several grape varieties used in local wines.

At one of the vibrant town beaches, gaily bedecked with orange and yellow striped chairs and umbrellas for rent, I take a swim and then wander, salty and cooled, into a neighborhood mini-market far from the touristy crowds. Here, I find an array of olive oils and select a green *lekythos*-shaped (tall and narrow with one handle) bottle of extra-virgin oil that, when empty, I can reuse as a single flower vase.

Port 6

Early the following morning, in the slightly worn but vibrant city of Aghios Nikolaos in Crete, I stroll past cafés and high-end shops selling jewelry. Turning up a residential side street, I discover a small beach where early risers are enjoying a morning dip. Nearby, a fish *taverna* prepares for a lunchtime crowd.

I duck inside a tiny storefront and purchase a bottle of ouzo, the licorice-flavored beverage that's synonymous with Greece. The exuberant cheerleader on the label is worth the price of the bottle and will serve to remind me of this larger island where, coincidentally, I have learned a toast: "*Yamas!*" (to our health!).

Port 7

Overnight, we cruise onward to Santorini, a small archipelago of volcanic islands where black basalt and red lava cliffs rise 900-plus feet above the sea. I love this mode of traveling, where each new day brings a new town to explore. In Fira, the main city, open-air restaurants cling to the steep hillside, providing a spectacular spot to watch the sunset. Along the streets that lead to the funicular—a hair-raising ride to the port area below—shops sell Greek art, crafts, jewelry, leather goods, cosmetics and clothing. Here, I choose a simple silver necklace with a single bead made from the island's black lava. It's light and elegant, like the spirit of Santorini. Someday, I imagine I'll pass it down to one of my young relatives and tell them the story of this trip and how I acquired the necklace.

PLANS AND PACKAGES

One convenient way to book an international cruise is through a tour operator who can offer package deals. Consumers can book directly or through a travel agent. This list of operators offers Aegean cruises from 3 to 10 days through the islands of Greece and ports in Turkey:

CENTRAL HOLIDAYS	KEY TOURS
www.centralholidays.com	www.keytours.com
800-935-5000	800-576-1784
HOMERIC TOURS	TOURLITE INTERNATIONAL
www.homerictours.com	www.tourlite.com
800-223-5570	800-272-7600

When the ship returns to Athens, I remain an extra day to tour the site of the first modern Olympic games, as well as the spectacular Parthenon. Beneath the slopes of the Acropolis, I find a colorful, bustling neighborhood called Plaka. Sometimes referred to as a village within the city, the area is closed to traffic and is ideal for browsing shops offering postcards, touristy souvenirs, jewelry, art and clothing.

At a small outdoor café, I enjoy a *frappe*, a frothy iced coffee. Watching crowds saunter past on this warm afternoon, I rewind my memories from the cruise and recall each item in my cache of souvenirs. Still, I need something from Athens to complete the collection.

En route to the hotel, I find it. It's the perfect, pocket-sized memento to tuck inside my bulging suitcase: A deck of playing cards. Each card sports a color snapshot of sites in ancient Greece. The three of hearts? The Parthenon. The queen of clubs? The Monastery of St. John on Patmos. Someday, if I'm feeling ambitious, I'll mount them all in a frame. Or maybe I'll use them when I host my regular Thursday night card game and regale my friends about my wonderful voyage—while sipping ouzo, of course. *Yamas!* ■