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GREEK ISLANDS

A mother-daughter odyssey through ancient wonders

By ANNE Z. COOKE Special to the Express-News and Chronicle
Oct. 10, 2008, 8:57AM



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Visitors to Ephesus on Turkey's Aegean coast navigate the marble Roman columns.

ATHENS - "Oh-oh," I thought, as my mother stumbled on the uneven stones, catching herself just in time. "Maybe this cruise really will be her last."

As she leaned, red-faced, on a fallen marble column in Ephesus, on Turkey's Aegean coast, the reality hit home. "If she breaks a hip, we're in big trouble."

If you didn't know better you'd think my mother was in her 80s. Her steady step and youthful voice would do credit to most 70-year-olds. Among relatives and friends, her photographic memory and keen interest in politics are legendary. But now, as we threaded our way among the partially restored ruins of this ancient city, her real age of 97 was showing.

"I'm sure this will be my last trip abroad," she'd reminded me firmly as we brought the suitcases in from the garage and attached Regent Seven Seas' baggage tags. "It's foolish to take chances at my age. I'm not worried about what happens to me, but the last thing I want to do is create problems for someone else."

"Sure, Mom," I said, to keep the peace. She'd been anticipating the inevitable ever since my dad died, a decade earlier. Since then we traveled together a half-dozen times, buying trip insurance each time, and never needing it. So far, this cruise - a seven-night Greek Islands voyage on the Regent Seven Seas Voyager, a luxury all-suite ship - had gone as smoothly as olive oil on feta cheese. But not all the passengers were so lucky.

In Canakkale, near the site of Troy, a senior from Kansas slipped outside a souvenir shop, broke a leg and had to be flown home. "Oh, that poor man," said Mother, as we stood at the rail and watched the ambulance pull away from the dock. "He was only 69. He's going to miss everything."

She was thinking of the wonders of the ancient world ahead of us: historical Istanbul, where East meets West; Ephesus, already ancient when the Romans rebuilt the city visitors see today; fortified Rhodes, first home of the Knights of Malta; Santorini's watery crater; white-washed Mykonos; the Minoan Palace on Crete; the Oracle at Delphi; the island of Corfu; and finally Venice, Italy.

From the time my sisters and I were kids our parents took us on their travels. "Seeing the world is educational," they said, removing us from school to traipse through Europe, Mexico, Central America and 48 of the 50 states.

But the trips my mother and I enjoyed in her 10th decade were affairs of the heart. We became true friends while sharing taxis with strangers, coping with misplaced hotel reservations and deciphering city maps. We savored the gloomy splendor of Notre Dame and the piquant smells of Oaxaca's outdoor market. Doing it together was a kick; reliving it later was sweet.

We toured Spain, rented an apartment in England and visited friends in Mexico. She dug into guidebooks for highlights and made lists of hotels. I did the grunt work, carrying suitcases, waving down taxis, double-checking invoices.

We took a budget cruise to Alaska. Then she had another idea.

"Let's take a luxury cruise this time," she said.

"We won't have to pack and unpack every night or look for restaurants. We can sit in deck chairs and watch the scenery glide by. It'll be easier for you, too." She paused and smiled. "And I can wear my new silk dresses."

It was true. Cruises banish the hassles of daily travel. You unpack once, the itinerary is set and sightseeing worry-free. You can poke around each port on your own, or join a ship-organized tour. There is time to read, to talk and to meet people. You can buy but won't have to carry from place to place those irresistible objets d'art.

If you pick a destination such as the Aegean or Mediterranean, where sea-going travel is part of the culture, so much the better. For my mother, who'd studied the Iliad and the Odyssey in Greek, putting a face on the stories was a dream. The 700-passenger Voyager was small enough to feel like a ship, but big enough to offer a lively, social experience.

No longer interested in budget travel, Mother wanted a luxury ship just expensive enough to discourage the rowdy-party crowd and appeal to people interested in history and art. And we both liked the one-price fare, which included tips, 24-hour room service, in-room dining, wines, spirits, bottled drinks and use of the self-serve laundry.

The Voyager's all-suite cabins each had their own balcony; we had generous closets and more than enough room for guidebooks, binoculars and my laptop. The ship has nine decks, several swimming pools and four dining rooms,

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PLANNING A TRIP

- **When to go:** Most Greek Islands cruises operate in spring and fall to avoid the region's hot summers. But some ships sail midsummer, too.
- **Finding a cruise:** Almost all major cruise lines familiar to Americans operate cruises to Santorini, Rhodes and other ports in the region. Many depart from Piraeus (Athens) or Istanbul, or sail between those ports. Consult a neighborhood or online travel agency for pricing, which can vary widely, and for reservations.
- **Resources:** For cruise news and reviews, visit www.cruisecritic.com and www.maritimematters.com.

from a casual café to the formal Le Cordon Bleu restaurant. Dining-room seats weren't assigned, but we soon formed a group of friends and met for dinner.

On most days, Mother was in good form, eager to learn what our table companions had seen and heard and happy to share her experiences. For the listeners, me included, her stories were a journey back to the days when all-inclusive resorts were non-existent, guides were few and tourists were a novelty.

There is a lot of walking on flagstones and dirt in the Greek Islands, but most places are accessible. For Mother, the toughest challenge was the terraced slopes of Mount Parnassus, site of the Delphic Oracle. When she saw the switch-backed path that climbs from one temple to the next, she hesitated.

"I don't think I can make it," she said. We linked arms and walked slowly to a bench under a tree, with a clear view of the hill. "You go ahead, you shouldn't miss this," she said. "I can see everything from here."

A few months after we'd returned home, I stopped by Mother's expecting to find her in her usual chair, reading. Instead, she was at the kitchen table looking over a stack of cruise brochures.

"I've been reading about these cruises to South America," she said. "Some of these look easy, even for me. What do you think?"

Who knows, I said to myself. She could be right.

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