

TRIP REPORT ON THE ROMAN EMPIRE CRUISE

April 18-May 2, 2009

Written by Tom Harrison
with Input by Richard Brabham



The Holland America (HA) 10-day Roman Empire cruise my long-time friend and travel companion Richard Brabham and I booked last summer lived up to my expectations. We selected it based on the itinerary which included seven port stops in four European countries plus the opportunity to explore Rome, and The Vatican, for one day before and three days after the cruise. Our research paid off in selecting as our Rome-based hotel the Anfiteatro Flavio in the Ancient Rome district not far from the Colosseum rather than hotels in the more modern and central area of Rome around the Termini railroad station. We were able to negotiate the Italian train and Rome's subway system for the transfers from Fiumicino international airport to downtown and to the port at Civitavecchia with minimum difficulty and at a considerable cost savings from the HA-offered transfers or even the typical airport shuttle services.

Holland America's 1918-passenger Noordam was a beautiful ship, but when negotiating meals at the crowded Lido buffet, I was grateful that there were only about 1,500 passengers booked on this voyage. Our stateroom 1123 was the last interior cabin on the main deck aft on the starboard side and one of only about six larger suites of this type. The beds were luxurious, closet space ample and a couch and table included. TV allowed us a view from the bridge looking both forward and aft. CNN and BBC kept us informed, mostly of the over-reported swine flu epidemic. We were convenient to the dining room, just two decks above us and the hot tubs on the Lido deck 9 directly above us. Evenings we had dinner at 8:00 in the formal dining room on deck 3 at a table of four with a retired couple—he from the postal service and she from corporate personnel. The service was good, if not exceptional. The food was generally good, but somewhat inconsistent with such dishes as prime rib. I could not help ranking HA food just a notch below our food experience on the Princess line. I did not partake in many of the ship's activities except for the musical/dance shows which we attended almost every night at 7:00. I generally did not care for the musical/dance shows, which I deemed too "L.A." for my taste. I especially did not care for the lead female singer, who substituted attitude for singing talent. Several of the male singers and dance ensemble were both cute and talented. I preferred this before-dinner show schedule over Princess' which has shows at 10:00 for the 8:00 dinner seating. I made use of the hot tubs on the Lido deck, mostly to help treat a swollen leg. Forward on the Lido deck, where the large swimming pool was located, the sliding cover was closed due to the rainy and cool weather for most of the first half of the trip. Now some highlights from the port tours that we booked in advance.

Dubrovnik, Croatia

4/21 - This was a new city and country for me. It is a coastal city of 45,000 at the extreme southeast end of Croatia on the Adriatic Sea. Italy is an 8-hour ferry ride to the west. Bosnia is over the mountains to the east and Montenegro to the southeast. Dubrovnik has a long history dating from the 7th C. It was an independent republic for 450 years from the 14th C. to early 19th C. In 1944 Tito made Croatia part of Yugoslavia. In 1991 the country gained its independence. Our tour was along a scenic coastal road, with views back to Dubrovnik and various islands to the village of Cavtat not far from the border with Montenegro. We enjoyed an outstanding native dance and musical cultural show in an old fort just outside the walled city of Dubrovnik. This fort was used to quarantine visitors for 40 days against the plague of the middle ages, a tactic that was successful in keeping Dubrovnik mostly disease free. Unfortunately, the logistics of assembling the half dozen tour buses delayed the start of the show and cut back on the amount of time we had for touring Dubrovnik inside the walls. We decided to stay with the tour bus that we had already paid for rather than spend an additional \$15 on a shuttle back to the ship, especially since it was raining.

Corfu, Greece

4/22 - The next day we stopped in Corfu, one of a group of islands in the Ionian Sea of western Greece. Corfu city is directly across a narrow strait from Albania. Here our tour was to the palaces of Corfu. The first stop was the Achillion Palace, which was the summer home of Empress Elisabeth of Austria (1837-1898), wife of Emperor Franz Joseph I. A marble statue of her adorns the entry. Other photos, furniture and memorabilia adorn the various rooms of this museum. The grounds are beautiful highlighted by an arch covered with elegant wisteria leading out to a viewpoint overlooking the sea. A massive 37' high statue of Achilles is located on the point and a smaller Achilles and other classic Greek male statues adorn the grounds and side porch. From there we drove to a lookout point to see Mouse Island then to Kanon to visit Mon Repos Palace. Formerly a summer home for British royalty—Prince Phillip Duke of Edinburgh was born there in 1921—it is now a museum with lavishly decorated rooms from the period.

Olympia, Greece

4/23 - After landing at the port of Katakolon we bused for 45 minutes through wine country to the site of the original Olympic Games. I noticed along the way that modern Greeks make use of solar panels to heat hot water tanks situated on their roof tops. The Olympic Games commenced in the 5th Century. B.C., the Greek Classical Period, ran through the Roman Period until Theodosius, emperor of Byzantium, terminated them in 393 A.D. Our guide supplemented our tour with photos of naked athletes from Greek vases and other sources as we viewed the ruins of gymnasiums, workout areas for wrestlers, hot baths, guest houses, temples, altars and monuments to the gods. Among the most visible ruins are portions of the Temple of Zeus and Temple of Hera, upon whose altar in front of the temple, the fires are lit for the modern quadrennial Olympic Games. We saw the 600' long by 100' wide stadium and track where up to 40,000 visitors from all over the Greek and Roman empires traveled for the typically five-day athletic and cultural events, including matches by wrestler Milo and Emperor Nero's chariot races. After the site tour we visited the Archeological Museum where we saw among other things the gold and ivory sculpture of Zeus by 5th Century B.C. sculptor Pheidias, who had previously worked on the Acropolis in Athens. We also saw a beautiful sculpture of Hermes by Praxiteles and vases showing athletes exercising.

Santorini, Greece

4/24 - My first visit here was in May 1996 with my daughter Elaine. We were only in port long enough to take the funicular up from the port to the town of Fira and walk around a bit. This trip was a scenic tour starting with a panoramic view from 2,464-foot Mt. Profitas Ilias; a stop at the Antoniou Winery with a vista point; and ending at Oia (EE-a) on the northernmost tip of the island. This is the village of blue and white buildings which so many artists depict in their paintings of Santorini. We saw the Greek cats and enjoyed stunning vistas of the sea and poked around quaint shops. Santorini is truly beautiful, especially as the evening sun reflects off of windows in houses on the island which we could see from our ship in the harbor before we sailed. Sunset was spectacular.

Kusadasi/Ephesus, Turkey

4/25 - Here Richard had made prior arrangement with a private tour operator named Serdar Atalan for a tour of Ephesus. We were joined by Richard's internet pen pal Volkan, a Turkish man who had flown in from Istanbul the previous night and met us at the dock. The four of us toured the 2,500-year old well-preserved Roman ruin avoiding the large tour groups from the ship. From the entrance we walked down the rocky street passing through the Heracles Gate onto Curetes Street seeing among other things the Fountain of Trajan; Temple of Hadrian; a relief of Nike; and the Baths of Skolastica, which had separate chambers for clothes changing, tepid water tubs, and hot water tubs. We lingered and mused over what it must have been like for the Romans who used the public latrines as a meeting place. We saw the two-story Celsus Library and Mazeus and Mithriadates Gate then headed up the Marble Street to the Grand Theater. This huge open amphitheatre dates to the 1st Century B.C. but was expanded during Emperor Nero's time. It has up to 23 tiers of seats and to this day enjoys perfect acoustics. From there we headed down Harbor Street passing by, but not visiting, the church



of the Virgin Mary. After stopping at a local vendor, known to the guide, we got back in the van and headed for the small village of Selcuk, where we stopped to see the ruins of The Temple of Artemis. The single standing column in what is now in a bog does not do justice to 137-column temple which stood there 2_ centuries ago when it was one of the 7 Wonders of the Ancient World. From here we returned to Kusadasi, where the tour guide dropped us in the center. We had lunch there then ventured over to a Turkish bath. We left our clothes in a locked room and were offered a towel, then headed downstairs into a steam room. The treatment consisted of a scrubbing down with a luffa-like hand sponge, then a wonderful bubble bath with voluminous suds dispensed from a pillow case. After a rub-down and rinse, we headed back upstairs for a full body massage. The treatment was about \$27. We all left exhilarated and refreshed. We then wandered around town and sat on benches along the waterfront. About 5:00 we said our goodbyes and sadly left Volkan to return to the ship.

Piraeus/Athens, Greece

4/26 - Our bus left the dock at the ancient port of Piraeus about 8:40 a.m. passing through Piraeus town with about one million people then entering into abutting Athens with its four million people and considerable traffic. There are about 11 million in all of Greece. The bus passed between two venues where the 2004 summer Olympics, and saw a number of other ruins and modern buildings as we made it to the National Parliament where we parked for a few minutes and observed the Greek guards with their colorful pleated skirts and shoes with pom-poms on them. We arrived at the National Archeological Museum about 10:00 a.m. Because of the huge crowds and the fact that I was having trouble hearing our guide, I broke away and toured the wonderful sculpture galleries featuring Classical Greek statues and reliefs of Hermes & The Nymphs, Poseidon, Aphrodite & Pan, as well as Olympian Marathon boy, Jockey boy and other athletes and naked youth (kouros) from Athens and many ancient Greek cities. Running late we headed for the Acropolis arriving about 11:50. We gingerly climbed the slick marble stones forming the path to the top. We stopped to view down slope the ancient Agora which was the market, government and entertainment center at the time. We proceeded on up the uneven steps passing columns of the Propylaea (gate) leading up to the Temple of Athena aka Parthenon. The guide gave us mythical stories and factual information about this historic building and we viewed restoration work in the decorative areas along the building face above the columns. Other structural restoration was underway elsewhere in the temple. We then peered over the wall to see the Odeon of Herodes (amphitheater) where musical and dramatic productions were held. We had excellent panoramic views of modern Athens from this level including Mt. Lycavitos. Attractive young

tourists were found sitting on the wall, at viewpoints, and all over the area at the base of the Parthenon. We then proceeded around to the Erechtheion with its famous group of goddesses holding up the roof of the porch. Exiting the historic site we walked down narrow streets, catching glimpses of the Acropolis from below it, trekking for perhaps a couple of miles to the Plaka where we found our restaurant--the Taverna Erato Garden. Here we where we were served an authentic Greek luncheon in a beautiful outdoors setting. After lunch we strolled along the Plaka streets and shops and found a resting spot near Sintagma Square. We boarded our bus back to the ship about 2:45 p.m. It had been an exhilarating, but exhausting, tour through one of the world's great cities.

Messina (Sicily), Italy

4/28 - The trip planned for this stop was a two-hour bus trip from Messina to Mt. Etna on highway A-18 along the coast. From the highway we saw many beachfront homes and resorts and other homes were stuck seemingly at random on the steep cliffs above the roadway. We passed through 38 tunnels to the community of Giarre where we exited the freeway. From there we traversed narrow streets through small villages and alongside wineries climbing steeply up a winding road until we reached the summit at the Silvestri Craters at an elevation of about 10,600 feet. On the way up we passed in and out of clouds, but it was clear at the summit. Mt. Etna is an active volcano that has erupted in recent times in 1908, 1923, 1929, 1950, 1981, 1983, 1986, 1992, 2001 and 2002. Lava flows from some of these eruptions have inundated villages that in some years were worse than others. We were struck at the starkness of the landscape of mostly loose lava rock/gravel, with snow on the higher peaks. We hiked around one bowl and encountered wind gusts of at least 50 mph, nearly toppling me off the mountain at one point. I did lose my yellow cap that has traveled around the world with me. It was cold and windy and we were glad to seek refuge in the store and we glad to hop back on the bus for the return journey. The volcano has transformed the landscape into an eerie moon-like environment.

Vatican City State

4/30 - Vatican City is an independent state covering an area of 110 acres circumscribed by the City of Rome. It was established by Mussolini by the Lateran Treaty on February 11, 1929. There is a total population of 800 making it the smallest country by area and population in the world. We selected in advance a guided private tour which consisted of about 20 people rather than 40 and we received priority entrance into the Vatican Museums. As luck would have it our tour guide, Graham, is from Napa, CA and is a graduate of Sacramento State in Art History. The guide commenced the tour in a large courtyard which has a large pine cone and a golden-hued mechanical world. He clustered the group in front of a poster of the Sistine Chapel ceiling where he reported that Michelangelo, a sculptor who had never done a fresco, was commissioned by Pope Julius II to decorate the ceiling which he started in May 1508. Michelangelo, unhappy with the small proportions of characters in his first four panels, quit and returned to Florence. The Pope refused to let him out of the contract and forced him to return. After some bargaining the pope agreed to Michelangelo's demand that he would never have to do another painting. Yet 23 years later Pope Paul III commissioned Michelangelo to do The Last Judgment which turned out to be the largest painting ever done by a single person. It took him 6_ years to finish. We then went into the Vatican Museum passing through such areas as the Octagon Courtyard, Hall of Animals, Belvedere Courtyard, Round Room, Hallway of Candelabra, and Pope Gregory Ceiling room, and Tapestry Room among others. We saw such masterpieces as the Apollo Belvedere and the Belvedere Torso, both of which Michelangelo had studied and interpreted in his own work. We also saw sculptures of Laocoon, a marble Hermes, Rodin's The Thinker, the Pantheon Ceiling, a grotesque bronze statue of Hercules, a marble statue that looks like Bill Clinton, the goddess Diana aka Artemis statue with bull testicles hanging around her bosoms. We passed through a tapestry room then walked some distance to rooms featuring paintings by Raphael including the famous "School of Athens". Finally we reached the huge Sistine Chapel crowded with visitors to behold the masterpiece. I was struck about how high the ceiling is, and indeed the figures in the first four panels are somewhat difficult to make out. We learned that this room is used for conclaves to select a new pope. As we left the Sistine Chapel, we peeked through the keyhole to a room where the pope entertains prominent heads of state. We then exited the museum complex and gathered on the steps of St. Peter's Basilica which was finished in 1660.

We did not see Michelangelo's Pieta which is inside as it would require standing in another long line. We looked out over St. Peter's Square, which in fact is an ellipse with 300 colonnades which took 60 years to build. Four columns hold up each statue, but an optical illusion makes it appear there is only one. Our guide ended the tour and we walked around St. Peter's Square and exited up Via di Porta Angelica, passing a fountain busy with young tourists.. Searching for something to eat, we mistakenly entered a sidewalk "ristorante" and discovered that that name means expensive food. We returned to our hotel via the Octaviano Metro station. We were quite exhausted having toured just some of the Vatican Museums and not even the famous St. Peter's Basilica. Oh well, another time. Touring is hard work!

Rome, Italy

4/18 - The day before the cruise after checking in to the hotel, we set out down Via Serpente, which is a narrow one way street in the direction of The Colosseum, which we could see off in the distance. We had a prepaid ticket for a multi-media show in a venue near the Colosseum called "Rewind Rome" which featured a glass bottom elevator which displayed artifacts from archeological diggings in the immediate area. We then went to a 3-D movie presentation focusing primarily on gladiator action in the Colosseum. We then walked across to the Colosseum and decided to take a guided tour since admission was free. We learned that gladiators were treated like professional athletes today. Starting in their teens they trained constantly at a school where they also lived, performed the dangerous work until their mid-20s, then they retired. We saw the tunnel leading to the school subsequently saw the ruins themselves across the road. From the spectator level midway up inside the Colosseum, we could see the doors on the floor where the entertainers entered, including Christians being fed to the lions. (There were crosses at those spots). After the tour we walked up Imperiali Boulevard viewing the Forum of Augustus and the Markets of Trajan to a venue near Piazza Venezia where we saw a hokey history of Rome multi-media event directed mostly to children, which included rocking of your seats. Oh well it was a rip-off. We crossed back by the Piazza Venezia and took in the massive Victor Emmanuel Monument then headed for a restaurant nearby that had been recommended by a friend. We finally found it and were greeted by the attractive owner and waiter. We were informed that they do not start serving on Saturday evenings until 8:00. Since it was only 6:30 we left and headed back to the hotel for some much needed rest. The next day was devoted to getting from the Cavour Metro stop to the Termini railroad station where we bought our ticket to Civitavecchia, found a taxi and made it to the port terminal in a pouring rain.

4/29 - We returned to Rome after the cruise having found a more direct train to Ostiense and transferred to the metro for Cavour station nearest to our hotel. We checked back in to the Anfiteatro Flavio for three nights and went to our room on the 5th floor in a tiny glass-walled elevator barely room enough for Richard and me. Indeed with our bags it was necessary for us to take two trips. It was the only room in the hotel with a tub allowing me to soak my swollen leg. Later we headed back towards the Colosseum and spotted a rainbow flag at a restaurant called Coming Out. We had a bite to eat and then headed San Clemente church. Here a 12th Century basilica sits atop a 4th Century Christian basilica, which sits atop a 2nd century Mithraic Temple and some even earlier Roman buildings. This was an intriguing visit down stairs through the layers of Rome.

5/1 - Our final day in Rome was a national holiday. The streets were packed with people and the police had closed off streets like Imperiali Boulevard which we had previously used. For this day we had a 3-hour walking tour that started in the Piazza Navona. We decided to cut across to the Tiber River through the narrow streets, some reserved for pedestrians only. We passed a beautiful fountain called Turtle Fountain and ended up on a major road parallel to the river at the Fabricio Bridge. We found our guide near the Four Rivers Fountain in the center of Piazza Navona. After distributing to us portable hearing devices and discussing the significance of the piazza and fountain she led us the Parthenon. The front and the entire interior were packed solid with people. We were given ten minutes to photograph then reassemble. This was hardly enough time to absorb and splendor of this great monument. Next we walked by and stopped briefly at Hadrian's Temple.

Down another crowded street we found the famous Trevi Fountain. It was at least six people deep along the wall, so forget about throwing coins over your shoulder and making a wish. We plodded on to the Palace of Venezia and were shown the balcony window from which Mussolini used to address the Italian people during World War II. We walked along the right side Victor Emmanuel monument and stopped to look at subterranean quarters which used to house the poor in Roman times. From there we climbed the magnificent wide steps, decorated on both sides with naked warriors and their horses, to the top of Capitoline Hill. Here in front of the clock tower there is a statue of Marcus Aurelius and a place to lookout down into the forum. Going around to the left we passed a statue of Romulus and Remus, the legendary founders of Rome. We passed one of the many fresh water fountains and filled our bottles. We then headed down the now barricaded Imperiali Boulevard to the entrance to the Roman Forum. Among the many structures in this area of ruins were: Arch of Sempitimus Severus, House of the Vestal Virgins, Altar to Julius Caesar (which had live flowers), and Basilica to Maxentius & Constantine. Pressing on towards the Colosseum, we dropped out of the tour at the Arch of Titus since we had already toured that monument and were exhausted. We stopped for an inexpensive dinner on Via Cavour before heading back to the hotel.

Conclusion

The Roman Empire cruise with the Rome and Vatican extensions was an intellectually- stimulating, engaging, if strenuous vacation. I added two new countries to my world travel list—Croatia and The Vatican, plus a group of new cities. The Mediterranean including Italy and Greece, with their marvelous cities of Rome and Athens, is an excellent tourist destination with great food, stunning vistas, extensive historic sites and most of all many strikingly good-looking people. It was a great trip.

Happy Travels!

Best Regards, Tom Harrison

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