

# Magic of the Mediterranean – Holland America Cruises – 24 days aboard the Nieuw Amsterdam

Ken Gill

## Brief outline of tour

This was a 24-day cruise (August 2014) from Barcelona to Venice to Istanbul then back to Venice. More recent versions of this cruise have varied itineraries, particularly with Istanbul no longer included.

The cost of the cruise was \$5,420 per person for a balcony cabin.

The full itinerary included: Barcelona; Marseille (Provence); Monaco, Monte Carlo; Livorno (Pisa); Civitavecchia (Tarquinia); Naples (Pompeii); Taormina; At Sea; Kerkira (Corfu); Kotor, Montenegro; Dubrovnik; Venice; At Sea; Katakolon (Olympia); Piraeus (Athens); Istanbul; Lesbos; Kusadasi (Ephesus); Thira (Santorini); Argostoli; At Sea; Venice.

As with most cruises, this trip would suit people with all levels of fitness. A variety of shore excursions were available at an additional cost and these again could be selected to match individual interests and fitness levels.

Pre and post-cruise destinations will vary with individual interests and preferences, available budgets and any time restrictions. In our own case, my wife and I visited Paris and Bordeaux before arriving in Barcelona. At the end of the cruise we broke our trip home with a stay in Singapore.

## Major highlights of the tour

**BARCELONA:** Before the cruise we enjoyed three nights in Barcelona, which is a fascinating city with so much to see. We always recommend using the **Hop On Hop Off Bus**, both to give you an overview of the city and then to get you to and from selected locations.

Recommended highlights included Gaudi's amazing church, **Sagrada Familia** (to avoid the long lines, we booked a specific day and time online before leaving home); Gaudi's **Park Guell**; the **La Rambla** shopping district; and the **Barcelona Cathedral**. For something completely different, we pre-booked a live theatre show and saw *Los Miserables* (yes, completely sung in Spanish – lucky we already knew most of the words!).



**ROME:** The port of Civitavecchia is a 90-minute coach ride from Rome so, when selecting shore excursions from this destination, a decision needs to be made about the possibility of spending three hours travelling to and from this most marvelous of cities. Given that we had visited Rome on a previous trip, we decided to do the **Etruscan Treasures** excursion as an alternative. We would highly recommend this excursion as we visited the **Necropolis of Monterozzi in Tarquinia**, where we viewed some of the 6,500 amazing underground tombs which date back to 500 BC. Related artefacts were on show at the nearby archaeological museum and the tour concluded with visits to the beautiful towns of **Marta** and **Tuscania**.

For those who share our interest in all things ancient (not referring to our schools' maintenance schedules), the excursion to **Pompeii** at the foot of **Mount Vesuvius** is also highly recommended. There is a lot to see, including an ancient theatre, narrow stone streets, remains of houses and shops and fountains and even a ten-room brothel.

**KOTOR, MONTENEGRO:** Kotor in Montenegro is a most spectacular place to visit. The incredibly steep black mountains that greet you as you sail into the beautiful fiord, on the way to the old walled town, are quite awesome. We chose the **Traditional Montenegro** tour which included a coach and minibus climb to **Lastva** and the **St Maria Church**, with amazing views back down to the old town. Later on, it was only the 37°C heat that kept us from climbing the 1,300+ steps from the old town, along the ancient fortification wall, up to the **Castel St John**. Then again, it may have been the local Niksicko beer that kept us sensibly on the lower levels of this intriguing town.



**DUBROVNIK:** Dubrovnik in Croatia provides similar breathtaking views where a **Cable Car** takes you high above the city and the coastline. Way below, the **Old Town** has an intact 2.5km wall that stretches around its perimeter. It was well worth the walk around the top of this wall where we could see the amazing array of buildings within the old town and the commanding strategic position that was held on this spectacular peninsula on the edge of the Adriatic Sea.

**VENICE:** How do you best describe Venice? Certainly, it was the major highlight of our trip. We had been here once before, but on that occasion we had arrived by train. However, arriving in Venice aboard one of these massive cruise liners is just amazing. The views of **St Mark's Square** and the mouth of the **Grand Canal** stimulate all the postcard images that are held in the brain from iconic photographs and popular travel shows.

Many a visitor will feel compelled to take an immediate gondola ride (which are quite expensive), but we resisted and chose instead to do a **two hour boat tour of Venice**. This took us past highlights such as **Lido, Murano** and back to St Mark's Square via **Arsenale**. On our previous trip we had boarded one of the many **vaporettas** (ferries or water buses) and visited both Murano (famous for its glassware) and **Burano** (famous for its needle work and lace). We enjoyed Burano the most as it is so much more colourful with its delightfully painted buildings and window baskets and shops amongst its narrow pathways and canals. The vaporetta option also provides an economical way of touring along the not-to-be-missed **Grand Canal** and under the **Rialto Bridge**.



Standing in St Mark's Square, you can't miss (across the water) the magnificent **Basilica of San Giorgio Maggiore**. We strongly recommend the short vaporetta ride to this beautiful church and the 360 degree view of the city and its surrounds provided from the top of the church's bell tower.

With so much more to see, including the wonderful **Palazzo Ducale** (Palace of the Doges) and the **Frari Basilica**, we will mention one final highlight of Venice and that is to **walk** as much as you possibly can to fully experience the amazing vibe of this city. We walked from St Mark's Square through the delightful maze of narrow streets and bridges over canals, zig-zagging our way past a variety of shops selling jewellery, clothing, Venetian masks and foodstuffs. There were many signs at major walkway intersections that pointed to our destination of **Piazzale Roma** – a major transport hub for Venice – where we boarded a "People Mover" or light rail that transferred us to the terminal where our ship was berthed. Many of the highlights of Venice are to be found off the beaten track and certainly well away from the bustle and expensive outlets around St Mark's Square.

**ATHENS:** A visit to Athens is also recommended for those with a passion for ancient history. Our coach excursion took us to the amazing **Acropolis**, featuring a number of temples and monuments built around 438 B.C. These included the **Parthenon** and the **Erechtheion**. Extensive restoration work is being undertaken to preserve many of these precious structures.



**ISTANBUL:** It is such a shame that recent world events have seen travel warnings introduced for the amazing city of Istanbul. From a previous visit in 2011 and then with this cruise in 2014, Istanbul has ranked as one of our most favourite places. With more than 15 million people living there, we had found it to be a "crazy" (with the best meaning) city to visit. There is so much to see, including the UNESCO **Aya Sofya** (Hagia Sophia – church/mosque/museum), the **Grand Bazaar** (the oldest shopping mall in the world), **Topkapi Palace** (residence of the sultans), the **Basilica Cistern** (underground water supply), the **Orient Express Railway Station**, the **Spice Bazaar**, the **Blue Mosque**, shopping along the main thoroughfare of **Istiklal Caddesi** and the **Galata Tower**. (Also, during our 2011 visit, we took advantage of the fact that Istanbul places you within a 5-hour drive to **Gallipoli** and this additional excursion proved to be a very moving experience. This option, which also featured a visit to Troy, was not available as part of our cruise).

**EPHESUS:** Ephesus in Turkey cannot be left out of the major highlights. A coach took us from the port at Kusadasi and after firstly visiting the **House of the Virgin Mary** we arrived at the ancient city of Ephesus, where evidence of human settlement dates back to 6,000 B.C. The extent of excavation is absolutely stunning, even though only a small proportion has been uncovered. There are ancient baths, roads, halls, gates, temples, theatres, library and the amazing **Terrace Houses** which are now protected by the construction of a huge roof. A truly incredible site.



**SANTORINI:** Perhaps every Mediterranean tour brochure features a striking image of the beautiful white buildings and blue-domed roofs of Santorini (Thira) in Greece. Viewed first hand, these magnificent buildings, set high on the cliff tops of the island/volcano that erupted violently around 1630 B.C., are packed precariously above the pure blue bay of



water that rushed in to fill the caldera. Our excursion was titled **Panoramic Santorini** and so it proved to be. Our coach tour took us past the town of **Fira** to the pretty village of **Oia** where we were able to walk along the extremely narrow paths and roads that zigzag their way through the thin line of fascinating buildings. Later, at the highest point of **Profitis Ilias Mountain**, we were assured that we were in the safest location as concern continues that the submerged Columbus volcano might still erupt with accompanying tsunami!



### Other comments

For a cruise of this length, a balcony cabin is highly recommended. Although you spend a fairly small amount of time out on the balcony, it is well worth having for the advantages of the fresh air and the opportunities to privately enjoy the sights or the astonishing expanse of the sea.

Although most cruise ships have nightly auditorium shows, some of these can be great and some can be “RSL” standard – it is a matter of taste. As an alternative, we particularly enjoyed the bands and entertainment in the smaller venues, with the B. B. King Blues Club Band being a highlight.

The afternoon Happy Hours (get a second drink for one extra dollar) with accompanying trivia sessions were particularly popular. These provide a great opportunity to meet other travellers from around the world and to share each others’ stories.

Whilst all meals are provided as part of the cruise, we would also recommend booking into one or more of the specialty restaurants onboard, e.g. the **Pinnacle Grill** or the **Tamarind**. These special dining experiences are well worth the extra per person charge.

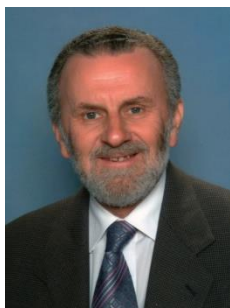
We have also enjoyed a New Zealand cruise with Princess (2016) and we find it difficult to distinguish between the companies in terms of what they offer and our resulting enjoyment of their cruises. We would recommend either.

### Useful references

[www.hollandamerica.com](http://www.hollandamerica.com)

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Ken was Principal of Richmond High School (1992-2004) and Macarthur Girls High School (2005-2010). In retirement he enjoys the challenges of golf, the discoveries of travel and the wonders of watching grandchildren growing up.