

CRUISING THE MEDITERRANEAN: Part II

Santorini – Athens – Dubrovnik – Florence – Venice



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Santorini



The people of the lost city of Atlantis were so advanced they had flushing toilets. The city was hugely prosperous, the people so self-satisfied that in his jealous rage Poseidon, as had his Roman colleague Vulcan 2,000 years later, flushed his mighty toilet in the sea. A volcanic eruption blew Atlantis sky high then ocean deep, leaving the bare rim of the caldera that now forms the Santorini Islands. Santorini, the jewel of our trip, sits high on the rim of that massive volcano that erupted nearly 4,000 years ago.

We are taken by bus, rather than by the traditional donkey, up a zigzag road to the top, through the capital, Fira, to the northern tip of the island to the village of Oia. Oia is long and very narrow, spread along a cliff top road, every turn a spectacle in itself. Santorini is a dazzling display of white buildings, and brilliant blues of rooftops, sky and sea. I expected it would be primitive but it had luxury hotels and internet cafes – and free toilets.



We sample three whites and their vin santo at a winery. The grape vines are woven into baskets hugging the ground like West Australian wreath plants to escape the fierce winds and blasting sun, resulting in these powerful whites made from the indigenous Assyrtiko variety and a rich vin santo, drunk by dunking a dry, hard chunk of bread into it. The soil is volcanic and rich soil, and while it rarely rains, the air is so humid, the porous soil absorbs the moisture and feeds it to the ground-hugging plants. Just like the wine grapes, the fruits and vegetables are strongly flavoured, especially tomatoes, eggplants and pistachios.



We have lunch in a cliff top restaurant, our ship at our feet. We start with a carafe of ouzo, to be drunk with just a smidgin of water. Then it's vast amounts of Mediterranean food with the usual red and white wine accompaniments. Not for the first time this trip, I am surprised at how I handle large lunches

with lots of alcohol that in Australia would sink me helplessly for the rest of the day. Here I just feel good. And when I get home I find I haven't gained weight significantly. That's the Mediterranean diet for you.

In the evening, on board ship, moored in at the foot of the island cliffs, we watch the sunset make Fira's white houses shine like the icing of an enormous cake. A band plays Greek music and we eat Greek food and drink Greek red wine – sparingly, at \$15 a glass.



Athens



but recall a lot. The Greek guide rightly reminds us of the perfidy of Lord Elgin, who in the early part of the C19 took the metopes and friezes to Britain for safe keeping – 'for the time being'. Now that the New Acropolis Museum has been completed in 2009, that time would seem to be right now, but the Director of the British Museum disagrees, basically, it seems, on the grounds that possession is nine-tenths of the law.

Santorini is a hard act to follow, even if visiting the Acropolis is on the agenda. To me, this is the field trip for Ancient Civilisations I that I'd taken fifty years previously. It helps that I've just read a Mary Renault novel, *The Praise Singer*, about the intrigues leading up to classical Athens and the Persian Wars. While the site disappoints due to much renovating and scaffolding, it is much more destroyed than I had

thought. I

feel little,



The Greeks smoke and drink a lot, never go to bed before midnight and get up at 6 a.m. – and are the longest lived in Europe: women 82, men 79. The guide attributes this miracle to relatively little meat, lots of vegetables and garlic and olive oil, 25 kg per head, compared to 10–12 kg. for the Italians, she says. An Italian guide we later imparted this intelligence to disagreed: she said they used the same amount of olive oil, and Greeks were no more longer lived than Italians. And how about us Australians with much less olive oil than either? At last count the figures were 83 for women and 79 for men.



It is Saturday and the Athenians throng the beaches along the 50 km drive to Cape Sounion where Saronic Bay becomes the Aegean Sea, a now ruined temple of Poseidon on the point. The temple was built on the spot where King Aegeus waited for his son Theseus to return from Crete. Minos, King of Crete, demanded seven youths and seven maidens to be sent to Crete each year to be fed to Minos's monster son, the Minotaur, half man, half carnivorous bull. Theseus, Aegeus's son, asked to go as one of the youths so he could kill the

Minotaur. He undertook to sail back with white sails not the black sails the Athenian ship used to mark its sad voyage. Aegeus saw the black sail on the horizon and was so grief stricken he threw himself into the sea – but Theseus had been successful. He was bringing Minos's daughter home but so distracting was she, he forgot to change the sails.

In keeping with this sad story, we have the worst lunch of the trip, heavy and stodgy. It gives me indigestion for the rest of the day.



Dubrovnik



The Croats built the present Dubrovnik, which from the 11th to the 17th centuries was the richest trading port in the Eastern Mediterranean. In the 1600s, Poseidon struck again, possibly jealous this time because the Croats moved the site from the Greek city of Epidaurus to the present site. The ill-tempered god conjured up a huge earthquake that levelled everything, except the massive medieval walls. The city was rebuilt and thrived again until Napoleon took the city and desecrated the magnificent renaissance churches by stabling his horses there.

When the velvet-gloved iron hand of Yugoslavia's Tito was withdrawn, Milosevich and the Serbs, having an army and no seaport, coveted Dubrovnik. They shelled the city randomly from 1991 to 1995, from Napoleon's hill-top fort less than a kilometre away. The remains of the pre-Serb chairlifts can still be seen in the picture. Our guide was careful to tell us the

deaths caused by the Serbs (over 300) and the wounded (a thousand) and the still visible scars on buildings in the unique old Town. Yet when the shelling finally stopped, the Old Town was rapidly restored



The outer suburbs however were over-run by the Serbs, people forced out of their houses to shelter in Dubrovnik while their houses were looted for anything usable – taps, toilet basins – and then torched. The guide was bitter about the Serbs and about a UN arms embargo that Croatia observed but Serbia didn't – and the UN did nothing about it.

Dubrovnik today seems well and prosperous, the only city so far where a nice young lady leaves laptops up a side alley so that passers-by may access the internet for nothing. Yet only ten years ago, the place was in ruins. Lunch is in an old house alongside a millstream. We have a rich legume soup, wonderfully cooked tender lamb, and very ordinary red and white wine.



Dubrovnik is set in rich, green pleasant country with a dramatic coastline. The city is encircled by the best preserved medieval wall in Europe. Walking along the wall offers an inside look into houses and gardens, which is as peaceful and intimate as the view outside to the islands and rugged sea coast is dramatic.

Venice – Florence - Venice



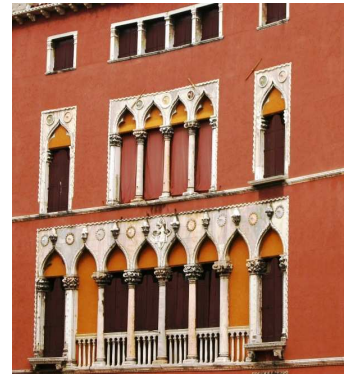
We enter Venice the grand way; slowly and majestically. The *Millennium* approaches from the Adriatic Sea, which merges into the vast lagoon upon which Venice is built. Slowly, houses, churches, and renaissance buildings come ever closer. To ensure we appreciate the splendour of the moment the ship's PA system plays Italian pop, Sarah Brightman, Ave Maria, Chariots of Fire and other film music to stir our souls in case the slowly emerging Venice doesn't.

A guide takes us on a walking tour – the only way to get around other than by boat. She explains that Venice started because the local people were pushed from the Mainland to marshy islands off shore. The only way they could survive there was to build a city on piles which they rammed into the mud. They paved the area, leaving watery strips between buildings that became their streets. Buildings started in early renaissance gothic, with a

Venetian twist to everything: their gothic is curved and embellished, while renaissance buildings are not symmetrical as those on the Mainland.

But Venice is on hold. We plan a two and a half days detour to Florence, taking the train from Venice's mainland Mestre Station, where Antonio conducts his lucrative business. ...

An elderly man is struggling with a heavy suitcase, grunting as he hauls it up the steep steps from the access tunnel to the platform. His wife has both hands full with hand baggage. Antonio nods to his friends a carriage-length away; they board the train.



Antonio steps between the man and his wife. 'I helpa you,' he says taking the case by the handle.

The older man mounts the steep three vertical steps up to the carriage and turns to take the case from Antonio. But Antonio keeps pushing.

'It's okay,' the older man says irritably, 'Thank you, but I can manage from here.'

But he can't manage. His way is blocked by two young men who just stand there, saying nothing. Everyone is pushing in opposite directions. The old man is red-faced and angry.

Suddenly the way is clear, the men disappear and the old man and his wife sit down gratefully in their compartment.

And I find that my bloody money belt is gone. So much for our early start for Florence.

We get off the train to report the incident to the Mestre Station police, but they don't seem in the least surprised or concerned. I immediately phone Australia and cancel my credit card. I've lost only €100 but driver's licence and so on will be a pain to replace. Fortunately Catherine has her credit card so we shall survive.



Florence

The next two days console us. Our hotel is walking distance from the station and all the sights in old Florence. We arrive late afternoon, thank you Antonio, and after checking in we explore down the nearest alleyway. We turn a corner and come into a massive square and a sight that strikes like a blow: We don't know what it is, we are simply gobsmacked at the

brilliantly ornate towering buildings in marble of three colours: white, red and green.

On our guided walking tour next day all is explained. What we found was the Grand Duomo, the Cathedral, or Basilica di Santa Maria del Fiore. IN front is the Baptistry with golden doors and at one side, Giotto's free standing bell tower. The inside of the Basilica is huge and rather bare, many Florentine churches did away with the rood screen as art of the renaissance. The Basilica dome is reached by 463 steps. As you climb, there are promenades inside the base of the dome giving close up views of the ornate paintings, with frightening visual shocks as the eye slips downwards to floor of the nave 100 ft below. And Michelangelo spent most of his life on his back on a flimsy scaffold painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel, death only inches away and diarrhoea, surely, verily present. The view from the top of dome of the city is just stunning.



At the centre of Florence is the long U-shape of the Uffizi Palace containing the Medici's art collection, donated to the City of Florence by the last Medici, Leopold. It opens out to the Piazza de Signoria, flanked on two sides by statues and another Medici Palace, the Ducal Palace with a copy of Michelangelo's David outside. We see the real David at l'Accademia; it grows more complex as you keep looking at it. The Florentines saw David as a symbol of freedom; the youth sizing up the giant Goliath, weighing a stone in an oversized hand, his sling over his



shoulder, his head oversized with concentration, veins stand out in his back and arms with the strain: reason and action, head and hand. You don't see any of this in the photos.

Many important figures of the renaissance and later are buried in the Church of Sta Croce. Machiavelli is one. We are told he was not the schemer of common belief but a true democrat who believed that the worst thing one human could do to another was to wield power over others. Power is always evil, he said, which did not please the Medicis and other powerbrokers, who distorted what Medici wrote. Machiavelli had written 'the end is *determined* by the means', which they changed to 'the end *justifies* the means', the opposite of what Machiavelli meant. Michelangelo, Galileo and Rossini are also buried at Sta Croce ... so many more stories.

Florence grows ever more complex the more we see and hear – but poorly digested smatterings about Italian history, art and famous names do begin to fall into place. May we have another five years here, please?

Our last afternoon is a personally guided tour to the village of Vinci, where Leonardo was born in 1452 and lived there for his first 16 years. When Leonardo went to Florence he was apprenticed to Varecchio, who was in the habit of asking his pupils to finish an aspect of the picture in progress. When Leonardo painted an angel into the picture, Varecchio broke his paint brush in half: 'I am finished. My pupil is better than I can ever be.' There is a museum of models of all the things Leonardo invented but didn't actually make.



We were taken to a Tuscan farm to sample their olives – strangely spiced – and their wine. The reds I found light and dry, but an excellent white at, wait for it, €2 a bottle! But when we drank it in Hong Kong, it too was light and ordinary. It seems that Italian wine is best when tasted on the soil on which it is grown, when the *gout* is on its *terroir*.



Our last night was in a good trattoria: twice cooked lamb and roast potatoes and a barley salad, and a half bottle of a big complex sangiovese. Like its wine, Tuscan food too may seem ordinary but when cooked well and locally, it's outstanding.

Take note: That's also true of Tasmanian food and wine.

Back to Venice

A new Florentine money belt safely strapped under my shirt, we arrive back in Venice intact and unplundered.



than we had paid.

Our hotel is reached by pushing through the San Marco crowds and millions of pigeons then up a narrow alleyway barely wide enough to take our suitcase. The hotel generously offers us a free trip to Murano, an island where the specialty is glass making. A water taxi picks us up. After a very deft demonstration of glass blowing a model horse, we are subjected to the hard sell, one on one. Signoretti's speciality is not cute little horses but elaborately coloured vases. We bought one, not cheap, that we later discovered on sale in Perth, WA, for rather less

John Berendt in *The City of Falling Angels* says that Venice is so beautiful he stops at any random event, a dog barking perhaps, at which he turns and photographs what is in front of him. Each time, he says, he obtains a picture of stunning uniqueness. I try the same, but my pictures are of a stunning similarity: Venice, where else? Maybe we mean the same thing but it's just that he's the better photographer.



La Fenice Theatre, the burning of which was the theme of Berendt's engrossing account, looks much like many another building: a canal one side, a classic but smallish front for the main entrance. (See what I mean about stunning similarity?) The outside of La Fenice didn't signal the magnificent inside that Berendt described. But we couldn't check the inside because we had arrived during the all-sold-out Venice Arts Festival.

But we did see the Historical Regatta, in which a procession of medieval boats move regally along the Grand Canal, starting at San Marco. The rowers, dressed in medieval robes, stand facing the way they are going, like the gondoliers themselves. Once on their way, we cut through the streets from San Marco to the Rialto, just in time to see the stately procession of dozens of elaborately decorated barges gliding silently to Handel's Royal Fireworks Suite, playing loudly over amplifiers. Essential Venice – but shouldn't that have been Gabrieli?



Essential Venice too when we board our water taxi, taking us from our hotel at 5 am to Marco Polo Airport on the Mainland in the pre-dawn light. It is magical – am I a curmudgeon if I add that it would need to be magical at \$170 AUD for a twenty minute ride?



When we check in at Venice airport we are told we are ten kilos overweight. 'You pay there,' the check-in attendant says, pointing to another counter, 'five each. Then I give you boarding passes.' We go there to pay the five euros. No, not five euros each, five *kilos*, and at €5 a kilo, that's €50 – \$8 AUD a kilo! Literally, that's down to our very last euro. What would have happened if we had been 11 kilos overweight?

Whatever, we board the plane and land at Fumicino Airport, Rome, for our final connection home.

After collecting our luggage, we search for our Cathay flight. I look at our tickets: our Cathay flight's from Da Vinci Airport and it is leaving soon! Horrified, I race to the nearest Information counter. Holding out our tickets, I blurt: 'How do we get to Da Vinci airport?'

'You go through that door just in front of you to the check-in counters. This *is* Da Vinci airport.'

I do believe she rolls her eyes at this fool.

Does anywhere else in the world give the same airport two different names?

