



Men's Club Mediterranean Cruise June 2008
Journal by Cindy Crane



Monday June 9, 2008. We arrive at the Marco Island Yacht Club parking lot and await the arrival of the two buses to take us on to our adventure. As we wait, everyone seems excited about the trip and there is much discussion about amounts and weights of baggage. As usual, Eddie has hassled me about “bringing too much stuff”, but I find that I do not have any more stuff than anybody else. Eddie has purchased a cool portable scale that we can use to weigh our bags by lifting them up by the scale. There is not much extra room for items purchased on the trip, but since the Dollar/Euro exchange is so unfavorable, I don't think there will be much shopping done anyway. On our bus we had saved seats for our travel mates, Joe & Mary Ann Cassidy, Richie & Eileen Carlsen, and Dave & Susie Walsh. We were also seated with Florence Hatfield and her friend Bea who we had met during the Egypt trip. The whole Men's Club group will go to Miami together on the two buses, but then the group is to be split up into smaller groups and will be traveling on separate planes. The trip home will be even more split up. It has been very frustrating trying to get any information at all from Air France, and they will not give assigned seats, so we have to wait until we arrive in Miami and stand on line. Ah, if that were the only problem... Our first big problem at Miami airport is that our bus, the #1 bus, arrived and the middle baggage compartment was completely jammed and would not open. This left several of us couples standing around on the sidewalk waiting for something to happen with our luggage, as we watched all the other passengers go into the terminal and create a huge line at Air France. It seemed to take quite a long time for each passenger to be processed and given seat assignments. As we stood around waiting outside, security was called to no avail. The bus driver made several phone calls to his company to no avail. Time was slipping away. After waiting almost 45 minutes, Eddie walked over to a construction site and stole a large piece of steel which he used to pry open the doors. Finally our luggage was available to all of us and once we dragged it all into the terminal, Eddie and I were the very last persons in the slow moving line. When we finally arrived at the desk, our troubles only continued. Everything that could possibly go wrong did in fact go wrong. First the scales to weigh our bags broke and had to be fixed. Then the machine that printed out the luggage tags for the bags broke and had to be fixed. Then the computers all went down along the whole row. Time is slipping away and I am really wondering if we will even get to start this trip. Finally the computers come back on line and Eddie and I are the only customers still there. We finally get seat assignments and are ushered through the many passages, through security, and onto the waiting plane for our first big flight. This was a 747...a big bulky plane with 3 seats on each side and 4 seats in the middle. Of course we were in the middle! Luckily our seatmates were Cindy and Mel Daly, so we had a nice time chatting with them. The flight was very long, but since it was international, there was actually food served and unlimited drinks. There was a movie, but I couldn't keep my earphones working

properly, so that was sort of a waste. Eddie slept much of the trip, but hard as I tried, I didn't get any sleep. We flew from Miami to Paris and had to change planes through Air France. True to form, this was not easy and we almost missed our next flight too. We had to collect our bags and then give them back, and then go through security again with our carry-on bags. Why one has to go through security so many times is beyond me... Anyway, of course we got into the line where everyone who worked for Air France now or in the distant past, and probably everyone who spoke French fluently, whether they ever worked for Air France or not, broke in line in front of us. The guard would not let us change lines. He kept saying for us to stay right where we were. He let probably 30 people cut in line in front of us and he kept leaving to go on breaks. When I was ready to completely give up hope we made it through the security line. However, a very brusque woman was at the end of the line and she insisted on opening and going through everything in my carry-on bags to such a degree that they almost would not close again. I finally got past her and was whisked through tunnels and finally onto my next plane which was to fly to Barcelona, Spain. So much for Paris, the City of Lights! We arrived in Barcelona in the early afternoon of June 10th. After getting off the plane there was a rush to find all our baggage and put it onto the waiting trucks and get onto the bus to take us over to the cruise ship terminal. We had really wanted to be able to see some of Barcelona, especially the architecture of Antoni Gaudi in the Bari Gothic and the famous cathedral, La Sagrada Familia. Gaudi developed an idiosyncratic form of Art Nouveau called "modernisme", which featured buildings with flowing, undulating lines and much colorful broken-tile mosaics. His buildings look almost alive, certainly very different from most of the ancient architecture that we will be seeing on this trip. His buildings were so intricately detailed, carved and embellished, that the modern day term "gaudy" was invented. However, both the lack of time and the drizzly cold weather kept us from getting to see any of his work or any of Barcelona. Oh well, we will just have to come back to Spain again to see it.



Tuesday, June 10, 2008- We went through security and checked into our ship for the cruise-Royal Caribbean's Brilliance of the Seas. This is a very large ship and very beautiful with lots of glass, featuring glass elevators that go outside the ship for great views of the surrounding sites. Eddie and I had an interior room #8625 and we are right next door to Susie & Dave with a door that we unlocked to make our little adjoining suite. We had all been successful in smuggling alcohol on board in our luggage so it was party-time. After getting unpacked, we began exploring the ship and I purchased the "coke" package so that we could have unlimited soft drinks for the trip. That with our smuggled rum and our smuggled limes made for a much more enjoyable journey and we began to settle into our new little home. Our ship sailed at 7pm and we did get to see a very little of the countryside with some pretty cool castles and mountainside tombs, etc. as we left Barcelona on route to our first stop Villefranche. There was a poolside party of sorts as the ship left, but the weather was not too great. Our first dinner in the main dining room was pleasant. We met our waiter, Fernando and his assistant Alfeo, who were both quite delightful and attentive to our wishes. They have probably never seen anyone eat as much as our table! We started off

the trip by ordering multiple appetizers and after the first night they always made sure that there were automatically 2 dishes of cheeses for the table. Alfeo always seemed to remember exactly what each of us wanted to drink and he kept the drinks flowing nicely. I told him that I was “buying” diet cokes for anyone at the table who wished them with my card and he caught on right away. Fernando always gave us the chef’s suggestions for each meal and the food was always very good. Some of us even ordered multiple entrees as well as multiple appetizers and desserts at each meal. At the end of each dinner Fernando would give us suggestions for the night and the next day.



Wednesday, June 11, 2008- We arrived in Villefranche, France around 10:00am and got onto our tour buses for our excursions. Joe, Mary Ann, Florence, & Bea joined us for the “Nice, Eze, & Monaco” trip. Our tour guide was Virgine and she was quite good. She wore a skirt and spike heels and we were all amazed that she

could do this walking and climbing in the heels, but she assured us that she was used to it and her 100 year old grandmother always walked in high heels. As we traveled she gave us a little history lesson of the area. The Citadel in Villefranche belonged to the Duke of Savoy from Italy first. We toured along the Lower Corniche Road with great views of the harbor. First we went to Nice, which is a lovely town, population around 400,000, with many interesting buildings. We saw the Opera House and took pictures of Square Mesina, which had just been rebuilt. We toured the open market of Cours Saleya in Nice which had all sorts of fresh fruits, vegetables, flowers, and little shops and restaurants. We tried the local specialty, “La Socca” which is sort of like a crepe. This is only made in Nice. The Old Town of Nice has a population of around 12,000 and has beautiful views of the Cote d’Azur. Interestingly, some of the beautiful old hotels along the waterfront were originally used as sort of spas for people with tuberculosis to come to heal. The rooms facing the water were the “worst rooms” since the cold and damp of the water was not so good for the sick people. Today, of course, the water view rooms are had at a great premium and Nice is a playground for the rich and famous. Everyday at noon the cannon of Nice sounds, but we didn’t get to hear it. We were off by way of the Middle Corniche road to the mountain side town of Eze for lunch.



We enjoyed a delightful lunch in Eze at the “Pizzeria Salon de The”. This was a cute restaurant on a cliffside overlooking the bay and we had salad, chicken entree, wine, and dessert and we were serenaded by a great accordion player. Everyone enjoyed singing along. Eze was built by Romans in honor of Isis around 1400-1700AD. There are

around 50 people who live in the old section of Eze, which is a charming medieval village perched on a craggy peak 1,400 feet above the Mediterranean and quite a steep hike up. The small winding side cobblestone streets were full of interesting shops. Joe opted to sit this one out but the rest of us climbed the very steep road up to the top. We viewed the Chapelle de la Sainte-Croix at the top, which was quite beautiful.



Next our bus took us to Monaco where we went to the Place du Casino in front of the Grand Casino in Monaco which was built in 1863, the Hotel de Paris, and the Café de Paris where Joe sat and enjoyed his \$12 beer while the rest of us explored. This whole area is quite elegant and a favorite of the rich and famous. We saw Mel Brown, also known as Scary Spice, being interviewed in front of the Hotel de Paris. We then drove to the Rock of Monaco, an ancient walled city overlooking the sea. At the top was the Oceanographic Museum, the beautiful Romanesque cathedral and the Prince's Palace where we were able to see the changing of the guard. The views from the top were outstanding. Monte Carlo belongs to the Principality of Monaco and is governed independently. Monaco is the world's 2nd smallest country and is 0.75 square miles with 32,000 inhabitants. Monaco is ruled by Prince Rainer III, a direct descendent of the Grimaldi family who have reigned since 1275. Prince Rainer II who wed Grace Kelley of Philadelphia is buried in the beautiful cathedral along with his beloved wife Princess Grace. We learned that the citizens of Monaco pay no taxes. Still it is hard to imagine how they are able to live in this area where everything is so very expensive. The citizens, called Monegasques, are quite loyal and well taken care of by their monarchy. This has been a lovely excursion, full of breathtaking sights from the hillsides, beautiful quaint villages, and massive wealth of Monte Carlo. We took our bus ride back to Villefranche on a part of the Grand Prix Motor Race circuit. Back on the ship, dinner was once again very good and the show this evening was a great show of ABBA music by Abbracadabra.



Thursday, June 12, 2008-Today we arrive in the port of Livorno, Italy and take our early morning excursion, "A Taste of Florence". Our tour guide is Trudy and we have Eileen & Richie, Joe & Mary Ann, Dave & Susie with us. This area of Italy is known as the birthplace of the Renaissance and includes the beautiful cities of Florence and Pisa. Our tour didn't include Pisa, but we could see the Leaning Tower and the top of the Baptistery in the distance. The Baptistery in Pisa is the largest in the Christian world. Pisa, situated on the banks of the River Arno, developed as a Roman military trading town. There are many universities in Pisa. The Livorno area is in the area known as Tuscany which is famous for its beautiful rolling hillsides and its wines. The famous leaning tree of Livorno is "Pino Mediterraneo" or Pine nut tree. Cypress trees are very plentiful in the area as are olive trees. There are approximately 90 million olive trees in the area. The mountains in the distance that look like they are snow-covered are actually full of white Carrara marble. There are still 1.5 million tons of marble quarried each year. Lucca, a small town in the mountains is a fortress with many watch towers and it is known as a major manufacturer of paper for money and toilet paper. Lucca was built around 180 BC and has 99 churches. Florence is also located on the River Arno and is 62 miles from Livorno. It dates from 800 BC and currently has quite an impressive 15th century skyline. The 13th century brought about a period of economic growth to Florence making it a center of finance and commerce.

However, it suffered greatly in 1347 and 1348 from the Black Plague and lost half of its population. In 1422 Giovanni Bicci Medici was elected Chief of the Republic of Florence and the community became wealthy again. The Medici family remained in power for over 300 years, devoting much of their wealth to art and science. Artists such as Michelangelo, Leonardo Da Vinci, and Raphael all found inspiration in Florence and contributed greatly to its art and architecture. Florence was incorporated into Italy in 1860 and was the capital from 1865 to 1870. During World War II the Germans blew up all of the city's bridges except the famous Ponte Vecchio. Our 2.5 hour guided tour of Florence with Trudy included the Piazza del Duomo where we saw the exterior of the beautiful Cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore, the 2nd largest cathedral in the world, along with the Bell tower, and the Baptistery. The Baptistery holds the famous Ghiberti's Gates of Paradise-beautiful bronze carved doors depicting scenes from the bible. The Cathedral was massive and covered in many colors of marble with exquisite carvings and paintings. Its boasts a cupola larger than that of the Pantheon, St. Peter's in Rome and St. Paul's in London. It was begun in 1296 and it took 140 years to complete. The Bell Tower stands 292 feet high and dates from the 14th century. Next we walked to the Piazza della Signoria, the city's largest square, representing the historical and commercial center of the city.



Here is where the copy statue of Michelangelo's David was placed along with many, many other beautiful statues and fountains, including the Neptune fountain. Here we had time on our own for lunch and we had a delightful lunch at Ristorante Il Bargello. Interestingly, when you sit down at a restaurant, as opposed to standing to eat, there is an extra service charge, but we didn't care, since we needed to sit and rest for a while. We had a very nice Italian lunch and then walked about for more exploring. Along the way we stopped by the famous straw market which had a statue of the head of a boar. If you rubbed the nose of the boar, you will return to Florence. The nose is a very shiny copper color from all the rubbings! After lunch, we walked past the Uffizi Gallery, along the River Arno, to the Ponte Vecchio, the oldest remaining bridge in Florence, lined with goldsmith shops. By this time there was a drizzle of rain but we still enjoyed exploring this fun area. We walked down to the Pitti Palace, but time did not permit us to go inside and explore, which is too bad because it contains many museums and the Medici family collection of gold, silver, jewels, and cameos, as well as many priceless paintings. We walked back to our meeting place at Santa Croce church. Unfortunately the square in front was closed off to set up stadium seating for some upcoming sports event, so we didn't get the full beauty of the square and the church. Although this excursion was 9.5 hours long, it really only gave us a small taste of the many beautiful things to do and see in Florence, a city that definitely deserves a return visit. I'm so glad that I rubbed the nose of that boar! Back on the ship, after another great dinner, we were entertained by the Royal Caribbean Singers and Dancers featuring many great Broadway show tunes.



Friday, June 13, 2008-Today we arrive in Civitavecchia, Italy for our excursion to the beautiful city of Rome. Our tour left at 8am and today we have Eileen & Richie, Joe & Mary Ann, Carol & Bob Hopp with us. Our bus tour guide was Sarah and we met our city guide Paolo. This excursion is called “Discover Renaissance Rome” and it is a 10 hour tour. Rome is called the Eternal City and is chock full of beautiful squares, fountains, statues, monumental buildings, and lots and lots of wonderful shops and restaurants. We begin our tour at the Spanish Steps (Piazza di Spagna), which once housed the Spanish embassy. This massive area was completed in 1726 and contains the Barcaccia Fountain by Bernini, depicting a sinking barge. The citizens of Rome think nothing of going up to the fountain and drinking from it. The water supposedly comes from ancient Roman aqueducts. The 137 steps were built by the French to connect the French Quarter at the top to the Spanish Quarter at the bottom. Today this area is a popular spot for Romans to hang out, have lunch, and enjoy the views. The whole area was bustling with everything from Roman Centurions in costume for picture taking, to horse and buggy rides, to gelato shops, to the famous shopping streets with their temples to the modern Roman gods of Gucci, Pucci, Versace, etc. On one end is the Piazza Venezia with the monument to Victor Emmanuel II, built in 1911 of white marble, the largest outdoor altar in Europe which also contains the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Mussolini made his speeches here from the balcony of the 15th century Palazzo Venezia, his official residence. Also at the square was the Keats Shelley Museum. Our next stop was the famous Fontana di Trevi, made even more famous by that movie and song, “Three Coins in the Fountain”. This was nothing like I had imagined. It was so huge-a whole wall of fountains and statues in front of a very beautiful building. And of course there were about a million people there all at the same time trying to throw their coin so that they would be assured of a return trip to Rome. We spent some time here roaming around and getting pictures taken. Another really cool touristy thing was all the people dressed up as Roman Centurions, Roman Statues, even a King Tut, all sitting around for picture taking opportunities. A special highlight was a wonderful gelato shop that we all tried.



Next we walked over to the Pantheon. It was so amazing to see this massive building built in 27BC as a temple and later restored by Hadrian which became a Christian Church in 606 AD. It was built by Agrippa to honor the many gods and is known as the most perfect of all the ancient monuments. The tomb of Raphael and many members of Italian royalty are inside of the Pantheon. This is a round building whose only source of light is from the round hole in the middle of the ceiling. Our next stop was the Piazza Navona, said to be one of the most beautiful in Rome. This area was originally said to be a large Circus. Bernini’s huge Fountain of the Four Rivers (Fontana del Quattro Fiumi) was unfortunately under renovation, but you could still get an idea of its beauty. This is a very large area surrounded by beautiful buildings and small side streets with wonderful shops and restaurants. We had a delightful lunch at the Take It Easy Restaurant where Eddie

sampled some great dark beer. The whole place was bustling with artists and small stalls selling all sorts of souvenirs.

We found out that President Bush is visiting the Vatican and the Pope today and we hope that he will be long gone before we try to get there. After lunch, we walked to the Vatican City by way of the River Tiber under the beautiful sycamore trees. Paolo told us of the statues you can see throughout Rome of Romulus and Remus suckling on the she wolf. At age 20 Romulus killed Remus and founded Rome on top of Palatine Hill. Seven is a magic number in Rome, because Rome has seven hills like the Palatine. I never did get to see one of those statues. Paolo told us that there are 5-6 million inhabitants in Rome and 10 million tourists yearly. There are only 2 subway lines and there is a bus strike almost every Friday. Romans are very lazy people and like to take long weekends at the seashore. He said that the Smart Car is the official car of Rome. They are funny looking little cars with Mercedes engines and they cost \$16,000 Euros.



As you come close to the Vatican you can clearly see the top of St. Peter's Basilica and the Castel Sant'Angelo built by Emperor Hadrian as his mausoleum in 139 AD. You cross over the River Tiber on a lovely wide bridge with statues of saints on both sides as you walk toward the Castel Sant'Angelo. You turn to the left and before you is the Vatican City State on the old site of the Circus of Nero. St. Peter's Basilica, the largest Catholic church

every built, was consecrated in 1626 after many years of construction under the direction of several famous architects including Bramante, Raphael, and Michelangelo. Among the chief objects to see inside are the 5th century bronze statue of St. Peter, the tomb of St. Peter under the beautifully carved Bernini pulpit, and Michelangelo's Pieta, a marble sculpture of the Virgin and the dead Christ. There are several Popes buried here, some in glass tombs so that you can see their bodies. There was a virtual mass of humanity all pushing to get inside of St. Peter's. Once inside, I was totally awed by the size of the structure and the beauty of the many paintings and sculptures. Our tour did not allow us time to go into the Vatican Museum, which is actually 8 museums, five galleries, and the Sistine Chapel, the private chapel of the Popes and named after Pope Sixtus IV who ordered it built. It has perhaps the most famous murals in the world on the walls and ceilings by Michelangelo. This is said to be the largest work ever accomplished by a single artist. I definitely must come back to Rome again someday and spend more time here. As we left St. Peter's Basilica, we saw the famous Swiss Guards dressed in costumes designed by Michelangelo. The Piazza San Pietro is the most popular square in Rome. Standing in front of St. Peter's Basilica, it is said to hold 400,000 people and is surrounded by 284 Doric columns with statues of saints carved by Bernini. This was quite an impressive site. After a little time for shopping, we all met at the appointed place and boarded our buses back to the ship. After another great dinner the entertainment was Paul Emmanuel singing a tribute to Nat King Cole



Saturday, June 14, 2008-After three exciting days chocked full of explorations, we all enjoyed our first full day at sea. We took the opportunity to sleep in late, have a leisurely lunch and explore the Solarium area of the ship with the hot tub and lovely serene surroundings. Eddie & I hosted Happy Hour in our room with lots of drinks and snacks and then we all got dressed up for our first formal night. Boy, we all looked great!! As we continued our sail tonight towards Mykonos, we crossed through a very narrow straight between the boot of Italy and the island of Crete. It was beautiful to see the land lit up on both sides of the ship. The entertainment tonight was so unusual and wonderful. Gary Lovini played the violin and he was a complete virtuoso. He even walked through the audience while he played. He was wonderful.



Sunday June 15, 2008-We arrived at Mykonos at 1:00pm today and Joe & Mary Ann went with us to our excursion of “Ancient Delos”. This was the only excursion offered but many people chose to simply explore Mykonos on their own. Delos is the birthplace of Apollo, the god of sun, light, music, harmony, and beauty, and was the treasury for Athens. This small uninhabited island was once the religious center of the entire Aegean area.

We walked through the ruins and saw the Temple of Apollo, many monuments and statues, and the famous dried lake with the palm tree growing in it. We also saw the ancient Delos marble lions. We climbed up through the ruins to the theatre and the famous Hellenistic mansions of Delos with their mosaics on the floors and walls. The view was magnificent from here. But it is truly a ruin, a very desolate place with the only flora being cactus type vegetation. As we boarded our ship back to Mykonos Island, we had some truly wonderful ice cold Greek beers.

According to Greek mythology, Mykonos was named after the half-god, half-man “Mykonos”, son of Anios and grandson of Apollo. The rocks around the island are supposed to be the petrified bodies of giants that were destroyed by Poseidon and Hercules. Mykonos has an area of just 33 square miles, making it one of the smallest islands in the Cyclades group. It has a population of 5,000 residents and over 900,000 visitors. It is full of small winding streets built to confuse the pirates, shops, nightclubs, and great restaurants. Mykonos Town or Chora is full of whitewashed houses, a maze of



shops, and windmills. Set against the brilliant blue sky it is truly a postcard setting. Since we had run out of rum on the ship, I had everyone follow me until I found a small grocery store where I bought a bottle of rum. We then went outside, poured out the water from our water bottles and filled them all with rum to take back on board. It worked like a charm! The town mascot is Petros II, the pelican who we saw swimming around as we sipped our cold beers before heading back on the tender to the ship. Mykonos is an incredibly beautiful island, and once again a place that would definitely be worth a repeat visit. During another great

dinner, we enjoyed hearing about the other adventures of the day. The entertainment tonight is a comedian and since I don't particularly care for them and tomorrow's excursion leaves very early, Ed and I decided to go right to bed after a nice after-dinner drink.



Monday, June 16, 2008-Today's excursion takes me to a place that I had very little prior knowledge of—the port of Kusadasi, Turkey and the ancient towns of “Ephesus, Didyma, & Miletus”. Today Joe & Mary Ann and Eileen & Richie joined us. Kusadasi is one of the most popular seaside resorts in Turkey. It has a population of 50,000 and is a very important port of call since it is the gateway to Ephesus, a city created by the Ionians in the 11th century BC and later expanded by the Romans. Kusadasi means “bird island”, named after Pigeon Island which is now connected by a causeway and is the home to a famous defensive castle. The port town was active for many centuries, but the town of Kusadasi that we see today was founded by the Venetians and was a major trading post with Europe and Africa. The Ottomans fortified the harbor and built many buildings and mosques that are still intact. It is now best known for its shopping and for its historical and archeological sites. Our excursion takes us first to the fabulous ruins of Ephesus where we see the Odeon, the Fountain of Trajan, the five terraces of the Apartment House, the Steam Baths, the Temple of Hadrian and the impressive Library of Celsus. This massive structure is considered one of the most impressive ruins of the world. The many mosaic floors and walls are remarkably preserved. The huge group latrine was very interesting. Eddie especially liked the area of the brothels. They conveniently had a footprint carved in stone which led to the brothels. I liked the fact that there were many nice cats how lived here and followed us around as we explored. The Greek Theatre where St. Paul preached is the largest theatre in antiquity with a seating capacity of 24,000. We actually walked the same streets where Mark Anthony and Cleopatra once rode in procession. At the Arcadian Way there was an interactive play showing events of the times. Ephesus once had a population of 250,000 and was the second largest city in the Roman Empire and the site of the Christian Shrine of the House of the Virgin Mary.



Our next stop was Miletus which is a ruin with the remains of two lions guarding the entrance. Miletus was the home to many philosophers and sages. We saw the Greek Theatre which was constructed in the Roman times. We had a typical Turkish lunch in Didim at a local restaurant overlooking the ruins, which consisted of a large salad bar, dessert and fruit bar, and lunch entrée of either baked fresh fish or chicken. The fish was great. There was also ice cold beer and a chance for a little shopping after lunch.



We next visited Didyma to see the magnificent Temple of Apollo. Although the temple was looted and burned many times, it is still impressive. Some of the 120 columns that remain standing allow you to visualize how huge this structure once was.

Next we returned to Kusadasi and did a quick tour of a local carpet factory while Joe went back to the ship to rest. Mary Ann was chased out into the street by one of the very aggressive salesmen. We then had time to browse

and shop through the many streets and bazaars of the quaint little town. This was really probably the best shopping area that we had since Turkey is not on the Euro and the prices were a little more reasonable. Unfortunately, while following Mary Ann into one of the shops, I took a bad fall and landed squarely on the bottom of my chin, my right hand, and my right knee. Ouch!! We found a nice bar to stop and have a cold beer



while I rested my sore body parts. Dave & Susie caught up with us and had a beer. We went back to the ship and I took a short nap. Tonight was another formal night and since our 2nd seating entertainment was before dinner tonight, we missed it.



Tuesday, June 17, 2008-Today we arrive at the magical island of Santorini. This is truly a spectacular sight to behold from the ship. The top of the magnificent cliffs sparkle with white buildings all with blue or red domed roofs. The cliffs are all colors of red, brown, and black. The island's history began when Europe and Africa were still joined together. The Aegean was dry land and linked the mainland of Greece to Crete. Then the Aegean sank beneath the surface of the sea, about 6 million years ago.

Santorini is one of several ancient volcanoes lying in the southern Aegean volcanic arc. During the Minoan era, around 1450 BC, the volcano erupted changing forever the geography of Santorini. The center of the island sank into the sea to form the crescent shape that we now have. The explosion exterminated all life on the island and produced a huge tidal wave 820 feet high traveling at a speed of 217 miles per hour, that claimed the lives of the entire Minoan civilization on the island of Crete. Crete is less than 75 miles south of Santorini. The massive earthquake and destruction is believed to be the cause of the lost city of Atlantis. The island now consists of three main islands-Thira, Thirasia, and Aspronisi. Thira was later changed to Santorini, after St. Irene, during the 13th century Venetian settlement. Santorini was considered the birthplace of Apollo and Artemis. The ship drops anchor off of Skala, which is 890 feet below the small town of Thira, the island's capital. Thira can be reached by cable car, donkey, or walking the more than 600 steps. Thira overlooks the caldera and the island of Nea Kameni. Thira was devastated by an earthquake in 1956 and then rebuilt and engraved into the volcanic cliffs with domed churches and barrel-roofed cave houses. The terraces are packed with hotels, bars, and restaurants. The population of Thira is around 2000. Our tender boat takes us to the port town of Athenios and we board a bus that climbs 800 feet to the top of

the caldera. There are ten of us on this bus trip. We drive through the picturesque scenery and small villages from the southern to the northern end of the island of Santorini. The countryside is rich volcanic soil and there are many grapes grown on the island to make their wines. The grape vines however are not up on arbors as usual. They are grown on the ground in baskets. They are never watered because being on the ground they get enough moisture from the early morning fog to sustain their growth.



We are on our way to the beautiful village of Oia on the northernmost point of Santorini. The views are panoramic of steep cliffs, the deep blue sea, and nearby small islands. The village of Oia has many small twisting cobblestone alleyways and steps, and a maze of fine shops, restaurants, cafes, and domed churches. It was great to just walk through the lovely town and see all the art galleries and the wonderful views from every angle.

This is not a town for the faint of heart or for someone with a fear of heights. There were many cats and dogs in this town that happily walked along with us. By the time we were finished and walking back to our bus, the throngs of other tourists



arrived and the streets quickly became almost impassable. We boarded our bus and traveled back along the road to the Santo Winery where we had complimentary wine tasting and mezes. The views were outstanding from up here. Next we went on to the village of Fira (Thira) where our guide accompanied us up the very steep street

to the top of town. There she said goodbye and we were on our own to either go back to the ship as Joe did, or explore for several hours. We went into the beautiful Orthodox Cathedral. Once again this charming cliff top town is full of narrow winding cobblestone streets lined with shops, cafes, and restaurants. There are no cars. Mary Ann & I got separated from the rest of the group fairly quickly, probably because Eddie & Dave and Susie were out looking for cheap beers, and everyone else went their own direction shopping. That was OK because we had a great time shopping, and found a lovely cliffside restaurant called Café Classico for lunch. When we were exhausted from pictures and shopping, we took the cable cars back down to the port and did some more shopping before heading back to the ship.



Several hours later, we heard from numerous people on the ship that Eddie & Dave were covered in “donkey doo” from their trip. Sure enough, they eventually made their way back to the ship after riding the cable car down, the donkeys up, and then walking back down. While we waited for them to come back, Mary Ann talked Susie & me into going to the infirmary with her to have her spider

bite checked out. While we were there, we realized just how many sick people there were on the ship. I was scared to touch anything or take a deep breath. After about 1.5 hours waiting we went back to our rooms to sterilize ourselves so as not to get sick. After dinner tonight, the entertainment was the Love & Marriage Game Show, which we missed, and then a toga party up by the poolside deck, which we went to for a little while. All in all another great day was had by all.



Wednesday, June 18, 2008-We arrived in the port of Piraeus, Greece this morning at 7am. Piraeus is the ancient name of the harbor created in the early 8th century BC and it is today the main port for the city of Athens. Approximately 5 million cruise ships and ferry ship passengers pass through the busy port annually. Our excursion today with Joe & Mary Ann, Bob & Carol, Eileen & Richie, and Dave &

Susie was “Athens Sightseeing & Acropolis”. The first part of this trip was to go up to the Acropolis, the most famous of all sites in Athens. It was pretty impressive, but not the most pleasant of trips for many of us. First of all there was a tremendous amount of climbing necessary and I told our guide that I didn’t think that Joe would be able to do it. She told Joe and Mary Ann to leave our group and walk down to where there was an elevator to take them to the top of the Acropolis. She then went in and got the tickets for the rest of us to enter the long walk/climb to get up there. We walked and climbed all the way to the top. It was unbearably hot even for so early in the morning. There had been a heat wave into Athens today. At the top, much of the main building, the Parthenon, was under restoration, but it was still impressive. All of the columns and the floor are slightly curved so that it looks straight even when viewed from far away. This building was dedicated to Athena, the patron goddess of Athens. The history of Athens is that the city was founded by a Phoenician called Cecrops, who came to the coast of Attica and decided that the area would be an excellent spot for his new city. The gods of Olympus decided that the new city should be named for the god that produced the most valuable gift for the mortals there. Poseidon, god of the sea, struck the ground at the Acropolis and a gush of water came from the ground along with a horse, indicating that Poseidon was offering the new city success in war and at sea. Athena, goddess of wisdom, dropped a seed to the ground and it immediately turned into an olive tree, meaning that she was offering the city the fruits of peace and wisdom. Athena won and the city was named Athens after her. The owl, connected to Athena, became the pet animal of many Athenians. When money was invented and the Athenians adopted the drachma as their currency, they had the profile of Athena on one side and the owl on the other side. The Parthenon originally had a huge bronze statue of Athena inside, but that is now long gone.



I especially liked the Propylea entrance and the Erechtheion, which had the Caryatids, statues of ladies holding up the building on their heads. There were great views of Athens from all angles of the Acropolis. Of course everyone got separated at the top. There seemed to be about a million people up there all walking around climbing over stones, etc. and taking pictures. I decided that I would start back down to give myself plenty of time to make it down and find Joe & Mary Ann who were to meet us at the bottom after viewing and going back down the elevator. Turns out, I took a wrong turn and followed everyone else down what I thought was the correct path. When I got to the bottom I didn’t recognize anyone from our tour, and I panicked and ran all the

way back up the path with my heart pounding in my chest. I finally ran into Eddie who was also lost and we finally ran into Dave & Susie who were also lost. By now, we had missed the proposed meeting time and after frantically running around we made our way to the buses. Turns out that our driver was at the bus and left another tourist with the lollipop sign we were looking for. Also turns out that Joe & Mary Ann never got up to see the Acropolis because they were denied the elevator and they didn't have a ticket to enter since our guide did not wait for them. All in all, I was exhausted and extremely hot. We made a stop at one tourist shop that had very expensive items for sale. We were told that everything was 20% off, but the only things that I bought were at no discount. Susie was very upset with the stop and with the fact that Mary Ann & Joe were unable to see the Acropolis. The guide got back on the bus and basically chastised us and said that perhaps we didn't read the tour description properly. It wasn't her fault. You know, in retrospect, this probably wasn't the right tour for Joe & Mary Ann to take due to the amount of walking, but the tour guide could have handled it in a better way. She did not even properly introduce herself to us at the beginning of the trip. The bus part of this trip took us past some sights of Athens such as the Temple of Olympian Zeus, Hadrian's Arch, the National Library, and the Parliament Building. However, the bus was moving so fast that it was hard to fully appreciate the sites and get any decent pictures. Once again, the tour guide didn't give any real descriptions of what we were supposed to be looking at or any history of the place.



We did stop at the Panathinion Stadium built in 1895 which was the site of the first modern Olympics held in 1896. We had the option of being dropped off in the city after the trip so that we could continue shopping and exploring on our own. We had originally all planned on doing this. However, the day had been so stressful and it was so darned hot that none of us did this option and we all returned to the ship. We returned and took a nice long nap. After dinner, the girls saw a wonderful show called Tango Buenos Aires. The guys decided to skip that and explore the ship's bars instead.



Thursday, June 19, 2008-We had another blissful day at sea. It was sunny and breezy and Eddie and I strolled around and had lunch at the Seaview Café. Then Eddie climbed the rock wall and did a great job. Of course there were the usual ship-type activities, such as the Art Auction, the Trivia contests, The Cooking Demo, Men's sexy leg contest, etc. Mostly we just lounged around the pool areas with my "traveling rum & coke bar". Dinner tonight was another formal night. Boy, do we look good when we dress up!!! After dinner the show was Jonathan Kane who did his Elton John impersonation and he was great! Tonight during the dinner and the show, I lost my voice completely and this was to be the start of a very, very bad cold.

Friday, June 20, 2008-Our last port of call is Naples, Italy. We had another incredibly early morning-watched the sunrise as we had breakfast. Our excursion today was the Amalfi Drive and Pompeii. By now, I am really feeling under the weather, but no way am I missing this excursion!



Our first stop was in Sorrento at a very nice inlaid wood carving shop. I talked my friends into sitting on the right side of the bus to get the best views and it worked very well. The drive was stunning if somewhat scary because of the height of the roads, the narrowness of the roads, and the impressive droop-offs into the surging ocean. We passed out of Naples by Mount Vesuvius which still looks over the city of Naples with its population of 1.5 million. The Neapolitans have a love of music, and the tenor Enrico Caruso was a native. The volcanic soil around Vesuvius makes crops grow very well and the population has spread up the side of the mountain. Guess they have forgotten what happened in 79 AD when the volcano erupted and devastated the area burying the towns of Herculaneum and Pompeii in mud and ash. Vesuvius last erupted in 1944; however there are still emissions of smoke and interior evidence of heat.



The dolomite cliffs that tower straight up from the sea were remarkable. The fact that the towns were built climbing right up those cliffs was even more remarkable. We went through Sorrento, Positano, and Amalfi. Our bus driver was very skilled at getting through the little streets with 90 degree curves. We could see where many other buses and cars had not done so well.



We were able to stop for a while to shop in Amalfi and it was just a beautiful little village. We managed to get some shopping done, see the Cathedral of St. Andres along the Piazza del Duomo, drink some Limoncello, and really enjoy the quaint life here. Lunch was at a wonderful hillside restaurant in a 5 star hotel called Voce Del Mare. Great food and great service...long lines at the ladies room as usual.



Now we were off towards Pompeii, one of the most famous excavations in the world. Pompeii was truly an amazing site. It was a little creepy to walk through the town and be able to envision the life that these wealthy people lived for over 1900 years until the blast when 30 feet of volcanic ash and pumice stone covered the city killing 2000 occupants. The Forum was the city's hub and was surrounded by lavish temples and porticoes. There were lavish baths. The mansions were originally filled with art of the wealthy patricians who moved from the turmoil of Rome.



The streets had raised sidewalks and stepping stones so that the citizens could easily cross the streets. The roads were cut by the wheels of the chariots that rode through here. There were many store fronts and brothels. There were murals that have been preserved and mosaics on floors and walls. Especially eerie was being able to see stone casts of some of the people who were buried alive by the volcanic ash.

By the time we arrived back at the ship, I was completely beat. I headed straight to my little cabin for a nap. By now, I had no voice, a very sore throat, a congested head, a splitting headache, and I was sneezing and blowing my nose so much that I was truly miserable. I made it through dinner that night but not to the show.



Saturday, June 21, 2008-This is our last day at sea and I spent the entire day in bed, sleeping, coughing, and watching several movies. I understand that the others had a good day lounging around the ship and hot tub areas.



I made it up for our last dinner which was a surprise birthday celebration for Susie at the Portofino Restaurant. The dinner was wonderful and luckily we did manage to surprise her. By now I have us all packed for the return trip. I missed the final show tonight also because of timing for our special dinner. We did go down to the dining room to say our goodbyes to Fernando and Alfeo and give them their tips. They were very good waiters and took good care of us.

Sunday, June 22, 2008-We got up extremely early and had our last breakfast on the ship. Our bags were already gone. We had a smooth disembarkation from the ship and trip to the airport for the long flight home. Each leg of the trip was quite miserable for me due to my illness. However, everything went as planned in Barcelona. In France when we had to change planes, the French, as usual, screwed up everything that they possibly could. The lines were unbelievable in the airport and the timing made we think that we would not make our connection. But everything worked out fine in the end. We arrived in Boston, MA. and had to change planes once more to American Airlines. It was long and drawn out, but everything went as planned. We arrived in Miami around 11pm Sunday night, got our entire little group together and contacted the bus to pick us up. It was a long 2 hour drive across the state but we made it back to Marco Island as planned. And we could even get our bags off the bus this time!

We found out later that some groups missed connections in Amsterdam and missed their flight. They arrived at 6am. Others didn't make it back to Miami until the next day. All in all, our group was quite lucky. It was another wonderful trip with the Men's Club. I would have loved to have stayed a little longer in each location, but that is the nature of cruises. I'll just have to go back!