

Greece and Turkey Tour – September, 2011

After 3 years of discussion and vacillating, we finally decided to go forward with our long anticipated trip to Greece and Turkey in 2011 (had to get the trip in before civilization disappears in 2012). The following details certain aspects of the trip.

The Tour

We elected to utilize a guided tour for this trip. Touring allowed us to concentrate on seeing the highlighted attractions without having to concern ourselves with all of the logistical challenges of doing an independent tour. An added benefit was that we felt like we acquired 40 new friends (our tour group) by the end of the trip.

We took the “Grecian Fables” tour hosted by Insight Vacations <http://www.insightvacations.com/us>. This was our first tour with Insight. On an overall basis, we were very satisfied with the quality of the tour provided by Insight.

The tour was divided up into two sections. The first part of the trip took place in the Greek mainland. The second part of the trip took place while cruising in the Aegean. Here’s a brief itinerary of the trip:

Day 1 : In Athens we toured The Stadium and the Acropolis. In the afternoon we took an optional excursion to the Cape of Sounion to see the Temple of Poseidon.

Day 2 : We boarded our tour bus to start our inland tour. The first stop was a short visit to the Corinth Canal. We then proceeded to Napflion for a short luncheon break. The last visit of the day was to two sites at Mycenae. While here, we were able to also visit the famed “Lions Gate” and the “Beehive”.

Day 3 : We toured the museum and site at Olympia. These were both spectacular. Our tour director was in her element here (she was like a walking encyclopedia on Greek history and mythology). After leaving Olympia, we started our journey to our next destination – Delphi. The scenery on the way was spectacular with lots of mountains and beautiful landscapes. Just outside of Delphi we saw the largest olive grove in the world (8 million + trees).

Day 4 : Today’s central activity was a tour of the museum and site at Delphi. The site at Delphi was of noteworthy importance for me as it is the namesake of the company that I work for (Delphi Automotive). The site was spectacular with a lot of interesting archaeological structures set in a stunning backdrop of the

surrounding mountains. The actual site is situated on several levels. Jan made it more than half way up the site. The billy goat (me) made it up to the 2nd highest level (it was hot and crowded that day).

Day 5 : We departed Delphi and made a short stop to Thermopylae on our way to Kalambaka. Thermopylae is the site of the famous battle between the Greeks and Persians (the movie "The 300" is based on this battle). After our short stop at Thermopylae, we proceeded to Kalambaka to visit a couple of the convents at Meteora. The scenery and setting were spectacular with the monasteries and convents built on precarious outcroppings in the mountains. Many of these sites were accessible only by cable car, or outside lifts. The site also contained many caves that were used in times past by hermit monks.

We returned to Athens that afternoon.

Day 6: We boarded our cruise ship for the second half of our vacation. This day was spent cruising the Aegean toward our first port of call – Istanbul, Turkey. Life on a cruise ship is certainly much less strenuous than what is experienced on a tour bus. It was really nice to actually unpack our luggage for a while.

Day 7: We arrived in Istanbul in the afternoon. Upon docking we headed out on an excursion bus for a stop at The Spice Bazaar. We were taken to one of the many shops in the bazaar. While there, we did manage to purchase a few spices and some local favorites (Turkish Delights and some other pieces of candy names of which I will never recall).

After the Spice Bazaar, we then headed to the Grand Bazaar. We were warned beforehand not to purchase anything of value here as the counterfeiting is widespread. It was fun to bargain with some of the merchants on the purchase of small trinkets etc.

Of note, in Turkey bartering is a an accepted (and expected) means of commerce. If you don't bargain, the merchant is actually insulted. In our family, the bartering was relegated to me.

Day 8 : Today we continued our tour of Istanbul (population 16,000,000). Our first stop today was the Topkai Palace. This was the principal residence of the Sultan's of the Ottoman Empire. The grounds were quite expansive with many buildings. Viewing the contents of the rooms, we were left with an appreciation of the opulence of this empire.

From the Topkai Palace, we then headed to the Blue Mosque. This is a very large

mosque located in the old City of Istanbul. It is a functioning mosque so proper protocol was required while visiting (attire and photographic restrictions).

Our next visit was to St. Sophia's. This is a very large cathedral that has been converted to an Islamic mosque. The structure is filled with a large collection of Islamic art as well as a lot of remnants from its Christian cathedral days. While here, we were also able to see the "Center of the Universe". A picture of it ("X" marks the spot) is contained in the Turkish portion of the trip pictures.

Our last stop in Istanbul was to a large store that offered jewelry and oriental rugs. While there, we were offered a demonstration of the technique and amount of labor that goes into the construction of a oriental rug. A lot of these rugs take several years to stitch together. We were also given an introduction to the various materials used in the production of the rug.

The stop also included a presentation of some of the rugs for sale. We had decided at the start of the trip that, given an opportunity, we would purchase a rug. Showing an interest in a possible sale, we were escorted to a private showing room where we were shown a large number of rugs. After applying my new found skills at bartering, we did purchase a rug for our home. It is due to arrive in November, 2011.

Day 9: From Istanbul we cruised down to Izmir Turkey. We opted to take the excursion to Ephesus from Izmir. Ephesus is a huge ancient archaeological site. It easily dwarfs Pompeii and Delphi by scale. We were told that the site is only about 15% excavated to date. It continues to be re-discovered. This is one of my "highly recommended" must see stops if you are in region.

After touring Ephesus, we returned to Izmir and spent a couple of hours walking about in the old fort at the port.

Day 10 : From Izmir, we cruised to the Greek Island of Patmos with an early morning stop. Here we spent a few hours walking around the port city and just enjoying the lay back lifestyle of island living.

We then headed out for our next stop today which was to the island of Mykonos. Again we decided to just walk about the town. We did manage to hike up to the top of the town to take in the famous windmills of Mykonos. During our visit we did get in some tourist shopping and have a casual snack at one of the many outside cafe's.

Day 11: Overnight we cruised to the island of Rhodes. Upon departing the ship we headed out for our optional excursion to Lindos. The principal stop on this optional

was the Acropolis of Lindos. This acropolis is built high on a mountain. We were taken by small bus up to the base of the acropolis (this was the preferred mode of transportation – the other options being walking or riding a donkey).

We then started our climb up to the entrance way to the acropolis. The path up was a paved sidewalk with no retention railing on the outside. Fortunately, we arrived early in the day so it was an easy walk up to the entrance. At the entrance we were provided with the usual history of the acropolis. The actual “walk” up to the acropolis was divided into 2 levels. The first part was hiking up a long narrow stairway (note no guard rails). At the top of the stairway, you were faced with a rather long trek up on ungroomed granite rock. Again, the billy goat opted to put life and limb at risk here. Reaching the top of the acropolis was worth the effort. The view of the surrounding area was really special. After the requisite picture taking the long journey down started. By this point, the site had become quite crowded. The open walkways were now crowded almost solid with people. One wrong “bump” and you were tumbling over the cliff.

When we finally made it down, we were informed that there was always an ambulance parked discretely at the base ready to ferry off the unfortunate tourist – most reassuring.

On our way back to the port, we did make one planned stop at a local pottery studio. We were provided with a small demonstration and the expected sales pitch.

Day 12: From Rhodes we cruised overnight to the island of Crete. We spent a few hours meandering about in the port city. From Crete we then departed for the island of Santorini.

The island of Santorini is the survivor of a gigantic volcanic eruption that took place in ancient times. The majority of the island was blown away as a result of this volcanic explosion. The caldera sank and filled in with the Aegean to form a large semi-circular bay. Most of the towns on Santorini are built high onto the surrounding mountains.

By tender (we could not dock) we arrived at the port. From here, we boarded the bus for the long drive up the narrow roadways to Fira. The many buildings in Fira are often found in postcards with the white stone construction accented by the Greek blue trim. Many of the houses are built right into the face of the cliffs providing dynamic views.

The only regret while in Santorini was the weather. Throughout the entire trip we were fortunate enough to have crystal clear skies. Because Santorini is purported to

have some of the most spectacular sunsets, mother nature decided to not participate this day. We had a very brief shower and generally overcast skies as the day approached sunset (I did manage to get a shot of the resulting rainbow overlooking the harbor). Of course, as we were boarding our bus at sunset, the weather cleared and the dynamic sunset did result.

At the port, we again boarded our ship for the journey back to Athens.

Day 13: We arrived back at Athens early in the morning. After depositing our gear at the hotel, we opted to explore the Plaka with some friends from the cruise. After milling about awhile in Syntagma Square, we all decided to head out for a tour of The National Archaeological Museum. This turned out to be a fairly long hike from Syntagma Square. The trip to the museum took us off of the "tourist route" in the Plaka. As a result, we were mingling with the native Athenian's as we made our way to the museum. It was really interesting to stroll past the large variety of local merchants on the way to the museum.

Arriving at the museum, we did a self tour that lasted the better part of an hour. While at the museum, we saw the spectacular artifacts and statues that are frequently the subject of travel related shows.

The only regret on our adventure to the museum is that I did not take a camera with me. It would have been great to photograph some of the sights on the way to the museum.

We topped off the day with an optional dinner at a local restaurant. As always, the food was great with more than adequate servings. As a special treat this evening, the wine continued to be served as needed. A very good time was had by everyone.

Day 14: We had an early breakfast and then checked out of our hotel heading for the airport and our flight home. The only interesting thing that occurred was the delay experienced once we had boarded the plane. It seems that there was some kind of a labor issue connected to the turmoil over the economy. Thankfully, the delay only lasted about an hour and the chime was made up during our flight back to JFK.

In summary, we had an excellent time on this tour. Insight did a very commendable job of accommodating everyone on tour. Our soul mates during the tour were outstanding and a real pleasure to be around. As I said at the outset, we felt that we acquired 40 new friends during this tour.

The places that we visited and the sites experienced while on tour certainly lived up and surpassed our expectations.

Photographic Information

Principal Camera Used : Canon EOS 60D DSLR – 18 megapixel (5200 x 3462)

Lens : 18-135 mm with stabilization and auto focus

Initial Format : RAW

Most shots made in aperture priority with Faithful white balance.

Storage Devices Used : Wintec 8GB Class 10 SD Cards

RAW Post Processing : Canon Digital Professional (Windows 7 Pro)

Pixel Level Processing : GIMP (Linux)

Website Flash File Production : Photo Stage Slideshow (Windows 7 Pro)

Tim Bonesho

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