

From Venice to Istanbul

MEDITERRANEAN CRUISE: The Ruby Princess cruise ship is home to *Yvonne Gordon* for 12 days as she traverses the Mediterranean Sea



THE sun is setting over Venice and I have a bird's eye view of the city – from the hot tub I am relaxing in. I'm on a cruise ship, and we've flown in to Venice a day early to soak up the atmosphere of the famous city, before setting off on an adventure around the Mediterranean. When we first arrived at the ship, I couldn't believe its size – even sitting on the dock, it looked like a



PICTURE: THINKSTOCK

BERTHPACE: The Ruby Princess cruise begins overlooking the sights of Venice and heads to Kusadasi

row of buildings and it was hard to believe it could move. The ship, the Ruby Princess, is nearly 1,000ft long and on board there are bars, restaurants, swimming pools, a gym, salon, shop, library, nightclub, even a jogging track and a chapel – it's a mini city.

The 12-day cruise starts in Venice and tours the Mediterranean, visiting Athens, Kusadasi, Istanbul, Mykonos, Naples, Rome, Florence/Pisa and Monte Carlo before docking in Barcelona.

When we leave Venice early the next morning, we sail along the Venetian Lagoon, with views right over the city. We pass the narrow canals, ornate bridges, domes and steeples. People are scurrying around St Mark's Square, while rows and rows of gondolas are lined up. Everyone is glued to the view from deck as we pass Venice and head out into the open sea, bound for Athens.

We spend the next two days exploring the ship and relaxing in the sun while we cruise down the Adriatic Sea towards Greece. Two days later, we arrive in Athens and there's a buzz of excitement on deck as we sail in to the busy port of Piraeus and someone points out the tiny shape of the Acropolis on a distant hill.

There are optional

excursions from the ship in each port and we've booked the Athens excursion, which takes us by bus to the Acropolis. Although it's still early morning when we get there, the site is already crowded – passengers from two other cruise ships have arrived at the same time.

In one massive group, we sweep up the steps and past features like the Parthenon and Caryatid porch. The tour gives a glimpse of this amazing ancient city, but I vow to return in the future at a quieter time to really see it. Next on our tour is a stop at the 1896 Olympic Stadium and then Athens city centre to see the 19th century market, the Plaka.

After another night on board the ship, checking out the entertainment and dining options, we arrive at Kusadasi, Turkey at dawn. Our excursion leaves at 6.45am before it's too hot and other cruise ships arrive.

Kusadasi is a tiny holiday town but the ancient city of Ephesus is

the main attraction, with its ancient Roman ruins.

When we get there, it's incredible to walk around and see fragments of the ancient temples of Domitian and Hadrian, the Library of Celsus, which once held 12,000 scrolls, and the Great Theatre, which seated 25,000. You can walk along the Arcadian Way, admiring the decorative columns and colonnades, and in the distance is the Temple of Artemis, built in 550BC. Our guide tells us that only 15 per cent of the archaeological ruins of Ephesus have been uncovered so far.

Back on the ship and heading to Istanbul, there's plenty to do. Evening entertainment includes live music, comedy and cabaret and the swimming pool area becomes an outdoor cinema. Food is all included and there's everything from casual buffets to more formal restaurants, plus a pool-side pizzeria and ice-cream bar for snacks.

One of the ship's best areas is Piazza, a buzzing open area with glass lifts, a grand piano and a café bar. It's a good place to watch the world go by and see who else has chosen to see the Mediterranean in this slow, elegant way by cruise ship.

A 12-day Grand Mediterranean cruise with Princess Cruises starts at €699 per person all inclusive (excl. flights & drinks). Check with your travel agent, call 087 972 1735 or www.princesscruises.com.



À LA MED: *Yvonne Gordon* goes on a whistlestop tour of some of the area's best holiday hotspots

■ Tour Lake Garda, Italy

Surrounded by mountains and lush countryside, its shores dotted with villas, palaces, castles and churches, there is lots to see and do at Lake Garda in northern Italy (pictured), whether you choose to explore it by land or by boat or just unwind and soak up the views.

The mild microclimate has led to an abundance of olive and lemon groves, vineyards and flower-filled gardens, such as the gardens and lemon house at Palazzo Bettoni in Gargnano. There are also lots of charming old villages with narrow streets, churches and bell towers, all with superb views over the deep blue lake.

Explore the castle walls of villages like Soiano del Lago or the ruins at Puegnago, or see fortress towns at Moniga and Padenghe del Garda. Gourmets will enjoy tucking into the region's delicious food and wine, with fresh-water fish, cured meats, cheeses, olive oil and full-bodied wines. Outdoor and watersports are also popular – with everything from horseriding and cycling to windsurfing, sailing and kite-surfing.

■ Dubrovnik and the Elaphiti Islands, Croatia

Set on the Adriatic Sea in the Mediterranean, the surrounds of the historic city of Dubrovnik are a popular holiday destination. The walled city was founded in the 7th century. However, much of its artistic, cultural and maritime history



dates from its golden age during the 16th century. One of the best ways to get your bearings is to walk the old city walls – with views of the city's red terracotta roofs on one side and the sparkling blue sea on the other. With its network of narrow streets, museums, palaces and churches, all set within the city walls, and its beautiful Adriatic setting, it's easy to see why George Bernard Shaw called Dubrovnik 'Paradise on Earth'.

Most people choose to stay in a coastal resort or hotel outside the walled city. Croatia also has many beautiful islands. For a taste of island life, the Elaphiti islands are near Dubrovnik and Lopud, Šipan and Koločep are worth a visit or a day trip, with small fishing harbours, beaches and waterfront restaurants. Rent a bicycle and explore cliff paths, citrus plantations and olive groves (some of the islands are car-free) at a gentle pace.

■ Sail the Greek Islands

With up to 6,000 islands stretching between the north Aegean Sea and Crete in the south, the Greek Islands



are the ideal setting for a Mediterranean holiday. Some islands like Skiathos are known for their great beaches, some for their archaeological sites (such as Delos or Crete) while others such as Ios and Mykonos are known for their nightlife.

There are lots of cruises to the Greek Islands, but a great way to experience them is to sail between the islands on a yacht, where you can drop in on uninhabited islands, secluded beaches and swimming coves, visit whitewashed villages and waterside tavernas, explore olive groves or visit old churches.

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Experienced sailors can rent a yacht with friends or join a flotilla, and those less experienced can go on a trip with an organised travel company like Intrepid Travel (yacht, pictured). Their eight-day sailing trip from Santorini to Mykonos stops off at islands like Ios, Naxos and Syros along the way, for the full Greek Island experience at a relaxed pace.

■ Culture in Cyprus

Cyprus is popular for its beaches, sun and resorts like Paphos and Ayia Napa. However, the Mediterranean island also has a rich cultural history, having been ruled by everyone from the Greeks and Romans to the Egyptians and Persians. It is in Cyprus that the legendary Greek

goddess of love and beauty Aphrodite was said to be born from the sea, while at Kourion, near Lemesos, there are remains of an ancient city which was inhabited from 4,500BC, with a Greco-Roman theatre from 2BC and 5th-century mosaic floors. At Kato Pafos Archaeological Park, remains of Roman houses dating from the 2nd to the 5th century were discovered in the 1960s.

In Kykkos Monastery in the Troodos Mountains, pilgrims queue every day to see a painting of the Virgin Mary (said to be painted by the apostle St Luke), and relics from St John the Baptist. The area also has ten Byzantine churches, all World Heritage Sites.






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