

The Eastern Mediterranean on the Nieuw Amsterdam

By KATHERINE RODEGHIER

Special Contributor

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The first minarets emerged from the blue haze, exclamation points above a busy skyline. As the ship drew closer, passengers poured onto the bow and decks to view the unfolding panorama of domes and spires, bridges and fortifications.

Pulling into port in Istanbul ranks as a highlight of a cruise in the Eastern Mediterranean. On the port side, the domes of the Blue Mosque and Hagia Sofia rise above the walls of Topkapi Palace. On the starboard, a suspension bridge spans the Bosphorus, linking the continents of Europe and Asia.

"The scenery coming into Istanbul was wonderful," says Peggy Wall, who cruised with husband Steve on Holland America's Nieuw Amsterdam last fall. The Walls and Larry and Jeannie Ryan, their neighbors in Katy, Texas, chose their cruise for the ports it visited.

In addition to Istanbul, the cruise featured tours of Venice, Italy and Split, Croatia, as well as several locations in Greece: Ephesus, Athens, the ruins of ancient Olympia and the islands of Mykonos and Santorini.

"It would have been expensive to fly to each place. Taking a cruise is more economical," says Jeannie. Plus, you don't have the hassle of searching for hotels.

Gondolas and Greek islands

Launched in 2010, the Nieuw Amsterdam is the newest of Holland America's 15 ships, as well as its largest, carrying 2,106 passengers. It is the only Holland America ship with private deck cabanas with butler service and a Master Chef's Table, a seven-course meal with wine pairings.

The Nieuw Amsterdam's 12-day Mediterranean Empires itinerary begins and ends in Venice, where passengers tour the Doge's Palace and St. Mark's Basilica. A ride to the top of the 325-foot Campanile bell tower gives you a splendid view of red-tile roofs and some of the 117 islands that make up Venice. At night, tuxedo-clad musicians perform classical music and show tunes outside cafes in the square. Crowds gather to listen, swaying to the music.

Oia, one of the prettiest towns on the Greek island of Santorini, is known for its whitewashed buildings. It, and the island's main town, Fira (also called Thira), are perched on cliffs — actually the rim of the collapsed volcano that forms the island. To access the towns, cruise passengers have three choices: ride a cable car to the top of the cliff in Fira, walk up a serpentine path or ride a donkey up the same path. The cable car is the fastest, but when several ships are in port you might stand up to two hours in line to board.

On Mykonos, the ship's tenders dock right in Mykonos Town, where whitewashed cafes and shops ring the harbor. Stroll through Little Venice, a neighborhood of art galleries, and climb the staircase to the Xenia Windmills that stand like sentinels overlooking the Aegean Sea.

Ottoman influences

Shopping always ranks as a popular activity for cruise passengers, and while the ports in the Eastern Mediterranean present plenty of opportunities, Istanbul stands out for its Grand Bazaar. This warren of shops displays a dizzying array of handicrafts and textiles. Carpets are Turkey's No. 1 export. Made by hand using the Turkish double knot, the skill is passed down from mother to daughter. The most well-known carpet shops occupy large stores just outside the Grand Bazaar. Should you wish to buy, remember that bargaining is part of the process.

Once the Roman capital of Constantinople, Istanbul remains a mix of old and new, East and West. Traditionally clad Muslim women walk alongside those in jeans and business suits. A few donkey carts still share the road with cars stuck in the crowded city's notorious traffic jams.

Shore excursions take in the big three historic sites: the Blue Mosque, where azure tiles brighten the interior; Hagia Sofia (also St. Sophia), built by Roman Emperor Justinian; and Topkapi Palace, where the sultan resided with his wives and children and as many as 320 concubines.

The palace was the site of a Nov. 30 shooting that injured two people; it was attributed to a single gunman, who was killed by police.

Ruins of civilizations past

Before the Ottomans came the Greeks and Romans. The fourth largest city in the Roman Empire was Ephesus, which lies in ruins near the port of Kusadasi, Turkey. Cruise excursions visit the House of the Virgin Mary as well as the Roman ruins, including the amphitheater where St. Paul preached, and the Acadian Way, where Antony and Cleopatra walked on their honeymoon.

For another trip back in time, go to Athens, a quick trip from the port in Piraeus. Stand next to the Parthenon on the Acropolis, the epicenter for the rise of Western civilization, and ponder the waves of influence that rippled across the Eastern Mediterranean, touching every port on the cruise.

Katherine Rodeghier is a freelance writer in Illinois.

If you go

In 2012, Holland America's 12-day Mediterranean Empires cruises on the Nieuw Amsterdam depart on April 30, June 5, July 18, Aug. 23 and Oct. 5. Rates range from \$1,799 per person, double occupancy, for an inside stateroom to \$4,799 per person, double occupancy, for a deluxe verandah suite. The 2012 itinerary replaces Olympia in Greece with Kotor, Montenegro. hollandamerica.com

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