

A DIRECTORY OF CRUISES WORLDWIDE

A HOMERIC HERO'S ITINERARY

Mediterranean journey inspired by Odysseus combines excursions to classical sites with modern luxury

By CAREY LOVELACE

AS our ship drew west through the Mediterranean, Bill Gutsch aimed a high-powered flashlight into the August night sky. "When Odysseus is told, 'Keep the Bears to your left,' " he said, "It's referring to the two Dippers, which are always in the north."

Dr. Gutsch, chairman of the Hayden Planetarium in New York, was talking about Odysseus because we were in the midst of a 16-day cruise tracing the journey of the Homeric hero.

About 40 of us had gone topside to hear this lecture, crouching in deck chairs to pore over star charts, blinking our tiny flashlights on and off as we tried to follow what Dr. Gutsch was talking about. We looked like lightning bugs. Meanwhile, he used the beam of his light as a pointer, as if the sky were a planetarium ceiling, tracing the constellations. One of four lecturers on board with us, Dr. Gutsch was less concerned with ancient skies than with modern ones, and especially supernovas and black holes.

We were about seven days into our Journey of Odysseus, a tour organized by Classical Cruises, a New York-based company. I was with my parents and a friend from New York; it was my first cruise. I had pictured a procession of nonstop dining, Broadway revues, casino gambling and aerobics classes — a kind of orgy of the senses. While our trip boasted the luxury, first-class service, fine food, relaxation and salt air I associated with this mode of travel, it featured the additional attraction of a theme. The program also offered lectures, guided tours, visits to archaeological sites, in-room video programs and even a required reading list — contributing a gratifying dimension to the sometimes unusual destinations. Meanwhile, we were borne along in comfort on the 270-foot Aurora I, which, with its compact size and wood-paneled elegance, resembled a plush private yacht.

I had spent months with my head buried in brochures, trying to find the perfect trip to take my parents on for a birthday present (they both turned 65 in the same year). It was my mother who had tracked down Classical Cruises, which operates a fleet of four ships and arranges package tours for institutions. Individual travelers can join many such trips by making arrangements directly with Classical Cruises, which we did; on board with us were groups from the American Museum of Natural History, the University of Chicago and Princeton University.

Our voyage began in Istanbul on Aug. 16 and ended in Athens on Sept. 1 — with stops in Malta, Tunisia, Corsica, Italy and elsewhere in Greece. Sites had a connection, strong or weak, with the "Odyssey": Malta, for example, is linked in legend with the nymph Calypso, with whom Odysseus lingered for nine years.

Our boat's departure from Istanbul was timed with the sunset; the 81 passengers gathered on the aft deck to watch a huge red orb setting spectacularly in the misty haze over minarets and domes. Holding our glasses of wine or sparkling water aloft, we oohed and aahed.

The five-deck ship was filled to capacity with a group that seemed to be primarily couples, mostly in their 50's and 60's. At the first dinner we shared a table with a professor of political science and her husband, a retired appliance distributor, from Wichita, Kan. She confessed to a longstanding passion for the "Iliad," knew ancient Greek and had chosen to take this trip "because it goes to places you can't normally get to."

One such hard-to-get-to place was our first stop out of Istanbul. We had the opportunity



A mural in the House of the Mysteries in Pompeii, above, and the Aurora I in Bonifacio, Corsica, below

to visit Hisarlik, near Canakkale, Turkey, the controversial hilltop site that some think may be the Troy of Homer. While we were still in Istanbul, Joan Aruz, assistant curator in art history and archeology at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, had delivered our first lecture, a slide talk detailing the history of the excavation — but Troy has never been located and scholars are not sure whether Illium as the bard described it ever existed at all. On a hill overlooking a vast plain of dry grasses, our intrepid group, in sun hats and baseball caps, clambered over trenches and mounds; nearby Turkish workers were digging up statues and columns (possible evidence for historians). Meanwhile, the archeologist now heading the dig, Dr. Manfred Korfmann, guided Dr. Aruz around to show her new evidence, recently uncovered, that may finally lead to the unearthing of the metropolis sacked by the Greeks. At the end of our own guided tour, a few of us were able to approach Dr. Korfmann with our own questions about ancient Troy and its demise.



CAREY LOVELACE writes about the arts and travel.

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On a Homeric Hero's Trail

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From Canakkale, our boat sliced through the Dardanelles (the strait joining the Sea of Marmara and the Aegean); and then, land fell away and we entered the blue-black Aegean with its choppy waves, the very spot where Odysseus would have started his epic trip. From there, our course was to Mycenae, then Malta, then Tunisia. Meanwhile, we drank Bloody Marys on the deck, ate fattening pastries and read epic verse.

It was hard not to compare the maritime hardships of Odysseus, storm-tossed and cursed by Poseidon, to our exquisitely comfortable surroundings and the swift pace of the *Aurora I*. When I first read about the 80-passenger ship, built in Lubeck shipyards, I was sure that its description as "intimate" was a euphemism for "cramped." In fact, the ship was quite roomy, with 7,000 square feet of deck space. But some brochure descriptions were misleading. The "pool," in size and depth, was barely a wading pool, the "gym" a mere cubicle with two exercise bikes and a Stairmaster. Likewise, the tiny boutique lacked essentials like aspirin, throat lozenges and writing pens.

BUT the stateroom I shared with my friend more than compensated (at \$6,000 a person, its cost was comparable to other luxury tours of similar length). Decorated in restrained blues and muted off-whites, rich with wood paneling, it was as comfortable as any room I've ever been in, good for a long stay. Twin beds, whose postures could be adjusted up and down via a hand-held control, were separated by a low bureau; a small refrigerator was tucked under the writing desk. The cabin had a sleek, modern bathroom with a marble vanity and a huge tub with shower. The closet space was more than adequate. And the two picture windows in our stateroom (and in most others) meant I could lie snug in my narrow bed, soothed by the churning of the engines, and watch the froth the boat sent gushing upward, illuminated by strong lights at night. Margo, our stewardess, left a plate of cookies every evening, and room service was available around the clock. I could have stayed put for the rest of my life.

And I was grateful for that exercise room, small as it was, which allowed me to work off the extra pounds gained from the abundance of food. Buffet breakfasts outside on the deck offered a range of freshly baked breads, meats, egg dishes, exotic fruit, hot and cold cereal, and yogurt. There was an ample lunch, afternoon tea, and a five-course dinner, which had a choice of three entrees, meat, fish, or vegetarian. (Desserts were often the best part — cream pastries, luscious cakes, tiramisu, a wonderful flan.) If you didn't finish the food on your plate, an extremely solicitous maitre d'hôtel would rush up to ask if anything was wrong. Yet, while the food was fresh and expertly prepared, it was sometimes overcooked; by the end of a kind of monotony of format had set in.

Dinner was open-seating around large round tables in the dining room's clublike atmosphere. (Formal dress was not required. Most people wore suits and ties, pants suits or dresses.) However, I noticed a slight air of anxiety soon attaching



Michelle Stuart

Sailors cemetery in Bonifacio, Corsica, a stop on the Journey of Odysseus cruise.

itself to the event. As our well-mannered group gathered in the lounge before filing into the dining room, the question began to loom: With whom would we be seated? Would we be humiliated with empty spaces at our table, or guided by the solicitous maitre d'hôtel to a place alongside someone with whom holding a conversation was going to be like lifting a lead weight? I was reminded of moments during high school. But with all we were experiencing every day, there was usually plenty to talk about. Land tours, nine in all (included in the price), were generally attended by almost everyone, although there was always the option to stay on board or go shopping in town. Tours might last a few hours or all day, and include visits to ancient ruins, sacred sites or unusual museums full of rare treasures. We might have lunch together in a restaurant, or have free time to shop in a charming port village. There was something inspiring about the way members of our group, many in their 70's, would routinely pile into buses under sometimes uncomfortable conditions (faulty roads, blistering temperatures, failing air-conditioning, inaudible tour guides), and would make difficult hikes up treacherous slopes without complaint.

There were three full days at sea. While we were cruising, the staff might arrange a Bloody Mary Mixer or an Ice Cream Social on the aft deck. Remarkably, although public spaces were few — the lounge did triple duty as cocktail area, after-dinner piano bar, and briefing area — we always had plenty of elbow room.

Every day or so, sometimes twice a day, we would gather in the tiny auditorium to hear one of the 12 lectures that were a highlight of the cruise — on Mycenaean art, archeology, Mediterranean geology, the night sky. (These could also be seen from one's cabin on TV.)

For the most part, lectures were on themes relevant to things we were experiencing. Herman Sinaiko, a humanities professor from the University of Chicago, was our Homer expert; with his wavy gray hair, wry speaking style, and Midwestern cadences, he dazzled his listeners with three talks on the clash of relationships and the "life lessons" in the "Iliad" and the "Odyssey." On the other hand, the American Museum of Natural History paleontologist Mark Norell, along with his geology expert, had just returned from a dinosaur excavation in the Gobi Desert and spoke about his experiences there.

There were visits to rewarding, off-the-beaten-track locales like Hagar Qim on Malta, the Neolithic temple of limestone slabs; there was the island of Djerba, where we bargained for goods at a Tunisian souk in primitive French, then traveled past white-washed beehive architecture erupting in a stunningly beautiful stark landscape. One of the most affecting stops for me was one of the most standard tourist stops, Pompeii. (Some in our group elected to visit nearby Herculaneum instead.) I was moved by the haunting impression it conveyed of life in the Roman era.

This was not a cruise for night owls or those seeking a social scene; evening entertainment, aside from a stroll on the deck or watching videos in one's stateroom, was limited to "An Evening With Paul in the Lounge." (Paul played piano.) There, a dozen or so smokers and drinkers could sit up late and quietly carouse. The single manifestation of group high jinks was an impromptu musical staged late in the cruise by one passenger that had tour organizers and the profoundly embarrassed ship's doctor draped in sheets, togalike, singing about Odysseus's homecoming to the tune of "Won't You Come Home Bill Bailey?"

Most of all, the cruise was a series of reflective moments. Before dawn one morning, while sailing in darkness alongside the Italian coast, we approached the island Stromboli (linked to Aeolus, Lord of the Winds). The most intrepid of us went to the topmost deck, clutching binoculars and cameras to marvel at the still-active volcano belching out small bursts of red-orange lava every 20 minutes or so. Standing on deck, I chatted with Professor Sinaiko, who pointed out that Homer composed his epic when this part of the Mediterranean was first being explored; its images were probably in part inspired by sailors' yarns about what they had experienced. Watching Stromboli, one could see how its fantastical qualities could spark myths about gods and wind.

Later that same morning we drew near to the Messina Strait between Sicily and mainland Italy. When I had first planned this trip, I had imagined my parents and myself lazing in deck chairs, leisurely catching up on each other's lives. As it was, with all the lectures, port briefings, group dining, in-room video programs, bus trips and guided tours (albeit including enough down time that we always felt refreshed) our moments together

were limited to breathlessly saving each other seats on excursion buses. For a moment, though, I was alone with my father on the ship's uppermost deck; he too had risen early to see Stromboli. In the filtered light, we read aloud to each other Homer's passage about Scylla and Charybdis, legendary monsters on either side of a treacherous channel. As we drew into the straits, we leaned against the railing. My father pointed out the tongue of land jutting into the water that exactly matched the description of one monster, as well as the turbulence where the Mediterranean meets the Ionian, causing the "whirling maelstrom" the bard delineated.

When our boat paused a day in Corfu, we visited Paleokastritsa, a hilltop 13th-century monastery, and gazed down to the cove below enclosing startling vivid aquamarine waters; then we rode by bus on the twisting roads across the island to Corfu town, checking out the shops and trying out Greek fare in the cafes. That evening, a handful of us opted to go into the island's interior, to the taverna Tripa, to sample authentic fare and folk dancing (the local men seemed a little more gifted in this regard than the women).

Finally, as our last stop, we, like Odysseus, pulled into Ithaca — relishing (as no doubt he did) the tranquility of the cozy harbor of Vathi, from which piney slopes rise sharply. At the Captain's Farewell Dinner that night, there were toasts all round — to one another, to our Greek crew and, of course, to Homer. ■

History at sea

The Journey of Odysseus, which ranges in price from \$6,145 to \$9,295, (not including air fare), will travel in 1994 on Oct. 13 to 28.

Other Classical Cruises theme trips include Across the Ancient Trade Route (March 16 to April 16), sailing from Singapore to Athens (*Aurora I*); Historic Cities of the Sea (April 5 to 16), from Lisbon to Venice, and the Western Seaway of Europe (May 24 to June 6), which retraces the Gibraltar to Scotland passage of the third century B.C. Greek explorer Pytheas (*Aurora II*).

All include noted lecturers traveling on board.

Classical Cruises, at 132 East 70th Street, New York, N.Y. 10021, can be reached at (800) 252-7745 and (212) 794-3200.

C. L.