

# Travel Time

## CRUISING THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN BROUGHT TO YOU BY CHASE BINDER

**B**ud and I tell people we're not fond of cruises, though we have been on more than a dozen over the past twenty-five years. Avid cruisers would have racked up ten or twenty times that.

So when travel pals Chuck and Debra Douglas suggested a Mediterranean cruise, we furrowed our brows and said "We'll see." We had already done two Mediterranean cruises and with the industry's recovery from COVID, cruise ships are full up. Popular Mediterranean destinations like Barcelona, Rome, and Venice are not only getting ridiculously overcrowded—some local residents are even staging anti-tourist protests.

Luckily, the Mediterranean offers much more than jam-packed Western European favorite destinations. There are smaller cities with lovely squares, interesting history and welcoming locals. Just look east!

We launched our search with some criteria: itineraries that avoid big Italian and Spanish destinations; cruise lines with attractive pricing and good reputations; NO mega-ships; and availability of stern cabins, which have bigger balconies for the best views. (photo under IF YOU GO on page 13).

What popped up but a 10-day Eastern Mediterranean itinerary departing from Trieste, Italy, and wandering through Slovenia, Croatia, some Greek islands, and Turkey before ending in Athens. The recently refurbished *Norwegian Dawn* was smallish with 2,300 passenger and stern cabins available. We pounced on it and travel buddies Erle and Linda Pierce couldn't resist joining our cruising party.

Though a perfect trip rarely happens (especially on a cruise ship traveling with several couples), this trip ranked very high on our list!



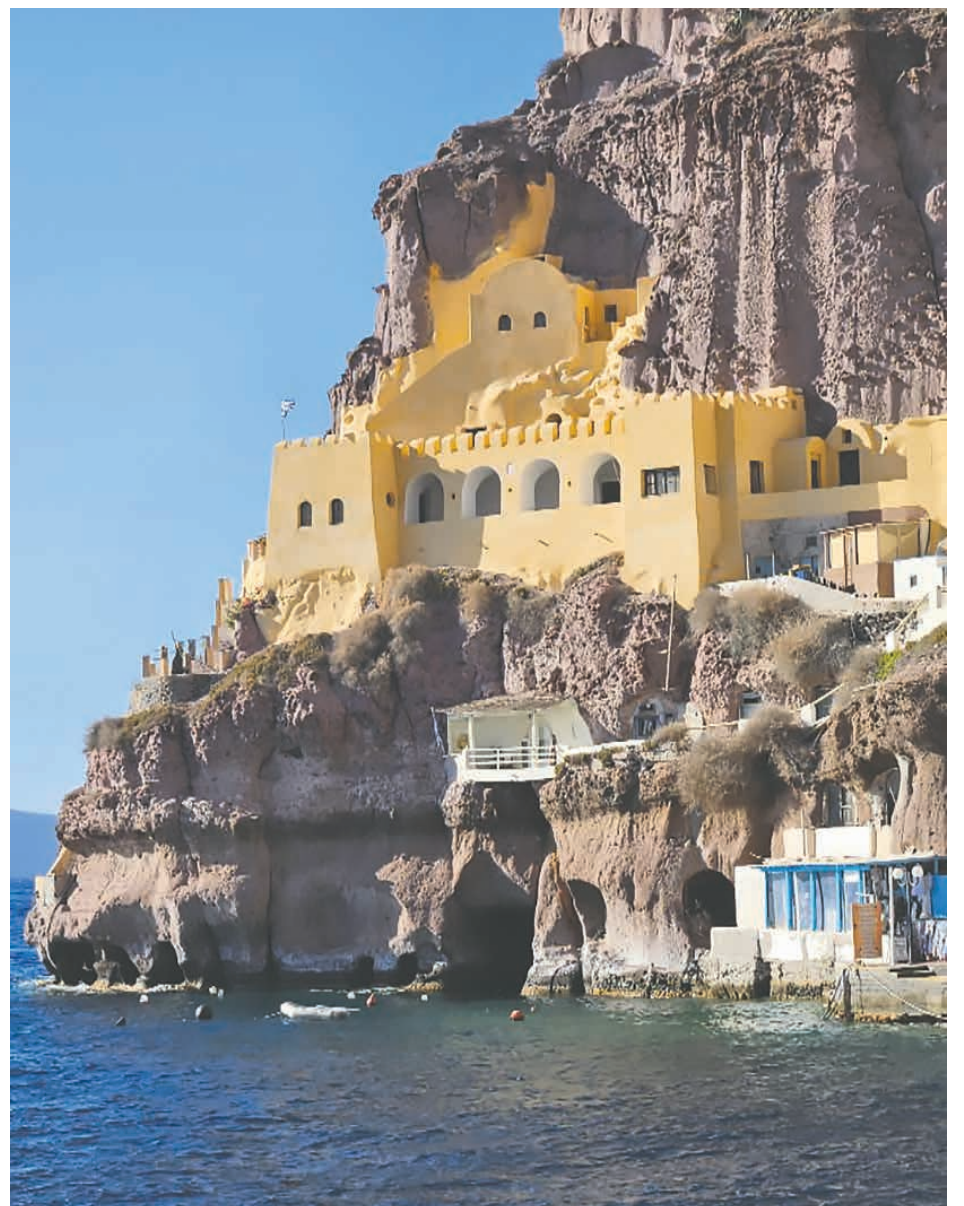
Our pre-cruise days in Venice proved easy with a 3-day unlimited tourist pass for the ferries. We chose the Riviera Hotel near the ferry terminal on Lido and were able to zip around the islands to Murano and through the Grand Canal.



Dubrovnik, Croatia, survived an 8-month siege during its 1991-2 war for independence from Yugoslavia. The center has many historical sites, but exploring the side streets shows that people still live and work inside the city walls.



Tuk-tuks are small open electric vehicles offering personalized tours for 4-6 people. We booked this one in Split, Croatia with [ecotoursplit.com](http://ecotoursplit.com). A perfect way to see this historical city.



Tenders are required to land passengers on a small dock at the bottom of the cliffs below the city of Fira. The island's sites are reached by cable car or climbing 587 steps to the top via foot or donkey. It's notoriously difficult to get back down, so we enjoyed lunch and views from a local dockside restaurant right in the port.



The Windmills of Mykonos were built by the Venetians in the 16th century and many were used to mill wheat until the 1950's. Mykonos is a wonderful port to just take a stroll through the city streets and enjoy a local cafe.





Istanbul is a fascinating combination of mosques, monuments, minarets and the bustle of everyday life. We used a Hop On–Hop Off bus to get around—an efficient way to explore almost any city.



We braved the long hike up to the Parthenon where our guide explained how to take the most dramatic shot of the most famous Greek temple. It was definitely worth it, but try late afternoon for cooler temps and fewer tourists.



The Acropolis in Athens is beautifully lit at night and visible from many rooftop hotel restaurants. We picked boutique Hotel A for Athens for our post-cruise visit.



## IF YOU GO

*The cruise industry is immense. More than 50 ocean cruise lines and 27 river cruise lines offer itineraries on 350+ cruise ships around the world. Dive into the details.*



**Research the cruise line.** Be sure to read reviews on Cruisecritic.com, Tripadvisor and more. Some lines are geared towards a specific clientele... Scandinavian, Asian or others and the food/entertainment may not appeal to you.

**Look beyond the list of ports.** How long are you at each port? Are you docked so you have easy/unlimited access to the port, or will you have to rely on tender boats?

**Research offers online—but find an actual person to help.** We connected with a single agent at Cruises.com. He had vast knowledge of numerous options and was very accessible by phone – invaluable!

**About those specials.** Packages can be cost-savers but be sure to do the math. Packages for beverages, internet access, tips and more might be great or be a waste. Research the details: our basic package included unlimited beverages. We kept getting additional expensive “Upgrade Now!” offers for top shelf liquor from NCL. But deep in the NCL website a list of brands already included in our package proved excellent! Better, our agent pointed out that drink tips were included. Money saved!

**Don't be afraid to book independent excursions,** especially if you're traveling with a small group. You will save money and have a much better experience. Toursbylocals.com has experienced, vetted guides who will personalize your experience and help avoid crowds.

**Arrive early and depart late.** Give yourself an extra day or two, or even three, on each end of the cruise to explore the embark/debark ports.

**Expect surprises – positive and/or negative.** Things like internet and plumbing can be problematic at sea. But we found the entertainment and food quality on the Dawn exceptional.