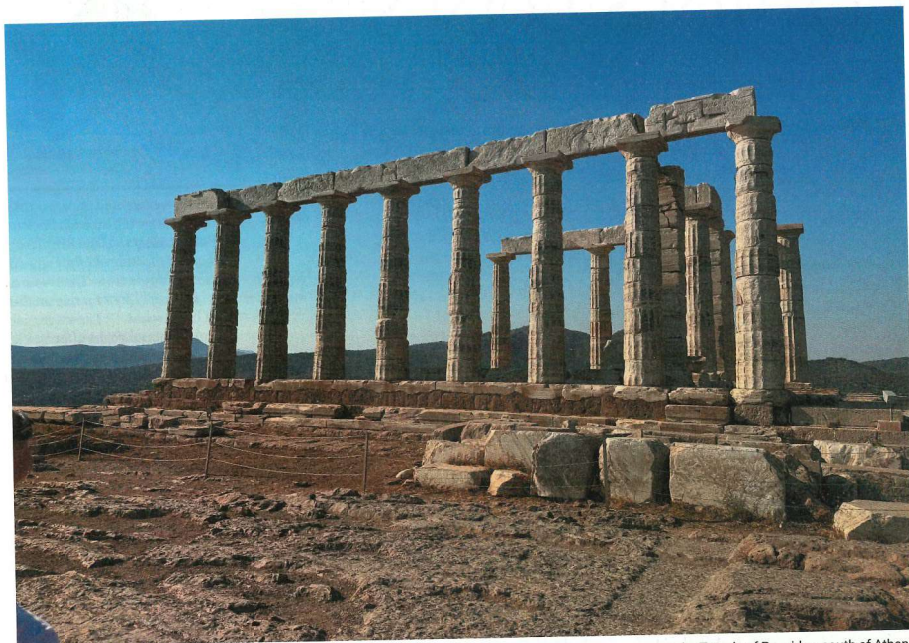




The Temple of Poseidon, south of Athens

Voyage of discovery

A reluctant cruiser goes on a Greek odyssey

WORDS & PHOTOS: Mark Cummings

Henry and Julie from Telford live inside my head. They are the clichéd couple I dread getting stuck with on a humongous ship with no escape from never ending stories of their long and exotic cruise history, laborious details about Henry's new electric Vauxhall Corsa and Julie's ever-growing list of food intolerances. This recurring nightmare has put me off the whole concept of taking to the water and presented me with a dilemma at a recent travel festival. I was hosting the team from the Small Cruise Ship Collection and confessed to the boss Powell that I had a conflict of interest. He reassured me that 90 per cent of their customers feel the same way and challenged me to experience a seven-day Greek odyssey for myself. In the unlikely event I might cause trouble my wife, Jo, was asked to join the voyage to ensure people like Henry and Julie weren't thrown overboard.



The prehistoric town of Akrotiri

In the taxi to the port in Athens I was praying their names wouldn't be on the passenger list. I was happily distracted when I saw the *M/S Galileo*, 157ft of raw, streamlined, nautical nobility, my home for

the next week. Once on board I met cruise coordinator, Katerina, who informed me we were the only English passengers which meant the Telford Two couldn't be on the trip. Katerina was a life-enhancing force of nature who knitted the whole experience together. I was soon to discover that every crew member was a warm, smiling, helpful bundle of joy. Powell had chosen Variety Cruises for me and a seven-day adventure called *Jewels of The Cyclades* with 38 fellow passengers, 18 crew and an exciting list of adventurous excursions to enjoy.

The Cyclades consist of 23 large islands and some 200 smaller ones with the sacred island of Delos forming the epicentre. This was the birthplace of Apollo and one of the many islands I was desperate to explore.

As we set sail for Poros we experienced that first awkward, but exciting, evening meal and the cruise ship ritual of sussing out the fellow

passengers. Over melt-in-the-mouth steak we proudly showed off our intimate knowledge of Barcelona (we have family there) to locals Pedro and Genia who instantly became our Catalan kindred spirits. Sara and Raul from Madrid also became constant companions and helped us polish off the red wine before we hopped off for a wander around Poros.

We had a few hours in Poros Town to soak up the sunset on the idyllic water front, gobble down a mango sorbet but mostly compare notes about the other passengers. Back on deck I cooled down with a cold, crisp Greek beer and a bit of socialising before a gently rocking deep sleep signalled the end of day one as the *Galileo* sailed overnight to our next destination. The air-conditioned cabin was a spacious, clean, comfortable, cool haven for the next seven days.

The next morning, I had a fascinating encounter with Andreas and Vladimira from Germany and some wild goats. We were sitting on a beach on the uninhabited island of Poligios (meaning 'many goats') and I discovered that this was their 60th cruise. What struck me as odd was the fact that they seemed perfectly normal and at no point did they talk about their other cruises.

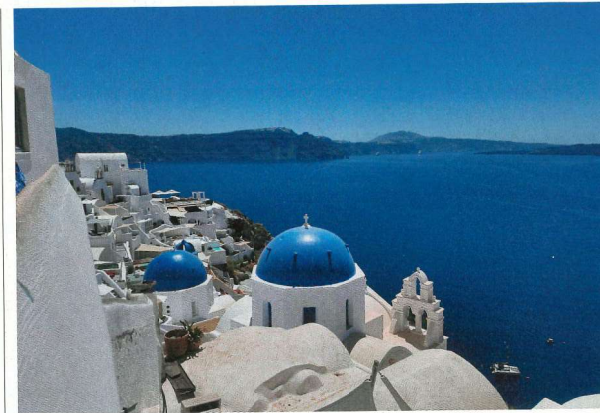
A delightfully choppy afternoon sail took us to the magical, untouched Greek island gem of Folegandros.

We disembarked and caught the bus up the cliff road to one of the oldest Cyclades towns, the port of Chora built in the Middle Ages. We were transfixed by the domed church on a cliff top above the town. Despite 37°C heat I was seduced by the walled path that zigzagged along the cliff edge that took me all the way up to The Church of Panagia (Virgin Mary). The sunset views over the town and port below are famous as the whitewashed houses turn golden with the Aegean Sea forming a perfect backdrop.

On Santorini we travelled back to 3000 BC visiting the archaeological site of the prehistoric town of Akrotiri. Known as the 'Minoan Pompeii' it was preserved by being buried under volcanic ash following a major eruption. Walking around the excavated streets and houses was slightly mind-blowing. The next island was Paros and a bus from the



Naoussa, a fishing village on the northern coast of Paros



Classic view of Santorini

'The air-conditioned cabin was a spacious, clean, comfortable, cool haven for the next seven days'

port took us to the northern fishing village of Naoussa famous for its colourful fishing boats, ancient windy streets and vibrant nightlife. We were let loose to roam wild all over the island and it was here I discovered the guilty pleasure of spotting a fellow passenger, out of context, approaching down some random alleyway. What is that about? By now I had got to know Mina from Sweden who was a finance lawyer living in London, formed a bromance with Carlos, a Brazilian restaurant owner from Sao Paulo, and worryingly I couldn't get rid of this nagging compulsion to track down Andreas and ask him more details about some of the other cruises he'd been on. What was happening to me?

On Delos we paid homage to the god Apollo on the island of his birth. It was well worth

the battle with the heat to wander through the remains of shops, houses, temples and a theatre. The first signs of habitation date back to the third millennium BC. After a short sail we saw the sunset at Mykonos followed by the sunrise the next day approaching Syros.

We cruised back to Athens via Kythnos and a stunning view of the Temple of Poseidon for a final night captain's dinner, fond farewells in the morning and time for me to reflect over a coffee waiting for the airport taxi. On Powell's website it mentions: 'Travel to enjoy, but also to see and experience, learn as you travel in the company of like-minded travellers.' That was it. Everyone I met shared a love of adventure. Powell chose Variety Cruises who also use the same phrase 'mingle with like-minded travellers' a company who believe in creating a 'better world at sea' contributing to sustainability projects in all the areas they sail to. I had swum, explored, made new friends and learned lots. This miserable mariner, dubious deckhand, sceptical seadog, vacillating voyager was no more. Got to go. Carlos wants a Facetime. ●

The Small Cruise Ship Collection is based in Hereford and offers a range of cruises worldwide including river cruises from the Congo to Columbia, a multinational Polar Expedition, a Galet adventure, hiking or cycling events or wildlife cruises.

Call 01432 507450;

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M/S Galileo - our floating home