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Special to the Star-Telegram

ATHENS AND THE GREEK ISLES

Give me a word, any word, and I show you how the root of that word is Greek." That line from *My Big Fat Greek Wedding* kept coming to mind when I read that Greece has more iconic sites than anywhere in Europe — 18 have been designated as UNESCO World Heritage sites. I could almost hear Gus Portokalos, the proud father of Toula in the

movie, chiming in, "Even the word 'icon' is from the Greek *eikōn!*" Now, if I just had a bottle of Win-dex and could bestow it with the magical properties Gus thought it had, I'd cure Greece's economic struggles.

Despite Greece's money woes and the tide of Syrian refugees that flowed for a time into popular islands like Kos and Lesbos, tourism reached an all-time high in 2015, thanks in large part to visits from U.S. and British vacationers, and 2016 figures are on track to be even higher.

The number of refugees has declined to a trickle — arrivals in the Greek islands are down 97 percent. The affected islands do not appear on cruise itineraries, and Greeks will welcome you with open arms, so don't hesitate to plan a trip. Since tourism contributes nearly a quarter of its gross domestic product and employs 1 out of 5 citizens, everyone you encounter will be happy to see you and motivated to make your visit a pleasant one.

ICONIC ATHENS

My husband and I arrived in Athens a day

before beginning a week-long cruise of the Greek isles and settled into our pre-cruise hotel, the St. George Lycabettus, located on the slopes of Mount Lycabettus, near the city's highest point. Our room's stunning view of the city and its focal point the Acropolis — the first of several UNESCO sites we would visit — provided the impetus we needed to begin exploring before our jet-lagged bodies gave in to a nap.

Upon the recommendation of the hotel concierge, our first stop was the Acropolis Museum, a contemporary multi-level building opened in 2009, which houses most of the artifacts found on the 10-acre rock and surrounding slopes that date from the fifth century B.C. to the fifth century. Admission is only 5 euros and well worth spending a couple of hours. We had lunch in its rooftop restaurant and worked it off with a walk to the Acropolis a short distance away.

Admission is 20 euros per person during the height of the tourist season, April through October, then discounted half-price from November through March. The ticket

EUROPE

Eternal appeal

Greece's financial woes aren't keeping away tourists who yearn to see its iconic sites and beautiful islands



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Santorini, with its blue-domed churches and whitewashed buildings, is the most recognizable of all the Greek islands.

price was increased this year from 12 euros as a measure to help boost government revenues; a multi-site ticket is 30 euros.

Navigating the uneven marble steps that lead to the top of the Acropolis, site of the Parthenon and other fifth-century sanctuaries dedicated to the

goddess Athena, can be a bit challenging, slippery when wet, and unbearably hot in the summer, so be prepared with good walking shoes and a bottle of water before you make the climb.

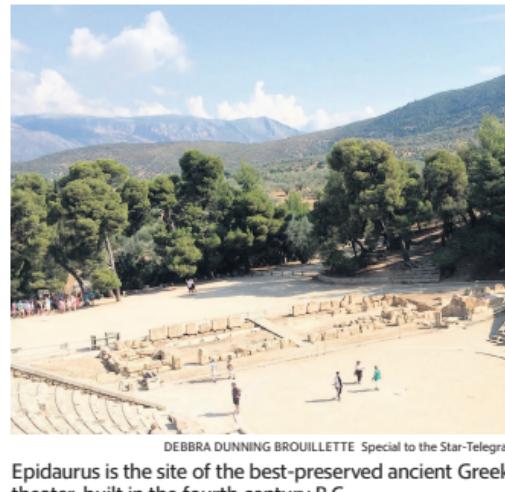
CRUISING THE GREEK ISLES

The following after-

noon, we boarded Windstar Cruise Line's Star Pride, a 212-passenger power yacht added to the cruise line's fleet in 2014, along with two other similar-sized ships formerly owned by Seabourn. Our itinerary included two of the most popular Greek islands, Mykonos and Santorini; two coastal

towns of historical significance, Nafplio and Monemvasia; and two ports we were eager to visit due to their biblical history — Patmos, where the Apostle John, writer of the Book of Revelation, was exiled, and Kusadasi, Turkey, home of the ancient Greek

SEE GREECE, 9D



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Epidaurus is the site of the best-preserved ancient Greek theater, built in the fourth century B.C.

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city of Ephesus.

Multiple sailings of the same itinerary will be offered beginning in May 2017 on the 148-passenger Wind Star, one of three motorized ships with computer-operated sails that complete Windstar's fleet.

Windstar's small luxury ships with port-intensive itineraries appeal, by and large, to active adults 40-plus. The majority of our fellow passengers were in their 50s, 60s, and 70s and hailed from the U.S., including two couples from the Dallas-Fort Worth area, with a smattering of guests from Canada, England and other European countries. Several families with adult children were aboard. Few were under 18, and there are no special kids programs.

Guests are invited to gather in the lounge before dinner to learn highlights of the following day's destination. Our preference was to leave the ship after a hearty breakfast to make the most of the hours we were in port. Those who return early can watch a cooking demonstration, take a dance lesson, or fit in a spa treatment.

I pre-booked shore excursions that featured UNESCO sites and opportunities to experience local foods and culture, returning in time to linger over multi-course evening meals as we shared the day's adventures with new friends in either the main dining room or the smaller reservation-only steak and seafood restaurant.

All Windstar ships feature open seating and a casual dress code, but no shorts or flip-flops. After-dinner options might include listening to a musical duo, a game of blackjack in the small casino, or taking part in a trivia contest. Elaborate Vegas-style shows are not part of Windstar's style and its passengers don't seem to miss them.

PORTS ARE THE STAR ATTRACTION

Nafplio

A drive through the countryside outside Nafplio, our first port stop, transported us to Epidaurus, the site of the best-preserved ancient Greek theater. Built in the fourth century B.C. with a capacity of 12,000, this

UNESCO World Heritage site is known for its superb acoustics — so good, in fact, that someone sitting at the very top can hear a coin dropping in the middle of the stage. Theatre productions of Greek dramas are still held here during the summer months.

Mykonos

As we approached

Mykonos, I watched for

views of its round

thatched-roof windmills,

dating to the 16th century. The island is known for its lively nightlife, but there was no evidence of that during our morning stroll along cobblestone streets.

The most memorable part of our time on Mykonos was spent at Vioma, an organic wine farm, where we tasted wines in an open-air latticed building near the vines. We purchased a bottle of the white wine for 7 euros and shared it with friends on the last evening of our cruise.

Kusadasi/Ephesus

The only port on our itinerary not a part of present-day Greece was Kusadasi, Turkey, location of the ancient Greek city of Ephesus, another UNESCO World Heritage Site. It was the site of a special private event — an Evening in Ephesus — just for passengers of our ship, which included a five-course dinner served by candlelight in front of the remaining facade of the Celsus Library, the third-largest of the ancient world. Earlier in the day, biblical history was our focus, as we visited the house believed to have been the last residence of the Virgin Mary, a sacred site to both Christians and Muslims.

Patmos

Patmos' UNESCO World Heritage designation includes the historic town center, the hilltop monastery dedicated to St. John, and the Cave of the Apocalypse, where he heard the voice of God while in exile and dictated his revelations to a scribe that later became the Holy Bible's Book of Revelation. It is now a chapel and place of pilgrimage. The small island appears on fewer cruise itineraries than many of the others, so it's rare that more than one ship will be in port when you visit.

Santorini

In stark contrast, Santorini was Greece's busiest port in 2015 and is included on most cruise routes. Nearly 800,000 arrived by cruise ship, leading to a decision by Greek officials to limit cruise ship visitors to 8,000 per day in 2017.

Santorini's blue-domed churches and white-washed buildings clinging to steep cliffs overlooking a volcanic caldera make it the most recognizable of all the Greek islands. It routinely appears on lists of the world's best islands and most romantic destinations.

Visitors ascend the cliffs to reach the main town of Fira in one of three ways — on the back of a donkey, by climbing 600 steps, or via a three-minute cable car ride, the most-used mode of transportation. Instead of booking a shore excursion from the ship, we opted for a private tour here with friends staying on the island, and also arranged a photo shoot in Oia, near its most-photographed

blue-domed church.

Monemvasia

The ruins of a Masada-like medieval city built entirely upon a rock came into view as we approached Monemvasia, the last stop on our Aegean journey. Connected to the mainland by a causeway, Monemvasia is popular with tourists touring by car, but isn't often included on cruise itineraries so it's relatively uncrowded. Before touring the fortress, we visited the Liotrivi olive oil factory, where we learned the traditional method of producing extra-virgin olive oil before sampling appetizers and local Malvasia wines in the shade of the olive trees.

Back in Athens

We chose the Central Hotel Athens, located in the heart of the Plaka, the oldest part of the city, for our last night in Athens. We booked a standard room but were upgraded to an Acropolis view. After lunch at a taverna popular with locals, we shopped for last-minute gifts on streets lined with tourist shops in the center of the Plaka.

Later in the day, we watched the ceremonial changing of the Presidential Guard outside the Parliament Building before crossing Syntagma Square to the Hotel Grand Bretagne. We splurged with dinner in its rooftop garden restaurant, one of Athens' finest, both for the food and the views. Just as our first course arrived, we looked down to observe a brief, peaceful demonstration, the only indication we'd seen since our arrival of any discontent, although rolling Metro strikes and other disruptions, mostly affecting Greek citizens, continue. Moments later, in the corner of the terrace, guests took turns posing for photos with the Acropolis in the distance.

Defined as "raised Citadel" or rock, this classic structure is an appropriate symbol for Greece at this point in its history. Resilient, proud, and strong, in spite of economic upheaval and uncertainty, its people have survived turmoil for thousands of years. After spending time here and on several of its islands, I believe Greece and its many iconic sites will endure and continue to inspire us, as it has for the ages. If I could ask Gus Portokalos, I know he'd agree.

If you go

Treasures of the Greek Isles

Athens to Athens, seven-day cruises begin May 6, 2017, and continue through Oct. 7 on the Wind Star. Book early: \$2,199 per person, www.windstarcruises.com

Athens hotels

- St. George Lycabettus, www.sglycabettus.gr, from 112 euros
- Hotel Grand Bretagne, www.grandebretagne.gr, from 230 euros
- Central Hotel Athens, www.centralhotel.gr, from 130 euros

On Santorini

- www.privatesantorinitours.com
- www.studiokristo.com

On the shopping list

Olive-oil soaps and products, Mati (evil eye) items, ceramics and pottery, Greek key symbol jewelry, Athenian owls, religious icons.