

ABAC Goes To Italy & The Greek Islands

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Images of gladiators battling savage beasts on the floor of the Colosseum in Rome. Riding a donkey down an 800-foot hillside on an exotic Greek Island. Gliding down a canal in a gondola in the most famous city on water in the world. Now that's what I call a vacation!

My wife, Kris, and I joined with other travelers from this area on the Abraham Baldwin Agricultural College Public Service and Business Outreach Center trip to Italy and the Greek Isles last summer. If you have never been on one of the ABAC trips, you have missed the adventure of a lifetime.

Upcoming trips for this year include the rail tour of the Canadian Rockies June 23-July 1 and Europe's Christmas Markets on Dec. 7-15. You can also sign up for the London and Paris trip on April 23-30, 2009. Call Diane Kilgore at (229) 391-5070 to make your reservation.

Here's a day-by-day look at the ABAC trip to Italy and Greece:

DAY 1: It's so easy to board the bus in the ABAC parking lot and travel to the world's busiest airport in Atlanta. Forget the driving and enjoy the trip. We fly out at 5:30 p.m., cruise at 41,000 feet, and arrive in Amsterdam at 7:10 a.m. The time is six hours ahead of Tifton.

DAY 2: After a short airport stay in the land of wooden shoes, tulips, and windmills, we fly to Rome where we step out into a gorgeous blue sky day. Our bus driver says, "Welcome to the most beautiful city in the world, Rome."

Everyone is a little ragged around the edges after flying all night and half the day. However, it's hard to contain the excitement as we check into the hotel, and take a long walk to the evening meal site. Rome is a gigantic city of three million people.

All the cars are compacts, and many people ride scooters, not motorcycles. It was not uncommon to see well dressed female executive-types zipping along the busy roads on scooters, complete with helmets and dark glasses.

DAY 3: Three minutes into our bus tour of the city, we discover there are two faces of Rome, the Rome of today and the Rome of Caesar's day. It's a fascinating place as you

move from one street filled with modern shops to another block with the magnificent Colosseum dominating the landscape.

Named again recently as one of the Seven Wonders of the World, the Colosseum took 10 years to build. Up to 50,000 spectators watched free shows where gladiators battled each other and where “hunters” with lances stalked lions, panthers, leopards, bears, rhinos, giraffes, and gazelles in their natural habitats.

An ingenious system of lifts and pulleys brought the animals and the gladiators up from the bowels of the stadium. They even flooded the Colosseum wood floor to stage mock sea battles. The structure is amazingly similar to the stadiums of today with an outside concourse where spectators could walk all the way around the arena to get to their seats.

From the Colosseum, we walked to the Forum where the Roman senators debated at length. Columns, some in fine shape and others in a state of disrepair, are everywhere. In its time, this area of Rome had to be absolutely magnificent. It's still unbelievably impressive today.

We had a lunch break at the famous Trevi Fountain, where by tossing in a coin, you supposedly will return to Rome. Picture stops abound in this city, and the fountain is a fantastic background. Climbing the Spanish Steps, designed by Michelangelo, led to more breathtaking views.

Before the evening meal, a few of us made a side trip to the Catacombs of Priscilla, eight miles of underground tunnels beneath Rome which were used as burial places for 40,000 people. A shelf was carved out of the rock, and wrapped up bodies were placed on the shelves. All remains have been removed because tourists kept stealing the bones.

The guide said there is no record of Christians hiding from the Romans in the Catacombs or that any Christians were fed to the lions in the Colosseum.

The evening meal was at one of the many splendid outdoor cafes at the Piazza Navona, a huge courtyard with restaurants and shops lining the perimeter. In the middle of the Piazza were street vendors selling everything from pocketbooks to candy. It was a warm summer evening with atmosphere galore, particularly when we made a nighttime stop at St. Peter's Square. We loved it.

DAY 4: Long lines which moved swiftly opened our day outside the high walls which surround The Vatican. We didn't see the Pope but we did see his apartment from a distance. The highlight of course was the interior of the Sistine Chapel. It took five years for the original painting of the Chapel, and Michelangelo took four years to paint the ceiling.

Scenes from the Bible jump off the walls, from the life of Moses to the life of Jesus. No pictures. No video. Blue-shirted guards clap their hands sharply and say “silence please” when the soft whispers of the crowd inside become too loud.

Every time you look up or down, you see something different. Every space is painted. The Chapel is a rectangular shape, 40 by 20 by 15 meters. You can see the little chimney where white smoke is released when a new Pope is selected. Black smoke means no decision yet. On the first Sunday in January, the Pope has a mass in the Chapel.

From the Vatican, we took a three-hour bus ride on a well-maintained interstate-like highway to Florence. Gas was \$6 per gallon, and very few big sports utility vehicles are on the roads as a result.

The countryside seemed familiar with goats, horses, sunflowers, and rolls of hay. Then we got into an area with olive trees and grape vines. Every town had its own little winery. Lots of soccer fields.

I expected very little from Florence but absolutely fell in love with the city that’s 60 years older than Paris. The “Birthplace of the Renaissance” is loaded with pedestrian walkways, lovely open spaces, statues, and outdoor cafes. Da Vinci painted the “Mona Lisa” here. Chaucer was here. Michelangelo, Raphael, Dante, the list goes on. We saw Giorgio Armani’s apartment on a bridge that Hitler spared because he loved the view.

DAY 5: Leaving the picturesque Hotel Villa Stanley with its giant door keys was hard but we’re off to Venice. We see corn fields, peach trees, and kumquat trees. Lavender grows along the road. People put it on their window sills to keep scorpions out.

In Venice, we board the Royal Caribbean Cruise Line’s Splendor of the Seas for seven wonderful days filled with new places and new faces. Seeing Venice from the top deck was a real treat as we headed out to the Adriatic Sea.

Norwegian Captain Yngvar Knutsen and his crew do everything in their power to make vacations memorable. When you’re not visiting ports of call, you can climb the rock wall, eat at one of the restaurants on board, play putt putt, swim in the pool, go to the ship’s library, spend time at the casino, take in fantastic live entertainment shows, get a manicure, and eat some more.

DAY 6: When the country of Croatia came to my mind, I immediately thought of the Serbian conflict. Not any more. Think deep blue sea with the ancient fortified city of Dubrovnik in the background. I love this place! Matt Lauer was once here for the Today Show, and I can see why.

Rocky hillsides. Fig trees. We toured a garden area on a mountain that overlooks the deepest blue sea I have ever seen. You could see for miles, and I could have sat in that spot for days. Croatia separated from Yugoslavia in 1991. The people speak English

because the children learn the language by age seven, but Croatian is the national language.

We visit the Franciscan Monastery in Dubrovnik as well as the Onofrio Fountain in the center of town. Some folks pay extra and walk the high wall which has kept out invaders since 1292. If you ever wanted to get away from it all, this is the place to do it. I still consider Dubrovnik the buried treasure of the trip.

DAY 7: We are at sea for an entire day, and it's a fantastic time to relax with a book on the pool deck where I see our Kelly Tours owner Don Adams participate in the belly flop competition.

Kris and I take in the Captain's reception and the evening show in the ship's 42nd Street Theatre, which features a group performing a high voltage Motown hits show. We even stay up late and watch the Royal Caribbean singers and dancers do their rendition of The Village People. Great fun.

DAY 8: Our first ever visit to Asia is at Kusadasi, Turkey. Turkish rug salesmen are everywhere as we disembark. Over 90 percent of the people are Moslems, and only seven percent are Christians.

The highlight of the day is a visit to the reconstructed ruins of Ephesus. The House of the Virgin Mary is our first stop on a hillside overlooking the town. The Apostle John brought Mary here before he was exiled to the nearby island of Patmos where he wrote the book of Revelation. For the first time, we see armed guards with Uzi machine guns.

The ruins themselves are a walking history lesson. I stand on the stage area at an amphitheatre where St. Paul preached. We walk down the Arcadian Way, where Marc Antony and Cleopatra once traveled in a procession.

We learn that all young men must go into the army at age 20. Gas is \$8 per gallon. Inflation is nine to 10 percent annually. The country is second in the world in silk. Cotton and tobacco are also raised in abundance.

DAY 9: A volcanic eruption created the Greek island of Santorini. No lava evident on this day as we gaze in amazement at grapes growing right on the ground because their only moisture is from the dew. It never rains here in the summer.

The island's 12,000 residents depend on tourism and the white wine industry. Black sand beaches and blue domed churches dominate the landscape. Lots of pistachio trees and purple flowers which turn out to be wild oregano. Called the "Black Pearl of the Aegean," Santorini is a picture perfect post card.

Kris and I choose to ride burros from the top of the island almost straight down an 800-foot narrow walkway carved out of the side of the rock back to the sea port. I immediately realize that my burro's only intention is to get to the food at the bottom. He

bangs me against another burro, then against the rock wall, and finally teeters on the open side of the walkway where I see my life ending as I start sliding off his back, heading for the rocks below.

Fortunately my death grip on the saddle horn saves the day, and we laugh about it afterwards. Just another once-in-a-lifetime experience I shall not soon forget.

DAY 10: The Greek island of Corfu is much different than Santorini. Called the “Emerald Island” because of its green landscapes, it’s an island of 120,000 people located only three kilometers from the coast of Albania.

We visit the Achilleion Palace, built by Empress Elizabeth of Austria in 1891. Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany later owned the palace which is highlighted by wonderful gardens overlooking the Ionian Sea. The statue of Achilles dying in the Terrace of the Muses makes for a great photo spot.

Wandering the streets of the city is so relaxing with the Greek merchants anxious to please on an island where tourism is the heartbeat of the economy.

DAY 11: Time has no meaning on a fantastic Friday on the Splendor of the Seas. We sailed Royal Caribbean for our Alaska trip, and I really like this cruise line.

While I’m allowing the sun to penetrate deep into my very soul on the top deck, I know there are 760 crew members from 62 countries working to make my time on board even better. Of the 1,864 passengers, 747 are American, 33 are from Spain, and 29 are from Brazil. Argentina, Vietnam, and 33 other countries are represented.

DAY 12: Just when you think it couldn’t get any better, it does. We have a full day in Venice.

We begin in St. Mark’s Square which is visually stunning. It’s gigantic. People, street vendors, and pigeons are everywhere. You can’t help but be caught up in this vibrant city, which was once home to Marco Polo and has been sitting on millions of wooden poles driven into the marshy ground since the 5th Century.

A three-mile bridge connects Venice to the mainland. Inside the city itself, there are 177 canals and 400 bridges. And of course, there are the gondolas.

Yes, we rode a gondola, complete with the striped shirt gondolier pushing us down the narrow canals with apartments rising up three or four stories high on each side of us. It was quiet in the canals as our gondolier was not a singer. Again, a once-in-a-lifetime experience that didn’t leave my heart in my throat as did the Santorini burro ride.

We glided under the famous Bridge of Sighs, named for the lament of prisoners as they crossed over the bridge to be killed or thrown in jail. We got off the gondola to stroll among the shops of the Grand Canal, which is lined with some 100 marble palaces.

In the afternoon, we took side trips via water coach to the islands of Murano, known for glass-makers, and Burano, renowned for its lace-making. Venetian glass and Venetian lace is known worldwide.

DAY 13: Arrived at Marco Polo International Airport in the pre-dawn stillness. Believe it or not, it hadn't opened yet. Diane Kilgore and some members of our group opted for an extra day in Amsterdam on the way home but the rest of our travelers headed for the USA.

I have reflected often on this trip. We saw so much in such a relatively short period of time that it was actually hard to comprehend while the trip was underway. Now the memories are priceless.

If you haven't seen the world, there's no better day than today. ABAC can take you to places you haven't even dreamed about.

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