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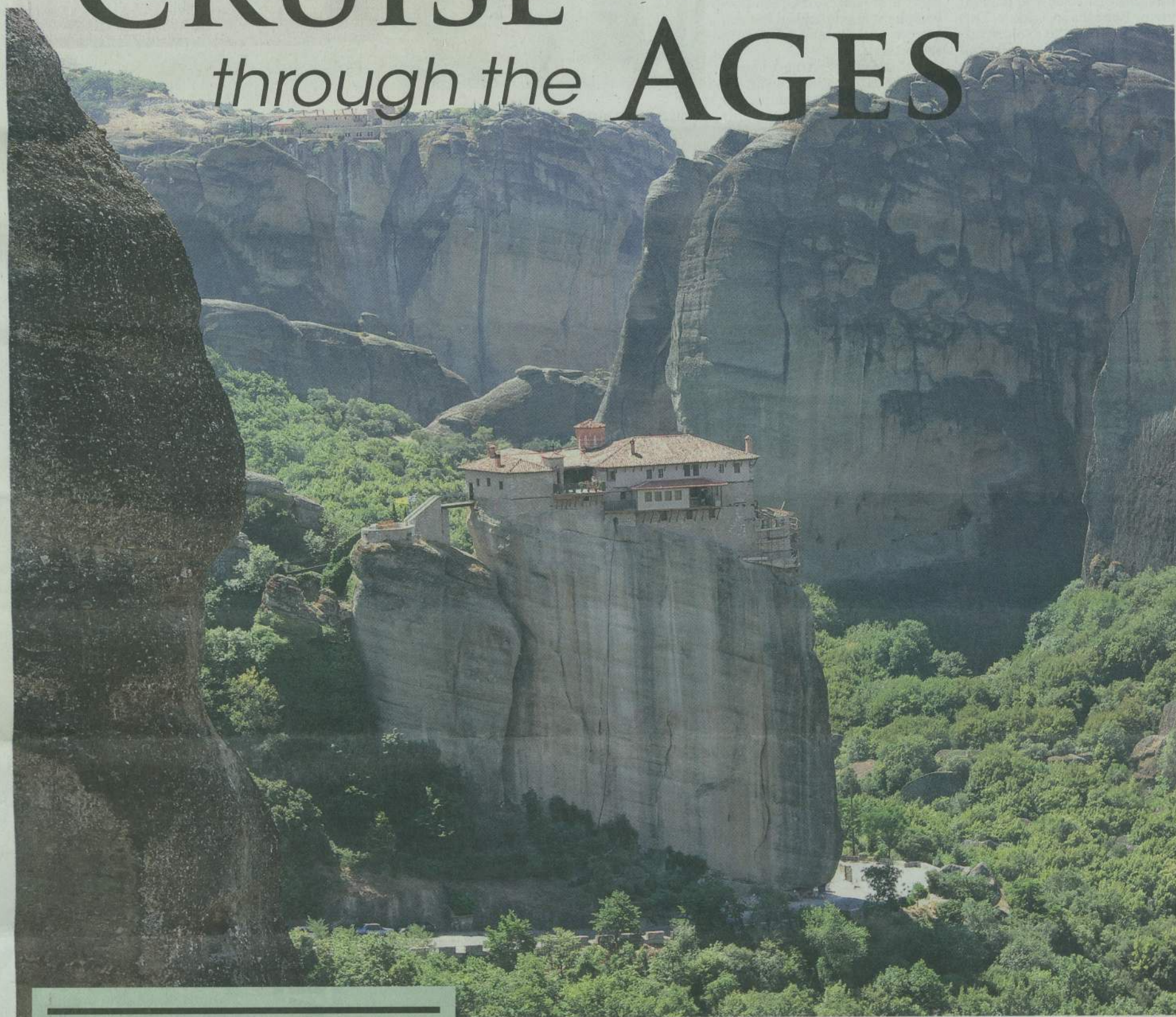
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# TAKE A CRUISE through the AGES



**JANICE AND GEORGE MUCALOV**  
SPECIAL TO THE SUN

LACONIA, Greece

If we were 17th-century Venetians, we'd have to cross a drawbridge or wade through the sea to enter Monemvasia. Today, a narrow causeway links the medieval fortress town, built atop a steep rock islet, with the Peloponnese mainland. Yet Monemvasia still evokes the past — a web of car-free cobblestone paths, wide enough just for a donkey pulling a wagon, winding past gold houses dating back to the Byzantine, Venetian and Ottoman empires. We were happy to be sitting with iced cappuccinos and amygdalota (traditional Greek almond cookies) on the terrace of a tiny cafe within Monemvasia's weathered walls. On a previous cruise we took on the Aegean Odyssey, swells prevented the ship's planned stop at Monemvasia. This time, the sea gods smiled on us, and the ship has anchored offshore.

The rock forests of Meteora host monasteries built hundreds of metres in the sky.

WILLIAM COUZENS



Mykonos is one of Greece's many cruise-friendly hot spots.

JANICE MUCALOV

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# Take a cruise through the ages

We admired the gold-leaf icons in the town's historic Greek Orthodox churches, sampled the famous sweet malmsey wine that originated here, and shopped for olive oil soaps and olive wood salad bowls in cute boutiques. We also went for a swim at a local pebble beach.

Monemvasia is one reason we chose this Aegean cruise itinerary from Istanbul to Athens. We'd already visited the better-known hot spots of Mykonos and Santorini and the ancient city of Ephesus in Turkey. This time, we wanted to explore off-the-beaten-path islands and archaeological sites.

Take Aphrodisias. We heard of it before our trip. Named after Aphrodite, the Greek goddess of love, this beautiful marble city

requires a little effort to get to — for us, a three-hour bus ride from Kusadasi on the Turkish coast. But it rivals Ephesus as one of the best preserved sites of the ancient world.

Only recently were the ruins unearthed, thanks to Turkish archaeologist Kenan Erim. Starting in 1961, he devoted almost 40 years of his life excavating the site (he's also buried here). Now hundreds of exquisite blue-grey marble sculptures and friezes of Greek philosophers, mythological heroes, boxers and Roman emperors can be seen.

With the sweet fragrance of wildflowers scenting the air, we walked through the monumental ceremonial gate, past the Temple of Aphrodite, to the ancient city's most significant structure — its huge 270-metre-long stadium, which could seat 30,000 spectators. Tufts of grass sprout



JANICE MUCALOV

Rethymno is a picturesque Cretan town with fantastic shopping.

up between marble and rock slabs for the stadium's 30 tiers of seating. But the bleachers have withstood the test of time since being erected in the 1st century AD. It's easy to imagine the ancient Greeks cheering as they watched foot races, wrestling, javelin throwing and other athletic contests. Later, though, the sport turned bloody — the Romans ogled gladiatorial and wild animal fights.

Quite apart from all the other beautifully preserved ruins — public baths, theatres, religious sanctuaries and chunks of graceful Corinthian columns scattered on the ground — what made Aphrodisias a real treat was the lack of crowds. Too bad the rock forests of Meteora aren't as people-free. These rock pinnacles rise 400 metres high into the sky. What's remarkable is that they're crowned by monasteries built by monks as far back as the 11th century. Until rock-hewn stairs were built in the 1920s, the only way to get to them was by being hoisted up in a bucket. One monastery is reached by a simple open-air gondola strung across a gaping ravine — we saw two monks glide across.

Some of the 24 existing monasteries and nunneries can be visited during limited hours. The problem is that everyone wants to see this amazing UNESCO-protected site. Even

## If you go...

- Operated by Voyages to Antiquity, the Aegean Odyssey offers historic and cultural cruises, carrying a maximum of 378 guests.
- Europe and Mediterranean sailings range from 15 to 18 nights. Rates start at \$4,945 per person for 15 nights. For most cruises, rates include return economy flights from Canada and the U.S., deluxe two-night hotel stays before and after your cruise, guided tours ashore (some optional excursions are extra), excellent guest lectures by professors and historians, house wines with dinner, and tips.
- In winter, 16- to 38-day cruise tours to Africa, India and Asia are offered.
- Visit [ca.voyagestoantiquity.com](http://ca.voyagestoantiquity.com) for more information.

though it was late September, we jostled with hordes of people, all squeezing together to climb narrow staircases to eye the famous 16th century frescoes (some quite gruesome images of beheaded saints and apocalyptic scenes of hell) decorating the monasteries' churches.

But there comes a time when one more ruin, one more church, one more ancient city blurs with the next, right? And sometimes you want to explore a place on your own — to have the freedom

## Pre- and post-cruise stays

- In Istanbul, our pre-cruise hotel was the Ritz-Carlton Istanbul. Its spa has a marble Turkish hammam — the steam, scrub and soap bubble massage is ideal for getting over jet lag. And right around the corner is Istiklal Street, the famous pedestrian-only shopping avenue. Visit [ritzcarlton.com/istanbul](http://ritzcarlton.com/istanbul) for details.
- In Athens, Voyages to Antiquity books guests into the historic King George or Grande Bretagne, probably the two most sumptuous hotels in the city. Both are walking distance to the Acropolis and steps away from the pretty and fun Plaka neighbourhood. For information, visit [kinggeorgeathens.com](http://kinggeorgeathens.com) or [grandebretagne.gr](http://grandebretagne.gr).

of unstructured discovery. So we skipped out on a couple of included cruise excursions to go it alone.

Take Rethymno, one of Crete's most picturesque towns. Seafood restaurants line the harbour, and the old Venetian-Ottoman quarter is chock full with graceful wood-balconied houses and shops galore. How could we pass up the chance to get lost on our own in its maze of car-free streets? Note: there's great shoe shopping to be had here.

And when it's hot outside, we couldn't resist hunting for a beach to cool off with a swim. Just east of Rethymno, a golden sand beach stretches for kilometres alongside the coastal highway. A short public bus ride later, and we were splashing out in the gin-clear Aegean Sea.

We visited the pretty pine-covered island of Skiathos — the Mamma Mia movie was filmed there — the sprawling ancient city of Philippi and the trenches and memorials at the heart-breaking First World War site of Gallipoli.

Then we'd return to our ship for a late lunch or dinner to tuck into the mouth-watering specialties created by the chef. We might take in a thought-provoking talk by popular BBC radio host Ernie Rea on current and historic affairs.

And at night, we'd fall asleep with history whispering in our ears, as our ship sailed to our next uncommon port of call.

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