## Overview

A ten day Viking Empires of the Mediterranean Ocean Cruise starting in Istanbul and ending in Venice, bookended by two and three day extensions, revealed hearts of world history and mythic places we have dreamed of visiting. A new ship, capable guides, food worthy of the local cuisines and of our palates, excellent service, and sharing our experiences with almost seven hundred like-minded travelers fulfilled a dream. (see website for a different presentation)

## Starting Point:

Two years ago, Deb and I concocted the Teator Trip Trilogy—three annual adventures. The solo Danube Viking River Cruise started the trilogy in August 2014, followed in May 2015 by the Teator-Adams collaboration in Tuscany and points northward. The April 2016 trip from March 31 to April 15 had ten of us meeting in Istanbul.

## Cast of Characters

The Rhine Cruise group of 2013 joined forces again.

--Deb and Don Teator, of NY

--Judy and Tim Adams, of VA, formerly of NY

--Pat and Jim Carr, of PA

--Lynda Pisano and Ross Burhouse, of NY.

And Elaine Ablett and Chuck Reilly, of NJ, completed the fearless group of ten

The Teators and Adamses had sights set on this cruise from the beginning. Anyone following our adventures knows of our kindred spirits. We talked up the trip, and, finally, friends, and friends of friends, joined us

Each of us came, not surprisingly, with perspectives similar enough to be compatible but divergent enough to add flavors to the experience. I hope my traveling friends recognize my account of the trip but are also able to complement the tale.

As for past Viking experiences none of us have utilized the ocean tours before. However, the Carrs won the ship prize for most Viking cruises – ten! The Adamses have sailed at least five and the Teators three. Lynda and Ross had the 2013 Rhine Christmas Market Cruise under their belt. And Chuck and Elaine were last to the continent in the “quit-job, go-with-backpack” adventure in the 1970s (London fit in there someplace a decade ago.). And in between are a host of other travels, especially Pat and Jim with their church journeys to eastern Europe. And there have been many adventures in the US, some of us extensively.

## The general itinerary:

And off we flew for Istanbul, to be followed by Troy and Ephesus and Athens with the Acropolis and Santorini and Kotor and Dubrovnik and Pula and finally Venice. In between, before, and after was much more, to be detailed below.

## Extending the trip

Knowing from past hard-earned experience that the starting and ending points of a cruise need more time, we scheduled a two day extension before boarding in Istanbul and then tacked on three days onto Venice.

## Viking cuts out Istanbul

Originally, the itinerary was to arrive in Istanbul on Day 1 and depart late on Day 2, and thus have one excursion in or around the city. However, because of recent terroristic attacks in Ankara and Istanbul, Viking concluded, as part of their official email, “After considerable deliberation, we have decided to modify our schedule so that you may continue to comfortably explore this part of the Mediterranean.”

That modification meant departing the evening of Day 1, thus excluding any contact with Istanbul, other than the dock. Instead, Day 2 would see us in Troy.

Although this news was probably disappointing to some on ship, we were satisfied that we had seen Istanbul and were getting a bonus of Troy.

## Detailed Itinerary

## Pre-Extension Day 1

Lynda, Ross, Deb and I left Catskill at noon to be driven by Tom Robbiani to JFK. What a smart move. Thanks, Tom, for a safe and scenic ride that caused me little stress compared to what I would have faced if I had driven.

The Delta flight that should have left at 5:45 was late by three hours, causing the six of us (Chuck & Elaine also) to ponder the consequences of not getting a flight out that night.

Fortunately, the flight was an hour faster than scheduled and, with a four hour schedule layover in Amsterdam, we had plenty of time. On to Istanbul, with thirty minutes of circling over some desolate land.

Touchdown at 4 pm, and Umit, our hired guide, was waiting to take us the nine mile drive to Eresin, our hotel in Old Town, Istanbul. Commentary along the way was the beginning our relationship with Umit.

We eight settled in, gave up our passports, and Umit took us on a 45 minute walking tour of the nearby Hippodrome and a walk past the two big mosques, talking about history, current politics, and Turkish culture and society (Jim and Pat passed on the extensions, having been here before.)

A suggestion for a restaurant took us to La Casa Nuestra, for what was the culinary experience of my trip. On a back street, carefully wending our way up three flights of tile steps, a gentle knock on the door, and we entered someone’s apartment, with a large table in one corner and more tables on the rooftop veranda.

We ordered two bottles of wine, awaited the owner Nurgay to take our order, but instead accepted his offer to bring some small plates. About seven plates of divinely crafted vegetarian appetizers (red pepper stuffed with cheese, stuffed artichokes with peas, lettuce with radishes, a long eggroll with prosciutto and cheese, two types of green beans, eggplant, ceviche, vegetable soup, and a couple more I lost track of), we were almost full, and pondering what to do about entrées.

The offer came to bring two dinner-plate-size bowls of spaghetti, one with porcini and one with Bolognese, which turned out to be just enough. The porcini nipped every flavor receptacle in the mouth, and the Bolognese was excellent comfort food.

Dessert beckoned and we accepted the offer of splitting two portions of tiramisu, just warm, weak on the coffee, fluffy on the cake, and some of the best I have ever enjoyed.

Meanwhile, we caught the life history of the owner who detailed his lifelong misery of work which had shifted into doing his passion, cooking Italian-Turk food for others to enjoy.

And a final bill of the equivalent of $60 per couple had us shaking our heads. I can count on one hand the number of culinary experiences that rivaled this one.

To be noted: The call to prayer! So starkly different from our country and yet a sound we came to mark parts of the day.

And this was only Day 1!

## Pre-Extension Day 2 in Istanbul

Day 2 made Day 1 look like a piker. Today was our chance to enjoy the skills of a consummate guide. Umit came early and spent all day with us, leaving us at our hotel in the early evening. And what a day it was.

We started walking to the Blue Mosque just after 9 a.m., with history facts and cultural tidbits, and there were hundreds. It is not possible to fully explain this site so the reader will have to avail themselves some other means. However, I recall the removal of shoes, the need to cleanse, head covering for the women, the symbols in the mosque and every mosque, the lowered chandelier, the red carpet, the blue tile, and more.

Across the plaza was the Aya Sofia, a former mosque, now a museum, and thus with different rules. It is an architectural masterpiece, rivaled by few others in the world. More history from Umit, more culture, especially about head coverings, the real Turkey, and the neighboring Arab world, which is not as compatible as some Americans think.

The Topkapi Palace was next on the list, and we spent the next almost two hours perusing some of the important buildings culminating with an expansive view from a point of the island across to the Golden Horn.

Lunch beckoned and Umit suggested the Pudding Shop, the iconic hippie joint in the 1960s where many travelers stopped on their way to Nepal.

After lunch, we descended into the Roman cisterns, gawking at the cavernous expanse that once was part of the Roman water supply. Such unexpected grandeur is seldom seen. The history of drinking water, the ebb and flow of history and of the use of this space, its recent excavation for tourist reasons, all of this in such an alien space, captivated us. The back-lit dozens of columns seemed like a setting for a Sting video, with its barely perceptible ripples, indeterminable depths of vision, and a wafting of soft background music. This was originally an extra excursion from Viking at what we thought was a hefty price but was included in Umit’s tour.

And then we just happened to wander in Punto of Istanbul, a classic quality carpet shop, and a story that almost deserves its own sub-section. We were given a lesson on carpet making, Deb and Judy tried their hand at tying double knots, we were shown the differences of quality and types, and given, of course, a possible sales pitch, even if reasonably non-aggressive. A snap of the finger produced two young men briskly walking to dig out a carpet and ceremoniously unfurl it on the floor or pose with it on the wall. A pot of tea shortly arrived, producing perhaps the fever that hit next. Short and to the point, each of the four couples bought at least one carpet; the Teator carpet is now an expensive wall hanging, too beautiful and crafted to be trod on.

The last major stop of the day was at the Grand Bazaar, with its miles of streets and thousands of shops. I do not have to go back but I was thrilled to see it. Still, it seemed there were multiple copies of about six types of stores—spice, Turkish delight, leather, lights, clothes. Ross was spotted with a bag in his hand with enough Turkish delight, dollar-wise, to keep him fed for a half-year. Each shop had an employee who would take a step into you, make eye contact, call loudly enough or more, waiting for a response. Umit had already told us to not make eye contact and to keep on walking. That was tough. And our Americanism must seep through our best attempts to tone it down. And we were not wearing sneaker, or baseball caps, or T-shirts or shorts or other obvious giveaways that even we can spot. This barrage of “invitation” would most likely be considered aggression in the US.

Umit returned us past Restaurant Row for a possible evening choice, helped Tim and I pick a nice bottle of Turkish wine, and returned us to the hotel. We would eventually give in to our tiredness and chose to dine at Eresin, our hotel.

## Last day in Istanbul – Cruise Day 1

Sunday. We slept much better, with cool air overnight. The hotel is not in AC season yet.

We enjoyed Eresin’s expansive breakfast once again, paid our bills, and Umit picked us up at 9:30. His driver took us to a tea shop with a view of the Golden Horn, and Umit treated us to a cup of tea, more history, and family stories.

One of the best was instigated by a white-suited boy of about eight, the traditional dress of a boy who will be soon circumcised--another Turkish culture tradition. Umit told a story or two about his son, and the traditions behind the celebration. A vivid story.

After this vista, it was on to the Spice Market, where Umit led us to Nuri, his recommended stop. After a lesson and some tastes, we made a few purchases. (We would guess that Umit gets a small commission for leading potential buyers into the few stores he recommends.)

A leisurely drive about 1 pm led us to the Viking Sea at dock.

Yeaaaaayy! We cheered as we approached and were greeted by the staff. We threw our bags in 3022, and off we went to explore. (More about Viking Sea later.) Jim and Pat would join us about 6:30 pm.

Meanwhile, we made reservations at their upscale Italian restaurant, Manfredi’s.

A few laps around the promenade on Deck 2, at a quarter-mile each lap, wore off some of the fullness.

The ship set sail near 11, we hooked into the ship Wi-Fi, caught our last scenes of Istanbul and were on our way. (We were thankful that we had already seen Old Town.)

## Cruise Day 2 – Troy

Sometimes, the destination goes through a port city and so it was with Troy. We docked at Canakkale, Turkey and were bused to Troy, a pleasant half-hour+ of country side and architecture new to our NY eyes. Along the way we passed a twenty foot high model of the Trojan horse, which would be a preview of the even bigger one at the park.

Our guide Adem led us through the various parts of the old city with its nine distinct major layers of civilization. Heinrich Schliemann’s excavations in the 1870s and 1880s plays a dominant role in the narrative of Troy’s excavation, and we certainly heard a lot as we toured the various layers, one site of which is under a tent. Fascinating stuff.

There is not much else to do here so the plan was to drop us off at Canakkale for an hour or so, to browse, shop, eat, or none of the above. We hoped we would get back to the ship by 2 p.m. and catch a late lunch, which we did.

## Cruise Day 3 – Ephesus

Sailing in to Kasudisa was transcendent—translucent early dawn ether rolling into sunrise, casting a low angle glow on the ancient castle guarding the harbor, and in we docked.

Ephesus is stupefying, even more so after the 100 yard slog past the aggressive shop hawkers at the entrance. We strolled gradually up the tree-lined path, with glimpses of ruins through the bare trees. One sidesteps to the left, and the 25000 seat theater bares itself, occupying half of a mountain bowl. Imagining it filled boggled the mind. Again, the history of the city, some of it Biblical, and the excavations has filled shelves. I cannot possibly do it justice. I can only tease you with the thought of Roman characters and Saint Paul treading these same stones, and that this city was once a port, now eight miles distant from the nearest water.

## Cruise Day 4 – Athens

Piraeus is the dock site for Athens, with a forty minute drive through the city, around its famous harbors, and into Athens although one cannot tell the difference between the two. Deb and I, along with Tim and Judy, chose the Acropolis tour, and so we got close up to one of the most significant settings in Western Civilization history. It must have been a daunting place in its day, and again I will forebear any full description.

Of interest to me is the number of buildings, in addition to the Parthenon, there are. It is an uphill slog but not overly so. The well-worn, smooth stone pavement is just difficult enough to watch one’s footing. I cannot imagine when it is wet. Our guide talked of general ages of history, Greek culture, and modern issues.

A Viking shuttle bus was running every half hour, so we shopped a little at the Plaka district, bought some wine, and Deb and I returned while Tim and Judy stayed longer.

## Cruise Day 5 – Santorini

Ah, Santorini. I had anticipated what it would look like, with its iconic white houses and blue mosque roofs. My anticipation was shattered by reality.

The first shatter was our approach by ship. I saw snow on the 1200 foot ridge of the collapsed volcano which blew its way into its current shape thousands of years ago. Except it could not possibly be snow. Gradually, the realization sunk in we were looking at the smattering of towns on the crests, with the white concentrations of houses being the snow.

Most of us took the excursion that viewed the excavation of Akrotiri, and I learned of everyone’s enthusiasm when I returned from mine. I had ventured on the Hidden Wine Trail excursion and was at least as satisfied as my cruise-mates.

The excavations has unearthed a civilization that appears to have suffered the same fate as Pompeii, except without the human remains, making this a large mystery even today. Economic shortages in Greece have delayed any further excavation in the last couple years, with the site just begging for more attention.

While that was happening, guide Nikos was driving a Mercedes van with nine people to three different wineries, with excursion through old towns, along the coast, and along the island of Thera (Fira). Another wonderful day.

## Cruise Day 6 – sail day

The distance from Santorinni and Kotor demanded a sail day. By this time, to the last person, we all needed a break, so we luxuriated in keeping busy doing nothing. Chuck and Elaine explored the ship, taking gobs of photos. Almost all of us spent time by the pool. A little reading, a lot of talking, catching our breath. A day needed.

## Cruise Day 7 – Kotor

Kotor was going to be the star of the ship arrivals. Unfortunately, the skies had lowered and it was raining lightly to at times moderately, obliterating the stupendous views that a sunny morning would have cast on its steep mountainous entry, narrow gorge, long arms of bays, and scenic villages on bay’s edges.

Even better was the ability of our smaller cruise ship to dock practically on the town’s entry sidewalk, thus erasing the need for tendering which the absence of a harbor in Santorini had required.

The red sea of Viking umbrellas wound its way through the ancient main streets of old town Kotor which did not take all that long for this small town. The major stops included the Cathedral of Saint Tryphon and the Maritime Museum.

Deb and I, Lynda and Ross had scheduled an afternoon excursion, leaving only 45 minutes for lunch, a feat we successfully reconnoitered.

Our bus of twenty-some ventured along the shore line (the mountains rise too precipitously to allow any but along shore line) to the town of Perast with its abundance of Baroque buildings of a time gone by. More later about excursions.

## Cruise Day 8 – Dubrovnik

Deb and I arose early to watch the early morning docking and an early departure for our cable car excursion. We had hoped to see the famous view of the red rooftops, evidence of the 1990s’ war. What a view.

We then descended, took the walking tour of Old Town that most of the rest were doing as a included tour, walked the town a little, and headed back to the ship a little earlier than usual for lunch and another afternoon excursion.

Deb and I, Tim and Judy took the 45 minute bus to the Karaman Winery, driving through Croatian countryside. More about this excursion later.

## Cruise Day 9 – Pula

Our next to last full day found us in the ship docks out in the bay, just far enough out that Viking used its tender boats for the twenty minute sail into town. Smack dab front and center as we unloaded is the one of the largest intact Roman arenas in the world.

Most of us took the walking tour of Pula. However, I chose the tour of Porec, with a native as our guide.

## Cruise Day 10 – Venice

And as happens to cruises like this, the ship pulled in very early in the dark morning hours, and we needed to be off the boat by about 9, leaving nothing to be seen of Venice unless you extended on your own. Which we did. So, leading into…

## Post-Extension Extension Day 1 in Venice

We strolled through passport check and customs, walked our way to the public space, and as was arranged, was met by our transfer contact who walked us to the water taxi area by the bus station. We loaded up, bobbed a few times, and headed into the Grand Canal, eventually motoring past St Mark’s Square, and into the Zaccharia station, unloaded, and walked and lugged our bags for three hundred yards and two bridges to Bisanzio, our stay for three nights.

We stored our bags and set out for the Square and checked into buying tickets, eventually getting a two day vaporetti pass and a combo ticket for the Doge’s Palace.

We realized somewhere along the way that the tour we had purchased was not today but tomorrow. Rats. And somewhere along the way, wiser heads agreed that waiting for eight people to make up their minds was a waste of good and little precious time so we broke into fours, an arrangement that last almost of the rest of the time, with the exception of dinner-time, and the final concert.

So we walked until our legs fell off, finally espying the Rialto, purchasing a bottle of wine at one of the more modern supermarkets in town, and heading back. Deb needed to rest her feet and I headed back with her to the hotel, a hot bath awaiting her, while Tim and Judy found the Fenice (Opera House), the topic of City of Fallen Angels, which three of us had read.

The eight of us later joined up in our room, commenting on quality of rooms, eating and drinking lightly, before deciding dinner should be.

## Post-extension Day #2 in Venice

The four of us (Tim, Judy, Deb and I) readied for our trip to the islands north of Venice. A light drippy rain greeted us as the vaporetto circled the island eastward, northward, then westward, before finishing the 45 minute trip to Murano.

We took our concierge’s advice, stopped at Schiavon, a glass-making business, asked for Tiberio, talked to Tiberio’s fill-in for the day, and were led to the back room where two brothers, long time experienced glass workers, were demonstrating their magic. We watched for nearly a half-hour before it was suggested that we make room for others trying to watch.

I think it was Tim who suggested the Florida house needed a light in the kitchen, perhaps three, and before the hour had expired, three Murano globes were ordered.

Upon finding out our next destination was Burano, the owner directed his driver to speed-transport us to Burano, saving us 45 minutes from a slower vaporetto. We were greeted by Jessica, sent by the glass shop owner, to give a short tour and introduce us to La Perla, one of the lace making shops on the town of multi-colored houses where it must be a cultural faux pas to have consecutives houses be the same color.

After another purchase by the Adams, we boarded the vaporetto to Torcello to view the remains of the old settlement where the early Venetians came to avoid the Goths, Huns, and other barbarians.

We came, we saw, we were getting tired and returned to Fondamente Nove (F.te Nove, for short), and trudged across the island, contemplating a reasonable way to our hotel, a feat accomplished without too much wasted mileage.

Meanwhile, the other foursome (Chuck, Elaine, Ross, & Lynda) spent the midday exploring the other side of the Grand Canal, crossing at the Accademia Bridge, through the Jewish Ghetto, and gathering photos of that slice of Venice.

We joined forces at Trovatore, a nice mid-scale restaurant that fed locals and tourists on a back street within five minutes of us.

Happy Birthday was sung to me – my 64th, celebrated in Venice.

And then off to a Vivaldi concert at Chiesa della Pieta, aka as Chiesa di Antonio Vivaldi, a Venetian church where Vivaldi performed. About fifty attendees enjoyed enthusiastic maestro violinist Glauco Bertagnin whose performance was our last image of our last full day of our trip.

Back home to pack, and bed.

## Post-extension Day #3 in Venice, and home

We met our transfer in Zaccharia station just a couple blocks from our hotel, packed our bags on the front of the boat. The water taxi made a circle and headed for shore, fortunately finding a canal that bisected the island we crept through the width of the island, with a zig here and zag there, before hitting the open water and the main waterway to the airport dock.

A nearly ten minute walk got us to the check-in counter where the attendant asked more questions that ever seen before at check-in, with another ten minute walk to our gate.

Eight of us climbed on board, endured the eight+ hour trip to JFK, went our separate ways, having lived through a thoroughly rewarding international trip.

Tom Robbiani eventually found Lynda, Ross, Deb, and me, whisked us away up the Taconic State Parkway to Catskill, where Ross dropped the Teators off in Freehold. Our 2016 adventure had come to a close, with Jackson and Monet demanding answers where we had been.

## Other Big Stuff Pieces

## Comparisons with River Cruises and Self-Prepared

What a different animal the ocean cruise was from the river cruise. More space, bigger staterooms, more food choices, another world of water views, options of cities not available on river cruises, more on-board entertainment.

This is not to diminish the value and enjoyment of river cruises—just a different creature, able to do different things. I foresee a river cruise or two before my traveling days are done.

And, of course, the self-prepared trips (France, Italy with the Tim and Judy) came about through lots of research, tackling all the transfer details, being responsible for every choice. It certainly was worthwhile but a whole different animal also.

## Viking Sea

The first cruise of the Viking Sea, our cruise, was wonderful.

We knew we would have good service and good food but we still wondered how it would be different from the river cruises.

A couple who tended to be seasick barely felt a flutter the entire way, other than the two times we needed to tender from ship to shore (and aside from the water taxis in Venice). In fact, the river cruise pros felt this ocean cruise was even smoother.

Three times as many people, spread out on six decks and in seven restaurants/dining areas, meant we would never recognize 90% of the Viking sailors we might have met off the boat, even if we had known they were Viking people.

Having seven eating areas provided more choices, so much so that I wonder what returning to the river cruise would feel like. Choices of up-scale, or big gathering spot, or casual, or Norwegian on Explorer deck all presented choices we enjoyed depending on our mood.

Our rooms contained all the same necessities but in a space that was 60% bigger than our river cruise rooms, feeling comfortable with the extra piece of furniture. And the side balcony was a delight, something river cruisers had not experienced (because we did not pay for the upper scale room that had a balcony).

Entertainment consisted of more music, and more of a night club for those want to stay and be entertained.

All in all, the ocean cruise might have spoiled us more than we knew. The future may tell.

For more info, the Viking web site will have to suffice.

## Travel Mates

Although the purpose of a trip is to see places and sites, an inescapable wild card was our anticipation of sharing it with friends with like minds. Each of us brought something to the trip, shared our individual perspectives, and complemented our individual adventures. We shared and laughed and commiserated, adding another chapter to friendships of a few years or several decades.

This bubble of friendship, as comforting as it is, also acts as a barrier to making time to visit other people. However, most of us would encounter and engage other people if the situation arose. For Deb and me, it was usually breakfast, one day encountering Betty and Allen from Wisconsin, Harley worker and hair-dresser, motorcycle riders once upon a time, who we casually met one more time. Another time, the quite congenial Rear Admiral and wife Donna sat with us and talked maritime history and travel; word got around that we had a private table with friends and none of our group would interrupt us.

Mostly, however, such contact was short-lived, interesting, but not to be continued.

## Food

Food was plentiful and excellent, with different experiences depending where we were staying. And we mostly ate smart, with minor over-eating; I had learned my lesson after the Rhine cruise.

For our ten days on Viking Sea, seven areas of different cuisines awaited our choices. We made reservations twice in the upscale Italian restaurant, Manfredi’s, a comfortable fit for us.

For three nights we made reservations for Chef’s Table—five course meals with wine pairing for four of the courses, with cuisines changing every three nights. So we experienced Norwegian, Xiang, and Venetian. Excellent food, smaller portions that felt good at meal’s end.

One night for Deb and me was at The Restaurant, a sit-down service, much like the river cruises. It turned out to be our only disappointing dinner, mostly with very slow service and food we deemed quite ordinary, at best.

Almost all our breakfasts, most of our lunches, and a few dinners happened in the World Café, with its two-sided offering of three segments each of ten to twenty feet of salads, fruit, cereals, yogurt, and other light fare; of several entrées, several more sides, several more small specialties; and finally the dessert section with its cakes, creams, pies, and, of course, gelato.

Our five mornings off the ship, and in the hotels, offered a wonderful breakfast spread, with the Eresin a bit fuller and a little more exotic. Bisanzio was less full but adequate for any day of the year at home, and then some.

Lunches off ship were local affairs, as were dinners.

Past write-ups may have detailed more menus. Suffice it to say there is too much good food to start that process.

## Divergence

Past trips had seen a greater cohesiveness within the group, easily done with four, or even with eight of us on the Rhine River Cruise, with its limited options. However, ten of us on an ocean cruise made for a big group (eight, on the extensions), and more options made that cohesion untenable.

It was inevitable that we would find ourselves on different pathways during the day, only to come back at dinner to compare notes. Divergent paths converging at day’s end made for interesting days.

Still, this account reflects more of *my* trip and less of *our* trip. And this note bears repeating.

Istanbul was the one place we stayed together, with Umit occupying most of our awake time. Hotel food kept us together for breakfast and once for dinner, and Umit’s pace needed our commitment as a group. And we welcomed this all-consuming attention, being somewhat nervous about the air of terrorism.

Venice, with a guide for only two hours, found us convinced that eight people making decisions was too unwieldy and we split into our two tribes of natural formation, coming back for dinner to trade stories.

And the ship, even though it was home base for the ten of us, allowed us to part ways every day, with only the evening meal being the regular constant, although that found us separate a couple of nights. There were not many excursions that found more than six of us together.

And it should be noted, while I look over our Top Ten lists, that the Carrs did not share the extensions with us and thus had an overall view of this trip different from the eight, even though they had previously visited Istanbul and Venice together.

And I suspect that most of us would agree that this variety of experience made for a more interesting trip.

Still, I repeat, I write an account that, at times, is more my narrative than that of the group that I have tried to garner in the past.

## Excursions

Excursions were our reason for traveling this cruise, and the size of the ship allowed for several options instead of the couple the river cruises allowed.

Again, Viking offered one complimentary tour, worthwhile but paling in comparison with some of the others. And most of the time, the optional excursions coincided with the complimentary one. Thus, Deb and I spent almost $700 for the extra excursions.

The complimentary ones we accepted were the walking tour of Troy (almost the only one available, given the last minute schedule), Deb took the Akrotiri tour, both of us took the Kotor walking tour, Deb took the Pula walking tour (while forgoing the one she paid for).

Our extras included: Ephesus tour (both), the Acropolis tour (both), secret wine tour in Santorini (me), baroque palaces in Kotor (both); cable car in Dubrovnik (both), family winery tour outside Dubrovnik (both), and the Porec and wine tasting (me).

And there were some that neither Deb nor I participated in but the enthusiasm of those who attended such a one was unmistakable. Pat and Judy attended a concert at the Church of Stones, and Pat and Jim attended one (Athens?) that seemed quite enjoyable.

And if time had allowed, there would have been a few more to add to the list—all reminders of future possible trips, although we suspected we had our one and only glimpse in our lifetime of some of these places.

And there were the activities on board that filled out time. The Rear Admiral’s series on Mediterranean maritime history and warfare was fascinating for a few of us. The art history of Mediterranean series was certainly worthwhile. The daily Port Talk around 6:15 was a good glimpse into the day ahead, although, if missed, was taped and viewable on our TVs. And a scattering of other programs caught our attention.

The trick seemed to be to fit everything in as best as possible without totally exhausting ourselves.

And omitted here, but mentioned previously, were our activities in Istanbul and Venice.

## Guides

We have come to learn that competent guides can add so much to a trip. And it can be equally frustrating to have one that somehow slipped through the evaluation cracks, having us suffer through a so-so, or lower quality, excursion. Fortunately, excellent guides is the rule.

Again, with our divergent schedules, it is impossible to list every excellent guide. Suffice it that we each have a memory of an excellent guide. However, I would be remiss, just for memory’s sake some years hence, that I note the guides I encountered: Adem in Troy, Sarah in Ephesus, Eva in Athens, Nicos in Santorini, Natasha in Kotor, Viette in Kotor, Ana in Dubrovnik, Christiana on the Dubrovnik wine tour, Ratko in Porec and the wine tour, an excellent guide in Venice (name not collected), and Jessica on the Burano dock. Nicos was my favorite of all, although many were highly competent. Which leads to…

## Umit

My email to Umit, a week after trip, went as follows:

-- Hello, Umit, from Upstate New York,

We have returned home, having left you for the ten day Viking cruise finishing in Venice. What a wonderful trip, with so many memories and so many chances to see the “real” world and the people who are so much like each other.

A special place in our heart belongs to you. Your skills, humanity, knowledge, and passion for Turkey impressed all of us, reminding us to recommend your services if we know of friends venturing to Istanbul.

A few of us held some reservation about visiting Istanbul (as did Viking!). You were the difference between feeling secure in a different world, and that of wondering at each turn any little signal any of us might have imagined.

I will remember your insights to your culture and I left Istanbul reassured that everyday people like you care about their country and world around, sharing your experience in a way that humanized not only your countrymen but also us.

What a trip!

Forever a connection of mine to the world,

Umit’s reassuring presence, the view from the tea stop, the circumcision story, his views of Turkish and Arab people, his perspective of Turkey, his leading us to his business “friends,” his affability, patience, helpfulness left an indelible impression that will be a memory that will live with our 2016 group for as long as campfires can be built.

## Living Quarters

Three places fill this section.

Viking Sea was quite comfortable, with our bedrooms spacious enough for our likes, with outdoor balconies available if we wished to combine adjoining balconies. Complementing this was the availability of the sitting areas in several area, especially the pool area and on the Explorer Lounge.

Eresin in Old Town Istanbul was lodging for our first two nights. Pleasant, a tad warm the first night, substantial breakfast, showcase old Roman ruins, pleasant staff. A good pick from Jody.

Bisanzio in Venice was a few hundred yards east of St Mark’s Square and nicely located for us. There was some kerfluffle about the smell of one room, the noise affecting rooms but mostly our four rooms seem convenient enough and a nice escape from the hustle and bustle of the water front near St. Mark’s. Another substantial breakfast and a quite helpful concierge aided Tim and me.

Left to our own devices, we probably would not have picked places like this but the power of suggestion from Jody led us here.

## Prep

Having started a couple years ago, and taking cues from Tim, we allowed Jody Harris to make suggestions and we reacted.

Hotels were the first order of business, we signed up for two, and were pleased after having stayed at them.

Then came the suggestion from Jody of a guide in Istanbul who would make the transfer from airport-hotel, and then hotel-Viking Sea. The price per person included transfers, guide, and the requisite admissions to at least three places. We thought it both a good idea and an economical one. We cannot begin to tell how thankful we are for that choice.

And for Venice, we signed up for a two hour tour of our part of the city, an informative trip. And the transfers from Viking Sea to hotel, and then hotel to airport went smoothly the way it is supposed to go but we did not have to doubt ourselves up to the last minute, instead trusting that Jody knew what she was doing. She did.

The flights proved to be convenient, with a stop in Amsterdam on the way over from JFK which we almost missed when the flight from JFK was late three hours. And the flight back on Delta was a non-stop, a pleasant happenstance we want all the time. One change in the flight over a few months before our departure had us avoiding Paris.

The issue of getting to and back from JFK was solved with Lynda and Ross’s suggestion we split the cost of friend Tom’s service. By the time we figured leaving a car some place for sixteen days, we thought we did well in spending about the same without the stress of driving, something that proved especially worthwhile on the way home, what with a traffic jam and our heavy eyelids.

We saved our dollars, bought a few trinkets for the trip, took home a few.

We paid for planning, and we were grateful for all the smooth transitions, the leaving and returning safely, and being deeply satisfied with all the details.

## Weather

We had anticipated daytime highs of 60s, lows of 50-ish, and the usual expected wet couple days or three, if we were lucky. We were luckier than lucky, with one wet morning in Kotor and another wet morning in Venice when it did not matter. Otherwise, dry weather, and mostly sunny greeted us, with temperatures half the time nearing 70. We were charmed.

## Service

Service at the hotels was excellent, with a character or two perhaps acting a bit more aloof than our liking but certainly within the range of being human. Overwhelmingly, we had staff falling over themselves to help us.

And Viking Sea’s staff is trained so well that every person greets you with a smile and a pleasantry. And we loved Marvin, who memorized our ten names from the first meeting. Good luck, Marvin, wherever life takes you.

## Wine

Wine, of course, was one of my focuses, within reason, I hope. Viking’s wines were meant to complement meals and to reflect regional areas. Still, I found myself, once again, wishing for wines that truly reflected the countries we visited. And I cannot fault Viking, given the wide spectrum they see, and I would have to guess I am not anywhere near the middle of that spectrum. Still, I was able to satisfy my wants in two ways.

The first were the three excursions that focused on wine. My favorite was the Santorini excursion to three wineries with special memories for Gevalas in Megalochiori, an old town not too spoiled by modern trends, with the winery nestled under a shady arbor, found after four turns up pathways I would have been intimidated into not taking. The Garaman Winery outside Dubrovnik highlighted the specialness of small family business. Watching a shy high school senior translate for her father, and gaining more confidence as she spoke, was one of our few “get to know the people” opportunities. Dad’s pride in his Prosek, an internationally known dessert wine, was a delight. The third, Sigalas, just below Oia, was a winery whose wines I have tasted in the US. The bus ride there, the wine descriptions, the topography—all, for me, is an essential way of getting to know part of a community. And I was the only one to experience. Yes, divergence. (Of course, I heard how wonderful Akrotiri was, and I am sure I would have enjoyed that as much, if differently.)

The second avenue was for Tim or Ross or I to buy a bottle locally and bring it to the table. Viking generously allows no corkage fee, and thus we tasted a few Turkish wines (my first), a few Montenegroan wines (my first), a few more Croatian wines, and a good array of Greek wines, with a specialization of Santorini wines. The wine list I keep grew a few dozen, almost all of them entries I cannot find at home.

## Money

Our once meaningful worries about having current cash disappeared this time. The debit card worked fine. However, the use of four currencies played out at various times, especially in Turkey (TL-Turkish Lira) and Croatia (kn-Kuna). Otherwise it was euro and dollar although Istanbul was interesting in accepting these last two in addition to the TL.

Jet lag: Once again, we took our usual precautions, waded into the first day full steam ahead and felt nary a twinge of jet lag. However, upon arriving home, once again, we dealt with eyes that ached with tiredness by mid-evening, followed by the urge to rise early. This time, though, I was better off (three days) than Deb (who took five days).

Docking sites: Ocean cruise dock sites are a far sight bigger than our river cruises. And scenic value was of interest, especially when approaching. Kusadasi was especially scenic with the fortress-turned-upscale-hotel guarding the entrance, as was Santorini with its alien veil of caldera and white-house-peaked volcanic ridge tops. Kotor was rated tops but rainy weather kept the spectacular to what-might-have-been.

We missed a couple entrances, arriving before morning light.

Ship tenders to shore was a first for us, having never done it on the river cruises. The Santorini ride on the private tender was a bit choppy up against the Sea, and a bit smelly with the exhaust of old motors. The other time, using Viking’s boats at Pula, went more smoothly. Istanbul, Canakkale (Troy), Dubrovnik, and Venice were not particularly interesting.

## Pacing

On paper, our pace should have not been that tiring but we felt pooped most days. Deb mildly complained the two days we took two excursions. And having excursions that ran over the lunch hour by a couple hours discombobulated our energy levels unless we had planned accordingly.

Diversity: Yep, Viking cruises seem to hit a certain demographic that certainly is not typical of the world. A lot of senior white American people populated this cruise, with a mix of Brits, and a sprinkling of other. Very young meant thirty-something, and very few Asians sailed with us.

Of course, the exception to diversity is the predominance in the wait staff of eastern European and Southeast Asian countries, part of Viking’s hiring practices.

Cost: We typically keep a good accounting of the cost of our trips. However, although we have a rough idea for this trip, we generally yielded on this one and went with the flow. We had paid a year, or more, ahead of time. The original flight changed once. We added excursions at some point. We paid for guides and tours at other points. It cost more than any other trip we have taken before but, having paid most of it already, it hurt little. And the rewards were so magnificent that we barely noticed the bills. Maybe the others feel differently. Or next month’s credit card will remind us.

Security: Security on Viking was high, consistent, and persistent. I am not sure what would have happened had I lost my boarding pass or ID card. Still, no one complained.

And we have mentioned Istanbul already.

Our stays in Istanbul and Venice felt like we were tourists in safe places. And in the day trips, we felt safe, even if it might have been an optimistic safe.

At the same time, we were acutely aware of threats in the world, perhaps built up by American media, maybe not. Still, we felt no real threat, and even the pickpockets managed to disguise themselves so well I did not notice. Even Ross, again, left for home with nothing stolen.

Airport security levels varied but there was a definite sense of care taken, even if the level of civility can vary a bit.

Sleep/noise/ocean: VOC were roomy and comfortable, as were our hotel rooms. Worries of seasickness or sea choppiness were so minimized that the river cruises produced more motion.

Walking on deck could be chancy in the high wind conditions, especially while on the high seas but the Deck 2 quarter-mile promenade was a nice option.

## Keeping in touch:

Although the purpose of the trip is to get away, it is still nice to stay in touch with back home. Still, we lost track of what was happening at home, and the respite from Republican politics, and American obsession with covering this awfulness to the blindness to other worthwhile topics, was almost a relief.

Deb and I still had no phone service, but email sufficed.

And I kicked out five emails to about 25 people back home with a short description of a couple photos to tweak some interest, or hoped I was doing that.

## Cats back home:

Deb always frets about leaving the cats alone, and two+ weeks is quite an absence. Fortunately, neighbor Linda checked in each day, and our minds are much more at ease, knowing that.

## Evocative sounds

--call to prayer in Istanbul: obnoxious in its loudness, at first; mellifluous in the repeats in the distance; almost comforting from Day 2

--the distant whoosh of an approaching trolley in Istanbul

--open window at night in Istanbul – truck and car traffic on cobblestone; pigeons; dogs

--breaking waves from open balcony door at night on Viking Sea: our nighttime white noise

--the serenading from the gondola in Venice

--the noise and feel of waves breaking in the open water while traveling by vaporetto

--the striking of bells in Venice

--the hum of luggage wheels on the long walks at all the airports

## Photo albums

The trip is over, a few days to rest, and Deb starts the photo albums. A couple thousand pictures, a stack of brochures and receipts, and the three volume Cruise 2016 is the product.

## Last details

* program director was the best of the three we have seen on Viking
* the breakfast spreads at the hotels were generous, to say the least
* scarves for the women at the mosque, no shoes for all
* the Trump discussion with our Eresin manager
* Aga Sophia vs Blue Mosque comparison
* the trolley almost nicking Ross in Istanbul
* aggressive Turkish shop employees
* the colors of the Nuri spice shop
* the Sea’s snow grotto, and Ross throwing snow on me
* octopus carpaccio
* lazy day at pool on sail day
* more muesli for breakfast than ever before
* Acropolis vs Parthenon
* Greek salad lunch at the Plaka
* tables of men and women at Manfredi’s one night
* the Rat Pack, and Deb singing along
* the big screen at the Beatles’ show
* cable car ride in Santorini and the ground it covered
* Santorini caves in pumice
* Kotor entrance and the large crowd waking early to see it
* Mexican train, on the sail day
* Viking recognition for repeat customers – champagne by pool
* Marvin, of course
* Kotor’s Viette and her view of Montenegro politics
* signing up for another cruise
* different colors of Istrian soils
* thick fog in Venice
* water taxi from dock to hotel
* tedious job of buying tickets at Venice TI
* Trattoria alla Fonte – nice local place recommended
* Judy buys masks for girls, Deb got her cat
* 5€ for each of the four bottles of water along St Mark’s
* the approach to the Venice airport by water

## A closing?

Two years of anticipation have passed, having shared it with a bigger group than Deb and I have ever shared with, sailed more miles than ever sailed before, and every day a chapter of a destination that begged to be seen in our long memories, a longing that came to fruition. We passed through quickly, as a cruise demands, but it also inspired the urge to revisit more fully if time and health and fortune allow.

The writing of these details, and the memories this writing has implanted, reminds us not only of life’s shared ride with so many others, but also how a journey gathers its own perspective, depending on many factors, especially experience and motivation and perspective. May we be so fortunate to explore more, understand more, savor more of these journeys, distant or close-by.

Adios, mis amigos. (Excuse my Turkish!)