The Ancient Stones of Athens
May 29 – June 6, 2021

The new Acropolis Museum (2009) is a dazzling marriage of contemporary museum architecture with ancient history. Set below the lofty cliffs of the Acropolis in the center of Athens, the award-winning museum eases one into the past through its clever entrance bridge, which affords one an overview of an archaeological site from later Roman and Byzantine Athens. Once inside, visitors have ample opportunity to study beautifully illuminated examples of sculptures and artifacts from the Classical and earlier periods of Greek history, many of these items recovered from the Acropolis site nearby. The original Caryatids of the Erechtheum stand unburdened of the weight of the Erechtheum’s portico, their drapery revealing the akimbo posture of the maidens’ form and the sculptural mastery of the original craftsmen; the 6th-century BC Acropolis Kore, liberated from the dust of centuries, smiles back at the observer, while the stunning sculpture of the Goddess Nike (1st-century AD) towers over the crowd in the main hall. Some have argued that the new museum, with its stunning beauty and design, effectively rebuts the weak explanation that the Parthenon Marbles, crafted for the Parthenon as a continuous frieze and later purchased by the Earl of Elgin in the early 19th century, should remain in Great Britain because the Athenians had no proper place to display them. The Greek government continues to urge that the marbles be returned from the musty interiors of the British Museum. Phidias’ horsemen ache to turn homeward. (Rob Fure)

Grand Canyon Rafting Adventure
June 4 – 13, 2021

You do feel rather small in such places. On the other hand, you feel connected to the vastness of time. A Grand Canyon raft trip is a profound withdrawal from the routines of the ordinary world. The relaxation during the day is palpable, even with the intermittent thrills of whitewater rafting. But the withdrawal is also toward something unimaginably larger than yourself. A shift of perspective from the little ticks on your desk calendar back home brings you first into the immense realm of human history and then into the mind-bending history of the earth. Thus liberated from usual preoccupations and spun into the maelstrom of geologic time, you begin to see faces in the rock, faces gazing elsewhere on something you’re drawn to but cannot see. Granted, it can be a little spooky at night. Single travelers are, perhaps, especially susceptible. A disquieting loneliness can come over you there in the dark. You crawl into your sleeping place after a festive dinner and try to shut your mind down. Easier said than done. On such nights, the sky offers a visual intensity that rivals the staggering immensity of the Canyon itself during daylight hours. The sky is so clear that you can see the bands of the Milky Way, clouds of stars woven through our galaxy. Gazing up from an uncertain bed on the sand, you seem almost loose enough in the earth’s gravity to tumble suddenly up into the zenith, like a meteor outward bound. The impulse, on these occasions, is to clutch the ground beneath your bedroll with your fingertips, to grab on, lest you fall numb and helpless into the infinite void. (Rob Fure)
Great Journey through Europe
June 15 – 25, 2021

Part of what makes the “Great Journey through Europe” great is that it begins below sea level in Holland and then, from Amsterdam, follows the Rhine upriver through Germany and the borderlands of France all the way to Basel, Switzerland. From Basel we make our way overland to the Alps. Zermatt is a lovely car-free town situated at the foot of the Matterhorn, one of the most spectacular peaks in Europe. My fondest memory of this portion of our trip was being awakened by the sound of cowbells and then opening the window of our room in the chalet to the majestic Matterhorn in full view. What made the view quite special is that Matterhorn’s almost-perfect pyramid peak is often covered with clouds. I knew at the time that this was a good omen for the day ahead. After a hearty Swiss breakfast and full of anticipation, we boarded the Gornergrat Rail, the highest altitude open-air railway in Europe to ascend the steep mountain. Exclamations of wonder can’t fully describe the reactions as we stood on the platform at the summit, taking in the most breathtaking panorama many of us had ever seen. For me it was a spiritual experience that I will never forget. (Susie Thompson)

World Affairs Cruise in the Baltic
July 15 – 25, 2021

Arriving in St. Petersburg, Russia, by ship, one is struck by the intense commercial activity of the port. As Peter the Great had intended, the city continues to serve as Russia’s great window onto the West and as the nation’s commercial lifeline for trade with its Baltic neighbors and beyond. It is also the main corridor for Russian tourism. Travelers may stand at the rail for hours as the ship makes its way along the Neva past shorelines and islands busy with loading cranes and dockyards before at last catching a glimpse of the golden domes of the city’s imperial past. Once ashore and checked through St. Petersburg’s sleek customs terminals, the traveler climbs into deluxe motor coaches for tours of the city’s renowned wonderland of Baroque landmarks: the Hermitage, Peterhof, Catherine’s summer palace, and St. Isaac’s Square. But perhaps the most evocative recollection is found in the words of Sara and Bill Fishback ’56: “With all of the memories of our W&L family and all the lovely and interesting palaces and churches we visited along the way, the most lasting images are of the Russian people: dear Victoria, for example, our Russian guide, who navigated us through the throngs at the Hermitage and the Summer Palace, green umbrella raised to mark the way, keeping us together by frequently calling out, ‘Bus Number Two.’ A school teacher trying to make ends meet as a tour guide, Victoria told us of her country’s tribulations and hopes. But, at the end of the tour, she left us with this wistful testimony, ‘I love my country.’” (Rob Fure)
Scotland: Highlands and Islands
July 31 – August 8, 2021

As we made our way north past Crianlarich and Tyndrum into the Grampians, the landscape became more barren of human settlement, a place of Stoic wildness, a windblown emptiness. We had moved, it seemed, more deeply into the mood of Highlands. Across Ronnoch Moor stood an immense mountain, “Buachaille Etive Mor,” poised like a Scottish “laird,” at the entrance to the Glencoe Valley. Once inside the narrow glen, we paused for photos, gazing up at the steep slopes ribboned with rivulets tumbling into waterfalls. While undeniably picturesque, Glencoe also seemed full of shadows, as if something from its dark history still haunted these lovely environs. The story of the slaughter of 38 members of the MacDonald clan in 1692 at the hands of the English and several Campbells loyal to the Crown — a notorious tale of violated hospitality — seems still very much alive here, whispering in the stiff winds coursing through the sere hills of this beautiful place. (Rob Fure)

Magnificent Great Lakes
August 16 – 26, 2021

It is best to see Niagara Falls within the context of the Great Lakes, for the grand placidity and long interludes of a Great Lakes cruise require a thunderous exclamation at some point in the journey. The Falls themselves are quite remarkable, a group of three immense waterfalls at the end of Niagara Gorge, which separates the province of Ontario from the state of New York. The visit to the American Falls begins with a stroll along a branch of the Niagara River, which drains a broad swath of water from Lake Erie into the gorge and then on into Lake Ontario. The Niagara’s current hastens over a series of low rapids headlong toward and then into the thundering cataract, large clouds of vapor rising from the cataclysm beyond the precipice, where the deep blue of the river first turns turquoise as the torrent hurls over the edge and then foams into white. After descending via elevators and then circulating through a carefully controlled entrance, visitors don thin yellow slickers for a closer, albeit damp inspection of the Falls at midlevel. Just beyond reach from the observation platform, the torrent cascades some 160 feet from the precipice before crashing onto the rocks and river below. From this perspective, eyeglasses fog up and collect water droplets, the roar of the falls prevents conversation, the damp handrails of the observation platform are welcome on the slippery concrete. Peering over the edge, one is aware of a sudden spike in one’s heart rate and then the mysterious, dizzying urge suddenly to mount the rail and leap into the foaming abyss. On a cruise itinerary, this is a salutary moment. (Rob Fure)

Douro River Cruise
August 26 – September 5, 2021

This will be a new destination for us, combining visits to the cities of Lisbon, Portugal; Salamanca, Spain; and Porto, Portugal with a river cruise on the Douro River through the wine regions of central Portugal aboard a new luxury-class river vessel, the Scenic Azure.
Morocco: Medinas and Minarets
October 11 – 24, 2021

Endless blue skies, red sunsets, millions of palms, goats in Argan trees, and Moroccans dressed in colorful djellabas — these were my first impressions of this fascinating country, whose cities, mountains, and desert offer the visitor unforgettable imagery. Fez, the cultural capital, is a labyrinth of 4,000 narrow, winding streets, where many young boys offer their services as guides (they’re essential). Within the old town, one finds individual communities with open oven bakeries, markets (souks), artists selling handcrafted ceramics and other artifacts, and pre-schools, where we were welcomed. Fortunately, efforts to move the markets outside of town have been unsuccessful for fear of changing a lifestyle that has survived centuries.

Marrakesh doesn’t disappoint with its old-world charm: pink buildings, outdoor market complete with snake charmers, monkey sellers, stews roasting in Tagine pots, and medicine men selling exotic herbs to enhance the male libido. But nothing can compare to crossing the Sahara’s magnificent dunes at sunset on the back of a camel! Dressed like nomads with our heads and faces covered, we arrived at our destination in the Merzouga Dunes and set up camp with the help of our guides. We settled in and enjoyed dinner at a long table under the stars, a magical night on the Sahara Desert. (Susie Thompson)

Classical World of the Aegean Sea
October 12 – 25, 2021

Today was our last full day aboard the Aurora. Since we had substituted Troy for Chios, we had a full morning’s sail to cover the greater distance across the Aegean. Our faculty escort Chris Pelling gave another fine talk after breakfast to prepare us for Troy and to review last evening’s film of Medea. The informed presence of an Oxford classicist in the body of a spritely Welshman has been a pleasure throughout our voyage. We entered the Dardanelles just before lunch, then tied up at the shabby Turkish port of Canakkale. Shortly thereafter, we disembarked for what had been advertised as a grim drive into the hills above the coast in something less than a deluxe conveyance. The one-hour ride, however, proved to be interesting, though rather uncomfortably swift at times. The archaeological site of Troy high on the hill of Hissarlik proved to be somewhat of a puzzle — the proverbial riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. The site consists of several cities on the promontory built successively over several hundred years, each one on the ruins of the former. The German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann had excavated the site rather crudely in the late 19th century, convinced that he had found the layer belonging to the Troy of Homer’s Iliad. We followed a couple of local guides, whose command of the history of the place seemed limited and limited further by their uncertain English. Several of us decided to follow Chris, who walked about the site at a meditative pace. He had taught the literature of Homer for 25 years at Oxford but had never visited the setting. Later, at the end of the stroll through the many-layered ruin, we paused at the far side of the hill. The spot afforded a commanding view of the coastal plains and beyond them the Dardanelles. We assembled on the ruins of a later Roman Imperial outpost, waiting for whatever Chris might share with us. Chris touched his fingers to his chin, seeming to reach for a thought, and then began to recite from memory Homer’s description of the advancing Greek army on the plains below. And in the winds that are always blowing against the cliffs of Hissarlik, one could almost hear the clatter of bronze. (Rob Fure)
As the road winds south from Naples into Sorrento, one is soon aware that the Amalfi Coast is indeed a popular destination. It is not difficult to understand why. Here, civilization hugs the precipitous cliffs and slopes that front the Bay of Naples and the Tyrrhenian Sea. An inescapable, perhaps permanent mood of holiday is in the air. Travelers from all over the world come to stroll the shop-lined streets and sandy beaches. Grand old hotels and some not so grand cater to the inevitable desire to linger here awhile. Fine hotels are conveniently located close to town. Somehow, they have managed to tuck themselves into a steep, verdant slopes just beyond the formidable limestone cliffs that guard the boundaries of the city. From one’s hotel it is a pleasant stroll to the first of many appealing restaurants in Sorrento. One that our concierge recommended is the Ristorante Parrucchiano Favorita (a mouthful indeed). A family-owned restaurant for four generations, the restaurant marries its interior to its garden setting. The somewhat imposing matriarch of the family, devoid of nonsense, sits at a management table near the entrance while the owner-patriarch works the tables, sweetly assisting his well-trained staff of waiters. A doddering grandmother dressed in black is also known to check on the well-being of the clientele. The meal I had there was quite amazing. Should I have been amazed? After all, I was in Italy. (Rob Fure)

From my first visit to Kenya, I recall vividly the impression of having happened upon another time in the earth’s history, somewhere long ago in the prehistoric kingdom of animals. Now I could see again the exquisitely clear landscape and hear the vast dome-like silence of the place. Indeed, these two phenomena haunt you most of all — beyond the zoological wonder of it all. The immense vistas break your heart, and the silence is so pure that you want somehow to box it up and take it home. That is done, I suppose, in the memory. You would take away, as the one true souvenir of your safari, this air so still that you can hear the padfall of the elephant, the grunt of the warthog, the swish of the lioness as she steps lightly through the grass. Back home, you might close your eyes and see again the rolling Mara plain, and be lifted for a time over all the barriers of ordinary life. A safari in Kenya is in this way restorative, a tonic for a busy existence lived too far from the timeless center of the natural world. (Rob Fure)
Egypt and the Nile River
November 4 – 17, 2021

We are approaching Aswan at this hour after two days devoted mostly to cruising on the Nile. It is difficult to describe the exquisite beauty and serenity of this marvelous passage of time. At first, our companions seemed stunned by the sudden tranquility as our barge, the Nuut, plied the gentle current of the Nile, gliding upstream and south from Esna. They wandered about the sundeck, surveying the sights from several angles, then settled into lounge chairs and low sofas, eyes cast toward the green banks of the river slowly sliding by. Sometimes the shoreline revealed lush marshlands twittering with birds, sometimes flat pasturelands where Brahma cattle, tethered water buffaloes, and goats grazed untroubled by our passing, sometimes thick stands of mango trees punctuated by lofty palms. Sometimes small hamlets would come into view, children waving to us, men in galabias riding small donkeys, sometimes the barren hills of the Sahara visible in the distance, sometimes the desert asserted itself in bluffs and outcrops all the way to the river’s edge. Sometimes on the slopes or crests of hills we would spy an archaeological site in a broken wall or abandoned mud brick structure — deep history is everywhere apparent in Egypt. The blue dome of the sky arching overhead was cloudless, the breezes soft and refreshing. On the river we would pass small dinghies, low in the water, often bearing two fishermen, one picking fish from straw-colored nets, the other pulling on two-by-four oars. The birds were everywhere — kingfishers, egrets, herons, ibises, gulls and ducks. For these, too, the Nile would provide. Occasionally, the metallic roar of a train would thunder through the valley, the tracks following the winding course of the river from Luxor to Aswan. At other times in the distance we’d hear the high, plangent call to prayer, signaling a village nearby beyond the trees. Our companions would look up from their books, or lift their binoculars, or stir with a twitch from their naps. Such afternoons were a luxury of time, a wealth that by its long history Egypt seems to possess in abundance. (Rob Fure)

Antarctica
January 13 – 24, 2022

The first ice came into view at 5:55 AM. We had been watching Cape and Antarctic Petrels darting in the wind alongside the ship when a blue ice “bergie-bit” — about the size and shape of a Volkswagen — bobbed by, the heaving surf lapping at its sides. Drawn to the window for a larger survey of the surroundings, we spotted, a mile or so ahead, a huge tabular iceberg, a white monolith glowing between low hanging cloud and the leaden sea. The sea had suddenly offered a wondrously different panorama. We were transfixed — first one iceberg, and then another, then a whole flotilla, each one unique, appeared on the horizon. As the Hanseatic hummed forward, undaunted, a brilliant realm of ice opened to us. However often we had seen photographs of the Antarctic, to behold it now in a fourth dimension was to discover a wholly new world, a dominion of white rimming into blue. (Rob Fure)
Patagonia Adventure
February 4 – 14, 2022

The scenery en route to Torres del Paine surpassed my imagination: miles of pampas, snowcapped jagged mountains against blue skies, sheep and cows running (yes) across the pampas while condors flew overhead, a lone guanaco poised on a mound keeping watch for pumas. First-class accommodations complemented our natural surroundings and offered a variety of activities including hiking, horseback riding, fishing in the pristine lakes nearby, visiting ice fields and waterfalls, and more. I had read Nick Reding’s “The Cowboys at the End of the World,” so my dream of one day riding horseback over the pampas led by a dashing gaucho was every bit the exciting experience I’d anticipated and a trip highlight for me. At the end of the day, while sipping excellent Chilean wine and comparing notes, we wondered what adventure could top this day’s. Patagonia is truly an unforgettable destination. (Susie Thompson)

Thailand, Laos & Cambodia
February 17 – March 4, 2022

Our second full day broke clear and bright over Bangkok, the Chao Phraya River below and beyond our hotel already churning with the city’s relentless commerce. Most of us took a buffet breakfast in the hotel’s dining terrace above the river, with its balmy breezes soft with the evocative scent of elsewhere. Breakfast was a blissful occasion charged also by good W&L company and our warm anticipation of the day’s events. Our tour of Bangkok’s major sights began at 8:00 a.m. Like load-weary elephants nudged from rest, our two assigned coaches rolled slowly down the hotel’s garden drive and into the colorful press of Bangkok’s busy streets. After several minutes spent pushing through the city’s narrow avenues — motorcycles, trishaws, and Mercedes honking and dashing around us — we arrived at the brilliant tranquility of Bangkok’s Grand Palace. Our guides led us into the palace grounds, pausing first for a souvenir group photo and then for sufficient time to allow us to gawk at the soaring architectural splendor of the brilliantly colored palace complex before us. The structures that we examined over the next 90 minutes were as dazzling as any we had seen on previous W&L Traveller adventures. One had the sense that here was a habitation built not so much for the pleasure of the king but for art itself — or, in the minds of the devout, for the sensual satisfaction of spirits forever lurking there. Each structure in the complex was artfully decorated, some of them to such gem-like elaboration that they resembled enormous jewel boxes tinkling with reflected light, their precious contents hidden from the prying eyes of our humble company. (Rob Fure)
Circle of Japan
April 4 – 15, 2022

Kyoto’s Ryoanji Temple is renowned for its magnificent Zen rock garden, which is said to express the mind of Zen Buddhism. To know that mind, our guide Kimiko explained, one must assume a meditative silence. The garden consists of fifteen rocks set in tiny furrows of raked white pebbles surrounded by a wall several hundred years old. In contemplating the garden one could imagine either a sea with islands or isolated mountain peaks poking through a layer of cloud. The point, Kimiko explained, was to move beyond the present moment to an inspired dream of nature’s perfection. Perhaps a more evocative encounter with this perfection came through a brief sojourn in the temple’s moss garden a few minutes later. We strolled blissfully along its winding gravel paths, gazing at the cool moss and a thousand delicate Japanese maple leaves overhead bathed in a rapture of sunlight. A few moments later, we emerged from the glade to find the temple’s placid lake, dotted with patches of blooming water lilies. Once again, although it seemed that we had the place to ourselves, the garden seemed to shimmer with spiritual presences. The tranquility was palpable. With all of her energy and civic intensity, Japan’s richest treasure may be her vast store of quiet places where one can find a solitude both exquisite and resonant. (Rob Fure)

The Undiscovered Italy
April 28 – May 7, 2022

The engineering evident on the drive north from Reggio de Calabria explains why the Italians are among the best — as well as the oldest, indeed — road builders in the world. The autostrada crosses through some of the most formidable landscapes anywhere, as the coastal range sheers right up to and then steeply down into the Straits of Messina. For several miles, lofty bridges feed into tunnels that open onto more bridges that carry one effortlessly through ever greater elevations in the journey north across the toe of Italy’s boot. Beyond the region of the Straits, one reaches a plateau and the rich agricultural region famous for the Calabrese olives, kiwis, Bergamot citrus, and sweet onions. Here, we turned right, heading into the forests of the Aspromonte region of Italy’s Apennines, the mountainous spine of the Italian Peninsula. Our goal this morning was Gerace, an ancient fortified hill town like no other in Italy. On reaching the dizzying elevation of Gerace and as we gazed out upon the magnificent landscape far below, our guide Romina began to narrate the thickly layered history of the region: the arrival of the Greeks in the fourth century B.C., then the Romans, followed by the Visigoths, then the Normans, followed by the Byzantines, then the Spanish, until finally the unification of Italy in the mid-nineteenth century. It is all a bit bewildering. And yet, as we pondered the sweeping vista below, it was easy to see why this fertile and strategic region would be so prized by invaders. (Rob Fure)
Flavors of Sicily
May 13 – 21, 2022

Some twenty minutes later we had arrived at the venerable estate of Benanti vineyards. Benanti has won widespread acclaim for its relatively small production of fine wines blessed by the mineral-rich soil of Mt. Etna. In a brief introduction, our lightly tattooed hostess/sommelier Valentina explained the virtues of the volcanic soil here. Thereafter we repaired to the ancient wine press room, the “palmetto” — still in use a mere 30 years ago — and then to a fabulous gallery with high ceilings, a marvelous array of Mannerist portraits above elegantly set tables. In the center of the room a harpist leaned into her instrument. Valentina directed our attention to blindfolds on the tables and explained that our tasting would be an experiment of music paired with the wine. By that point of the day, we were game to try anything. The wine was crisp and refreshing, the harp angelic. While no close connection between the wine and music was discovered, even with our eyes blindfolded, some did claim that, deprived of sight, they were able to discover more nuanced flavors. We then moved out and up to the terraced slopes behind the compound to examine the fruit on the vines. The walk was salutary for the caloric burn it offered on this day of feasting. Valentina explained that the harvest had been delayed this year because of persistent rains. If the harvest could not be undertaken in the next few days, the quality of this year’s vintage might be compromised. The grapes, however, were sweet to the tongue. From what little we could determine, all would be well. After a benign half hour, during which we could gaze out upon the town below and the sea beyond, we returned to the tasting room for a generous serving of antipasti and four more vintages. After more harp music and happy conversation, we ceased our lingering, purchased a few souvenir bottles and slowly made our way into the twilight across the loose crunch of the graveled drive. The ride home in the dark had the stillness of a full day, one that for many would always to be remembered. (Rob Fure)