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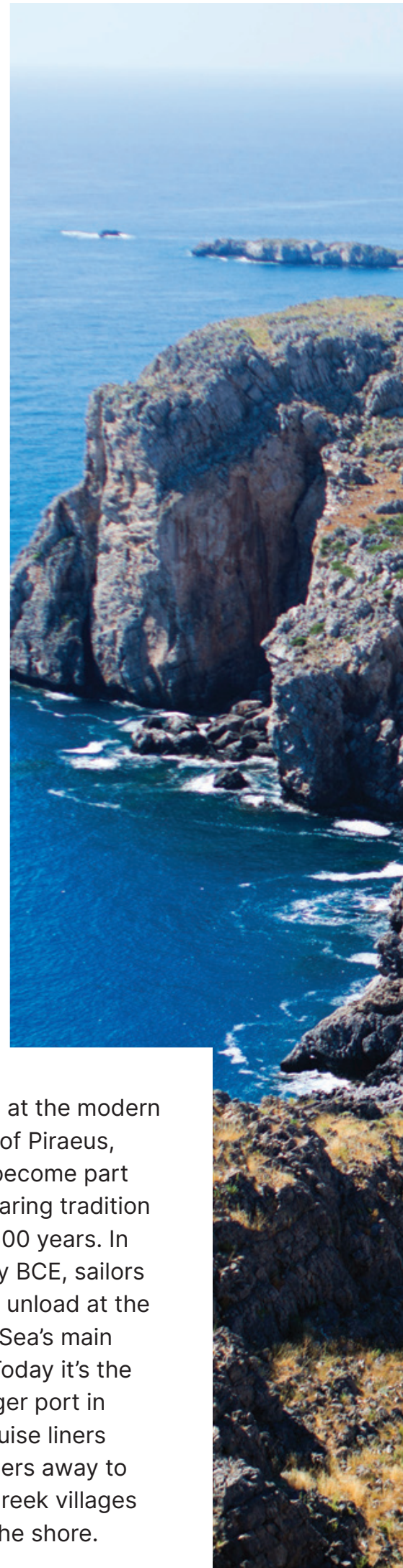
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Icons and Idylls

Three continents on the Mediterranean

BY CHRISTINA NEWBERRY

Boarding a ship at the modern cruise terminal of Piraeus, near Athens, I become part of a Greek seafaring tradition dating back 2,500 years. In the fifth century BCE, sailors moored here to unload at the Mediterranean Sea's main hub for trade. Today it's the largest passenger port in Europe, with cruise liners whisking travellers away to whitewashed Greek villages for sangria by the shore.







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I'm embarking on a slightly more ambitious trip. The Celestyal Cruises Three Continents itinerary will see me venture to some of the Mediterranean's truly once-in-a-lifetime destinations, including the Pyramids of Giza and the Celsus Library in Ephesus, one of the largest of the ancient world.

As its name suggests, the voyage touches three continents – Europe, Africa and Asia – and it's a mind-blowing experience to step foot in all three in just seven days.

I land in Athens the night before the ship embarks, allowing time to explore the Acropolis, built 5,000 years ago as a defensive outpost and transformed 2,500 years later into a religious site. Even the wild olive trees here are sacred, said to be a gift from the goddess Athena.

At the Acropolis Museum, built atop an old Athenian neighbourhood whose ruins are visible through a glass floor, I admire the display designed to model the Parthenon so the friezes and pediments sit just as they would have thousands of years ago. The portions taken for the British Museum are replicated here in plaster, revealing just how much Lord Elgin stole. Items of everyday life in the sixth century BCE are also on display – dishes, pieces of a loom, children's toys. "Every time we dig in Athens, we find antiquities," says my guide.

After a long day of cultural exploration, it's a treat to board the ship and settle in for a drink at the Horizons Bar. I watch the sun set into the sea with a Skinos Sour in hand. Made with mastic resin from the island of Chios, this cocktail is a staple of life onboard.

In the morning, I awake to the vast stretch of hours that is a day at sea. But I soon learn there is plenty aboard to fill my time. The morning is occupied by a cooking demonstration followed by a massage at the ship's spa, while the afternoon finds me in the theatre at an educational presentation about Egypt to prepare for the next day in port. And the evening ends with a tasting of typical Greek Roditis and Savatiano wines led by Adrian, the maître d'. "I'll tell you which is the best wine," he says. "The one you enjoy with your friends."

The next day brings a new continent and a new country, as we disembark in Alexandria. When I find myself sitting astride a camel named Casanova and looking right at the Pyramids of Giza, it's hard not to grin. But the moment I really feel connected to this place is when I climb inside the Great Pyramid, up through a long, cramped

The Great Pyramid originally rose 147 metres above the plateau, but time has taken its toll. The iconic structure was built as King Khufu's burial chamber: a crypt for one man.



passageway, hunched over to avoid hitting my head. Emerging into King Khufu's burial chamber, I place my hands against the ancient stone walls in the stark tomb. This is what the Great Pyramid was built for, a crypt for one man. To touch the stones placed here with such care more than 4,000 years ago feels unexpectedly profound.

Then it's on to the Egyptian Museum in Cairo, where King Tuktankhamun's treasures gleam. His gold death mask offers a mesmerizing look into the eyes of the boy-king. We reboard the ship in Port Said, where it has sailed to meet us at the mouth of the Suez Canal.

At the ancient city-state of Kourion in Cyprus, I stand on a cliff overlooking

the crystal blue sea and feel a little envious of the citizens who bathed here in the public recreation complex at the fifth-century House of Eustolios. Inscriptions and symbols in the murals – a fish, a magpie, a partridge – are some of the oldest indications of Christianity's arrival in this region that would become an important strategic location during the Crusades.

The next day we are back in Greece, at Rhodes, another strategic location for its proximity to all three continents we visit on this cruise. It has seen empires come and go since it was founded in 408 BCE: first the Romans, then the Byzantines, then the Catholic Knights of Saint John. By the 15th century the Ottomans had arrived, then the Italians

and finally the Greeks in 1948.

At Lindos, a 3,000-year-old city whose citizens participated in the Trojan War, I climb 300 steps to the island's own acropolis. Here, I walk the same paths religious pilgrims followed in the fourth century BCE to the Temple of Athena. The wind blasts across the top of the hill and it's a challenge to stay standing to take in the views over the walled town and the Mediterranean Sea.

I make my way back down through the charming curved streets of this largest continually occupied medieval town in Europe. In the town square, the air smells of ripening oranges. Dark clouds begin to roll in and the skies open just as I step aboard the bus that will return







me to the ship. As we drive away, a rainbow appears, its bright arch disappearing into the temple atop the hill.

As the cruise nears its end, we reach our third continent, Asia, where we disembark at Kuşadasi in Turkey for an excursion to Ephesus.

Abandoned after an earthquake in the seventh century, this former capital of Asia Minor is one of the largest and best-preserved ancient cities in the world. At its peak, half a million people lived here, and only a quarter of the city has been excavated to date.

Walking along the road over what used to be a Roman canal, I notice that there may now instead be half a million cats, as the creatures sun themselves on every surface, from ancient clay pipes to the steps of the library that once housed 12,000 papyrus scrolls.

In the terrace houses, where wealthy families lived as early as the first century BCE, mosaic floors and painted walls remain colourfully intact. Even a backgammon board is visible, carved into a marble table.

Across the valley, in the tiny hillside village of Şirince, we lunch on

hummus with tarragon and butter served with olives grown right next door. At the many cafes dotting the car-free cobblestone streets, coffee bubbles in hot sand pans, and there's time to linger over apple tea.

Laden with local olive oil, preserves and soap purchased at the impressive bazaar in the town square, I head back to the ship. It's time for a final Skinos Sour and a last night of Greek disco at sea.

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