

TEN DAYS IN THE ADRIATIC

BY MONICA FRIM • PHOTOGRAPHY BY JOHN FRIM AND MONICA FRIM



Lured by spectacular scenery, vestiges of ancient civilizations, folkloric foods and customs, breathtaking beaches and bays, and jagged mountains that seemingly tumble into the Adriatic Sea, Monica Frim spends 10 glorious days cruising from Venice to Athens.

The trip takes her to five countries and nine ports of call beginning in Venice and ending in Athens.

THE SHIP

Whether you call it a small ship or a large yacht, Windstar's *Star Breeze* is a cozy all-suite vessel that blends luxury with casual comfort, and an ability to nudge into cozy ports and coves that the larger ships can't access. For a cruise of the Adriatic Sea, it's perfect—not too big, not too small—with a capacity of 212 passengers and 150 crew, which makes for attentive service. Like all ships in the Windstar fleet, the *Star Breeze* offers just the right touch of informality and sophistication to keep the atmosphere low key for those seeking to get away from it all, yet convivial enough for social butterflies who like to mingle.

Unlike Windstar's founding fleet of masted ships, the *Star Breeze* is a motorized yacht that makes up in elegance what it lacks in tall ship romance. It may not have a sail to hoist but its sail-away flag-raising ritual, set to the blare of the theme song from the movie



Star Breeze, a Windstar yacht



Gondola on canal

1492: *Conquest of Paradise*, is a heart thumping replication. I had goose bumps each time we pulled out of a port.

VENICE

In the fog of early morning, Venice rises out of the sea like Lerner and Loewe's mythological *Brigadoon*. It takes a while for the sun to burn off the mist and reveal the lemon and peach facades of buildings that appear to be floating on water. The architecture is anything but Italian. Byzantine domes, Islamic arches, Gothic medallions and Moorish mosaics grace Renaissance and Baroque buildings as reminders of the various civilizations that have left their marks on what was once the main gateway to the Orient. The architectural smorgasbord constitutes a style known as Venetian Gothic. It began in the 14th century, which partially accounts for the peeling plaster frescoes of the grand palazzos and the seemingly ongoing restoration projects that are as ubiquitous as the canals. The elements may have exacted their toll, but Venice still maintains a polychrome veneer, somewhat faded, yet invigorated with gilded detailing and other decorative flourishes that contribute to its romantic reputation.

Naturally all this romance comes at a price. Venice is one of the most expensive cities in the world, a fact that doesn't seem to have hindered tourism in the least. Many visitors are happy to fork out a richly sum for a dreamy ride in a gondola through canals that serve as thoroughfares

St. Stephen's Cathedral, Hvar

(there are no cars in Venice) in a city woefully short of ground. These sleek little love boats with gold trim atop six coats of shiny black paint are propelled by (sometimes) singing gondoliers who will seemingly turn a blind eye should there be any onboard canoodling. A more economical, though less romantic, way to get around is by *vaporetto*, the Grand Canal's version of a water-based bus.

On this trip, I opted to explore the cobblestoned alleys on foot early in the morning before the crowds descended on the usual tourist haunts. I watched shopkeepers opening and sweeping the sidewalks in front of their doorways, children playfully skipping to school, and delivery men shouldering goods from boats to their destinations. Here was the real Venice. Combined with the more popular attractions of St. Marks Square with its 11th century Basilica, the Doge's palace, the Bridge of Sighs, the buzzing shops of the Rialto Bridge, and myriad museums and galleries.... Venice was just as it should be, a mix of sublime and prosaic experiences.

HVAR, CROATIA

Our first stop on the Dalmatian coast was full of reminders of Venice, which came as no surprise given that Venetians ruled the island until 1797. What did surprise us was the rain. Hvar's prime drawing feature is abundant sunshine—it's practically guaranteed in the tourist literature, with some hotels even offering free accommodation in the

A lane in Old Town Hvar





unlikely event of a seven-day downpour. The *Star Breeze* accommodated with complimentary rain ponchos. I grabbed one and joined a group tour, trudging through the slick cobblestoned streets of the medieval town, from the Franciscan monastery with its beautiful 16th century stained glass, across the square of Trg Sveti Stjepana with its famous Arsenal and Cathedral of St. Stephan, and through the winding lanes of the Noble Town where ramparts and aristocratic palaces offer stunning glimpses into island history and lore. An interlude in the drizzle prompted a slippery climb up the pine-covered slopes where the views of the clay-roofed town, fortifications and outlying islands rendered the climb a worthy endeavor.

The longest of more than 1,200 islands in the Adriatic Sea, Hvar is also the highest. A jagged coastline of rocky coves and beaches encircle the island and look out towards small, white-fringed islets that appear, on sunny days, like emerald pendants on blue glass. I caught only a brief glimpse of Hvar's luster as I returned to the *Star Breeze*. It seemed almost as if the sun was attempting to bid us a propitious farewell.

DUBROVNIK, CROATIA

Ranked as one of the ten best-preserved medieval walled cities of the world, Dubrovnik oozes art and architecture at every bend. Although earthquakes, wars and fires variously ravaged the city, its historic walls, churches, palaces and fountains have been painstakingly rebuilt and restored as close as possible to their original Gothic, Renaissance and Baroque styles.

As I strolled fort to fort atop the city walls, with views of the Adriatic on one side, and the old town on the other, the panorama perfectly summed up why this "Pearl of the Adriatic" was once a center of diplomacy and wealth. Viewed from on high, the Sponza, Franciscan Monastery, Rector's Palace, St. Blaise's Church and Onofrio fountain invited further inspections up close. So down I went, to amble in and among the historical buildings, then up the winding pathways where quaint shops and outdoor cafes were wedged together like meats in a sandwich. But my consummate jaunt was a cable car ride to the top of Dubrovnik's Mount Srđ. It's said that on a clear day you can see 35 miles over the countryside, the islands and the sea. I believe I did.



Onofrio Fountain, Dubrovnik



Croatian needlework

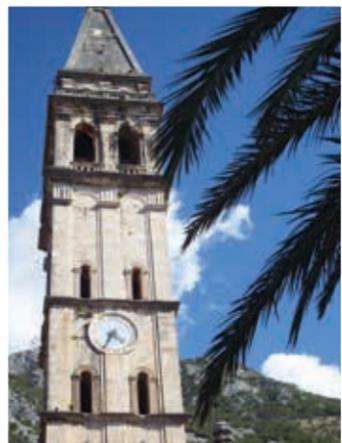


KOTOR AND PERAST, MONTENEGRO

Montenegro is so small you could fly over the entire country in four minutes, but a cruise into the dramatic Bay of Kotor is more immersive. Resembling a fjord, the long, cliff-flanked bay is actually a ria or submerged river. A handful of towns cling to smidgeons of flat ground between the water's edge and the darkly forested mountains for which Montenegro is named.

The town of Kotor at the end of the bay is a walled maze of cobblestoned streets that wind among squares studded with Romanesque churches and a cathedral. Venetian influences are everywhere—in the food (gnocchi is a favorite), museums, palaces, churches and fortifications, the result of early Venetian measures to protect the Adriatic coastline against invasions by Ottoman Turks. It's worth climbing the steep path from the town to the castle atop St. John's Mountain even if, like me, you get there panting like a locomotive. The views are to die for and I wouldn't be surprised if some people had.

A more restive excursion takes you to the coastal town of Perast, known for its Venetian clocktower and two quirky little offshore islands. During the boat ride to the Island of Our Lady of the Rocks with its church and museum, the driver regaled us with tales of the island's man-made beginnings. According to lore, it was built stone by stone over 150 years by sailors who considered it a sign of good luck to leave a stone behind. A few scuttled boats provided additional reinforcements.



Clock tower, Perast

As a relative newbie on the tourist circuit, post-communist Albania still has some catching up to do in terms of attractions and facilities. But the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Butrint National Park, a short drive from the port of Sarandë, offers a promising start and serves as a perfect link between Slavic and Greek cultures. The Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Venetians and Ottomans all left their mark on Butrint, but the communist era thinking of the 20th century was hardly conducive to preserving history. That mindset changed after 2000 with the creation of Butrint National Park and a program of extensive renovations that resulted in the 2005 reopening of the Acropolis and museum as one of the most important archaeological sites in the country. Nestled in woodlands on the shore of Lake Butrint, monuments date from the Bronze Age to the 19th century, and form an integral part of Mediterranean world history.

BUTRINT NATIONAL PARK, ALBANIA



GREECE

One of the limitations of cruising is that one can never fit in enough shore excursions to do the destinations justice. In Greece, the problem is compounded by the sheer number of antiquities. Here, history assimilated mythology, and furthered almost every imaginable aspect of culture and learning: art, history, literature, politics, philosophy, science and mathematics. In every port, ancient pillars and stones cradled the advancement of civilizations all over the world.



Harbour at Katakolon

KATAKOLON

The tiny Ionian fishing village of Katakolon exists mainly as the gateway to ancient Olympia and site of the ancient Olympic games. With a population of only 250 people, the shops and outdoor tavernas of Katakolon come alive for cruise ships and passengers who take buses or rent vehicles to visit Olympia, which tends to be overrun with shops, cafes and hotels. Katakolon, in contrast, offers a small sandy beach and lighthouse.

A more authentic Greek experience takes place at Magna Grecia, a family-owned olive farm a half hour's drive inland. *Windstar's* arrangements with the owners allow for a private event complete with olive tastings and a lavish lunch of bruschetta, sausages, lemon chicken and a host of popular Greek accompaniments all washed down with Greek wine and the local anise-flavored Ouzo. A traditional Syrtaki dance demonstration had willing participants, including this shameless scribe, prancing among, and, as is the custom, on top, of the tables. (Okay, so only one person graced the table tops. And no, it wasn't me!)

ITEA AND DELPHI

The next day, the port of Itea revealed a quiet village life, where a fruit and vegetable market served as the main attraction. This was the gateway to Delphi of oracle fame, now a UNESCO Heritage Site on the slopes of towering

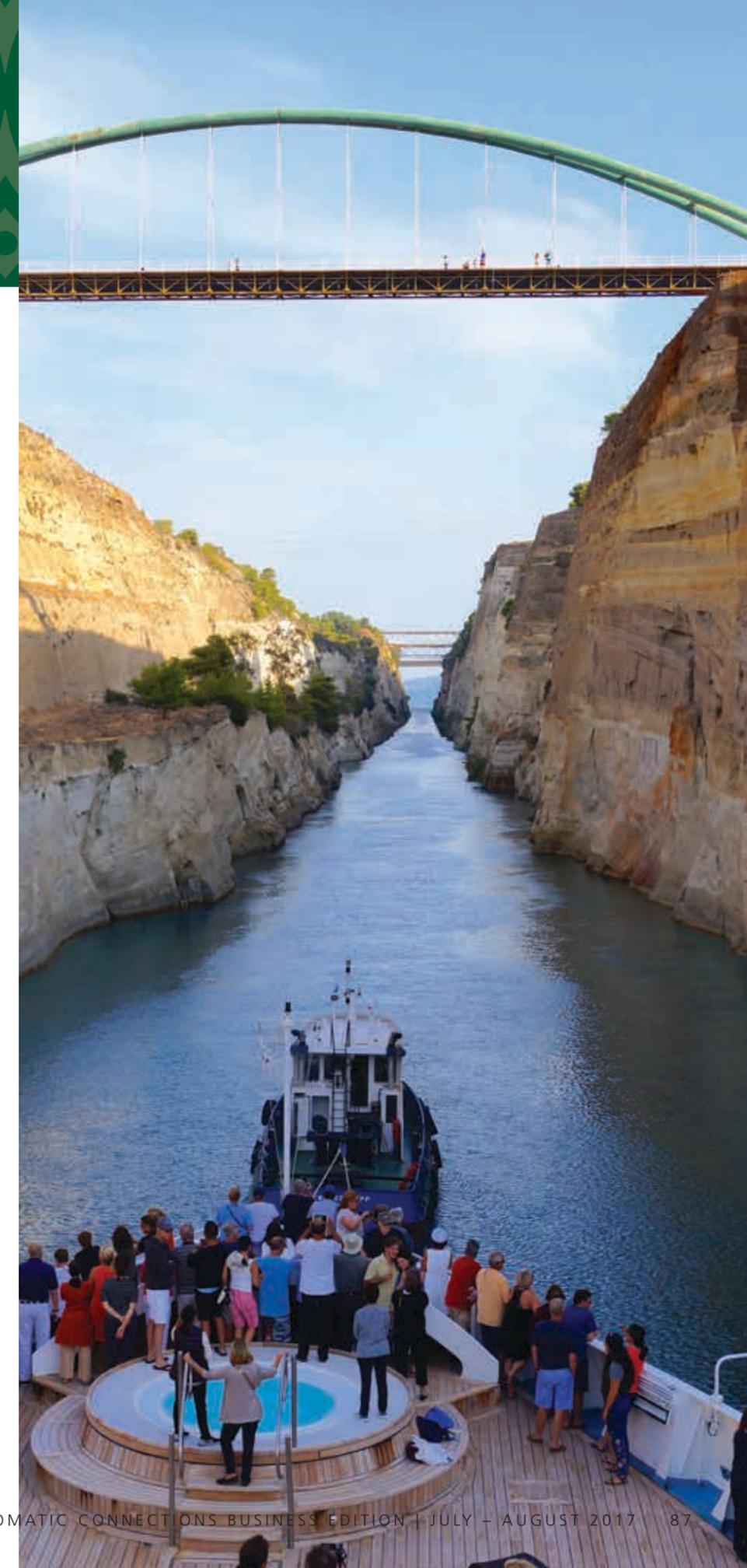
Breakwater at Itea



Parnassus. In ancient times, the oracle (a legendary virgin priestess with trance-induced wisdom that researchers have since attributed to the inhaling of ethylene gas from a chasm) was revered for her advice to leaders and pilgrims. Modern day pilgrims still flock to Delphi's fourth century theater, Treasury, and Temple of Apollo, though their reasons have more to do with an appreciation for history and culture than any psychic phenomena. Or perhaps they're simply attracted by Delphi's nickname, Navel of the Earth, as represented by its famous Omphalus stone.

THE CORINTH CANAL

One of the advantages of small ship cruising is that they can squeeze through bucket-list places that larger cruise ships can't—such as the celebrated Corinth Canal. First envisioned by Nero as a short cut through the Peloponnesian Peninsula (now effectively turned into an island) between the Adriatic and Aegean Seas, the canal only became a reality in the late 19th century when technological advances and funds finally made possible the crucial gash through four miles of sheer rock. The entire shiplod of passengers stood mesmerized on deck as the 63-foot wide *Star Breeze* scraped through the 70-foot wide canal walls with only inches of playroom on either side. There are no locks—the entire traverse is at sea level—but the passage is sublime!



NAFLIO AND EPIDAUROS

Nafplio is situated in one of Greece's sunniest and most scenic corners and amply loaded with cultural and historical attractions. Wherever you look there are fortifications, fountains, statues, castles, churches, mosques, museums, and other architectural marvels of various historical eras. I practically ran through the town to cram as much sightseeing in as possible.

The town is also a portal to archaeological wonders at Mycenae and Epidaurus, with Windstar offering excursions to both places, which makes choosing a difficult feat. In my case, Epidaurus, with Greece's best-preserved amphitheater, won over Mycenae, where the German amateur archaeologist, Heinrich Schliemann, spearheaded excavations in 1896 in his search for Homeric truth.

In Epidaurus medicine and theater go hand in hand. The ancient amphitheater was built a mere stone's throw from a healing center, known as the sanctuary of Asclepeion after its founder. It was once considered the largest hospital of the Classical world. So ingrained was the belief that hubris (arrogance) was the cause of all suffering that people would come by sea or walk for weeks, even months, to be healed in combination with theatrical productions that supposedly exposed and punished hubris, and suggested a turn-around lifestyle. I was grateful to get there by bus.

A visit to the museum that houses ancient medical instruments and other artifacts and a climb to the top of the amphitheater afforded seemingly glimpses into the Hellenistic lifestyle. But I would love to have been there for a theatrical show. Still operative, the amphitheater apparently hosts one of the most prestigious theatrical festivals in all of Greece.

The return to Nafplio included a stop-off at Palamidi Castle, a 17th century Venetian fortification overlooking the old town, the countryside and the sea with the island castle of Bourtzi anchored off shore like a colossal ship of stone. As I descended the flaunted 999 steps (in some reports they number between 857 and 917, depending on who's counting) to the town and the ship, Nafplio solidified all my expectations of Greece into a quintessential vision.



The Athens Acropolis

ATHENS

Our cruise ended in Piraeus, seven miles from the Athens city center and heart of ancient Greece. Here Socrates waxed philosophical in the agora, and Plato raised ethical and political speculations way beyond anything Socrates, his mentor, could have imagined; Pericles spearheaded the building of the Acropolis and its optically perfect Parthenon; and Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes wrote plays that are still performed today. As ubiquitous as the ancient monuments are, one never tires of their splendors, which explains why crowds keep coming back to Athens, whether by cruise ship or airplane, to relive the past and drink in the intoxicating, albeit smog-laden air. But next time I just might buy myself one of those tacky can openers shaped like the Parthenon that's sold in kitschy souvenir stalls. It just might help wedge me into the crowded cafes and tavernas that tumble over the ancient outdoor stairways and narrow, winding sidewalks of Plaka, the oldest part of the city. I'm already planning the trip.

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Ancient amphitheater of Epidaurus