



I recently returned from a group tour to Greece and Turkey, along side a group of grade 11 and 12 students from Langham, Sask. I have been booking their group tours for 8 years now, and I could not pass up the opportunity to travel with them and the remarkable chaperones I've grown so fond of.

It was also an amazing opportunity to finally meet the local team from Expedition and Travel, whose services I have engaged for all of my Greece and Italy groups for the past 8 years. Not only do they do school groups, but many Religious Tours as well. They are very professional and most personable. From the moment we met at the airport to the day we left, they were attentive and dependable. Our guide, Athena, took us on an amazing journey throughout all of Greece's history. She helped us experience new things such as taking the subway, the trams and the city bus. Her top priority was to keep us safe and she did just that.

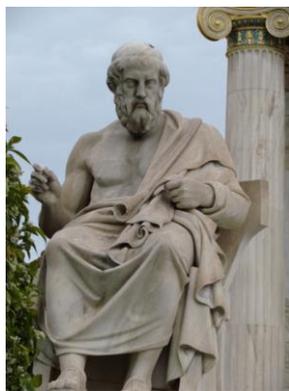
Here is a quick account of what we did..

#### **Day's 1-2/6-7**

Athens, Titania Hotel

- Very well located near the subway and attractions
- Clean and friendly staff, great meal services
- Olive garden on the roof top with amazing night view of the Acropolis

#### **Sight seeing**



On arrival in Athens, Yannis took us to Syntagma Square, the Royal Palace and the Parliament Building with the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. The next morning we proceeded to Ancient Athens to visit the world renowned Acropolis, site of the most outstanding ancient Greek ruins. All those movies we watch that depict this ancient time do not do it justice.

We shopped at the Plaka a few times during our stay, (hundreds of little side streets with shops selling souvenirs). Everyone is very friendly and they are not

overly pushy to buy from them, very respectable! (Except for the little old lady I wasn't able to get away from. My mother now has a new hand made table cloth). In one of the stores, there was a very nice old man who gave a few of us an owl necklace just because. He didn't want anything for it, but a hug and kiss on the cheek.

There are also many street side café's and restaurants. Starbucks is the Tim Horton's of Greece, it's everywhere! Make sure to order a filtered coffee, unless you want two shots of espresso and nothing else.

Good Friday Way of the Cross - amazing to see!

The city of Athens is very safe. The population is an estimated 665 000 people. There isn't very much green space inside the city.

The people of Athens and Greece in general feel very misunderstood. They will all take the time and speak with you about their history, how unfortunate they have been in their history and how this continues today. They all wish for better as a Country and believe that one day they will rise up again.

### **Day 3 - Delphi**

We drove 3hrs from Athens to Delphi passing by some of the most impressive country side I have ever seen. Olive groves for miles and the mountains are absolutely spectacular and breathtaking. We found ourselves in the region of Macedonia, where they uncovered a Lion monument dating back 3000 years BC. We also stopped in Distomo, where today stand a Nazi War Memorial for all 214 people who were massacred in 1944.



We visited the Ancient site for the worship of Mother Earth and Themis, the Arcade of the Athenians, the Treasuries, the theatre and finally high above the place of worship, the Stadium.

Delphi is shadowed by Mount Parnassus, a massive mountain of limestone, the same limestone which was used to build the Acropolis, 121 km's away! It is a very quaint little village, with many shops and café's. We stayed at the Hotel Hermes, locally owned by a small family.

The views from my private balcony were heavenly! This was a favorite stop, I felt extremely at peace!



Our lunch stop this day was at a family owned restaurant, on a farm. I had the "Greek" plate. No idea what I ate, but it was good.

#### **Day 4 - Olympia**

Here lies the site of the 1<sup>st</sup> Olympic Games in 776BC, where today the sacred flame for the Olympic Games still burns at the Altis. (Actually, they light it with the sun, and they do a practice run a week before just in case there's no sun on the actual day) We visited the ruins of Apollo and the Zeus Temple. It was most impressive in what they have been able to discover and restore! It wouldn't be complete without some of our group partaking in a race, just like they would have done way back when!

Olympia is slightly bigger than Delphi, the shops are plentiful! We stopped in one of the shops where we met Nontras, an Olympian from the 1976 Olympic Games. He has so many stories to share with us, and all he wanted was for us to listen to him. It kind of got awkward, but we stuck it out and we are so happy we did, as we were so fortunate that he allowed us to take pictures with him and the 1976 Olympic Torch! As a thank you to him, I have to send him a copy of this picture and a post card from Canada.



Our hotel was in a nice secluded wooded area, the hotel Antonio's. Private balconies and outside pool, very modern. The pool wasn't open this time of year.

### Day 5 - cross country

**Argolis;** an important pole of attraction, with natural beauty and gifted with extremely interesting archaeological sights.

**Mycenae;** the ancient town with the impressive findings and the important remains of the ancient Tiryntha, a mycenaean Acropolis reflect the unique historical profile of Argolis.

**Nafplio;** what a gorgeous town, expensive, but worth the stop to walk up some 867 steps to the castle of Palamidi. I got all my best pictures this day walking the quaint and pictures streets. Best gelato in all of Greece.

Just 10 minutes drive from Nafplio you can find Tolo, a famous Holiday resort with natural beauty and wonderful beaches, where we stayed at the hotel John and George. Another private balcony looking over the sea and mountains, \*sigh\*. Our students swam in the sea this day, they froze pretty good and the locals had a hoot watching this. Once they heard we were from Canada, they seemed to understand.



### Day 6 - Back to Athens

On our way back to Athens, we stopped in Corinth for lunch - we ate like Kings! Pizza, meats, cheeses, breads, and the list goes on. We walked over the Canal Bridge, a true marvel! You can do bungee jumping off this bridge...maybe 10 years ago!



We also visited the site of where Apostle Paul stayed for his missionary activities in Hellas; the Roman provinces of Achaia and Macedonia. He stayed for some eighteen months (50-51 AD). I'm excited to tell all of this to my grand parents.

One our way back we stopped at a local art gallery where we were supposed to have taken part of a pottery class and get our hands dirty. It was a tourist trap. This was the only aspect of my trip I did not enjoy. At least now I know! In lieu of this, we took everyone bowling once we got back into Athens.

### **Day 7 - Greek Island cruise**

Today we set sale to Hydra, Poros and Aegina, minus Hydra. It was too windy. Had they taken us there we may not have been able to leave. Both island stops offered great sea side stores and restaurants.

Our ship, Olympic Cruises, was beautiful and offered some great seating and viewing areas. We dinned on board, and also witnessed some Greek dancing and live music, OPA!

Once in Aegina, some of us decided to buy a volley ball and play in the local court. This was so neat and so out of the blue. The ball was expensive, but the experience will stay with me forever! It was great fun! A group of American school kids showed up, and all they wanted to do was play a game against us. When they found out we were Canadian, they basically decided to call it quits. We decided to give our ball to Athena, our guide, to give to her younger children.



### **Day 8 - Good Bye Greece**

What an amazing journey through this beautiful country. The history and sheer size of the many monuments is mind blowing! We learned so much in such a short amount of time, I don't want to forget any of it. I've already ordered some books online to refresh my memory! I know a lot of the students really enjoyed Greece, and I am sure many of them now have the travel bug!

It's also worth mentioning that we walked at least a few thousand stairs during our stay in Greece. You need a very good pair of running shoes, or strong feet. Fortunately for me, I have strong feet! I left my runners at home as they are my expensive "running shoes" and took a new pair of flats, with grip and Dr Shoals gel

inserts thinking I'd be good to go. The two ridiculous blisters I got on each foot the size of a quarter within 2 days just couldn't handle any of this and I did all of those ruins in my flip flops! People looked at me strangely, but I conquered just like they would have in the olden days, no one had shoes! We experience the worst weather in 7 years, yes it even snowed.

We flu with Turkish Airlines to Istanbul - a fabulous airline, top notch services! I would recommend them to anyone.

### **Day 8 - Hello Istanbul**

I wasn't sure what to expect of Turkey. But what I didn't know was that I would fall head over heels in love! I detest that this country has a stigma, I detest that I also took part in society's way of thinking. I am here to tell society to stick it!

Turks are an extremely proud of their country and it shows. The love this country has for their 1<sup>st</sup> President, Mustafa Kemal Ataturk is very moving, and I too have a great respect for this man! Under his leadership, thousands of new schools were built, primary education was made free and compulsory, and women were given equal civil and political rights, while the burden of taxation on peasants was reduced. He also abolished that women had to cover up and made it entirely their choice to do so.

Istanbul is clean and the amount of green space is fantastic! So many children's parks! 17 million people live here, that is insane! You feel safe walking around as long as you are in a small group, but you do need to be cautious. I don't recommend anyone take the trams, it's a disaster waiting to happen and you're lucky if you make it off without the doors shutting on you. That was a close call, but an experience I will never forget. Unfortunately, there is a high amount of Syrian refugees that have come to Istanbul, and night time can be a very daunting experience.

We met with our guide, Atakan, with Marveltour. 100% satisfaction guaranteed! We had a short tour of the city (old town) prior to arriving at our hotel, The Zurich. Its location can't be beat! And neither can the accommodations. I'm not sure how I became to be so lucky? My suite; with views of the Blue Mosque, Jacuzzi tub, walk in closet and king size bed - let's just say I've never slept so well! I'm sure my experience would have been just as amazing with a different hotel, but I'll never forget that room!

In the afternoon, we ventured out by ourselves as a group and visited the Grand Bazaar, Solomon's Mosque and the Basilica Cistern. It was simple enough to get around, we took a few wrong turns, but we managed!

**Bazaar;** what an experience! We were in small groups, 1 adult per group and I was responsible for 3 girls and 3 boys. They were all very well behaved and we had a lot of fun bargaining for souvenirs, which is very easy to do. Name your price, walk away, they will want you back! By the end of our hour there, we were all pretty well versed in getting souvenirs for a ridiculous price!

**Solomon's Mosque;** ladies bring your head scarf. No bare feet! Perhaps the most beautiful mosque in all of Istanbul is the Suleymaniye Mosque. It was built by the greatest of the Ottoman Empire architects, Mimar Sinan. It is the second largest in the city after the Blue Mosque. It was built in only seven years beginning in 1550, and is the largest and most complex masterpiece of Ottoman

architecture. Sinan built a number of mosques in Turkey as well as others in Istanbul.

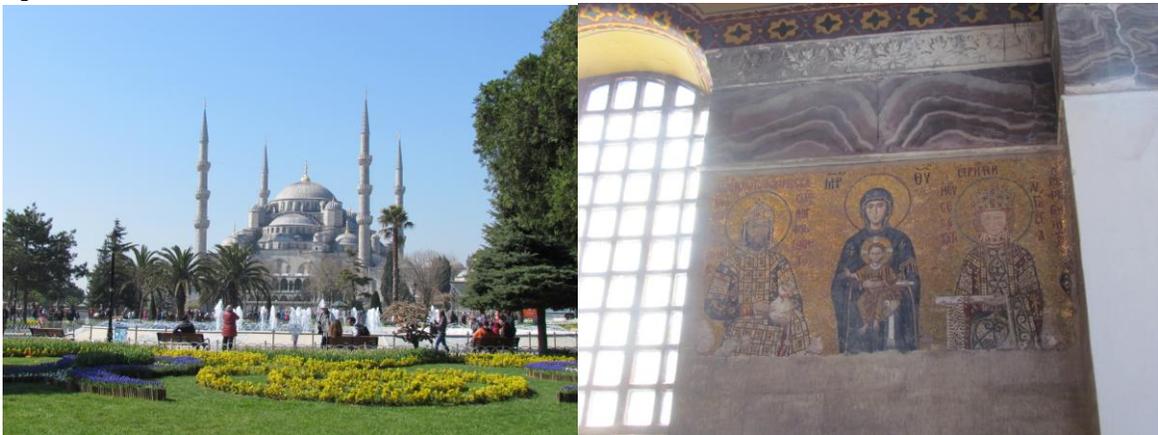


**Basilica Cistern;** we met a guide offering to take us down and by pass the line to enter - money well spent!

There are hundreds of ancient cisterns hidden underneath the streets and houses of Istanbul. Of the two that are open to the public, the Basilica Cistern is the largest and Istanbul's most unusual tourist attraction. Contrary to James Bond, who had to row his way through Istanbul underground cistern in *From Russia with Love*, you can take a stroll in the forest of hundreds of marble columns and enjoy the subterranean cool on a hot summer day. Make sure you walk all the way to the far left-hand corner of the cistern, to see the two Medusa heads. Both heads are casually used as column bases; one positioned upside down, the other tilted to the side. Both their positioning as their origin remain a mystery up till now, although rumor has it that they were recycled from an antique building of the late Roman period.

**Day 9 - more of this majestic city!**

**Blue Mosque;** The Sultan Ahmed Mosque is a historic mosque in Istanbul. The mosque is popularly known as the Blue Mosque for the 20,000 blue tiles adorning the walls of its interior. I preferred the Solomon Mosque, not sure why, but the Blue Mosque is most impressive and a must see!



**Hagia Sofia;** A great architectural beauty and an important monument both for Byzantine and for Ottoman Empires. Once a church, later a mosque, and is now a museum. For me, it was like being back in the Vatican. The immense feeling of calmness I felt cannot be explained. There is a very strong Christian significance, maybe that's why?

**Spice Market;** you want quality spices, you come here! They vacuum seal it for you, luggage approved!

Once we were done at the spice market, and while waiting outside for everyone to return to the meeting point, a young boy walked up to our guide and asked if he could interview us for a school project. What a privilege, as I was the lucky one whom he spoke to and video taped. He asked me a variety of questions, in English, and I shook his hand and he return me a shy smile. I will never forget this experience! I wish him nothing but good things in his bright future!

We also visited the Istanbul Museum and drove across to the New Town.

### **Day 10 - Bosphorus**



Early morning departure back to the Grand Bazaar! I didn't go in this time, but I did shop the side street vendors where I found a lot of souvenirs, including my COCO Chanel jump suit!

We visited the Sadberk Museum, with a private collection owned by the Koc Family (the rich and famous). Some of their objects go back to 5500BC!

After lunch, we boarded our private boat for our Bosphorus cruise. Yes, I said private! The million dollar homes (they start at 20million), Ottoman mansions, palaces and castles of previous centuries adorn the natural scenery. HEAVEN!!!

Of course, I wouldn't have been the same had our guide not arrange the pod of dolphins to come and visit us! He kept reminding me that all of this was just for me, the travel agent. Jokes on him, he's stuck with me now!

We were so close to the Asian continent, we just had to go! We barely made the ferry departure, both ways, but how cool to experience being on another continent and still in Turkey! By this time, all I had left was 10 turkish lira so what to do with so little money and only an hr? Go to Starbucks of course! This was the night we took the tram back to the hotel. I probably will never do this again!

What I found most interesting is everything we saw and learned in Greece, all coincided with the history of Turkey. The two together make for an amazing learning experience.

I am so honored to have traveled these two amazing Countries along side some really great people! I gained 19 new friends! My sincerest "thank you" to all of these amazing young students. I wish you all nothing but happiness and the best of everything. Every single one of you made me feel most welcomed and I developed a strong bond with many of you! I look forward to hearing from you, and booking you on your next trip!