

IN THE warm sunshine of a Greek autumn morning, we are climbing one of the most famed hills in all the ancient and modern world: the Acropolis. Up slopes, up steps, up through the gateway at which the Athenians left behind their world and entered the sanctuary of the gods.

And here, despite the depollutions of age, war and looters, the Parthenon stands before us, a damaged but perfectly proportioned testament to the dazzling artistic and engineering skills of a civilisation long gone but never forgotten.

Visible for miles around, this building said to its ancient beholders, Athens is so powerful, it is but one level below the gods.

Or so our eminently knowledgeable guide Michael C Scott, research fellow at Cambridge University department of archaeology, tells our tour group in typically informative and accessible style. Michael, who rapidly becomes known as "the Prof", is the week's guest lecturer on the unlikely-sounding Classical Greece Cruise on easyCruiseOne, a ship better known for its summer runs around the Med.

Popular with party people for its no-frills approach to cruising, the summer schedule allows for maximum stays in lively destinations, making short hops to minimise time at sea and make the most of the bars, restaurants and clubs on shore.

On the Classical Greece itinerary, the clientele is definitely a shade older but the destinations are thoughtfully put together to offer a broad view of the ancient world in a week, beginning and ending in Athens.

First, passing through the Corinth Canal, you can see ancient Corinth, Nemea and Mycenae, palace of the fabled Agamemnon. Then it's on to Patras to visit Ancient Olympia, birthplace of the modern games, Itea for stunning Delphi, site of the famed Oracle; Aegina, the home of Achilles and site of the pretty Temple of Aphaia surrounded by fragrant, wind-whispering pines.

YOU also visit the gorgeous island of Ithaca, arriving at the delightful natural harbour of Vathy, dozing in off-season slumber after the summer hordes. Michael's enthusiasm for his subject is infectious and he mingles happily, sharing knowledge with all the passengers, on board and on trips. These range from day-long excursions stopping for lunch at tavernas to a stunning hillside walk on Ithaca above a shimmering sea and a tiny white cove reputed to feature in *The Odyssey*. It's strenuous enough to get the heart pumping and not for the faint-hearted or frail.

The ship itself, it must be said,



GATEWAY TO GREECE: Through the Corinth Canal from Delphi to Athens. Inset, easyCruiseOne

Follow the Prof for the lowdown on high culture

easyCruise may be the budget option when it comes to on-board accommodation but, says PENNY MEYRICK, its off-season itinerary around the classical Greek sites is first class

is not for the faint-hearted either. The cabins are small, some have no window, and beds are a single mattress set on a shallow platform barely six inches apart. The bathroom consists of a loo, basin and shower unit (with an alarming tendency to slop over its tray) and there is very little storage space - no drawers, one not very handy shelf, and just eight hangers.

In our cabin, the platform was painted a scratched grey but the ceiling and most other fixtures were the easy brand's unsuitable trademark orange. You also have to pay extra to have your towels and linen changed daily. On the

plus side, although the ship is compact enough not to dwarf its surroundings (unlike many liners) it does have a hot tub and sauna, a deck bar, plus a bar and restaurant serving good food, with a wide menu choice.

THERE are also themed evenings, including disco nights, wine-tasting and Greek dancing. But this is not glamorous cruising by any stretch of the imagination and a sleep mask and ear-plugs are essentials. That said, most of the

passengers - who included a majority of ultra-picky Americans used to very high service standards - were more than happy, not least because of the amazingly small amount of money they had paid for the cruise.

A double cabin can cost as little as £140 for the week - that's £10 a night each if you share - and a great pre-pay excursion offer of £142pp gets you the full set of excursions.

This is less than half the cost if you paid for them individually and terrific value since it includes coaches, entry to the sites, great guides and filling lunches. If you pick a date with

the Prof on board that's an added bonus.

● GETTING THERE

The Classical Greece itinerary on easyCruiseOne (0871 210 0001/www.easycruise.com), departing from Athens, is available for departures until April 6 2008. Itineraries restart on October 19 2008. Seven nights cost from £70pp (two sharing) for a standard inside cabin, room only, or from £185pp (two sharing) for a suite with a balcony. easyJet (0905 821 0905/www.easyjet.com) offers return flights from Luton and Gatwick to Athens from £62.

Q I HAVE always fancied the idea of a cruise but suffer from a balance problem and travel sickness. My father, who had a similar condition, used to enjoy cruises but got an injection on board that would prevent it. Can you advise, please?

A SEASICKNESS is uncommon on today's cruises and ships which have excellent stabilisers that keep movement to a minimum. However, if you are particularly susceptible, book a balconied cabin towards the centre of the ship,

where motion is minimised and you will have the benefit of fresh air. Over-the-counter remedies are very effective for most people and you will find these in the ship's shop. However, as your father rightly discovered, if all else fails, the ship's doctor will be able to administer an injection to eliminate all effects.

Q MY wife and I (aged 77 and 75) have holidayed all over the world but only on one cruise.

That was a 15-nighter to 11 islands in the Caribbean. We are concerned that insurance for us seems to be exorbitant. Could you recommend a reasonable cruise and a reasonable insurance company?

A CRUISES are extremely good value, especially taking into account the food, activities and entertainment included in the price. However, if you are looking to keep

costs down, avoid peak season or even try a repositioning cruise, where the ship is travelling between its seasonal bases (for example, the Med to the Caribbean for the winter season).

Unfortunately, many insurance companies do increase the premiums for travellers over 65, whether for a cruise or a land-based holiday. The best option is to contact your nearest ACE cruise expert, who may refer you to a specialist

provider such as Saga, Age Concern or RIAS, which will not only have lower premiums but also higher upper age limits.

Please e-mail your questions to: qatravel@express.co.uk. Please include your name and address.

● For further information, call 020 7436 2449/www.discover-cruises.co.uk

● Details of your nearest expert can be found online at www.cruiseexperts.org or by calling 020 7436 2449.

YOUR CRUISE QUESTIONS ANSWERED