

# In the gods' own country

**O**xymoron – a Greek word, meaning a contradiction that makes sense in the end. For example: 'bittersweet' and 'easyCruise-Classical Greece'. Who better than entrepreneur Stelios, creator of the 'easy' brand, to make that happen?

No longer an orange blot on the marine landscape, easyCruiseOne has been reworked in stylish anthracite grey and moored in the Marina Zea harbour at Piraeus, the port of Athens. Its mission: six-night cruises of the Aegean and Ionian seas, offering some of the best sites and most informed thinking on ancient Greece you can buy.

'I wanted a reason to get people to come to my country,' Stelios explained, as plate after plate of Stelios-endorsed dishes piled up on our table. 'You see a civilisation from the Acropolis to Mycenae. No one else is doing this.' Not at prices beginning at £70 per person per week they're not.

Our easyOdyssey had an enticing itinerary, far less arduous than the perils faced by Odysseus as he began his ten-year trek back from the Trojan War. We were to visit, among other things, Ithaca, his mythical homeland, the oracle at Delphi, the Acropolis and, with Beijing looming, the birthplace of the original Olympics.

A guest lecturer, Dr Michael Scott, classicist and fellow of Darwin College, Cambridge, joined us. Together with Kelly Agathos, whose enthusiasm for Greek mythology was infectious, they brought the sites alive. They never went on too long or assumed too much.

I'd forgotten which Greek god, disguised as what animal, did unspeakable things to whom. As we sat in the stadium at Nemea, one of the ancient sanctuaries where games, news, arts and debate brought the ancient Greek world together in a single religious festival, Michael explained the Who's Who of Mount Olympus. Top god among the 12 in the pantheon was Zeus. Seven Doric columns, surrounded by fallen chunks of stone, are the temple of Nemea, dedicated to him.

Professor Stephen Miller, from the University of California, has been excavating the sanctuary, 'his baby', for 35 years. Each column is painstakingly restored from a series of cylindrical drums that fit together like vertebrae – making it more flexible in the event of an earthquake. The games were

## Sarah Lucas sees classical Greece on a new kind of Odyssey

'like a big party. We found thousands of drinking cups'. They also represented an important ancient Greek ideal – a beautiful outer body meant inner beauty, too. One modest athlete had scrawled 'Aristarchus is beautiful' on the stadium entrance.

There's a league table of ancient games. If Nemea and Isthmia were second-division players, Olympia and Delphi were Titans of the premier league.

We moored at uninspiring Patras, the largest city in the Peloponnese, for an excursion to Olympia. The site is exquisite. Set in a valley between two rivers, it's overlooked by the Hill of Kronos, blackened by last summer's fires, pines reduced to charcoal stumps. For more than 1,000 years, from 776BC, the most important Panhellenic games and the model for all others, were held here.

Pheidias created a wonder of the ancient world with his gold statue of Zeus. Statues were commissioned to famous athletes. Training was supervised, to lessen the chances of classical steroid abuse. Beyond the confusion of ruined temples lies the entrance to the stadium, a long arched tunnel opening on to a 200-metre track. The start and finish lines are still there. You can almost hear the cheers.

Were it not Greece, you might say a

disadvantage of sailing out of season is that most of the onshore restaurants are shut. On board, in Fusion on Four, you can get a very reasonable meal for €11 (£8), though the service, after Stelios left, was sometimes surly.

A Singapore Sling cocktail demonstration punctuated courses one evening – add in a few Naked Ladies and the music quiz became impossible.

**T**here were 'happy hours', salsa classes and a Greek night when a family came on board to sing, dance and create the kind of chaotic atmosphere you could usually find only in a Greek taverna.

EasyCruiseOne moored by pretty quaysides in, generally, small ports which meant we were immediately in the heart of town, so there were no lengthy transfers.

On rocky Ithaca, legendary home of Odysseus, we followed a steep coastal path, with great sea views, to the Fountain of Arethusa. At Aegina, where pistachio orchards are drinking the island dry, we discovered the freshest fish in an unprepossessing taverna and a beautiful temple to Zeus's daughter, Aphaea.

Nineteenth Century Itea, with its cafe-packed seafront, was our starting point for the most mystical site of all – Delphi. Arising from the slopes of Mount



**CLASSICAL EDUCATION:** Sarah contemplates the stunning Temple of Apollo, main picture, while the Temple of Aphaea, above, is dedicated to Zeus's daughter

## GETTING THERE

**The Classical Greece** itinerary on easyCruiseOne, right, costs from £70 per person, sharing a standard inside cabin and from £322 per person sharing a suite with a balcony.

Pre-bookable guided tours are available. A package of five costs £94 per person if booked in advance (saving 50 per cent compared with onboard prices.) All full-day excursions include lunch in

a Greek taverna, transport, guided tours and any entrance fees.

**For more information** visit [www.easyCruise.com](http://www.easyCruise.com) or call 0871 210 0001. To join easyCruiseOne from the UK, easyJet flies to Athens from Luton and Gatwick airports. See [www.easyJet.com](http://www.easyJet.com) for details.



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