

MY GRECO CRUISE

It's all hands on deck (deck of cards, that is) when former EastEnder Michael Greco takes a trip to classical Greece

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When a friend asked if I fancied a cruise to the Aegean coast to take in the sites of classical Greece, I wasn't sure what to think.

My holidays have always consisted of a beach, getting a perfect tan, a good book, a few beers and, I won't deny, the occasional glance whenever a gorgeous woman crossed my path! But I'm older and wiser now and I fancied a change. In Italian, Michael Greco literally means Michael the Greek, so really it was an offer I couldn't refuse. It was also a chance to take a week off from playing poker – or so I thought.

We arrived in Athens on Sunday evening and drove 30 minutes to our ship, easyCruiseOne, which was docked in Piraeus. Who should be on the boat but easyJet founder Stelios Haji-Ioannou himself.

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Joining me for some food it was obvious that he took great pride in this recently refurbished ship. If you imagined the ship to be a floating hulk of orange you would be very wrong. EasyCruiseOne is all sleek black and white, very modern in looks with just a hint of orange in places. The cabins vary in size, ranging from twins to suites complete with balcony. I had a twin cabin which was comfortable, clean and just what the doctor ordered.

The next morning, we were gliding through the amazing Corinth Canal, where you can almost reach out and touch the cliffs either side of you. It reminded me of the scene with the clashing rocks in one of my favourite films, Jason and the Argonauts.

We docked in the ancient town of Corinth and as we strolled around the picturesque harbour, it wasn't long before we came across a busy bar. It was full of old men, caps on head, cigarettes in mouth and a coffee cup in hand, all gesturing wildly around a big group of tables.

I knew immediately what they were doing. My love of card games started at a young age and watching these guys took me back. I used to watch my dad and uncles sitting around the table, all trying to out-bluff each other and cursing when they lost a hand. Even aged six I wanted to join in, but was always told "You can play next week". A few years later and I was in the game.

One of the old Greek men spoke some English and invited me to a game of backgammon. It's a game I enjoy but it took him about 10 minutes to see me off.

Pride hurt. I asked "How about some cards?" He nodded and another older, even more wrinkled man joined us. I winced every time he wrapped his knuckles hard on the wooden table to put down a card. Were they made of steel?

His name was Dimitris and he had been a fisherman. When he looked at his hold cards his eyes did not betray him – they were as lifeless as those of the fish he used to catch. His brain was still very sharp – he seemed to have a knack of knowing pretty much what I had in my hand every time.

I tried to teach them how to play Texas Hold 'Em, the most popular version of poker in the world right now and a game I play in professional tournaments around the world. But they were having none of it. I was their guest and instead they insisted on showing me a few of their own variations, none of which I knew. The best was one they called "The Elevator". You deal each player two cards face down, then put seven cards face up on the table in an H shape (two rows of three and one in the middle). The card in the middle can move up and down (like an elevator) giving you the choice of several rows of three cards (vertically and horizontally) with which to make your hand of five.

Genius! I loved it and I'll be showing all my poker-playing buddies how to play. Dimitris won a few Euros from me but would not accept them – it was as though teaching me a lesson was good enough. Only afterwards did I find out he was 92! He even paid for my coffee, showing that the Greeks really are very hospitable.

After a lovely dinner in the easyCruiseOne restaurant that evening, I was telling a couple of other guests about the game and they were asking me to show them the ropes.

A big Texan guy approached the table and said "You wanna show me how to play too, buddy?" I immediately understood it as more of a challenge than a question and one that I didn't need asking twice to accept. A couple of Canadian guys and a Brit also wanted to join in and the game was on.

The Texan tried to be clever and asked "Does a straight beat a flush?" (like I was going to fall for that old chestnut), but it was soon clear these guys were all good players, though none of them was aware that I'm ranked in the top 15 poker players in Europe right now.

By 2am, with the ship serenely making its way to the beautiful island of Ithaki, we called it a night. The game was played in a great spirit and I made some new friends. But I never like to lose and I was about 50 Euros better off. I bought all the guys a round of drinks with my winnings.

The next day in the onboard spa, I had an amazing massage and put in a good 30 minutes on the running machine – part of the open-air wellness zone on the top deck.

Once my travelling partners, Elizabeth and Ciro, awoke from their slumber, they joined me in the hot tub and we sipped some cocktails. It wasn't long before Liz noticed a young man sitting at the bar. "Cor, he's fit!" she said as he got up and walked across the deck.

It turned out he was a classical Greek history professor from Cambridge University, who was to give lectures during the week. But he didn't have leather patches on his jacket elbows or smoke a pipe. Dr Michael, as he would soon be called by all the guests, told us what we were going to see during the week. And it suddenly dawned on me: I hadn't actually come here to play cards.

It was fascinating stuff – Zeus, Achilles, Troy, Athena – stuff I'd never really taken an interest in before. We all really enjoyed his talk – though Elizabeth's reasons may have differed from ours!

I was even more pleased when a group of women joined us. But I soon realised it wasn't me they were interested in. Dr Michael's Hugh Grant-like British accent and clean-cut looks clearly made some of them weak at the knees. A real-life Indiana Jones I thought, and only 26 – not that I was jealous, of course!

The rest of the week was very enjoyable and featured a visit to Olympia, where the first Olympic Games were held 2,700 years ago. My favourite excursion was a trip to the awesome ancient city of Delphi, high in the mountains above Itea.

I'm sure there are a lot of holidaymakers like me who are content to go to the same places year in, year out. But I'm really pleased I went to Greece and came back with more knowledge, as well as a few more friends.

And this was also one of those holidays where I didn't come back feeling like I need another holiday to get over it.

What's the deal?

The Classical Greece cruise from Athens on easyCruiseOne starts at £70pp based on two sharing a standard inside cabin, and from £266pp based on two sharing a suite with balcony for departure dates between February 24 to April 6. To book call 0871 210 0001 or go to www.easycruise.com. EASYJET flies to Athens from Luton and Gatwick, with fares from £59.98 return. Book online at www.easyjet.com

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