

Sailing Through Time On the Aegean

Tracing ancient civilization by small ship is an immersive travel experience that brings history to life

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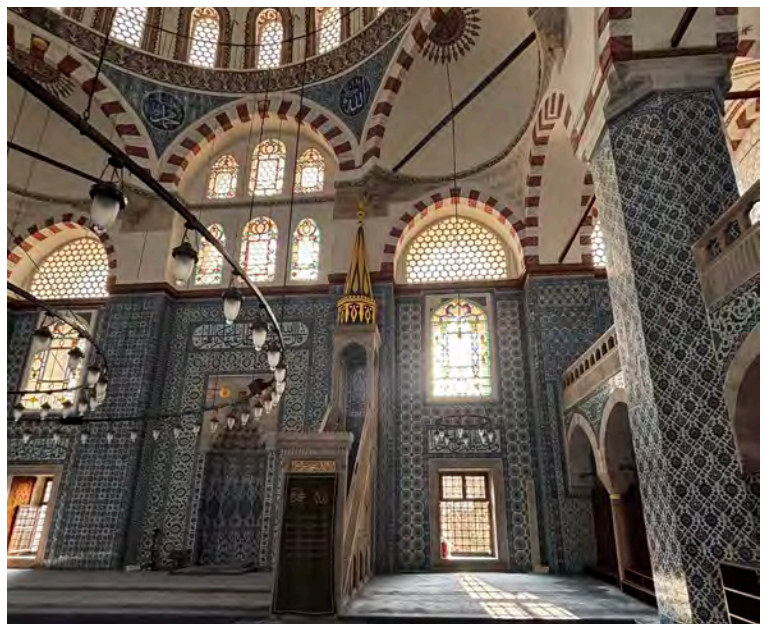
One of the great luxuries of travelling by sea is the ability to unpack once and wake up somewhere new each morning. On an eight-day small-ship voyage through the Aegean aboard Viking's newest ocean ship, Viking Vesta, that ease became the framework for something deeper: tracing the origins of ancient civilization from Istanbul to Athens at a pace that allowed history to unfold naturally.

Moving slowly across water that once carried traders, philosophers and conquerors, the journey revealed how closely the ancient and modern worlds still coexist; not as museum pieces, but as living places shaped by time.



Istanbul: Where East Meets West

Our journey began in Istanbul, a city that feels less like a destination and more like a threshold. Straddling both Europe and Asia and divided by the Bosphorus Strait, Istanbul has carried many names through history, yet its identity remains layered and vibrant.





Our first visit was to the Rustem Pasha Mosque. From the outside, it is modest and easy to overlook, but stepping inside reveals a jewel box of blue, white and green hand-painted Iznik tiles, intricate and serene. Mosques here are as much social spaces as places of prayer, and the quiet reverence inside offered a gentle introduction to the cultural depth that would define the trip.

Just steps away, the Spice Market brought a sensory shift. The air was rich with saffron, cinnamon and turmeric, and vendors offered tea, dried fruit and Turkish delight. Evil eye amulets, believed to offer protection from harm appeared everywhere, a reminder that ancient beliefs still weave through daily life.

With a population of 15 million and a notably young demographic, Istanbul is both ancient and energetic, a fitting place to begin a journey through civilization's roots.

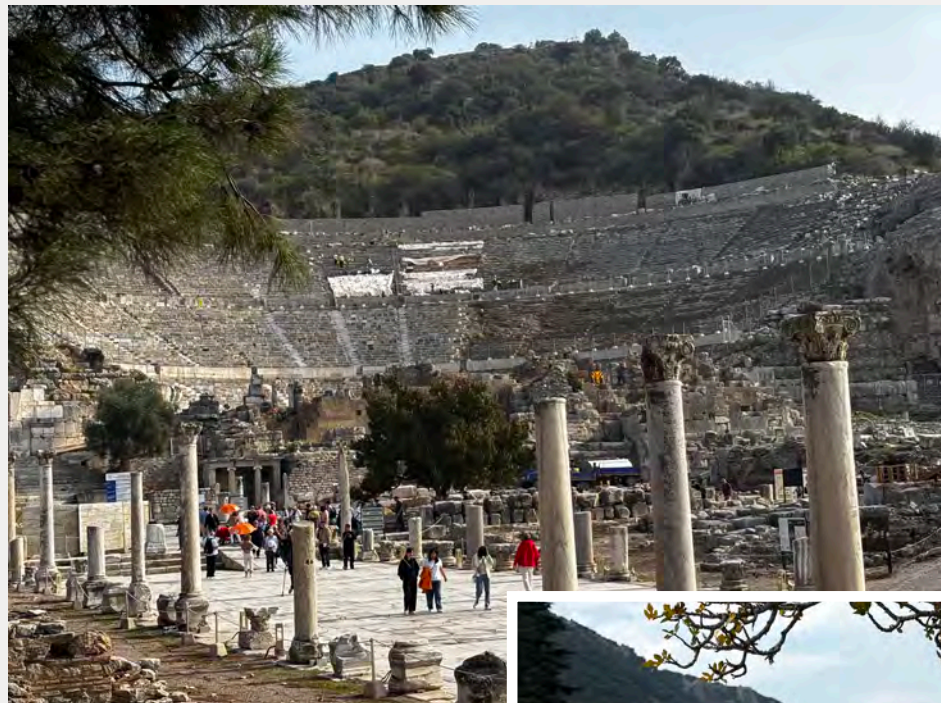
Ephesus: Walking Through the Ancient World

From the port of Kusadasi, the road to Ephesus winds through orchards of olive, fig, peach, pomegranate and mandarin trees. The approach feels almost cinematic, heightening the impact of what lies ahead.

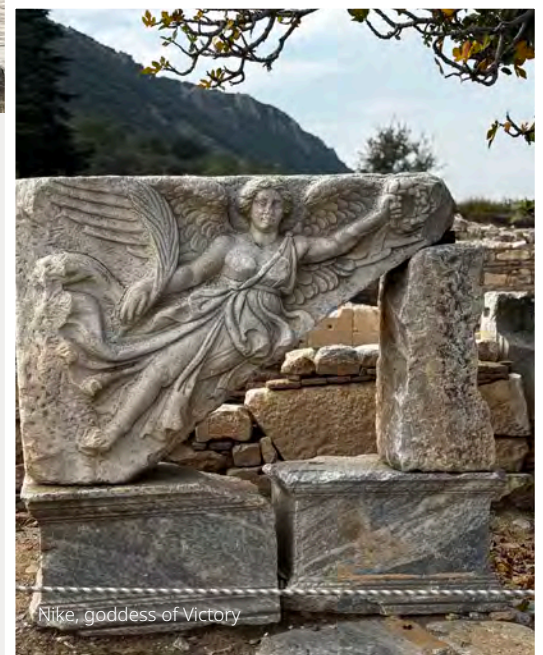
Ephesus is one of the largest ancient cities in the world. The ruins are astonishing and more impressive than any I've ever seen. Excavations only began in 1967 and restoration continues today, with cranes still visible across the site.

The scale is breathtaking: the grand Library of Celsus, broad avenues worn smooth by centuries of footsteps and the immense theater capable of seating 24,000 people. Today, the theater still hosts evening concerts, with performers ranging from Pavarotti to Elton John, Diana Ross, Ray Charles and John Legend.

Across from the library, the ancient latrines remain intact. Our guide explained that wealthy businessmen once gathered there each morning to talk politics and trade; in winter, servants would warm the marble seats before their arrival. It's a detail that's both amusing and deeply human, collapsing centuries into a moment of recognition.



With fewer visitors in the shoulder season, there was space to linger, absorb the silence between stones and understand why Ephesus remains one of the most powerful archaeological sites in the Mediterranean.



Nike, goddess of Victory



View over heart-shaped bay of Lindos

Rhodes:

Myth, Landscape and Living History



Arriving on Rhodes felt like stepping into a place where history and daily life are in constant conversation. With no other cruise ships in port, the streets were quiet, shops unhurried and the experience refreshingly uncommercial.

As we boarded the excursion bus, I greeted our guide with a tentative “Kalimera” (good morning). He broke into a huge smile and replied, “I love you.” Any attempt to speak the local language, even a single word, goes a long way. Being the only ship in port made an enormous difference; empty streets invited easy wandering and shop owners welcomed conversation and bartering with genuine warmth.

Rhodes is known for its beaches, but it was the landscape that surprised me most—rolling green hills, valleys thick with pine and cypress and a coastline that shifts effortlessly from rugged to luminous. It’s easy to see why the island is called the Emerald Isle. In the village of Lindos, white limestone houses shimmer beneath

the Acropolis, perched above a heart-shaped bay crowned by the Temple of Athena. The views stretch endlessly across the Aegean and Greek mythology feels less like a story and more like a natural extension of the land.

Later, wandering through Rhodes Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site revealed layers of medieval walls, mosques and palaces alongside cafés, shops and a remarkable number of cats. It’s humbling to remember that this island once held the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. Even now, that sense of grandeur lingers in the cobbled streets and sea-salted air.



Old Town



Winery view

Crete:

Traditions That Endure



Crete, Greece’s largest island, offered a different kind of continuity, one rooted in family and craft. Inland, we visited a family-owned winery founded in 2013 and now the island’s largest. From the sunlit tasting room overlooking the vineyards, with the Dikti Mountains rising softly in the distance, the balance of tradition and innovation was unmistakable.

Maria and her brother Nikos Haralabakis trained abroad and now work alongside their father, who learned through experience, each contributing to a shared legacy. As we tasted the wines, bread and cheese cleansed our



Potter, Nikos Ploumakis



Maria and Nikos Haralabakis

palates between sips, grounding the experience in simple, enduring ritual.

Nearby, another family tradition came to life through pottery. Master potter Nikos Ploumakis worked at his wheel, shaping local clay into elegant vessels within minutes. Outside, pottery baked in the Cretan sun before spending days in the kiln, while shelves inside overflowed with handmade treasures crafted by the entire family. Crete doesn’t preserve tradition; it lives it.



Athens Acropolis

The Lens of the Voyage

Throughout the journey, the ship itself served as a calm, consistent lens through which to experience these historically rich destinations. Viking describes its style as “comfortable

elegance,” a philosophy evident in everything from attentive service to peaceful public spaces.

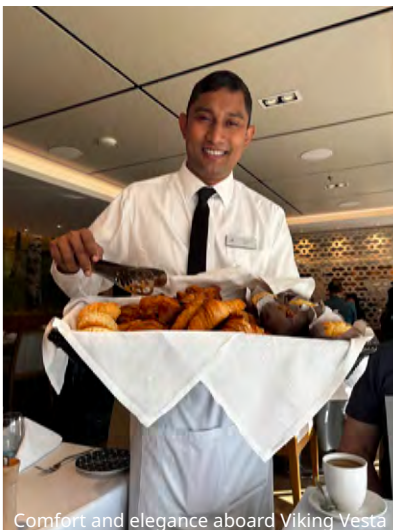
Days of exploration ended with restorative meals, quiet evenings and moments of solitude in light-filled cabins. A visit to the Nordic Spa, including a deeply relaxing Hygge massage,

reinforced the sense that this was travel designed to nourish rather than exhaust.

Tracing ancient civilization through the Aegean allows the past to reveal itself gradually. Each port builds on the last, creating continuity rather than isolated experiences. Moving slowly across these storied waters, it becomes clear that civilization here isn't something left behind, it's something still very much alive.



Viking Vesta



Comfort and elegance aboard Viking Vesta

Athens:

A Journey Comes Full Circle

On our final full day, we arrived in Athens and made the ascent to the Acropolis. The climb is steep, but the reward is profound. Passing through the Propylaea and stepping onto the rocky plateau, the Parthenon stands weathered and commanding, surveying the city below. Having seen the Goddess Nike in Ephesus and the Temple of Athena in Rhodes, standing here felt like the journey coming full circle, fragments of ancient Greece converging on one sacred hill.

A Floating Home Base: Life Aboard Viking Vesta

The Viking Vesta, the newest ship in Viking's ocean fleet, is designed not to compete with the destinations it visits, but to quietly support them. Carrying 998 guests, it remains firmly in the small-ship category, creating an atmosphere that feels calm, uncrowded and intentionally unhurried. All staterooms feature private verandas, and the ship's light-filled Scandinavian design favours natural materials, clean lines and spaces meant for reflection rather than spectacle.

Viking's adults-only philosophy is immediately noticeable. There are no announcements echoing through corridors and no high-energy entertainment. Instead, the ship feels like a refined retreat at sea. Returning guests appreciate that every Viking ship shares the same layout, making navigation intuitive from the moment of boarding.

Dining reflects the same understated elegance. The Restaurant offers white-linen service without reservations, while the World Café provides a relaxed, globally inspired buffet. Favourites include Mamsen's for Scandinavian open-faced sandwiches and waffles, the Pool Grill for casual outdoor meals and The Chef's Table, which presents rotating multi-course tasting menus paired with wines and requires advance reservations.

Wellness is central to life onboard. The Nordic Spa features a Scandinavian-inspired thermal circuit, and the signature Hygge massage, performed on a warm bed of sand nuggets and finished with scented oils offers deep relaxation after long days ashore.

Service aboard Viking Vesta is polished yet personal. Crew members remember names and preferences while allowing guests to feel entirely unhurried. As a floating home base, the ship succeeds by staying in the background, creating the comfort and continuity that allow the ancient world beyond its decks to take centre stage.