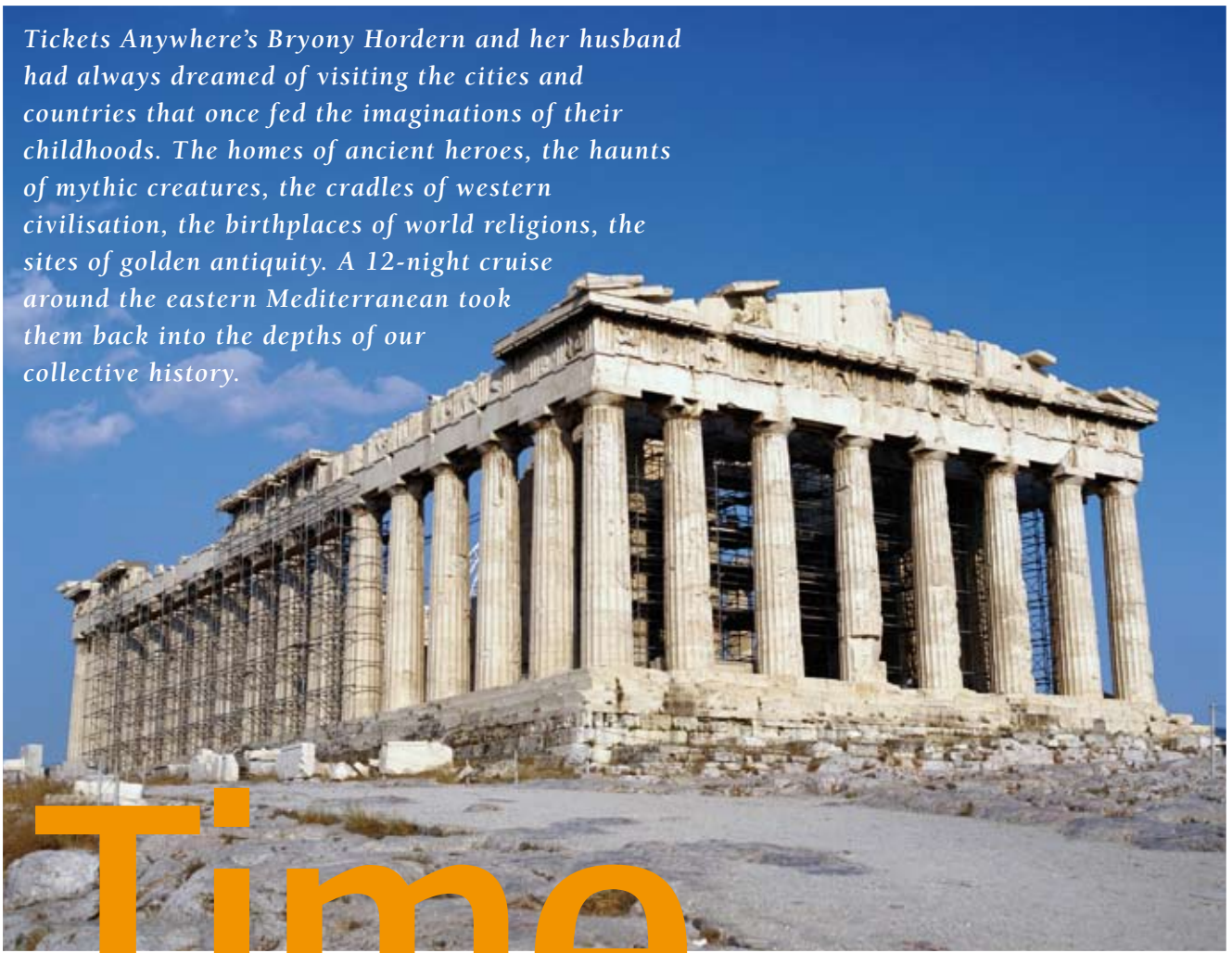


Tickets Anywhere's Bryony Hordern and her husband had always dreamed of visiting the cities and countries that once fed the imaginations of their childhoods. The homes of ancient heroes, the haunts of mythic creatures, the cradles of western civilisation, the birthplaces of world religions, the sites of golden antiquity. A 12-night cruise around the eastern Mediterranean took them back into the depths of our collective history.



Time travellers

We flew to Athens in late May when we knew that the temperatures, hovering in the mid-70s, would be pleasurable rather than oppressive. From the airport, we were whisked to the resplendent King George Palace hotel in the heart of the

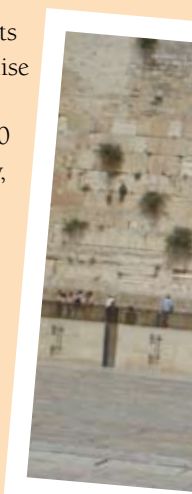
city. Regally luxurious, the rooms were adorned with upholstery fabrics in raw silk, satin-fringed drapes and grey-veined marble bathrooms.

In the morning, we took breakfast on the rooftop of the hotel, overlooking the wonder of the Parthenon, that flowering in carved, fluted, iconographic stone of the power of classical Athens, capping the Acropolis, itself an exuberant testimony to the magnitude of the achievements of ancient Greek artistic

and religious culture, in eternal homage to the goddess Athena.

Having feasted on the sights of Athens, we boarded our cruise ship, the Pacific Princess, in Athens harbour. With only 700 fellow passengers for company, rather than the overwhelming numbers who travel on some of the larger cruises, there was room and chance to get to know other people.

We sailed for Santorini, a volcanic island dot among the many other dots that cluster about the southern Aegean



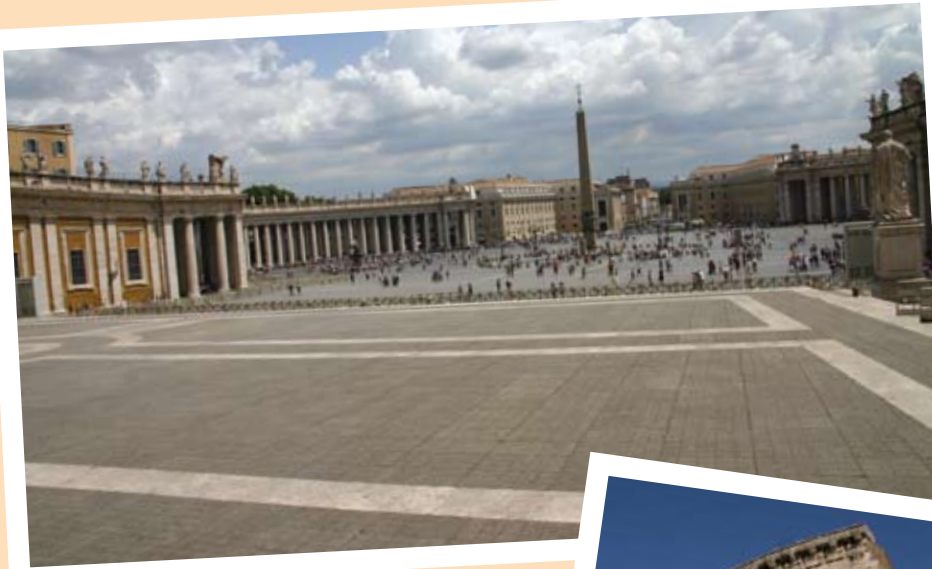


Kusadasi, standing on a bay on the west coast of Turkey, with its palm-lined boulevards, is one of the Aegean's most attractive resort towns. It is also the gateway to Ephesus. Before the Cayster River silted up, marooning the settlement miles from the sea, Ephesus was once a major trading port of the ancient world and, as home to one of the seven churches of Asia, a centre for early Christianity. Human history – the Persians, the Lydians, the Greeks, the Syrians, the Egyptians, the Romans, the Byzantines have all left their signatures on the archaeology of the place – runs deep and long in Ephesus. We were treated to a tour

sea, but, for all its insignificance on the map, an idyll of white-painted houses and crystalline blue skies, cupping a giant aquamarine lagoon. Clinging to the sides of the caldera – Santorini was the site in the 15th-century BC of a civilisation-destroying eruption, the tidal wave from which laid waste to Minoan Crete – its towns and villages are laced with strings of steps that thread their way through the houses. Excavations have unearthed a buried settlement from the Minoan period, its buildings decorated with frescoes, preserved by the volcanic ash, showing saffron gatherers, fishermen with their catches ribboned by their gills and boats escorted by leaping dolphins.

From an apocalypse of nature to an apocalypse of the human imagination. Our next port of call was Patmos, the island on which an exiled St John wrote the Biblical Book of Revelations, a vision of the end of times.





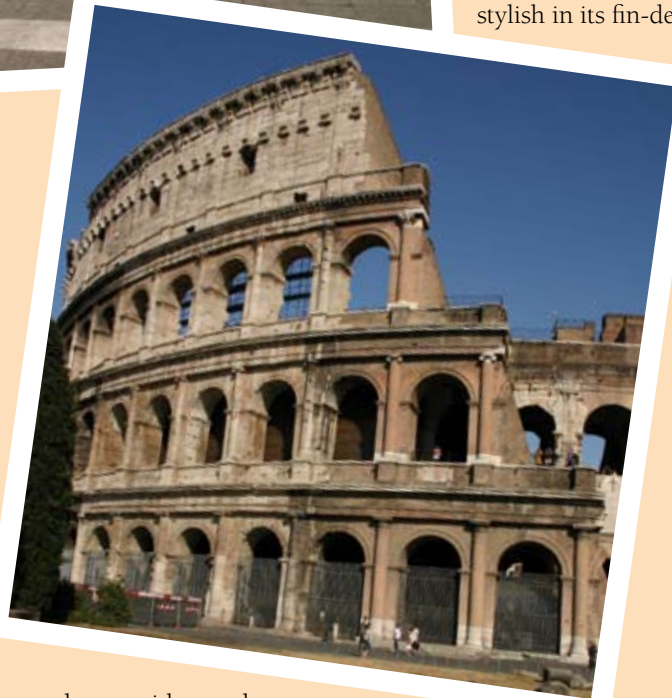
intimately scaled statues, masks, jewellery and shrines – the museum's true glory are the Tutankhamun rooms – that once embellished the ancient dynasties of the Nile valley.

Two leisurely days at sea saw us heading back across the Mediterranean and to Sorrento, a small port city port in Italy's Campania region. Out across the Bay of Naples, the peak of Vesuvius seemed to touch the sky. A private lift carried us up the Sorrentine cliffs to our hotel, the Excelsior Vittoria, elegantly stylish in its fin-de-siecle splendour, outdone only by

of the huge expanse of architectural ruins that even now offer only a hint of the splendours that were ancient Ephesus: the Library of Celsus, the gate of Augustus, the temple of Hadrian, St John's Basilica and the Odeon of Vedius Antonius. Of the greatest marvel of Ephesus, however, the temple of Artemis and one of the seven original wonders of the world, nothing more remains than one rather inconspicuous column.

After a day at sea, we docked at the northern Israeli port of Haifa, ranged on the slopes of Mount Carmel. From there it was a journey inland to Nazareth, nestling in a natural bowl in the landscape, framed by the hills of the Lebanon mountain range, and the childhood home of Jesus; then on to the central West Bank and Bethlehem, the birthplace of Jesus; and from there to Jerusalem. Tucked at the foot of the Mount of Olives in the Kidron Valley, flanked by shaded groves of citrus trees, is the Garden of Gethsemane, where, the night before his crucifixion, Jesus prayed with his disciples. Overlooking the groves on one side is the Church of All Nations, while nearby stands the Russian Orthodox Church of St Mary Magdalene, topped by golden Byzantine domes. We walked the route that Jesus would have taken, his cross on his back, on the way to Calvary.

Port Said, our next destination, is a busy Egyptian harbour close by the Suez Canal, its merchant



houses heavy with grand balconies. Then it was Cairo.

An overnight stay at the magnificent Mena House hotel – it rests almost in the shadow of the great pyramids, its corridors gently scented by the fragrance of jasmine carried by the air from the gardens – refreshed us for a visit to the Amr ibn al-As mosque, a forest of pillars and a carpet of exquisitely tiled floors, the pyramids of Giza, towering against the blue sky like their own mountain

range and, stood beneath them, feeling almost as ancient, and the Sphinx, sandstorm beaten but still staring east towards the rising of the sun, enigmatic and monolithic. As if the monumentalism of Giza were not enough, the galleries of Cairo's Egyptian Museum are a trove of the more

the stunning views that sweep from the terraces across the sparkling bay below. We took the train to nearby Pompeii, a catastrophe and a culture embalmed in pumice and volcanic ash. It is possible, as we did, to arrange your own guide, given how much there is to see and learn.

The cruise ended in Rome where we had time – two days – in which to explore the eternal city's own many pasts: the still breathtaking skeleton of the Colosseum, the magnificent remnants of the Forum, Trajan's Column, the Pantheon, the grandeur of the Vatican, the Renaissance piazzas and the Baroque palazzos.

One of the pleasures of a cruise is that it is an unhurried, always relaxing way to travel. A cruise ship is a floating hotel that has the good manners to conduct you to your destinations.

Our cruise lasted 12 delightful days. In that time we travelled thousands of years

