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Four siblings and their spouses embark on a Mediterranean cruise for some family bonding time.

together at SEA



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BY JANNA GRABER



Traveling has always been important to my family, but organizing trips was no small task. My parents had three children and then adopted five more, so vacations took some planning.

Fast-forward many years, and we still love to travel together. Early on, we learned that cruising offers a stress-free, fun option. No one had to cook, plan meals, host visitors or organize activities, leaving us free to enjoy our time together.

When our own kids were little, we took a family cruise to the Caribbean on Disney Cruise Line. For my dad's 70th birthday, he chose a Holland America Line cruise to Alaska for our family trip. But many years had passed since then. With busy jobs, growing families and that dreadful time of COVID, it had been way too long, and I missed the camaraderie of my siblings, who had always been my constant friends.

Above: The old port in Chania on the Greek island of Crete

Inset: Our writer's family in Ephesus, Turkey



COURTESY OF ROYAL CARIBBEAN

Above: The Main Dining Room aboard the *Odyssey of the Seas*

Right: A guided tour can enrich your visit to the Roman Colosseum.



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So, three of my siblings and I recently decided to take another cruise along with our spouses. (Though all of my brothers and sisters were invited, not all could make this trip.)

Planning the Cruise

We chose Royal Caribbean's nine-night Greek Isles cruise on the *Odyssey of the Seas*. It would take us to Italy, Greece and Turkey, destinations high on our bucket lists.

Once we had selected the cruise, booking it for our group of eight was simple. We worked with a AAA travel advisor, who helped each couple book their cabin and make flight arrangements from our different cities. She also made sure we had our own private group table for dining on the cruise and advised us on shore excursions.

Traveling in a group has its challenges. Each person has their own idea of what

they want from a trip. My siblings and I are close, but we're all very different. How would we plan our time together?

The good thing about a cruise is that you can spend as much time together or apart as you want. For group activities, we decided to take turns planning our port visits, with each couple assigned a different port. Sometimes, we booked ship excursions; other times we explored the destination independently as a group.

ROME:

Walking in Ancient Footsteps

Our cruise left from Rome, so we flew in a few days early to explore this iconic city. We stayed at the Anantara Palazzo Naiadi Rome Hotel, a luxury hotel housed in a 19th-century palazzo within walking distance of the Imperial Forums, the Trevi Fountain and the Spanish Steps.

I was in charge of the Rome activities. Our group of eight was the perfect size to book a private tour of the Colosseum and Roman Forum. Our guide was a trained archaeologist whose expertise made this fascinating experience even more special.

POMPEII: *A Look into the Past*

We boarded the *Odyssey of the Seas* in Rome and made our first stop in Naples. My brother Andrew suggested that we bypass that city and head instead to Pompeii, about 45 minutes away. Pompeii is an ancient Roman town that was frozen in time by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD.

Walking Pompeii's ancient streets past the remnants of homes and marketplaces, we tried to imagine life there. Peering into well-preserved ruins with intricate frescoes on the walls and colorful mosaic floors, my husband,



PHOTO BY JANNA GRABER

From top: The Caribbean-style Lime and Coconut bar; the Odeon of Herodes Atticus in Athens; a fresco at the ancient Roman city of Pompeii



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Benjamin, remarked at how advanced their civilization seemed.

Later, at the small museum, we saw haunting plaster casts of citizens frozen in their final moments. Pompeii brings that tragic past to light in a very real way.

Days at Sea

During our two days at sea, we booked a ride on the North Star, an observation capsule that goes 300 feet above the ship, offering 360-degree views. We also tried RipCord by iFLY, a sky diving simulator that offers the feeling of freefalling without leaving the ship.

Other times, we sat by the pool or sipped piña colodas at the Caribbean-style Lime and Coconut bar while enjoying precious time to catch up.

We attended several Broadway-style shows, the best of which was *The Effectors*, a fast-paced multimedia original production about a band of heroes and their archnemesis. The highlight came when dozens of mini lighted drones flew out over the audience.

ATHENS: *Ancient History*

At our next stop, my brother Philip suggested we tour the Acropolis, an ancient citadel perched atop a rocky outcrop.

Once the center of Athens' religious life, its towering structures have been well preserved. The Parthenon, a temple dedicated to the goddess Athena, is a masterpiece of classical Greek architecture.

As a theater director, my sister-in-law Krista couldn't wait to visit the Odeon of Herodes Atticus, a Roman theater built at the Acropolis around 161 AD. The ancient Greeks had a huge influence on theater, which is still visible today. While we explored the open-air theater, Krista explained how the Greeks introduced changes of scenery, costumes, music and more.

MYKONOS:

A Gem in the Aegean Sea

From there it was on to Mykonos, one of the most photographed of the Greek islands, famous for its white-washed, cerulean-accented buildings. We spent the morning exploring the narrow, winding streets of Mykonos Town (or Chora), stopping to eat seafood and baklava at a local restaurant overlooking the sea and then browsing its small shops.

One unique area of the island is so-called Little Venice. It's known for its windmills and colorful houses built right at the water's edge. The setting was so picturesque that we just had to capture it with a group photo there.



EPHESUS:

UNESCO World Heritage Ruins

At our next stop, Turkey, our excursion took us to Ephesus. While Mykonos charmed me, the UNESCO World Heritage ruins here left me in awe. Our guide shared some insight into the city's Biblical significance. The apostle Paul spent a considerable amount of time here, as chronicled in the Book of Ephesians.

Strolling through the ruins of the Library of Celsus, built in 117 AD, I felt tiny next to this towering emblem of Roman might. Once a repository of more than 12,000 scrolls, it is one of the most impressive buildings remaining from the Roman Empire.

SANTORINI:

Wine and Tradition

Just getting to Santorini, our next stop, was an adventure. The town is perched high above the sea on dramatic cliffs.

We took a modern cable car from Old Port up to the town of Fira. My sister Debbie decided we should learn about wine



This page, from top: Family photo in Mykonos; the cobblestone streets of Mykonos Town; a view high above the sea in Santorini



Art Space Winery and Art Gallery

COURTESY OF ART SPACE WINERY

by visiting a few wineries. Santorini's dry climate and volcanic soil is ideal for grape cultivation, and the island has a rich tradition of winemaking.

Our favorite stop was at Art Space Winery, a winery and art gallery. On the wine tour, we visited its underground pumice rock caverns, which create a perfect place to age wine. Later, we did a wine tasting in a part of the cavern lined with art by local and international artists. Our favorite was the sweet dessert wine Vinsanto, which we purchased to take home.

Returning to the ship, we decided to walk the winding trail down from the village to the shore. Walking the steep, slippery trail is not for the faint of heart, but we enjoyed the views and the exercise.

CRETE:

Savoring Time Together

At our last stop, Crete, we headed to Chania, the Greek island's second-largest city. It has a lovely location along the Venetian Harbor, and we walked along the Aegean Sea, admiring the scenery and taking in the sunshine. At a portside restaurant, we dined on fresh fish and local wine, watching lazily as wooden fishing boats bobbed in the water.

We had experienced so much during our cruise, and my mind was filled with precious memories. Italy, Greece and Turkey had left an impression, but the best part of our vacation was simply spending time with family.

At the airport, when it came time for us to head in different directions, I began to feel a little nostalgic. My brother Andrew must have felt the same way, asking, "Hey, guys, what do you think about a Caribbean cruise next year?" We immediately smiled and agreed.

Royal Caribbean's *ODYSSEY OF THE SEAS*

The 16-deck *Odyssey of the Seas* carries up to 4,198 guests and 1,612 crew. Its modern design includes roomy common areas, so the ship never felt crowded on our sailing. Our balcony suite allowed us to enjoy the views as we sailed in and out of each port.

The ship has seven complimentary dining options, plus eight specialty restaurants that require a reservation and an additional fee. One of our favorite areas of the ship was the Solarium, an adults-only tranquil escape at the front of the ship with lounges, whirlpools, a bar and bistro, and sweeping views of the sea. —JG



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