



Celestyal Cruises Offers Authentic Experience—On & Off Shore

ONBOARDREVIEW

By Laurel Herman

Visiting the Greek Islands and neighboring Turkey by ship is a bucket list vacation for your clients, particularly when the cruise line is Greek and offers an authentic local hospitality experience. That is exactly the type of sailing **Celestyal Cruises** offers.

“Our philosophy is about the Greek experience on and off the ships,” says Gordon Dirker, v.p., business development, North America for Celestyal Cruises. “We are a cruise line but for us, the hero is the destination.”

Recommend was on board the **Celestyal Crystal** this past summer experiencing the 1-week *Idyllic Aegean* itinerary—a must-do sailing it is. It’s chock-full of Greek history and mythology, ancient cities and culture, landscapes unique in nature, fresh, locally inspired culinary experiences, homegrown music and complete R&R on the Greek Islands’ beaches.

Celestyal makes it possible to experience not just the popular Greek islands of Santorini and Mykonos, but

also Milos, Rhodes, Patmos and Crete—all in one week.

The Onboard Experience

Being a mid-sized, 1,200-passenger ship with 480 staterooms, of which 53 have private balconies, makes it easy to get around while exploring on board. It’s well-outfitted with multiple dining and entertainment choices, and even a spa to indulge in after a day on shore. Adding to the ambiance is an international staff that is friendly and provides excellent service.

Our accommodations were in a recently refreshed outside balcony suite, all of which are located on Decks 6 and 7. The 172-sq.-ft. suite offers a sitting area, comfortable full-size bed, double closets, bathroom with shower (with optimal water pressure) and a TV (though with all the ports and onboard entertainment on offer there’s hardly time to turn it on). Dirker reminds advisors to tell their clients they will be spending a lot of time off the ship.

Who to Book on Celestyal?

Travel advisors should focus on those customers who want to learn about different cultures and immerse themselves in a destination.

“We are a destination-centric cruise operator and we offer cruises for travelers, not cruisers per se. Those who value the destination as most important yet like to enjoy the comfort of a premium ship while they explore a destination,” says Dirker. “And, based on the fact that most guests are spending so much time in port, while a balcony is nice to have, most of our guests are perfectly content to have a comfortable stateroom without a balcony.” Dirker points out that if your clients do want a balcony, book early as those cabins do go first.

Travel advisors should also think groups, as the *Celestyal Crystal* ship caters to many groups; i.e., religious—considering the Biblical history in the region—students, families, multi-generational, weddings and milestone events. Another point in choosing who to sell the brand to is to consider that approximately 50 percent of Celestyal

Opposite page: *Celestyal Crystal* sailing to Santorini. This page, top to bottom: Dish by Chef Diane Kochilas, Jr. Balcony Suite; and the Temple of Poseidon.

ships’ guests hail from international destinations not the U.S. So, be sure to book travelers who like a culturally diverse experience on board, too. Also, remind them that the ship operates with extended port stays on its 7-night itineraries, allowing guests to truly explore more of the Greek Islands and the eastern Med.

Culinary Delights

The culinary experience on board is superb, not just in quality of ingredients, taste and presentation, but also in the style of dining. For instance, at breakfast, your clients can opt for an elegant dining experience just like they would for dinner in either the *Amalthia* or *Olympus* restaurants with tables dressed in linen and a full breakfast menu. Or they can opt for the casual dining indoors or bring their food alfresco to a covered area on Deck 9. For dinner, the two restaurants offer an array of choices—from meats, seafood and vegetarian dishes to, of course, local Greek specialties. Come dinnertime, cruisers dress smart but casual, creating a non-stuffy vibe.

New for 2022 will be the inclusion of culinary items created by Diane Kochilas, a consulting chef, leading expert on Greek and Mediterranean cooking, cookbook author and host of PBS-TV’s “My Greek Table.” The Greek specialties that will appear on menus will be mostly focused on the Blue Zone Mediterranean diet—plant-forward and healthy. Of course, Greek fare such as lamb will also be featured. There will also be a new specialty restaurant available to guests that will feature Kochilas’ recipes exclusively.

We were also taken by the variety of bar service on board *Crystal*, pre- and post-dinner. Clients can enjoy libations coupled with music, from classical melodies to international hits and even dance music. I particularly enjoyed the nighttime shows in the *Muses Lounge and Bar*, including my fave, the ABBA show. And your clients will love that the cruise includes a *Classic drinks* package, giving the cruise pricing even more value. By the way, included in the fare are two shore excursions—one on one of my favorite islands, Rhodes, to the beautiful city of Lindos; and the other a visit to the world-renowned Ephesus ruins in Turkey. ▶





Taking a plunge in Milos, Greece.

Safety First

Front and center during our sailing experience—and you should share this with your clients—is how hard Celestyal is working to make sure their passengers and crew stay safe. At press time, all U.S. travelers arriving in Greece must have either a negative Covid-19 PCR test taken no later than 72 hours before arrival or a negative antigen (rapid) certificate taken no longer than 48 hours before arrival. Proof of a negative test is not required however for travelers holding a valid vaccination certificate. All travelers must also complete a passenger locator form (PLF) prior to arrival and show a provided QR code upon arrival. Celestyal requires a PCR test before boarding that needs to be administered no more than 72 hours before sailing. During our cruise, they gave us a rapid COVID test before boarding and required daily self-administered temperature checks via easy-to-use equipment at multiple stations throughout the ship. Guests were also required to mask in common spaces except when outside or dining. The entire crew is also required to mask. Says Dirker, “We are subject to Hellenic and EU health and safety regulations, and as **CLIA** members, we go above and beyond implementing their recommendations as well. For the spring 2022 cruise restart, we are hopeful that some of these current protocols will start to ease.”

A Few Favorite Experiences

Each port call has its own charm, but here’s a handful of must-do experiences:

Athens: Recommend clients have a drink or dinner at Horizon Sky Bar with views of the city and the Acropolis at night. Only way to get there is by cable car. Also, visit the Acropolis museum and take a stroll in Plaka, Athens’ old town.

Rhodes: Here, one finds the world’s best-preserved medieval town; visit the Acropolis and the town of Lindos (this is included as a port excursion when purchasing the cruise).

Milos: Experience the geological formations—similar to moonscapes—that resulted from undersea eruptions millions of years ago. Then visit Kleftiko and swim in the turquoise, crystal-clear waters through caves and amazing rock formations.

Throughout the islands: Experience as many local taverns while on shore. We feasted on delicious Greek dishes like moussaka, zucchini pancakes, tasty grilled lamb and meats and, of course, Greek salads with copious chunks of feta cheese.

Mykonos: Take a nighttime stroll to enjoy the winding walkways brimming over with shops, restaurants and bars.

Santorini: Besides the views from Oia Village, which are the most photographed in the world, don’t miss visiting the Symposium of Music & Mythology Cultural Center in the enchanting village of Megalochori. Clients would take this excursion on their own.

Cape Sounion: Visit the Temple of Poseidon, from the golden age of Athens, with its rich history.

Crete: Gateway to Krista, a charming, low-key traditional village where you can stroll

through local shops and take in the sights while sipping coffee at an alfresco table.

Getting There

American Airlines has ramped up its service to Greece. We flew the new nonstop daily service from New York to Athens in a Boeing 777-200 aircraft with a superb Business Class offering.

This past summer, American also started flying from Chicago to Athens on a Boeing 787-8 aircraft as well as from Philadelphia to Athens. These three routes will continue to operate through the end of October and resume May 2022.

“American Airlines remains committed to the travel advisors’ community as recognized by ASTA, which named American Airlines the ‘2021 Airline of the Year,’” says Derek Stewart, American Airlines’ sales manager-global cruise partnerships. “This past year served as a vivid reminder of how far we have come as a travel industry and the travel advisor community’s vital role in our recovery.”

Looking to the future, Stewart adds, “We remain committed to our partnership with Celestyal Cruises and supporting each other’s business. Cruise travel stimulates air travel and air travel enables cruise travel. Celestyal Cruises recognizes American Airlines as a strategic partner to serve Greece as a key destination. ”

Importance of Advisors

Celestyal continues to focus on working with travel advisors in North America with three BDMs who are 100 percent dedicated to this effort. Travel advisors have responded with 2022 retail business already on the books that has surpassed what was produced by travel advisors in all of 2019. In addition to commission incentives, says Dirker, “we offer a *Book Three; Sail Free* program as well as FAM trips and aggressive advisor discounts.”

Celestyal has announced that the 1-week cruises aboard *Crystal* will begin sailing on April 30, 2022. The line’s other ship, *Olympia*, will offer 3- and 4-day all-Greece programs. Both ships will sail from the port of Lavrio where Celestyal has its own terminal, allowing for faster and easier boarding/processing and which is closer to the Athens airport. ■

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