

The Black Sea and Holy Lands

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This was a 12-day Holland America Cruise on the Rotterdam starting and ending in Piraeus (Athens), Greece. Holland America has started an open dining concept for dinner. We opted for this and were pleasantly surprised how well it worked. The open dining is from 5:30pm to 9:00pm and you can make reservations for same day up to 7pm. You can also just show up at anytime and be seated. They seat you at tables with other passengers who have arrived at about the same time. We did enjoy the open seating dining. The ship was booked to capacity but did not feel crowded at all. They did a good job of getting everyone off and on their tours each day without a hitch. Because some of the tours were had large numbers of people taking them, they staggered the time you were to disembark. On the Jerusalem/Bethlehem tour there were 744 people – very popular tour. The ship only had 1352 passengers. In Egypt the buses when in convoy with police escort and we had police/security people on each bus.

Cities visited were Istanbul, Turkey; Varna, Bulgaria; Odessa, Ukraine; Constanta, Romania; Haifa (Jerusalem), Israel; Limassol, Cyprus; and Alexandria (Cairo), Egypt.

Highlights of the cruise were the Hippodrome, Blue Mosque, Grand Bazaar and Spice Market in Istanbul. In Varna, the Antiquities Museum was very interesting and we saw a wonderful cultural program with dancing and music. Odessa, we saw the Potemkin steps. The Potemkin steps are right in front of you as leave the port area where we docked. Also in Odessa we saw the 5 domed St. Panteleimon Church. Constanta is the largest port on the Black Sea. This is more of a resort area for the Black Sea. Constanta has some nice beach areas. In Constanta our tour was a very old church and then a shopping area. And out to the beach resort area.

Haifa, here we did a full day – 12 hrs – Jerusalem and Bethlehem, I have to say these two cities were one of the best days of the cruise. The rich history in each city is incredible. We visited the Church of Sepulcher, inside the old walled city of Jerusalem, the West Wall or Wailing Wall, the Mount of Olives, Stations of the Cross and the Church of Gethsemane.

Limassol, we saw Apollo's Sanctuary and a quaint village called Odomos. Also at Limassol we visited the ancient city of Kourion with its preserved mosaic floors. Alexandria – Cairo – another 12 hr day, but we saw the Pyramids and the Sphinx and had a lunch cruise on the Nile.

This was an incredible itinerary and one of the most interesting cruises we have done.