



Santorini

The most beautiful place in the world

Buying a simple postcard shouldn't be so difficult, I mumbled to myself. But each time I thought I had made a good selection, I looked up at my surroundings and my heart skipped a beat. How could any one place on Earth contain so much beauty? And how can I convey this to the folks back home in a simple picture postcard?

By Diana Lambdin Meyer
Photos by Bruce N. Meyer

We were on Santorini Greece, a crescent-shaped piece of earth about 130 nautical miles from Athens. The island is most known for the striking blue-domed churches, the clusters of square white buildings that have been described as sugar cubes perched on cliffs, and the most fabulous sunsets found anywhere. These kaleidoscopic images of Santorini now spread before me like the colorful Land of Oz appeared to Dorothy as she peaked out of the black-and-white world of her Kansas farmhouse.

Widely considered the most popular of the Greece's 1,400 islands, Santorini is one of three Greek islands on Holland America's itinerary for a 12-day Mediterranean cruise. We had already visited Corfu and Cephalonia, lesser-known yet quite lovely islands under the blue and white-striped Greek flag. We had spent luxurious days in Venice and Capri, Italy, and Dubrovnik, Croatia. From each I had sent postcards with similar declarations to what I now felt—that I was in the most beautiful place in the world and nothing I experienced ever again would be quite as lovely.



Much of the Mediterranean is this way. Something about the warmth of the sun, the intensity of blue in the sky and water, and the millennia of history and mythology that abound here transports travelers, particularly antipodal North Americans, to a place of inquisitive and fairytale-like ecstasy.

Archeologists adore Santorini for the remains of the Minoan culture, particularly the treasures to be explored in the village of Akrotiri on the southern tip of this sliver of land less than 60 square miles. Santorini is what remains of an island once known as Thira that literally had its head blown off in a cataclysmic volcano eruption in 1450 BC. Apparently when the volcano erupted, residents had enough warning to escape so the falling ash and debris did minimal damage to what had been a thriving community.

Since the Holland America cruise schedule allows only about 10 hours to experience Santorini,

Cruise ships sail through an opening in the caldera to an interior that is about 35 acres across, which is about the same size as a football field times 35. Be sure to be on deck to witness the changing climate and landscape as the ship anchors here.

Small launches carry passengers from the ship to the old port of Fira Skala. And therein lies a problem, or an opportunity as some may see it. You have to get to the top of the caldera to explore the beauty of Santorini. There are three ways and three ways only to get there.

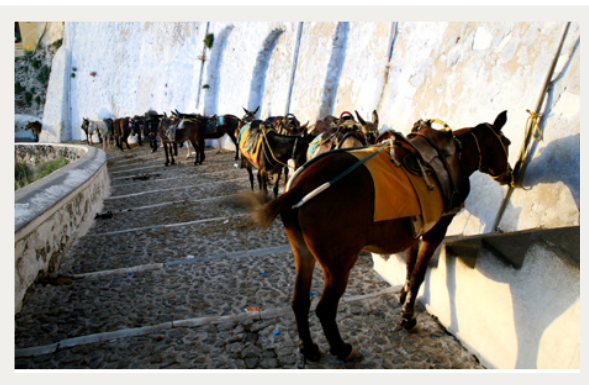
First choice, and by far the easiest: Ride the cable car. For roughly a \$3 round trip, you join about 10 other passengers for a five-minute ride straight up the side of the caldera. There's a bit of a line at the beginning of the day as cruise ships arrive, but overall, the cable car is fast, inexpensive and without risk to life and limb.

Second choice, and a little more adventurous: Ride a donkey. The cost is the same as the cable car. The donkeys and their herders are energetic little two-

But the reward is FiraTown, the conglomeration of those little white sugar cube-like buildings you saw as you sailed in. There are art galleries and gift shops and enough souvenir vendors for the most incurable shop-a-holic. But there are also geraniums the size of small trees, quiet cafés carved into the side of the volcano and a maze-like arrangements of streets that, if explored, allow you to peak into the lives of the people who call Santorini home.

From FiraTown, few visitors find their way to Oia, (pronounced "ee-ah"), on the north end of the island. We chose to rent a car for a few hours and found the process far easier, faster and cheaper than renting a car in the U.S.

In a fairytale destination like Santorini, Oia is the golden slipper. It only fits those who deeply value the unique sense of place provided by an ancient fishing village clinging to the side of a cliff above the sea. Oia is where your spirit is fed with the simplicity of a shopkeeper strumming a guitar, feral kittens playing



many passengers prefer exploring the history of the Minoan people in the Museum of Prehistoric Thira. Not as stuffy as the name implies, the museum includes a lovely collection of figurines, vases and other relics found in Akrotiri. It's a small museum, which means it won't take too much of your time, and it's located in the heart of FiraTown, the capital of Santorini, where all cruise passengers come ashore.

If it's not already a part of your vocabulary, the word "caldera" will be after your visit to Santorini, for that's technically what the island is. A caldera is what's left after a volcano blows its top. It comes from the Spanish word for caldron, so think of the land mass as the rim of the caldron and the Aegean Sea as its contents.

comes very much in need of a bath. The good news is that the path is wide and paved, and the donkeys are in a hurry to get to the top. So hang on tight. It'll be over with soon.

Third choice, and absolutely nuts: Walk. That's what we did, thinking it would be a pleasant energetic way to work off some of the great cruise ship cuisine and get some good pictures along the way. No one mentioned that we would be sharing the trail with the donkeys and all of the wonderful souvenirs that donkeys leave behind. More than 900 steps later, we had received the workout of our lives and memories as vivid as any on the trip.

in the sun, a farmer delivering a basket of tomatoes and a breeze that carries the music of village church bells.

Sit in an open-air café and allow the beauty and sensuality of the Mediterranean to overpower you. Enjoy a glass of wine with bread dipped in olive oil. Have the best baklava of your life. Taste ouzo where it is meant to be sipped. And watch the sun move below the horizon.

This is a destination that will alter the heart of the most hard-to-crack romantic and the been-there-done-that-seen-everything traveler. Santorini is a place to appreciate life as it has been given to you, and any place that does that is truly the most beautiful place in the world. **GP**