

GOING ASHORE: (Cruise port)

A CALL IN CEPHALONIA, GREECE

By Richard H. Wagner

Cephalonia, also known as Kefalonia, is a destination that captures the imagination. Relatively undeveloped as a tourist destination and sparsely populated, it is still possible to imagine the ancient Greek heroes who legend says strode this island. At the same time, you can enjoy its natural beauty and environs that seem to just call for you to relax.

History and Background

The largest of the seven Greek islands in the Ionian Sea, Cephalonia is quite mountainous. Its highest peak, Mount Ainos, rises to 5,341 feet (1,628) meters. Adding to the scenic beauty are the many small inlets and bays along the coast.

Cephalonia has a mild climate - - it is dry and hot with plenty of sunshine in the summer while the winters are rainy with a touch of snow in the mountains.

Evidence indicates that people have lived on Cephalonia since at least 50,000 B.C. Because of its location on ancient trade routes,

the island grew rich from trade. In addition, its now balding mountains were essentially deforested over the years in order to build ships. However, these connections to the outside world also resulted in Cephalonia becoming involved in numerous ancient wars including the Trojan War, the Persian Wars and the Peloponnesian War.

In 188 B.C., the Cephalonia was invaded by the Romans, looting the island and selling the inhabitants into slavery. However, the island eventually became a Roman province. Important Roman antiquities showing a luxurious lifestyle are still being discovered.

The Middle Ages were a turbulent time for Cephalonia. At first, the island was under the control of the Byzantine Empire followed by the Normans, the Kingdom of Naples and still later the Ottoman Turks. However, in 1500, the Ottomans were driven out by the Venetian Republic.

Cephalonia remained under Venetian control until 1797. In that year, Napoleon Bonaparte conquered Venice and took her Ionian

colonies for France. Two years later, the Ottoman Turks, supported by Russia ousted the French but when Czar Alexander I made peace with Napoleon in 1807, the island reverted back to France.

This turn of events did not bring peace. Instead, Napoleon's most steadfast enemy, Great Britain, attacked and drove out the French. In the treaties following Napoleon's abdication in 1814, the Ionian islands became a British protectorate. During this period, the poet Lord Byron visited Cephalonia on his way to assist the cause of Greek freedom from Turkish rule.

In 1864, Cephalonia, together with the other Ionian islands, was united with the recently independent Kingdom of Greece.

Early in World War II, the Axis powers, Italy and Germany, occupied Cephalonia. But after Italy concluded an armistice with the Allies in September 1943, fighting erupted between the Germans and the Italians. The Germans prevailed and executed 5,000 of the 9,000 Italian soldiers that took part in the revolt as a reprisal.

One of the most talked about dates in the history of Cephalonia is 1953. In August of that year, a massive earthquake ravaged the island. Six hundred people were killed and many more injured. Entire towns were destroyed. Prior to the quake, there were 365 villages in Cephalonia; now there are only 200. As a result, although Cephalonia has a long history, you will see very few structures that date from before 1953.

Visiting Cephalonia

Cruise ships arriving in Cephalonia can dock at a new pier in the capital, Argostoli. The waters surrounding the pier, as seemingly throughout Cephalonia, are quite clear and sea turtles are often seen frolicking around the pier.

Agrostoli is more of a town than a city – the population of the entire island is only 33,000 with about a third living in Agrostoli. The capital is somewhat sprawling but well-laid

out with wide streets and squares. Almost the entire town had to be re-built after the 1953 earthquake.

One exception is the Drapano bridge, which runs across the bay linking the peninsular that Agrostoli is on to the main part of the island. It is a stone structure built by the British in 1847 to replace a wooden bridge that they had erected in just 15 days in 1813.

At the opposite end of that same peninsular is a lighthouse that looks like an ancient Greek temple. It too was originally built by the British but had to be re-built following the earthquake. Cruise ships arriving and departing Agrostoli pass close by it.

On the other side of the island from Agrostoli is Sami. A small town, its most impressive feature is the harbor with fishing and ferry boats. This is the primary location where the movie “Captain Corelli's Mandolin” was filmed. (The film and the book upon which it is based were inspired by the aforementioned revolt of the Italian soldiers during World War II).

The ferry boats link Cephalonia to the neighboring island of Ithaca, which is clearly visible from Sami. Ithaca, course, was the home of Odysseus and his struggle to return there is the plot of Homer's epic poem “The Odyssey.” According to legend, Odysseus also ruled Cephalonia and he paused here within sight of his goal. It is interesting to ponder what his thoughts must have been as you look across at Ithaca's green mountainsides arising out of the sea.

Near Sami is one of the highlights of a trip to Cephalonia. Melissani Lake is a unique setting - - a lake that is partially underground and partially open to the sky within a deep cavern. This arrangement results in an unusual play of light on the clear water, which ranges in depth from a few inches to over 100 feet. The water in turn reflects the light back onto the vertical stone walls of the open chamber. Meanwhile, artificial colored lights have been placed inside the enclosed portion of the lake.

It is an other worldly experience. You can easily see how the ancient Greeks were inspired to call this place “The Cave of the Nymphs.” At any moment, you expect to see a nymph emerge from the depths or to see some nymphs cavorting with a river god or two on the small island that separates the enclosed chamber from the open-air section. This is the kind of place that you might expect Jason or Odysseus to visit on some quest.

Indeed, some ancient artifacts have been found at this site. These include an oil lamp, a clay figure thought to represent the god Pan and a terracotta slab depicting Pan and three nymphs. According to legend, the name of the lake comes from the nymph Melissani who fell in love with Pan and drowned herself in the lake when he rejected her.

The lake is not far from Sami in the midst of some fields and orchards. There is a large parking lot with a small building in the middle that acts as a combination entrance to the cave, snack bar and souvenir stand.

After buying a ticket you walk through a somewhat steep tunnel that has been carved out of the rock to the level of the lake, which is perhaps 50 feet below the level of the surrounding fields. At the end of the tunnel, is a small pier. Here, boatmen assist you into one of several small boats that tour the lake. Each boat holds perhaps a half dozen people. Visitors do not have to take the boat ride but since the lake laps against the vertical walls of the chamber, you cannot go far unless you take the boat ride.

Looking eerily like the paintings of Charon ferrying souls to the underworld, the boatman stands in the stern during the voyage. The boat first makes a circuit of the open chamber. Although this is not a great expanse of water, the scene changes as the boat moves from sunlight into shadow and out again.

Then, the boat enters the narrow channel that takes you into the enclosed chamber. Here, there is not enough room to row so the boatman pulls the boat along with a rope attached to the

wall and/or uses his oar like a punt pole. Once inside, the colored lights play upon the 20,000 year old stalactites and it would not be a surprise if the Cyclops suddenly appeared demanding to know who had entered his domain.

In addition to being a treat for the imagination, Melissani is a refuge. Regardless if the temperature is 100 degrees at street level, this other world is cool and refreshing.

Another highlight of the island is the beach at Myrto Bay. Consistently voted one of the world's most beautiful beaches, it is a mile and a half crescent of white tiny pebbles and sand. The deep water ranges in color from aquamarine to turquoise depending on the light. But what gives the beach such dramatic beauty is that it is overlooked by high vertical cliffs. Of course, this also makes it something of a challenge to get to the beach, involving a winding road.

Speaking of roads, Cephalonia is mountainous and often the narrow roads are cut into the sides of the mountains. This means that the views are often spectacular. However, riding in a coach next to a sheer drop of a thousand or so feet can be an adventure in itself.

Further up the road is the village of Assos. Sometimes called “The Honeymoon Village” because Prince Charles and Princess Diana stopped here during their honeymoon, this picturesque village is overlooked by the remains of a 16th century Venetian castle.

At the north end of the island is Fiskardo. This little village was one of the few spared from destruction in the 1953 earthquake. As a result, it has the architecture and feel of a traditional fishing village. Situated on a small bay, Venetian-style buildings adorned with thick clusters of flowers line the narrow streets. Along the bay, cafes and taverns offer drinks and meals under awnings that protect you from the afternoon sun. It has a timeless and restful feel, no one is in a hurry.

Perhaps because of this, Fiskardo has become a favorite with celebrities who bring

their yachts into the bay and then come ashore to explore the shops and cafes. While Fiskardo cannot be called undiscovered, neither is it composed of international chain tourist shops and restaurants. It still retains its authenticity and genuiness, which is generally characteristic of Cephalonia.

Other attractions in Cephalonia include the Drogarati Caves, the Castle of St. George, Lord Byron's rock, the Monastery of St. Andrew and the re-constructed village of Kourkouvelata.