

*GOING ASHORE (Cruise Port):*

# PALACES OF ESCAPE IN CORFU, GREECE

By Richard H. Wagner

Corfu has long been a travel destination. Indeed, according to legend, Jason and the Argonauts visited here on their search for the Golden Fleece. Romans, Byzantines, and Venetians have all come and left their mark. In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, it became the destination of choice for royals, nobles and aristocrats from throughout Europe. More recently, it has become a favorite of holidaymakers - - almost a million a year.

Located between Italy and Greece at the entrance of the Adriatic Sea, Corfu long attracted visitors seeking trade or, less welcome, seeking a strategic advantage. Today, the island's mild climate, scenic mountains and picturesque beaches draw the visitors.

Corfu is considerably more developed than other Ionian islands. This is especially evident in the environs around Corfu Town, where in some areas there has been commercial development with seemingly little regard for aesthetics.

But elsewhere Corfu can be spectacularly eye-pleasing. It receives more rainfall than some of its neighbors and so the countryside is often rich with vegetation - - poplars, fig trees, lemon trees and in the Spring and early Summer, thick wreaths of bougainvillea. Surrounding the

island is the Ionian Sea, which can be as still as a lake on a summer day with the mountains of Albania and the Greek mainland off in the distance. Of course, Corfu has its own mountains from which you can take in the panorama.

Not all of the beauty is the product of nature. While almost all of the structures in nearby Cephalonia were toppled by the 1953 earthquake, much of the building from Corfu's past remains standing. On one side of Corfu Town is the Old Fort, which was built on the site of the 6<sup>th</sup> century settlement. On the other side of town, is the New Fort, begun by the Venetians in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Standing below its towering walls, it indeed looks impregnable.

Between the two fortresses is the old portion of town. A UNESCO World Heritage site, it is marked by narrow winding streets and Venetian-style architecture. It is busy and many shops cater to the tourist trade with signs written in English. The merchandise ranges from souvenirs to upscale offerings. There are also outdoor cafes and taverns.

But if one is looking to escape from the modern world, it is easy to do so. Not far outside of town (6 miles) is an idyllic spot, the Achilleion Palace. Built in 1892 by Empress

Elisabeth of Austria-Hungary, this beautiful spot has a rather melancholy story.

Sissy, as she was known to her friends, was the daughter of the Duke of Bavaria. A marriage had been arranged between her old sister and her cousin Franz Joseph, who was to become the Emperor of Austria-Hungary. However, when Sissy and Franz Joseph met, they fell in love and so Sissy became the bride. Together, they had four children.

From this romantic beginning, the story turns south. One of Sissy's daughters died of natural causes and her only son committed suicide. Her relationship with Franz Joseph deteriorated. She began to travel, spending little time at court in Vienna. At the same time, she became very concerned about keeping fit. She would exercise up to five hours a day and would eat very little. The paintings and photographs show that she had a remarkably tiny waist at a time when full-figured women were considered the ideal of beauty.

One of the places that Sissy liked to visit was Corfu and so she decided to build a home there.

Her father had been very interested in Greek mythology and Sissy had inherited this interest. Accordingly, she dedicated her new home to her favorite figure from Greek mythology, Achilles, one of the heroes of the Trojan War. The architecture and the décor recall Ancient Greece.

Although Sissy's home is called the Achilleion Palace, it is more the size of a country house than of a palace. It successfully avoids the heaviness of most mansions of that era, largely because of its use of the neo-classical rather than Gothic revival in its design and decoration.

Sadly, Sissy did not get to enjoy her home for very long. One day when she was walking beside Lake Geneva in Switzerland, an anarchist handed her a bouquet of flowers and as she accepted them, he stabbed her in the heart.

The next owner of the Achilleion Palace also lived a life out of a Greek tragedy. Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany was born to rule one of

the richest and most powerful countries of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, his left arm was injured at birth and he became extremely sensitive about his stunted arm. Throughout his life, his actions often seem to be motivated by a desire to prove himself equal to or better than other men, particularly his uncle King Edward VII of Great Britain and later Edward's son King George V. This, of course, was to have tragic consequences for the entire world. After his abdication at the end of World War I, the gods gave the exiled Wilhelm years to brood upon his failure and lost glory.

While Sissy had recognized the tragedy in the Achilles legend, Wilhelm saw only the marital glory. When Sissy owned the Palace, the statue of the dying Achilles was the centerpiece of the gardens. Wilhelm had that statue moved and in its place, he erected a giant bronze sculpture, the Victorious Achilles. Standing upright and proud, the muscular figure holds his spear and shield. Did Wilhelm ever realize that it looks entirely out of place in this peaceful and serene world? It ominously portends tragedy.

You may well have seen the Achilleion Palace. It was used as a set for one of the James Bond movies "For Your Eyes Only." By then, it was no longer a residence but the fact that it was selected to be the backdrop for one of the glamorous spy tales testifies to its ongoing elegance.

Today, the Achilleion is a museum. Several of the interior rooms have been restored to give something of a feel for what they looked like when Sissy or the Kaiser was the occupant. This includes furniture and various artifacts relating to the two owners. Portions of the gardens are also open to the public. The gardens are well tended and inasmuch as the palace is on the side of a hill there are gorgeous vistas of Corfu Town and the sea

Of course, the Achilleion is something of a fantasy land. It was built as an escape from reality. The elegant house was designed to transport the occupants into the world of myth

and legend. It is set in a formal garden, which is by definition something apart from nature. On a sunny day with the blue Ionian sky overhead, it can still sweep you away to another, albeit melancholy, world.

Somewhat closer to Corfu Town, high atop Analipsis Hill in the Kanoni area is another palace of escape, Mon Repos. It too has a somewhat turbulent story.

After the defeat of Napoleon, the Ionian Islands became a British protectorate. Accordingly, the British government dispatched Frederic Adams to Corfu to act as High Commissioner and govern the island. One thing that no one expected was that Adams would fall in love with and marry a local woman, Nina Palatianou.

The British had built a palace for the High Commissioner in Corfu Town. (The Palace of Saints Michael and George, today the Asian arts museum). But Nina did not want to live in hot and busy Corfu Town. Therefore, as a token of his love, Adams had Mon Repos constructed as a country retreat.

Unfortunately, the two lovers did not live there very long. Shortly after Mon Repos was completed in 1831, Adams was transferred to India. Mon Repos became a residence for Adams' successors and then later a school for fine arts. Eventually, in 1864, when the Ionian Islands were united with the Kingdom of Greece, Mon Repos became a summer residence for the Greek royal family.

One interesting fact about the modern Greek royal family is that they are not of Greek ancestry. The family came to the throne after the overthrow in 1862 of the first king of the independent Greek state, Otto of Bavaria. In a referendum, the Greek people voted to have Prince Alfred, second son of Queen Victoria, become their king. However, this proposal did not sit well with the other great powers of the time and so the Greeks turned to the Danish royal family, which also had ties to Queen Victoria.

This is how Prince Phillip, consort of

Queen Elizabeth II of the United Kingdom, came to be born at Mon Repos in 1921. While his father was the seventh son of the King of Greece, he was also a grandson of the King of Denmark. Although Phillip renounced his Greek titles and succession rights in 1947, Phillip was a Prince of Greece when he was born.

Mousolini's forces occupied Corfu during World War II and during that period, Mon Repos was the residence of the Italian governor.

In 1967, when King Constantine II of Greece unsuccessfully attempted to lead a counter-revolt against a cabal of military officers who had taken over the government of Greece, the royal family had to flee. As a result, Mon Repos came into the possession of the Greek government. (The King subsequently tried largely unsuccessfully to obtain compensation for Mon Repos in the European Court of Human Rights).

Mon Repos was allowed to become derelict but in the 1990s it was restored. Today, it is a museum open to the public.

The gate for Mon Repos is at the base of the hill along a relatively busy road. Across the road are the ruins of the agora of the ancient city of Kerkyra. Archeologists speculate that Mon Repos is built atop the rest of the ancient city.

You walk up the hill to the palace through a park. The tall trees provide cool shade against the sun, which can be quite powerful.

In a clearing at the top of the hill, stands Mon Repos. Like the Achilleon Palace, it is not a true palace but rather a Regency-style villa. Its white-painted neo-classical design suits the Mediterranean climate.

Inside, several of the ground floor rooms have been restored to the days of Commissioner and Nina Adams. Through the portraits, you see the faces of the people for whom this palace was a home.

Sadly, there is nothing on display relating to Mon Repos' most famous resident. Although Phillip was only here as an infant, seemingly there should be something to tell the story.

Rather, the remainder of the house is devoted to displaying archeological finds and telling something of the ancient history of the area.

Mon Repos has a peaceful feel. It is quiet and the tall trees shelter it from the modern world. Indeed, there is more of a connection to the past than the present.