



**Your on the  
Street Reporter**



**Uyless Black**

**Foreign Places:  
The Mediterranean: Rhodes**

## The Mediterranean

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## The Mediterranean Report Four: Rhodes

*Rhodes was first noted in history during the second millennium BC when it was inhabited by the Dorians. Because of its strategic importance and crossroads location, it experienced centuries of warfare between, and occupations by Greeks, Romans (including first, Pompey, then Caesar, and later, Parmensis---who attempted to kill-off each other to gain power), Knights of St. John of Jerusalem, Ottomans, and Italians. Presently, the Greeks are in charge.*

**June 5, 2006. At sea, destination Rhodes**



We are at sea today, on the way to Rhodes Island, a Mediterranean crossroads and a favored passageway in the old days for marauders. It is now a popular spot for vacationers.

### **The Minerva II**

The figure above, shown several times thus far, is used to track our sojourns for these two weeks. Let's take this opportunity to spend a few moments listing the cities at the places on the itinerary and a look at the ship and crew.

The yellow line, starting from Istanbul, shows the path *Minerva II* took across the Mediterranean Sea. The yellow letters identify the places where the ship docked and where we disembarked to check out piles-upon-piles of rocks...rocks revealing the details of how some of our ancestors lived thousands of years ago. The stops were:

- Istanbul, Turkey (recently described)
- Rhodes, Greece
- Ahhios Nikolaos, Crete, Greece
- Valletta, Malta
- Catania, Sicily, Italy

- Palermo, Sicily, Italy
- Cagliari, Sardinia, Italy
- Mahon, Minorca (Menorca), Spain
- Ajaccio, Corsica, France,
- Civitavecchia, Italy

The *Minerva II* crew was competent and interesting. The Juniors, Holly, and I enjoyed their company and their telling us about their home nations, of which there were many. So were the passengers. They were not one-arm-bandit, midnight-dancing party animals, but reserved, even studious people. I learned they signed on for this trip because of the reputation of *Minerva II* and the itinerary: visits to ancient sites in the Mediterranean, places once populated with villages and temples earlier than the 4th millennium BC. Thus, the name of the cruise, *Islands of Antiquity*.

### A Special Ship

Our cruise ship had no casino. In its place was a large library taking up enough space to offer the reader a complete set of Britannica encyclopedias, shelves of references on the Middle East, scores of up to date magazines, several thesaurus books, numerous dictionaries, compilations of major newspapers, and other offerings. The *Minerva II* library surprised me. It was not what I would have expected on a cruise ship.



Figure 1 is a composite photo I made to give you an idea of this library. The top part of the figure shows some of the books and bookshelves. The bottom left part shows Reporter Junior reading a daily news dispatch. The bottom right part shows other amenities of the library, including a table for an ongoing puzzle, and a table for a chess game.

I was a contented cruiser as I sat in a cushioned chair reading a research paper about the ancient inhabitants of Rhodes, our next port of call.

**Figure 1. The library on the *Minerva II*.**

### Rock and Roll!

While in the library and learning about 2nd century BC Dorians, I began to hear chords of rock music pulsating through the windows. Cool beats, oldies but goodies, yet perfect for the clientele on the ship.

The music commanded us to the dance floor. After all, we were on a trip to learn about our ancestors and recent finds indicate these people learned to express themselves in gesture and forms of music before they learned speech. Some archeologists believe they also used primitive musical instruments and performed a rhythmic movement to the sounds of their prototype drums, bassoons, and violins. How this is known from looking at piles of rocks is beyond me, but I am not a rock hound or anthropologist.



Anyway, we tracked down The Juniors and the four of us were soon boogying to the song by Danny and the Juniors, *At the Hop*. Dancing old fogies, living it up as the classy *Minerva II* made its way through the gentle currents of the Mediterranean Sea.

*Good Golly Ms. Molly! La Bamba! Ain't That A Shame!* With the help of a live band, we cut-a-rug with disco tricks learned forty years ago. All the while, the *Minerva II* cut through waters once visited by ancient Roman soldiers and Greek poets. A modern sailing, with contemporary amenities, blasted out rock and roll music. It cascaded across the waters of those who sailed in silence hundreds of years ago.

### **The Crew and the Passengers**

As a whole, our cruising partners could hold their own in a conversation about subjects other than their children and pets. During our first few days aboard, we met:

- A retired syndicated news columnist.
- A Maryland state legislator and her mate, a retired NASA scientist.
- A Canadian pharmacist and a Canadian petroleum engineer.
- An attorney who specialized in city and county governmental law, and her mate, a physicist and an expert on the subject of absolute zero.
- A retired U.S. Navy Captain.
- A climatologist.
- A crew of mainly Brits, Filipinos, and Indonesians, but other nationalities as well. Later, we visit with some of these folks.

The first day at sea has highlighted by a reception on the same deck where we later danced with the Juniors to Danny and the Juniors. The occasion asked for black tie for the men. I do not own a tux that fits my old age frame, so I took along a black suit, black tie, and a white shirt. I could have passed for the ship mortician. Most of the Brits were decked out in a tux or a dinner jacket, as seen in Figure 2.



**Figure 2. At sea reception.**

For my next cruise aboard this ship, I am buying a new, revised, and expanded tux. This voluntary dress code adds a touch of class, and I think we would agree that our culture could use

a dress code here and there. Next time you fly, check out the attire of your fellow passengers. Some are hardly dressed. On a recent flight, a woman sitting next to me wore rubber shower shoes, gym shorts, and a T-Shirt. Perhaps she was a rebel, making a statement against fashion. Perhaps she did not care. Wearing attractive clothing is not a matter of wealth or "good breeding." It is a matter of civility.

But the traveling scene is not all bad news. For example, Southwest Airlines now charges a double fare for fat people who cannot fit into one seat. The fatties are outraged, and I will wager we will see lawsuits against Southwest Airlines for discriminating against the weight-impaired.

The speaker on the left side of the photo welcomed us to the cruise and proceeded to deliver sad news. The *Minerva II* was being purchased by another cruise line and its ongoing, year-round program of visiting historical places would likely end. A sample of what was to come: The library was going to be converted into a gambling casino. I like poker, but I also like to read. Why not both a library and a casino? Because a library does not bring in cash.

The speaker on the right side of the photo was the ship captain. On several occasions, he spoke with us and could be seen walking around the ship, talking to passengers and crew. He and his crew were not only fine navigators they also ran a tight, but loose ship. Tight, in that the ship was spotless, ran on time, and offered wonderful service. Loose, in that we guests could pretty much do as we wanted.

### **June 6, 2006**

We pulled into Rhodes early in the morning. Fortified with an English breakfast of scrambled eggs, bacon, baked tomatoes, muffins, beans, and tea---assuaged with an American beta blocker---we took a walk through the town of Rhodes, considered in the old days to be one of the most beautiful cities in the Mediterranean.

Our first stop was the Church of St. Mary Cathedral, built in 1480. Later, the Turks laid siege to the town, and the church was taken over to serve as a mosque. Still later, the Christians assumed control again and redecorated the building to give it the furnishings and embellishments of a church. All for naught. During WWII, the church was destroyed by the allies' bombs. Figure 3 shows the remains of St. Mary's. The photo on the right depicts a part of the building that has been converted into living quarters for some of the Rhodes citizens.

Rhodes is part of Greece's mythical heritage. Homer wrote about Rhodes as did the poet Pindar, who claimed, "Zeus thought so highly of the ancestors of Rhodes that he sent them golden rain, while Athena endowed them with the gift of being the finest artists on earth...."<sup>1</sup>

The city was built by the Greeks and has mirrored the chronicles of the other islands in the Mediterranean Sea: War, a capture by an invader. Another war, another capture by a different invader. On and on, certifying the old saw, "History repeats itself."

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<sup>1</sup> Grigoris Konstantinopoulos, *The City of Rhodes* (Chalandri, Athens, Greece: Adam Editions, nd), 10.



**Figure 3. Church of St. Mary Cathedral.**

As we walked around the town, Holly and I noticed several acres of structures---houses, stores, offices, and restaurants---that were originally castles and forts. They were constructed to prevent enemies from entering the island from the sea

Take another look at the map of the Mediterranean. Rhodes lies at a crossroads between Greece, Africa, and the Middle East. It was a strategic position, one guaranteed to invite wars and invasions. It was a fine situation for the Generals and Admirals and other persons in charge. Not so fine if you were not in control of the situation. If you were a commoner, a peasant, trying to obey a construction foreman in charge at the time, it was not a pleasant way to live. You spent a lot of time hauling stones and rocks to build the temples, castles, and forts that protected the position and wealth of someone else.



**Figure 4. Historical relics.**

But then, for us modern commoners, this rich history provides opportunities for stocking our curio stores with the historical artifacts of those ancient people, as seen in Figure 4: a snapshot of a bric-a-brac store in Rhodes.

For the common man, it was better to live in a remote part on earth. Being out of the way translated into less pillage and suffering...but with the eventual loss of curio shop opportunities for his ancestors.

In Figure 4, Reporter Junior checks out the Islands of Antiquities' facsimiles.

## **The Knights<sup>2</sup>**

The Knights of Saint John of Jerusalem played a significant role in the history of Rhodes. Originally located in Jerusalem, they fled to Cyprus when the Crusader states were defeated in 1291. Unhappy with their lot there, and unhappy with the Cyprus citizens who were unhappy with them being there in the first place, in 1309, they repacked and headed for Rhodes. Here they lived for two centuries under a different name, the Knights of Saint John of Rhodes.

According to one of our tour guides, their ownership of Rhodes came about because of what we call today, a non-hostile takeover. Without opposition, the Knights bought the island, a break from the practice of taking turf by force.

The Knights, also referred to as Hospitalers, were the oldest institution among the three military orders of the Roman Church in Palestine. Originally founded to perform charitable works, they increasingly assumed military duties, including defending the Holy Land from Muslims and other non-Christians.

They had an interesting job description in that they were soldiers and thus trained to kill and injure people. On the other hand, they were also hospital people, and thus tasked with caring for the people they had only injured. Even more, they followed the monastic Rule of Saint Augustine and carried the additional responsibility of trying to convert to Christianity those they had not yet killed.

No question, the Knights' soldering, hospital work, and proselytizing made for an interesting job mix. Even so, they managed to wear a fourth hat, that of profitable business men. Success of the Christians in the Holy Land wars enriched the order with vast gifts of property in Europe and Palestine. To the victor belongs the spoils was in evidence here and in all the places we visited on this cruise. They acquired three fortresses in Palestine at Krak des Chevaliers, Belvoir, and Margat. In 1323, they also acquired parts of the Templars' wealth.

The Knights were important players during their stay in this part of the Mediterranean. After Constantinople fell to the Ottoman Empire in 1453, they were the only Christian presence in the entire eastern Med and used their navy to thwart Muslim colonization. The Knights continued to hold Rhodes until 1522, when they were finally defeated and moved to another island, discussed later in this report.

To gain an idea of the presence and influence of the Knights in Rhodes, we visit two buildings they constructed on the island: The Hospital of the Knights and the Palace of the Grand Master. Even though this order became as much a military organization as a charitable one, its members were involved in taking care of the sick and providing shelter to the old and helpless. Figure 5 (left photo) shows the courtyard of this hospital, which was built in the 1440s, just over a half century before Columbus landed on America's shores.

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<sup>2</sup> "Rhodes," *Microsoft Encarta*, 2006, Microsoft Corporation, 1993-2005.





**Figure 5. The Knights Hospital on Rhodes.**

The hospital is large, measuring 55 x 65 meters. The patients' ward was on the second floor and is shown in the right photo in Figure 5. It is also large, measuring 51 x 12.25 meters. The ward now contains several Knights' gravestones and curious tourists.

A small chapel resides in the building along with numerous other rooms and hearths. The Knights followed the rules of Bernard of Clairvaux, also used by the Templars, which governed the order's daily rituals of prayer, study, and work.

The Palace of the Grand Master of Rhodes, also known as *Kastello*, was the home of the boss of the Knights. He was called the Grand Master and lived in grand surroundings. He presided over a centralized organization of knights, chaplains, and servants.<sup>3</sup> He and the other Hospitalers wore a black cloak with an eight-pointed Maltese cross on it---clothes depicted in old Robert Taylor movies---and the order's organization was similar to that of the Templars.



Figure 6 provides a view of this castle, situated toward the top of the photo. The town wall is seen in the middle of the figure, as it winds its way to the right and then to the bottom. Also shown is a round turret, which is located at the shoreline of the Mediterranean, and was one of the principal defense points for the city.

**Figure 6. Rhodes and the Palace of the Grand.**

This wall surrounds the entire city. I estimate its total length to be about 3,400 meters. The Knights were attacked often by the Turks and other tribes who knew about the wealth of the Order, so the wall was an important line of defense.

The format and structure of these reports do not allow us to go into much more detail about

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<sup>3</sup> Grigoris Konstantinopoulos, "The City of Rhodes," 63. The picture in Figure 7 is also sourced from this booklet.

Rhodes. But I wanted you to see the interior of the palace, so I selected the shots in Figure 7. The left photo is a picture of a typical room. The walls are built of stone, alternating in color and shade. The middle picture is an example of the artwork in the castle. The right figure is an example of one of the floors, many made from mosaic tiles, and in almost perfect condition.



**Figure 7. Some scenes inside the palace.**

It is time to download this report to you. In closing, we did not explore all the interesting sights here, so the next time you're in the area, Rhodes should be on your itinerary.