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Secrets of ANCIENT RHODES

Unearthing ancient history hidden in one of the longest-inhabited medieval cities in the world

Words Nicole Trilivas





Previous page The Acropolis of Rhodes
This page Windmills line the coast
Opposite page, clockwise Rhodes Old Town; a pretty alleyway; the harbour from the stateroom veranda; Street of Knights; a Cretan man in traditional clothes

As far as ports go, it doesn't get much more romantic than Mandraki Harbour right at the foot of Rhodes' medieval quarter. I sweep the curtains of my veranda stateroom aside and gasp – literally gasp – when I first set eyes on it. Dawn's rosy fingers have pinked the sky and gilded the edges of the clouds above the port and the UNESCO-listed city centre, and the light-strewn Aegean twinkles like spilt glitter. Byzantine towers and stone walls coil from the water's edge, and a lone lighthouse stands proudly on a fifteenth-century fortress. It looks like something from another time period. It looks like something from a dream.

Not all harbours are so charming. I'm on Viking's *Ancient Mediterranean Treasures* voyage – an eight-day, history-themed spin around the Aegean – and our ship, the *Viking Sky*, has just come from Athens and Crete, whose beauty and treasures lie beyond the harbour. After a day in Rhodes, the ship will go on to sail to Ephesus, Troy and Istanbul. But the sun-splashed island of Rhodes immediately steals my heart – even before I have a chance to set foot off the ship.

As one of the world's only continuously inhabited medieval cities and as a one-time bastion for Christendom, the well-preserved old town of Rhodes (also called Rhodes' medieval city or medieval quarter) has objective, postcard-worthy appeal that only gets more remarkable with historical context.

Born and raised on the island of Rhodes, Viking's on-the-ground guide Georgios has a knack for spinning stories and pointing out history hidden in plain sight. Rhodes is one of those handy destinations where you can simply stroll off the ship and be in the heart of the action; and in the short walk from the gangplank to the city walls, Georgios gives our small group a little overview of the island's long and lustrous heritage.

According to Greek mythology, Rhodes is the birthplace of the king of the gods Zeus. (My love-at-first-sight response is immediately validated; I just knew there was something special about this place!) As the largest of the Dodecanese islands and the fourth largest island in Greece, Rhodes was also a one-time maritime power in the Hellenistic period; however, much of its legacy is connected with the Order of the Knights of Saint John, also called Knights Hospitaller and the Knights of Rhodes. The Knights ruled Rhodes from 1310 until 1522 when they were forced to depart after a successful six-month siege by the Ottomans. Later, the Knights would go on to set up their base on the island country of Malta, where they would eventually be known as the famed Knights of Malta.

Georgios guides us into the sand-hued ramparts of the city, and the air immediately shifts once we're inside the city's walls – it's like you can taste the past on the fresh sea air. The city is a tangle of narrow lanes

THE SUN-SPLASHED ISLAND OF RHODES IMMEDIATELY STEALS MY HEART

studded with wrought-iron lanterns and umbrellaing Ficus trees. Ottoman influences abound: closed wooden balconies cling to the sides of buildings and minarets spire the sky.

Cats doze on windowsills like gargoyles. “The cats have the run of the place,” says Georgios, as I chase a calico kitten down an alley garlanded with purple vines of bougainvillea. “We don’t have crime here, and no mafia – only cats.”

Georgios brings the city to life as we walk: see this stone pavement? This was designed to force invaders from their horses because the horses’ hooves would slip on the small polished stones. See these massive granite balls that line the pathways? They were once used in catapults in one of the many sieges on the island. It’s not all so grim. See those plants growing from the old stone walls? Those are capers, which we pick and eat. See these traditional mosaic pebble floors? They keep the houses cool in the summer, and they feel good on your feet, “like reflexology”, Georgios declares.

It’s all impossibly picturesque. Everyone has their camera phones out when we get to the cobblestoned Street of the Knights, which starts from the Knights’ Hospital, one of three hospitals built by the Knights of Rhodes. The street is lined with sixteenth-century “inns”, each representing the Knights’ territories of origin. The stone walls are lined with imposing crests and ornate inscriptions. Georgios points up to show us a stone carving that looks suspiciously like a crocodile. He explains: “The story goes that a crocodile escaped from a ship from Egypt and washed ashore in Rhodes, terrorising the city.” Allegedly, the head of the knights at the time, called the Grand Master, “killed it and saved the city,” Georgios tells us as we start walking again, passing under the stone crocodile, which has been carved in tribute to the Grand Master.

The Street of the Knights leads to the Gothic Palace of the Grand Master of the Knights of Rhodes, which was first built as a Byzantine citadel in the seventh century before going through several makeovers across the centuries. Though there are plenty of stories originating within the palace walls, we can’t talk about Rhodes without talking about one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, the Colossus of Rhodes, which has an unexpected connection to the palace. Stick with me...

Perhaps Rhodes’ most famous association, the Colossus of Rhodes was a massive, 32-metre bronze statue built in honour of the sun god Helios, patron god of Rhodes, after the island survived a siege in 280BC. The statue only stood for 56 years and fell in an earthquake in 224BC. No traces of it exist today.

Georgios is quick to right common misconceptions about the Colossus, the most prominent being its location. While countless artists’ renditions place it at the mouth of the harbour – where the Viking Sky is docked, archaeological evidence suggests the location of the statue was actually on the top of the hill – right where the Palace is now located. The remains of a temple of Helios were discovered in this spot, and ancient writings insist that when the statue fell, houses were crushed, which would have been impossible if the statue was located in the harbour.

As the tour starts to wind down and the blinding Mediterranean sun starts to slip closer to the horizon, I can’t help but feel like I have just been trusted with all these wonderful secrets, like I wandered into a looking glass to the past (even though the tour was only a few hours long). “A cruise is like a wine tasting, a little bit here and a little bit there,” Georgios tells us, right before we part ways, thanking us for coming to his island. “I hope you have liked this taste. Maybe one day you will come back. Maybe one day, you will order the whole bottle.”



This page, clockwise
A cobblestone alley in Rhodes; a bronze deer guards Mandaraki harbour; Rhodes’ vineyards produce many varieties of grapes; The Palace of the Grand Master; bougainvilleas grow everywhere;