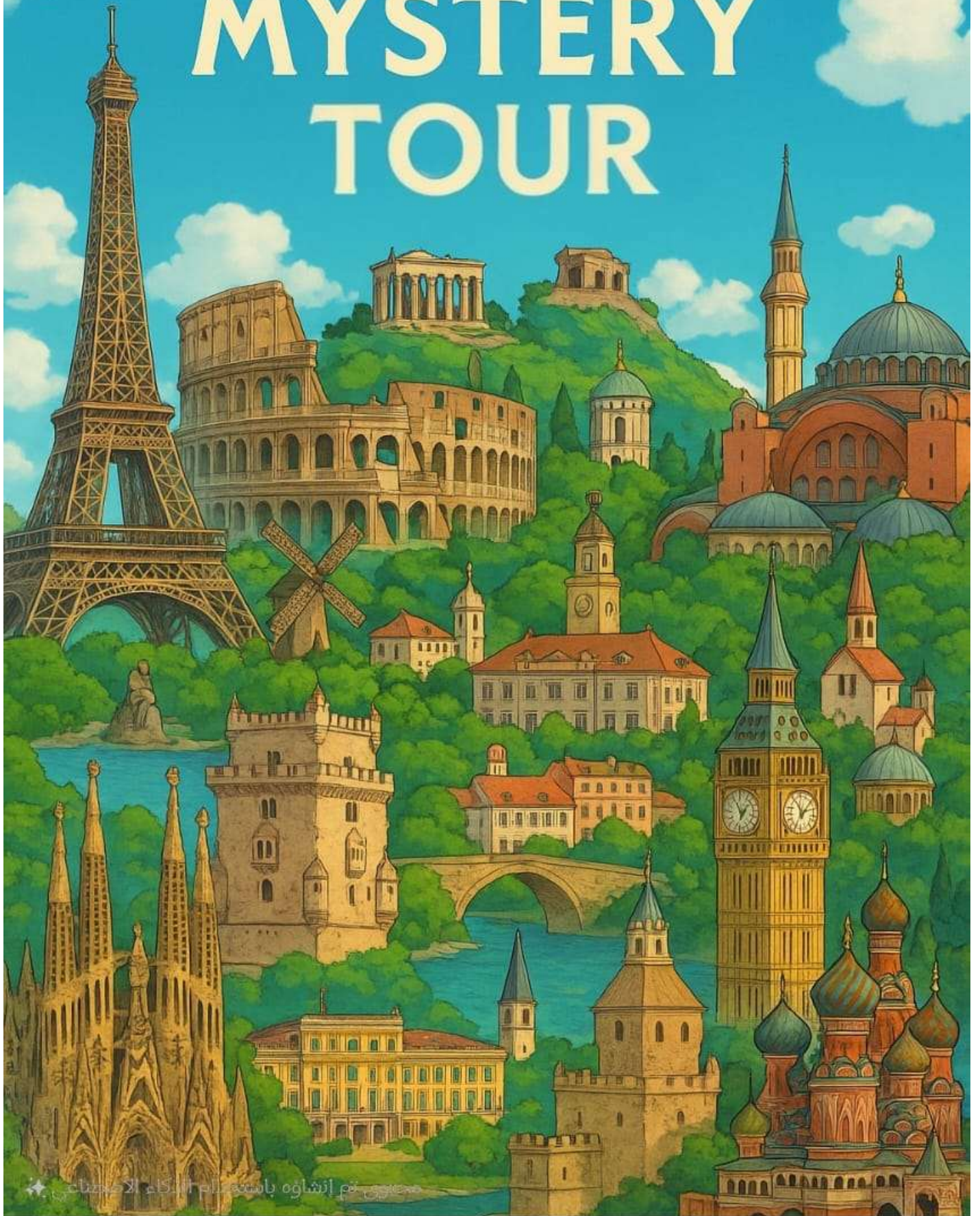


MAGICAL MYSTERY TOUR



The inside cover for your information.....



The Magical Mystery Tour is just one of a series of documentary travel guides under 'The Where To Go' banner. You can also find curated videos of the many different places visited on this tour on my YouTube channel which can be found at www.youtube.com/@thewheretogo. Please feel free to like and subscribe.



You will also find up to date information about my worldwide travels on my dedicated Facebook page at www.facebook.com/TheWhereToGo.



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Chapter 1: Magical Mystery Tour



Welcome along to my very own magical mystery tour. For this tour, each destination will be chosen on the basis of it being the cheapest available. To avoid repetition, I will not visit the same country twice or use the same airline twice. That should make sure that I don't end up circling the UK or forever flying with Ryanair.

I have tried a few dry runs using Google flights which allows me to put 'Anywhere' as a destination. I didn't actually fly the routes but changed the dates to see how a real tour might progress. Two days ago, I tried it for real and today I am off to Heathrow Airport for my flight to Dublin.....my first stop!!!!

Chapter 2: Dublin



Well, this is a good start to my mystery tour. I used Trip.Com to make my booking because they were even cheaper than booking the airline direct... which is not always the case. They told me that I am a diamond member which I presume is due to the number of times I used them while I was in China.

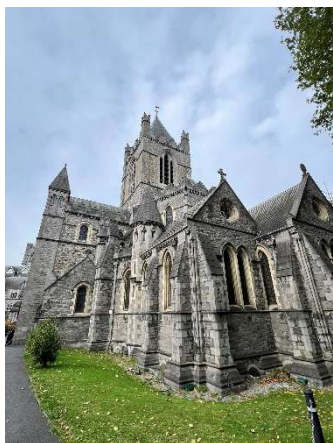
As a result, they book me into the airport lounge for free and I am determined to get there early to make the best use of it. When I arrive (incredibly early) I am politely asked if I would mind taking an earlier flight. I reluctantly give up the opportunity for a free binge in the airport lounge and find out that I have also been promoted to business class.

When I say business class, I mean I am sitting in the front cabin (seat 3D) and the seat next to me is vacant..... in fact both seats are vacant so I could probably have a lie down if it wasn't for the fact that this is still early in the afternoon. On top of all that, I just love the Irish accent and, for once, I pay full attention to the safety announcement.

This is a wonderful start.....and I only paid £49.00!!!



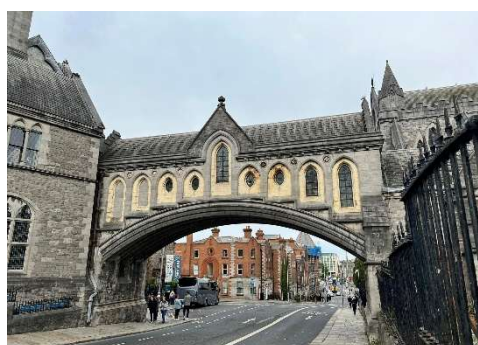
Dublin City centre



My last visit to Dublin was in 2018 when I was most fortunate to accompany a school group from Luxembourg in my capacity as the Secondary Inspector for European Schools. The visit confirmed the literary heritage of Dublin including Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, William Butler Yeats, George Bernard Shaw and Seamus Heaney.

Besides its rich literary heritage, Dublin is also famous for its vibrant culture, stunning natural beauty, lively entertainment and Guinness which originated on a four-acre brewery site in the centre of Dublin City. It has two cathedrals (diocesan and national) and a multitude of beautiful parks including the Garden of Remembrance.

This short stopover is not going to do justice to this wonderful city.



Oscar Wilde Memorial Sculpture



The Oscar Wilde Memorial Sculpture is situated in Merrion Square Gardens opposite his home and just around the corner from Trinity College where he studied the classics. The statue was commissioned by Guinness in 1997 and was created by Irish sculptor Danny Osborne using a collection of ornamental rock types from across the world.

Oscar Wilde, named Oscar Fingal O'Flahertie Wills Wilde, was born in Dublin in 1854. His father was a successful surgeon and his mother a writer and literary hostess. Wilde was educated at Trinity College, Dublin and Magdalen College, Oxford.

His literary contribution included a first volume of poetry published in 1881 and a novel called 'The Picture of Dorian Gray' published in 1891. In addition, he produced a string of extremely popular comedies including 'Lady Windermere's Fan' (1892), 'An Ideal Husband (1895)' and 'The Importance of Being Earnest' (1895).

He married Constance Lloyd in 1884, and they had two sons called Cyril (born in 1885) and Vyvyan (born, in 1886). In 1891 he began an affair with a younger man called Lord Alfred Bruce Douglas whose father, the Marquess of Queensberry, accused Wilde of being a 'posing sodomite'.

In April 1895, Wilde sued the father for criminal libel and lost after details of his private life were revealed during the trial. He was subsequently arrested, tried for gross indecency and sentenced to two years of hard labour. Wilde was released with his health irrevocably damaged and his reputation ruined.

On his release from prison, he caught the evening ferry to France and never returned. He spent the rest of his life in Europe and published 'The Ballad of Reading Gaol' in 1898. He died in Paris on 30 November 1900 of cerebral meningitis. His last words were 'My wallpaper and I are fighting a duel to the death. One or other of us has got to go.'



Drag Queen



Rory O'Neill is a drag queen and accidental gay rights activist better known by his stage name Panti Bliss. On Instagram, she describes herself as pub landlady, performer, writer, speechifier, gender discombobulist and National Fucking Treasure (her quote not mine). I was first introduced to her in a TED talk called 'All the little things' which was recorded in Dublin. Since then, I have seen her perform on two occasions at the Soho Theatre in London and she is a fantastic raconteur with some truly amazing stories. I am only reminded of her now because today I stumbled across the pub she opened in Dublin way back when she wasn't as famous as she is today.

You can listen to that TED talk on https://youtu.be/hIhsv18lrqY?si=4mFThMD_QZgP0SIx

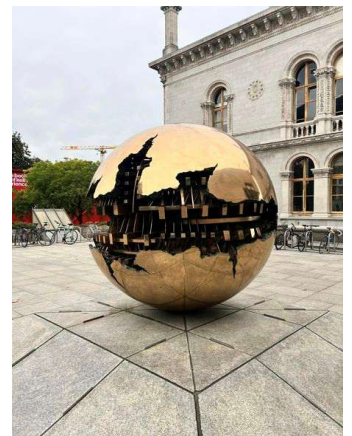
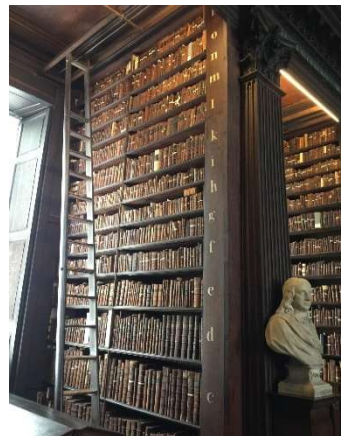
The pub....and a few others



Trinity College Dublin



The Book of Kells sometimes known as the Book of Columba is an illuminated manuscript written in Latin containing the four gospels of the New Testament. The book dates back to 800 AD and is reputed to be one of the oldest surviving books in the world. The book is kept in the famous college library at Trinity College where it is visited by over one million people every year. My tour of Dublin included a visit to Trinity College, and I have included some of my pictures of the Book of Kells from my last visit as I did not have enough time on this one.



Chapter 3: Madrid

Time	Destination	Airline	Flight	Check-in Desk
11:45	London GTH	British	BR211	Go to Terminal 1
11:50	Dubai	Emirates	6E602	29-29
11:55	Stockholm	Swedish	SK908	Go to Terminal 1
11:55	Manchester	British	BR345	Go to Terminal 1
12:00	London LHR	British	BA584	29-29
12:00	Roma Saba	Alitalia	FR457	Go to Terminal 1
12:00	Manchester	British	BR355	Go to Terminal 1
12:00	Nepesin	British	BR340	Go to Terminal 1
12:10	Aberdeen	British	LM882	Go to Terminal 1
12:15	Raykjavik	Reykjavik	FI417	Go to Terminal 1
12:20	Frankfurt FRA	Lufthansa	LH178	Go to Terminal 1
12:20	Oslo	British	BR408	Go to Terminal 1
12:30	London LHR	British	BA990	29-29
12:30	Malaga	British	FR7048	Go to Terminal 1
12:30	Washington	American	AC3871	18-21
12:40	Dallas - Fort Wo	American	BA1571	22-28
12:40	London LTN	British	FR337	Go to Terminal 1
12:40	Copenhagen	British	EW358	Go to Terminal 1
12:45	Düsseldorf	British	EW9385	Go to Terminal 1
12:50	San Francisco	British	BA8147	29-56



It is Monday morning, and I am at Dublin airport awaiting my next flight to.....Madrid with Iberia. I must admit that I thought my next flight would be to Lisbon, but my flight booker came up with Barcelona and Madrid as the cheapest flights for £34.00 each. Now I hadn't imagined that I might be presented with a choice of destinations, so I chose Madrid as I had visited Barcelona recently. I checked in with Booking.com and managed to get the same flight at the same time for £29.00.

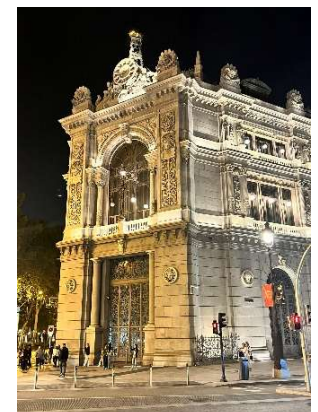
My departure from Dublin does not seem to be as straightforward as my arrival since the website directed me to Iberia flights from terminal one but when I got to terminal one, the board said terminal two. When I got to terminal two, the board said terminal one so now I am completely confused. Eventually, I talk to someone who knows the answer to my question, and I get booked in at terminal two ... although the airport lounge is back in terminal one.

Boarding the flight now but will someone tell me why my aircraft seat is labelled XL.....how rude!!!!



Madrid

Madrid is as beautiful by night as it is by day. It is well after 10.00pm the streets are heaving, the restaurants are full, public transport is in full swing, and the grocery shops are still open. Music emanates from every corner of the city..... and this is on a Sunday night. It is hard not to fall in love with Madrid on the first date.





Parque de el Retiro



The Parque de el Retiro or Retiro Park is one of the largest city parks in Madrid. The park covers over 125 hectares and has more than 15,000 well looked after trees. The park originally belonged to the Spanish monarchy until 1868, when it was commandeered as a public park. The park was designated as a UNESCO World Heritage site in 2021. The park is home to numerous sculptures and fountains as well as many architectural wonders such as Velázquez Palace and the Crystal Palace.



The latter was being refurbished when I visited so I have sneaked in a copyright free picture of the building showing its true splendour. I hope you enjoy these pictures as much as I enjoyed the park notwithstanding the occasional rain showers.



Plaza de Oriente



Having worn myself out walking around the park, my next stop is the Plaza de Oriente which is home to the Almudena Cathedral and the neighbouring Royal Palace as well as the Teatro Real opera house.

The Cathedral of Saint Mary the Royal of the Almudena, commonly known as the Almudena Cathedral. The construction of the Catholic Cathedral began in 1883 and finished over century later. Unfortunately, the project was beset by financial difficulties and further delayed when the gothic style church was considered to be out of keeping with the neighbouring palace. The building was eventually consecrated by Pope John Paul II in 1993.

The Royal Palace of Madrid is the official residence of the Spanish royal family although nowadays it is only used for state ceremonies. The palace is the largest in Europe and has 3418 rooms. The Royal Palace was built during the 18th and 19th centuries, replacing the former palace which was burnt to the ground in 1794. To save you looking it up, Buckingham Palace has 775 rooms so that should help you appreciate the size of this place.

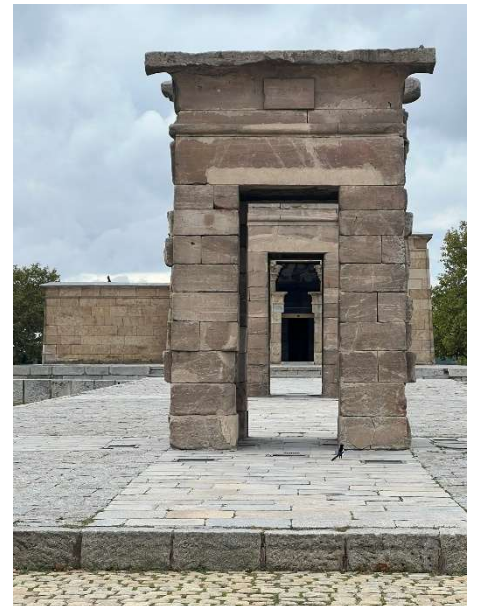
The Teatro Real opera house is located in the Plaza de Oriente, opposite the Royal Palace, and known colloquially as El Real. The opera house is considered to be one of the best institutions for performing and musical arts in the country and one of the most prestigious opera houses in Europe. The building was started in 1818 and finally inaugurated in 1850. It was deemed unsafe in 1925 and closed for 41 years until it reopened again in 1966.



Temple of Debod

The Temple of Debod is an ancient Nubian temple which was erected in the early 2nd century BC just south of Aswan in Egypt. The temple in Madrid is not a replica but the real thing which was moved by stone from Aswan to Madrid. The temple was gifted to Spain by Egypt to thank them for helping to save temples affected by the Aswan Dam project. It was painstakingly moved in 1968 from Egypt to its new resting place in the Parque del Oeste at the top of a hill affording wonderful views of the Almudena Cathedral and the Royal Palace.

PS Similar gifts of temples were also received by America, Italy and the Netherlands. These can be found in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Museo Egizio in Turin and the Rijksmuseum in Leiden.



Puerta del Sol

One of the biggest tourist attractions in Madrid is to be found in the Puerta del Sol. The statue of El Oso y el Madroño better known as the Bear and the Strawberry Tree is the official symbol of Madrid. The statue in Puerta del Sol, it was created by the sculptor Antonio Navarro Santafé at the behest of the Spanish government. The statue was inaugurated in 1967.



Nobody really knows why the bear and the tree are the symbols of Madrid but there were bears in the fields around Madrid and there were many trees that looked like strawberry trees. A more exciting suggestion says that it originated from a quarrel between the church and the city. It was eventually agreed that the trees, represented by the strawberry tree, were to be the property of the city and the animals, represented by the bear, were to belong to the church. This solved the quarrel and subsequently resulted in the symbol being adopted by the city as its official emblem.



Chapter 4: Rome



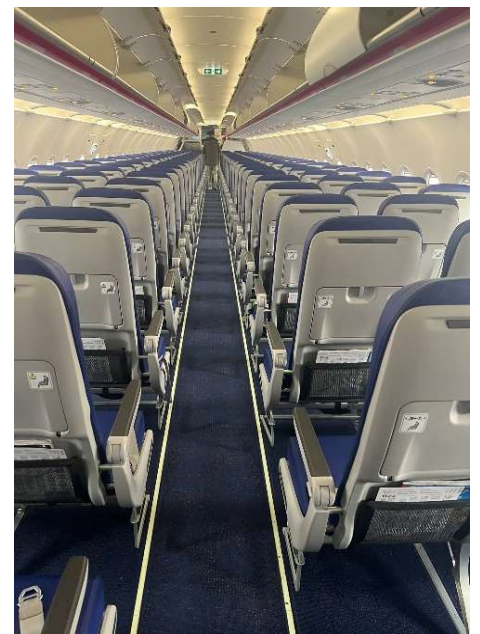
Early in the morning and I sitting in Terminal 2 of Madrid Airport. I am on the next leg of my magical mystery tour. My choices for this flight included Barcelona but my rules do not allow me to go to the same country twice. The next cheapest flight was back to Dublin, so I have to reject this as well. The next cheapest is Wizz Air which, by the time you have included all the extras, is still £2.00 cheaper than Milan and £4.00 cheaper than Venice and Vienna..... what a pity, but rules are rules. It is raining here in Madrid so maybe not a bad time to leave. Next stop Rome.

Rome Fiumicino Airport

In spite of all my reservations, the flight with Wizz Air was not as bad as I had been anticipating I. Boarding was a bit of a bun fight and If you want to get on board quickly then purchase priority boarding or position yourself at the end of the priority boarding queue so that when they are all boarded then you are next.

The plane was a relatively new A321neo with pretty comfortable seats and more legroom than I was expecting. You won't be surprised to know, that I am not used to sitting on a plane where you can see from the back to the front because there are no separate compartments. From my airline assigned seat in 36A it looked like a long long way to the front.

Regardless of my reservations, Wizz Air has carried over 60 million passengers.... although the flight magazine does not say since when. The airline has 223 aircraft and 798 routes serving 53 countries. By comparison, British Airways carried 43 million passengers last year, has 570 aircraft and 250 routes.





Rome in a day

My first visit to Rome was in 1975 (I was very young then) and my last one was in 2010 when I was desperately trying to get back from Dubai during the disruption caused by the Icelandic volcano. The problem here in Rome is that it is an extremely big place and I only have 24 hours.

They say that Rome was not seen in a day (adapted from the original) and there is no way that I am going to get to see all of it. I took the decision to make use of a tour bus see how much I could see from the top deck of a double-decker.

After shopping around, I managed to get a discounted ticket, and I quickly realised that I was going to see half of the tour from my seat on the left-hand side. I did the tour again and managed to see everything I had previously missed.

On the third tour, I took advantage of the hop on/hop off facility to make sure I didn't miss Saint Peters Square. I had intended to visit the Vatican and the Sistine Chapel, but the queues were so phenomenally long that this was not going to happen on this tour.

The next stop was the Trevi Fountain as I remembered it from my last visit since it was partially covered up and completely empty of any water. I must say it was interesting to see the Trevi Fountain without the Fountain and I saved myself three coins.

I had intended to see the National Museum of 21st Century Art whose design was selected following an international competition launched in 1998. The winning design was that of the architect Zaha Hadid who, as many of you will know, is one of my favourite architects.

Unfortunately, my time ran out, but I have many memorable moments from those tours which I am happy to share with you here.....





The Colosseum

The Colosseum is the largest amphitheatre ever built and still the largest standing amphitheatre in the world. Construction began in 72AD under Emperor Vespasian and was completed in 80AD by his son Emperor Titus. The inaugural games were organised in 80AD.

The Colosseum could hold up to 80,000 spectators over five levels. The best seats in the house were those on ground floor which were reserved for senators, priests, VIPs and vestal virgins. As a rule of thumb, the lower your class, then the higher you would sit.... nothing changes!

The Colosseum was built as an entertainment venue, hosting gladiator fights, animal hunts, public executions and naval battles. For the naval battles, the arena was flooded with water, so that battles between ships could take place. The last recorded gladiatorial games took place in 404AD.

It is estimated that half million people and one million animals were killed during various events. The Colosseum was in use for about 500 years after which it was used for other purposes such as a cemetery and a fortress as well as housing and the home of a religious order.



Roman Forum and Palatine Hill



The Roman Forum is located next to the Palatine Hills. The site grew over time from a simple marketplace in city centre which was home to temples, monuments, statues and government buildings. Although not much of this is left today, the site represents much of the history of Rome and is an immensely popular tourist destination.

One of the oldest of the Roman Forum structures is the Temple of Saturn which was originally built around 500BC and reconstructed around 5BC. The Temple of Castor and Pollux were also built around that time although it was subsequently rebuilt in the early first century AD.

The Temple of Julius Caesar was built over the spot where Julius Caesar was cremated and buried following his assassination. Not much is left of the temple other than an alter block under which the cremated remains of Julius Caesar are presumed to lie.

The Roman Forum was also the home of the Temple of Vesta which stood in front of the House of the Vestal Virgins. The role of the Vestal Virgins included the maintenance of their chastity, tending Vesta's sacred fire, fetching water and preparing food.

To become a Vestal Virgin, young girls (mostly between the ages of 6 and 10) competed to join the order. The Vestal Virgins were highly regarded and held an enormous amount of power. After 30 years of dedicated service, the women were free to reintegrate into society, allowed to marry, buy property, and even vote.





St. Peter's Basilica



St. Peter's Basilica is situated in the Vatican City and is the headquarters of the Catholic Church as well as the Pope's residence. The construction of the Basilica began in April 1506 during the time of Pope Julius II. It took 120 years to finish and was finally completed in 1626, during the papacy of Pope Urban VIII.

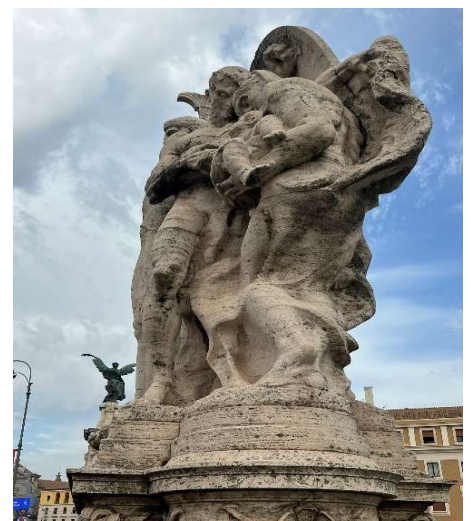
The Basilica is built over the tomb of St. Peter and in 1950 an inspection conducted under the altar revealed human bones dating back to the first century. These relics reportedly belonged to a 60-year-old male and are widely believed to be that of the remains of St. Peter.



St. Peter's Basilica is the second largest * church on earth and has the highest dome on earth. In fact, the dome is so tall that you could fit the statue of liberty inside it. The dome was designed by Michelangelo and the other main designers included Donato Bramante and Carlo Maderno with the piazza by Gian Lorenzo Bernini.

There are 91 popes buried in St. Peter's Basilica, including Pope John Paul II who was buried there in 2005. In addition, there are also three women including the Polish princess Maria Clementina Sobieska, Christina Queen of Sweden and Matilda of Canossa who was a medieval countess, duchess, marchioness and queen.

* Wikipedia confirms that the Basilica of Our Lady of Peace of Yamoussoukro on the Ivory Coast is the largest church in the world..... that sounds like a good question for a pub quiz.



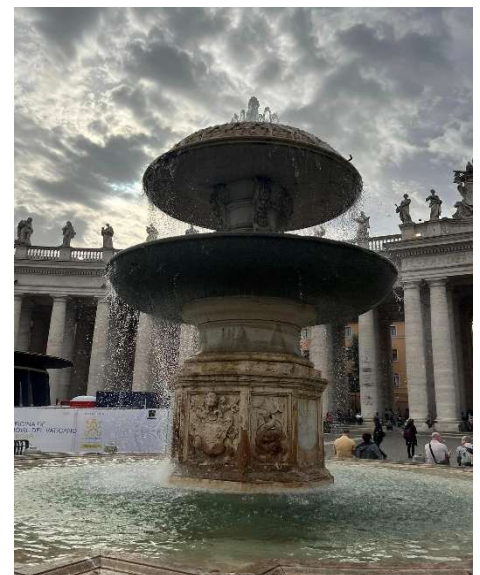
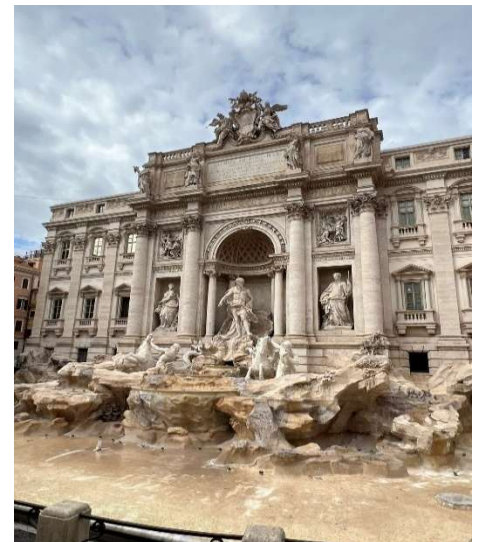
Trevi Fountain

La Fontana di Trevi, known to us as the Trevi Fountain, is one of the best known of the 2000+ fountains in Rome. It was commissioned by Pope Clement XII in 1730 to replace a previous fountain dating back to the 15th century. The design for the new fountain was the result of a competition won by Nicola Salvi, who was then a relatively unknown architect.

The fountain was not only intended to be a work of art but also a political statement to showcase the power and influence of the Catholic Church in Rome. Construction on the fountain began in 1732 but was beset by financial and logistical difficulties. In the meantime, Nicola Salvi died in 1751, leaving the project unfinished and there were rumours that the fountain was cursed.



The myth, from the movie 'Three Coins in the Fountain', suggested that if you throw one coin then you will return to Rome, if you throw two coins then you will fall in love with an attractive Italian and if you throw three coins then you will marry the person that you met. As a result, around £2500 are collected each night and donated to a charity for needy families.

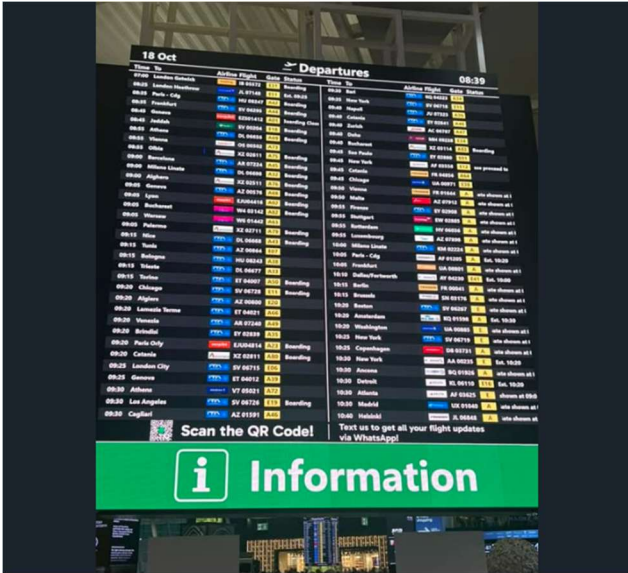


Chapter 5: Malta

Early morning and I am back at Rome's Leonardo da Vinci–Fiumicino Airport. There are plenty of flights advertised on the destination boards but, once again, I am taking the cheapest. My flight is with Air Malta and, not surprisingly, Malta is my next stop which I wasn't really expecting.

At the airport, I learn that the airline is now called KM Malta Airlines as Air Malta ceased operations on 30 March 2024 to circumvent EU regulations. Seemingly, when the regulators blocked any further bailout with public money, the Government of Malta simply shut down the airline and started a new one.

Same planes, same staff, same routes.... Malta here I come ❤️



Malta



I had not expected Malta as my next destination, so had not even considered the possibility of what to do while I was here. The problem is that Malta is a country not a city so spending 24 hours in Valletta did not seem to be on the agenda.

The tour bus seemed like a distinct possibility, but I wanted to explore a bit of the island, so local buses seemed the best suggestion. A four-day pass purchased at the airport allowed me to travel anywhere on the island, so this is how I expected to spend my fleeting time here.

There is an extensive bus service across the island although buses do not seem to run to any published timetable. Often buses are so full that they won't pick anybody up at the bus stop, so you need to be prepared to wait. The service provided by tour buses is not much better.

Fort Manoel



First stop this morning is Fort Manoel on Manoel island with just a bridge connecting it to Gzira which is a short bus ride from my accommodation. The island was quiet, and the fort was impenetrableI walked around the whole perimeter and could not find any way to get in. I guess that is the purpose of a fort!!!

Fort Manoel was built between 1723 and 1755 by the Order of Saint John. After a brief occupation by the French from 1798, the British military took over the fort in 1800, and it remained in their use until 1964. The fort was severely damaged during the second world war and is presently being renovated in anticipation of being nominated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site.



Valletta

Valletta is the capital of Malta. It is the European Union's smallest capital city. I decided to take the bus to Sliema and catch the ferry from there to Valetta. The ferry service was not much better than the bus service although it only cost €2 and afforded excellent views of both Sliema and Valletta.

The walled city of Valletta was established in the 1500s on a peninsula by the Knights of St. John, a Roman Catholic order. The city is known for its museums, palaces and cathedrals as well as some amazing eating places and lovely weather 300 days of sunshine, but not when I was there.



Teatru Manoel



The Teatru Manoel is Malta's National Theatre and one of the oldest working theatres in the world. The historic building was started in 1731 by Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhena. The building took just 10 months to build, and the first production opened on January 9th, 1732.

By 1866 the theatre was going through a tough time because of the construction of the new Royal Opera House which was built in the centre of Valletta. The designer was. Edward Middleton Barry was also responsible for designing the Royal Opera House at Covent Garden in London.

In 1873 the Royal Opera House burnt down and the Teatru Manoel had a brief reprise while the Royal Opera House was rebuilt. During the World War 2, the Teatru Manoel served as emergency accommodation for victims of the constant bombardment of the city.

Meanwhile, on the evening of April 7th, 1942, the Royal Opera House was devastated by a direct hit during a bombing raid. Plans to rebuild never came to fruition and other suggestions were dismissed. Today the site is used as an open-air theatre in the ruins of this once grand building.

Today, the Teatru Manoel is a successful and thriving centrepiece for the arts. The building has been completely refurbished and is one of the finest examples of Baroque architecture. The auditorium with a seating capacity of 547 and 51 individual boxes on three levels.

During my brief stay, I was fortunate in being able to undertake a tour of the inside of the theatre which is truly magnificent. I hope you enjoy these pictures as much as I enjoyed visiting the theatre and taking them. If you ever get to Valletta, then please go and see.



Mdina the Silent City

Mdina is a small and walkable historic city in the middle of Malta. In medieval times this was the capital city and is known as the 'Città Silente' or 'Silent City.' Certainly, this place is not heaving with tourists like Valletta and has the added advantage of no cars. Although those horse and carts can be a nuisance down those narrow alleys.

The main entrance to the city is the impressive Mdina Gate, also known as the Vilhena Gate, is the main entrance into the ancient walled city of Mdina. The gate was built in the baroque in 1724 during the time of Grand Master Antonio Manoel de Vilhenaalso see my piece on the Teatru Manoel.

Mesquita Square is a charming square lined with houses and supported by a restaurant where you can sit and enjoy the tranquillity. This is also the exact same square where Jamie Lannister and his spearmen have a heated skirmish with Ned and his guards in the series 'Game of Thrones.'





St. Dominic's Priory, Rabat

Next door to Mdina is the town of Rabat and my next stop which is St Dominic's Priory. The site is built upon the legend of an apparition of Our Lady that occurred around the year 1400. The building and its attached chapel are dedicated to the Madonna of the Grotto.

This priory serves as the base for the Dominican Order in Malta and was established in 1450. It boasts an impressive cloister and a lovely garden which could honestly do with a good clean up. In fact, come to think of it, the whole place could do with a good clean up.

My pictures will give you some idea of the potential of this place to be a real tourist magnet.



Chapter 6: Athens

It is Sunday morning and I'm off to my next destination. I am sitting in the airport lounge awaiting flight A3 731 to Athens. The cheapest flight out of Malta airport was with Aegean Airlines which is flag carrier of Greece and historically linked to Olympic Airlines. The airline is part of the Star Alliance group.

Athens

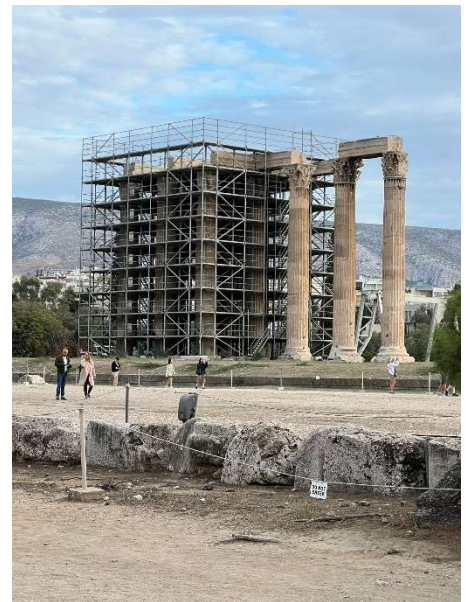


I last visited Athens in 1973. I had just finished my A-levels and decided that I wanted to see the world well Europe on an InterRail pass. In those days there was no internet and no google maps so heaven only knows how I managed it. My abiding recollection was sleeping overnight underneath the Acropolis, so I guess we didn't have booking.com either.

Athens has matured a lot since I was last there and I was half expecting to visit Athens at some time on my travels. I must admit that I wasn't expecting Beirut and Tel Aviv to pop up on my list of possible travel destinations and it was fortunate that the flight to Athens was a little bit cheaper than both. So, 50 years later and here I am again.

Besides being capital of Greece, Athens is Europe's oldest capital city with origins dating back to 3000BC. Athens was also the first European Capital of Culture and is reputed to be the birthplace of democracy, arts, science and philosophy. Capturing all of this in 24 hours is going to be a considerable feat and, on this occasion, I intend to make best use of public transport.

On arrival at the airport, I purchased a three-day tourist card which cost €20. The price for a single fare from the airport to the centre of Athens takes approximately one hour and costs €9 each way. So, by my reckoning, I am getting three days of travel on the buses, the trains and on the Metro for just €2. This sounds like a real bargain to me!!!!



Panathenaic Olympic Stadium



After an early morning flight, I found myself with a bit of time to make a start on my programme of places to visit. I took the metro to Syntagma Square and found myself staring at the Hotel Grand Bretagne. The hotel was built in 1842 and, during its long history has hosted Kings, Presidents and delegations as well as members of the third Reich when Athens fell to the Nazis in 1941.

Over the road is a beautiful park which I later found out was the National Gardens. On the other side of the gardens was the Panathenaic Stadium which was built around 330BC and was the site of the first modern

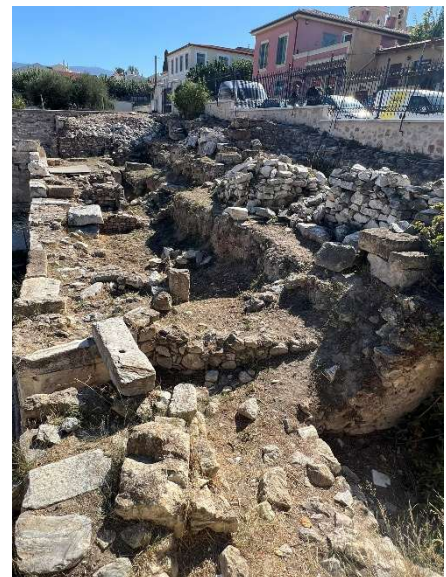
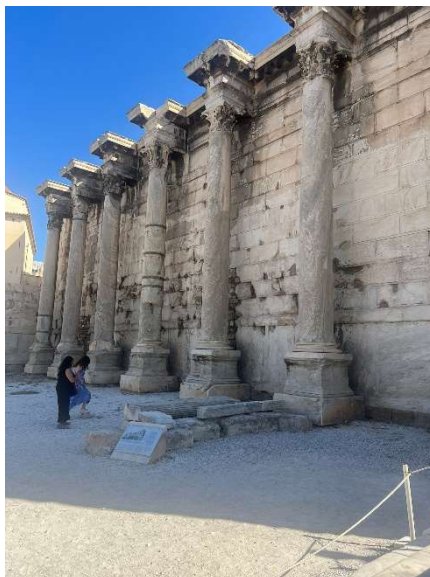


Olympic games in 1896 and remains the starting point of the Olympic flame torch relay. The original stadium was made entirely of marble and could seat up to 50,000 spectators. Nowadays, an Olympic Stadium would be expected to hold at least 80,000 spectators.

The original stadium fell into disuse and the marble was repurposed for other buildings around Athens. However, in 1895 the stadium was restored to something like its original glory. It hosted the opening and closing ceremony of the very first Olympic Games in 1896. The stadium was also used, in part, for the 2004 Olympics when it returned to Greece. For good measure I walked around the track and climbed to the top of the stadium my knees are still aching from my exercises!!!

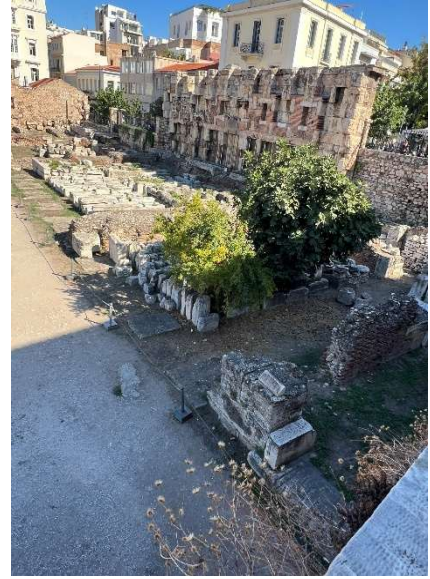


Tetraconch Church



The Tetraconch Church (also called Megali Panagia in later periods) was an early Christian church built in the 5th century AD. The word 'Tetraconch' is the name given to the layout which consist of a central square space with four semi-circular additions (conches or apses) on each of the sides. The church was located in the courtyard of Hadrian's Library.

The building is probably the oldest Christian church in Athens (or among the oldest) of which there is archaeological evidence. It represents a shift in the city's religious /cultural identity from paganism to Christianity. Although there is not much left of this historic monument, it is still possible to discern the footprint of the area.



Holy Metropolitan Church of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary

Athens Cathedral, otherwise known as the Holy Metropolitan Church of the Annunciation to the Virgin Mary is the base of the Greek Orthodox Church in Athens. The cathedral was started on Christmas Day in 1842 but halted a year later due to a lack of funds. The cathedral was constructed with materials from over seventy abandoned or ruined churches. It was eventually completed in 1862. Next door to the cathedral is the Church of Saint Elefthrios. The church is built on top of the ruins of an ancient temple dedicated to Eileithyia who was the goddess of childbirth and midwifery.





Athens Riviera

It is easy to forget that Athens is a coastal city and has its own beaches. Tourists generally use Athens as a stopover on their way to places like Santorini, Mykonos and Crete, but the city centre is just a 30-minute ride away from the 'Athens Riviera'. The tram is a lovely way to see the beautiful beaches as the route runs alongside the coast for some distance.

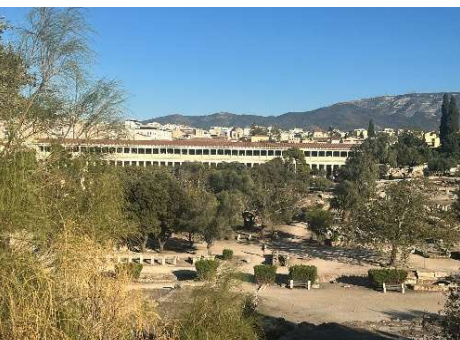
The Athens Riviera is collection of organised and unorganised beaches, resorts, rocky coves and harbours including the Bay of Zea, Flisvos Marina, Glyfada, Voula, Vouliagmeni, Lagonisi, Varkiza, Sounio and Anavyssos. I thought I would list them so you might check them out on your next visit. Saves time hanging around for all those ferries.



Ancient Agora of Athens



The Ancient Agora and the Temple of Hephaestus are generally accepted to be the birthplace of democracy. It was here that the city's most important political functions were undertaken and where both Pericles and Socrates once walked. The ruins of the ancient Agora, the well-preserved Temple of Hephaistos and the restored Stoa of Attalos lie in the shadow of the Acropolis but are well worth a visit and the €10 which it costs to get in there.

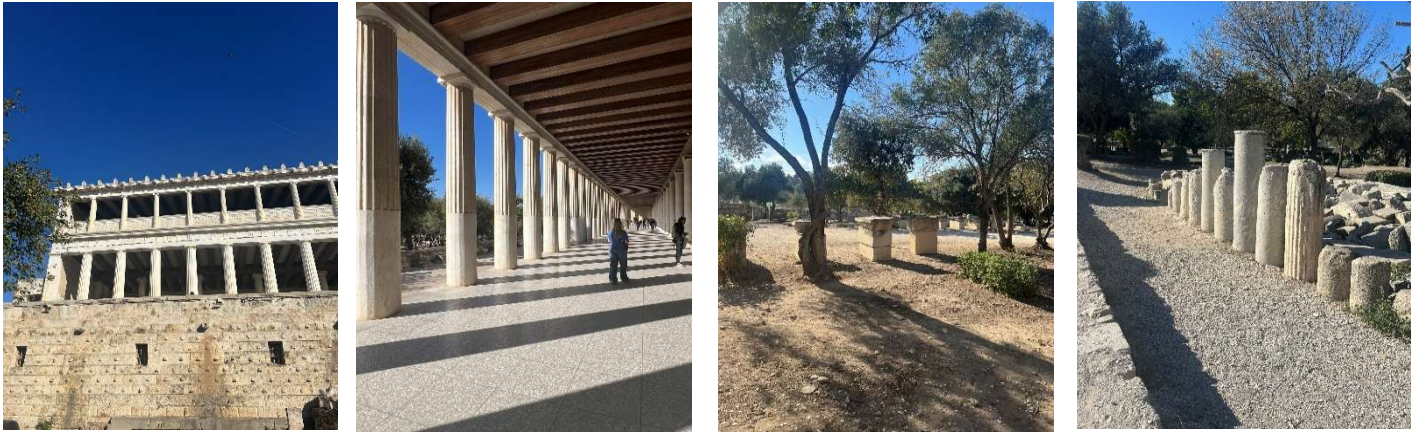


Democracy, in this instance, developed around 500BC and allowed eligible citizens the right to participate in decision-making and vote on laws. The definition of eligible citizens was limited to adult male Athenian citizens who had completed their military training..... not quite that democratic as the definition only applied to about 10-20% of the total population.



The Stoa of Attalos was originally built by King Attalos and painstakingly reconstructed by American archaeologists during the 1950's. This building now houses the museum of Ancient Agora.

The Temple of Hephaistos is one of Athens' best-known buildings and one of the best-preserved temples in Athens. The temple is dedicated to the ancient Greek god of blacksmiths, fire and volcanoes.



Acropolis

The word "Acropolis" comes from two Ancient Greek words: akron meaning highest point and polis meaning city. It is likely that the area was inhabited as far back as 4000BC on the evidence from pottery pieces that were found there.

Due to its high location, the Acropolis was the perfect place from which to defend the area. Therefore, the first structures built on the hill were fortress like walls dating back to around 1300BC. The area was used by the Mycenaeans to rule and protect their kingdom.



The impressive, and much visited, buildings. today were commissioned by Pericles and constructed or rebuilt between 447 BC and 432 BC. These include the Parthenon, the Erechtheion, the Temple of Athena Nike and the unfinished Propylaea.

Though the buildings on the Acropolis were initially built to worship Greek gods, they were later used by Byzantine Christians who turned the temples into churches, and by Ottoman Muslims who turned the Parthenon into a mosque.

Not surprisingly the area is designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site which describes the collection of monuments as "universal symbols of the classical spirit and civilization." This site is just one of the 19 such sites to be found across Greece.

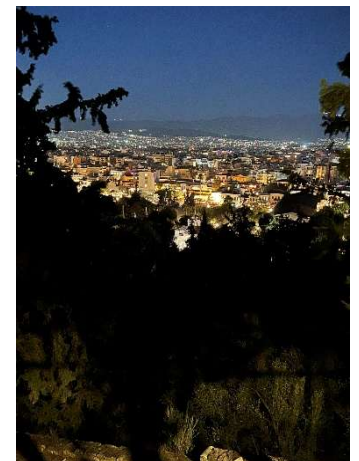
My favourite building is undoubtedly the Parthenon dedicated to the goddess Athena.

During its long history, the Parthenon has served as a munitions dump, a church, a mosque and was bombed by the Venetians in 1687. Sadly, according to my guidebook, the building was 'widely looted by former Ambassador to Constantinople Lord Elgin.'

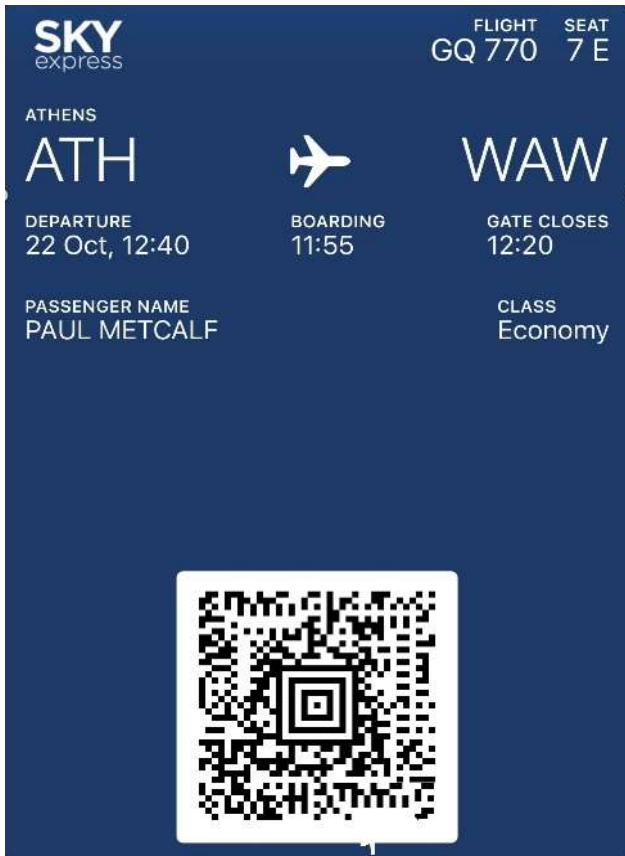
We are talking here about the Elgin Marbles which are a collection of sculptures from the Parthenon that were taken by Lord Elgin in the early 1800s. Today they remain in the British Museum and, despite international pressure, the British Museum has no plans to return them.

Finally, I have to admit, that I did not have time to visit the Acropolis on this occasion. It wasn't the €20 admission charge or all of those steps but simply the fact that I had run out of time and the Acropolis shuts early.

Instead, I have taken some lovely pictures from various advantage points around the city, and I took a final walk around the Acropolis after dark to catch some beautiful pictures of the area and its neighbourhood which is full of delightful shops and beautiful restaurants.



Chapter 7: Warsaw



Introduction

One of the problems with trying to find the cheapest flight out of Athens is the large number of flights available but, unfortunately, they are all destined for such lovely destinations as Santorini, Mykonos, Crete and Rhodes.

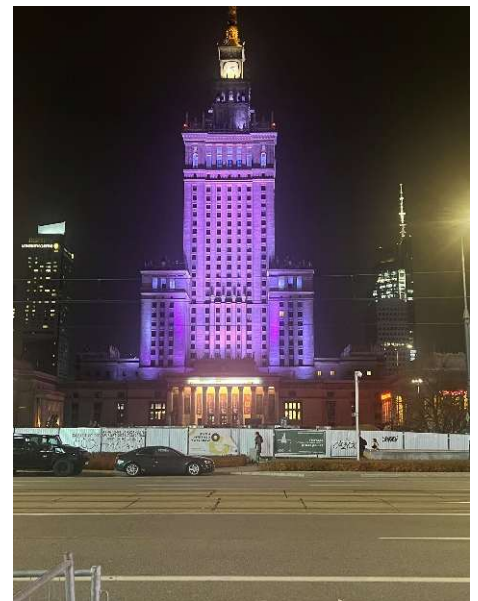
With prices such as Santorini at £17 and Mykonos for £31, I wish I did not have to abide by my own rules that say cannot go to the same country twice.....else I would be touring the Greek isles!!! Rules are rules and I am now left with Tirana in Albania and Warsaw in Poland for £117.

Now, I haven't thought about what I should do in the event there was a tie so checked the figures more closely and realised they are both £116.80 but the Tirana flight is with Wizz Air (and I cannot fly the same airline twice) so ruled out and the Warsaw flight is with Sky Express so next stop Warsaw.

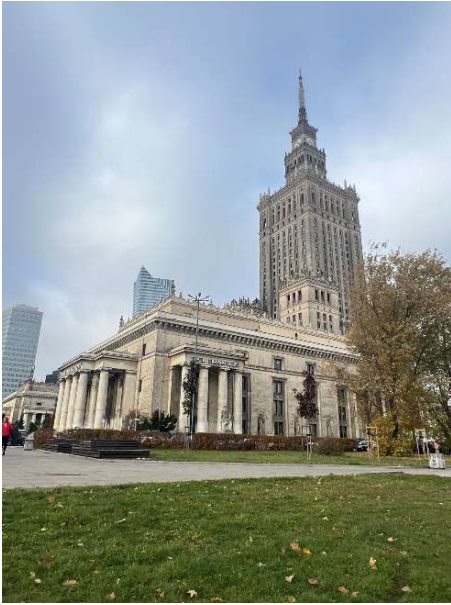
I must admit that I have never heard of SKY Express and although I found their website, I could not find an app which would have been extremely useful. Regardless, this is a Greek airline headquartered in Heraklion international Airport and founded in 2005. We will see.

Warsaw

I found nothing particularly beautiful about Warsaw as I travelled from the airport to my hotel. Rather the place looked like a city of ugly high-rise boxes.... more eyesore than Warsaw. Regardless inside those boxes, the people of Warsaw manage to create a beautiful space in which to exist. Bars, cafes and restaurants are particularly welcoming. They are thoughtfully decorated and make effective use of furniture and furnishing. Ugly outside but beautiful inside.



Warsaw is the capital of Poland as well as being its economic and business centre. The architecture is shaped by Poland's turbulent history with communist era apartment blocks contrasting with the graciously reconstructed old town. It is hard to believe that in 1944, nearly 90% of the city was razed to the ground in retaliation for the Warsaw Uprising where the Polish underground resistance attempted to liberate Warsaw from German occupation.



Warsaw Market Place



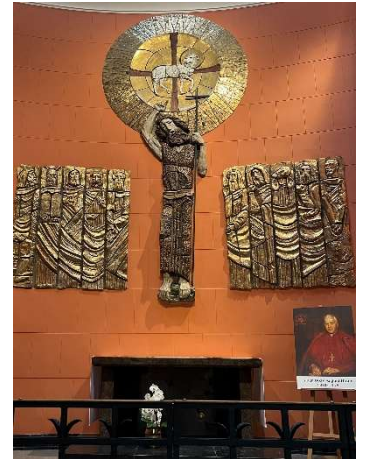
Next morning and it is absolutely freezing outside. For some reason I am well packed for summer but did not expect the temperature to be quite so cold. I am wearing two pairs of trousers, a T-shirt, a jumper, and a cardigan over the top. This morning, I am off to the old town and what a difference and what a contrast. This place is unbelievably pretty and bring here is like stepping back into a fairy tale. How different from last night's grey boxes.





St John's Archcathedral

St John's Archcathedral is one of three major cathedrals in the city but is the only one with the title of an archcathedral as it is the mother church of the Archdiocese of Warsaw. In 1944, the cathedral was a place of struggle between the Polish underground resistance and the advancing German army. The German army managed to get a tank full of explosives into the cathedral and the huge explosion caused extensive damage to the cathedral walls. The cathedral was rebuilt after the war using the original 14th century plans.



Tomb of the Unknown Soldier

The Tomb of the Unknown Soldier is dedicated to the soldiers who gave their lives for Poland and the symbol of the struggle for freedom and independence. The tomb was situated in the Saxon Palace in 1925 and is the only surviving part of palace remaining after it was dynamited by retreating Germans at the end of World War II. A defining feature of the Tomb is the eternal flame that burns perpetually, symbolising the enduring memory and respect the fallen soldiers. The flame is permanently accompanied by two soldiers representing the Polish Army and confirming their respect for their unknown soldiers.

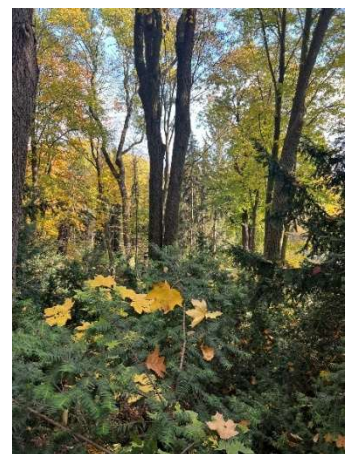


Royal Lazienki Park, Warsaw



One of the very noticeable things about Warsaw is the number of open spaces and parks around the city. One of my favourites is the Royal Lazienki Park which is also known as the Royal Baths Park. This park is the largest in Warsaw. and occupies approximately 188 acres (76 hectares) of city space. The extensive Gardens includes a theatre, numerous palaces and the sculpture of Fryderyk Chopin.

One of the highlights of the park is the Lazienki Palace known as the Island Palace because it is built on an artificial island in the middle of one of the park's lakes. The palace was built in the 17th century and was the summer residence of the last King of Poland. Towards the end of the war this inside of the palace was devastated and the retreating Germans drilled holes in the structure to rig it with explosives. Fortunately, for all those concerned, the plan was never carried out.



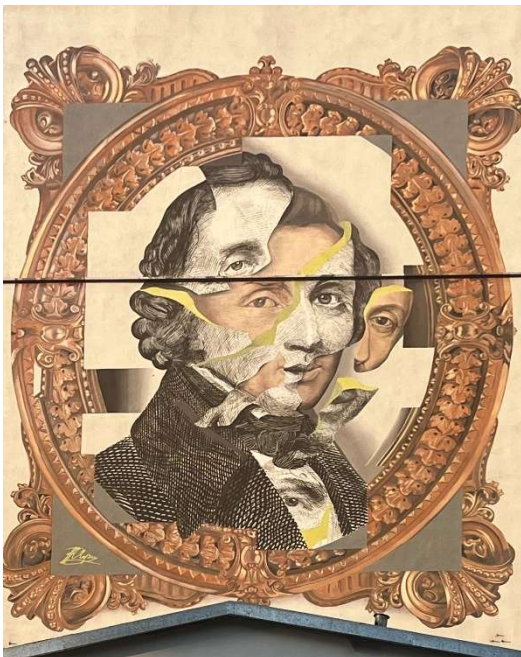
The Fryderyk Chopin Museum in Warsaw

One cannot help but notice the omnipresence of Chopin across the whole of Warsaw. This starts with your arrival at Warsaw Chopin airport and is further immortalised through the names given to streets, bars, cafes and restaurants as well as the Chopin Monument, the Chopin Museum and the Fryderyk Chopin Institute.

Fryderyk Franciszek Chopin was born on March 1st, 1810. He is reputed to be one of the greatest pianists and was proclaimed a child prodigy since he composed and published his first piece at the age of six years old. After finishing his studies at the Warsaw Conservatory music his parents sent him to Vienna where he made his performance debut over the next few years he performed in Poland, Germany, Austria and Paris where he settled in 1832.



Chopin's last concert was in London in 1848 for a fundraising concert organised by the Literary Association of the Friends of Poland raising money for Polish refugees who had fled to London. Afterwards, he returned to Paris where he died from tuberculosis on October 17th, 1849, aged 39 years old. Approximately 3000 people attended his funeral at the Church of Madeleine in Paris.





Chopin International Airport in Warsaw

They say that' all good things must come to an end and, at last, I am on my way home. I have enjoyed my trip very much and appreciated your company and your comments. Today I am taking the cheapest of all my flights..... BA business class to Heathrow for just £12.50 actually, I used my Avios points. Lucky, I did because the next cheapest flight was to Oslo for £13 and I am freezing enough here in Warsaw.

I must admit that I quite enjoyed my stay in Warsaw, albeit rather brief and extremely cold. There are parts of this city which are extremely beautiful and that alone makes the trip worthwhile, although there are plenty of enormously ugly bits which I have chosen to ignore. I found out a lot about the history of Warsaw not least the challenge of building a city from scratch after WWII. I also know a lot more about Chopin now than I did before and have a renewed interest in his music. The walks in the parks were delightful with something to see at every turn, and I am sure the exercise will have done my knee a lot of good.



Chapter 8: Summary



Well, that was an adventure. My Magical Mystery Tour unfolded as a vibrant tapestry of Europe's contrasts, weaving together history, culture and some amazing experiences across six capitals in 12 days. Guided by budget flights and a rule-bound itinerary, the journey offered many fleeting yet vivid encounters.

Starting in Dublin, the journey celebrated literary legends like Oscar Wilde and the ancient Book of Kells, paired with quirky stops like a drag queen's pub. Madrid dazzled next with lively plazas, Retiro Park's tranquil gardens and the unexpected Egyptian Temple of Debod.

Rome brought ancient wonders to life—the Colosseum's grandeur and the democratic echoes of the Roman Forum although I missed the queues to get into the Vatican. A surprise detour to Malta revealed Valletta's Baroque charm, Mdina's medieval silence and a definite sense of being on the set of a Game of Thrones.

Athens bridged past and present and the €20 transit pass definitely unlocked the city's secrets efficiently. Finally, Warsaw mixed resilience and beauty with the charm of the rebuilt Old Town charm, Chopin's lingering melodies and Soviet-era blocks softened by welcoming cafes.

From Dublin's literary pubs to Warsaw's frosty parks as well as fleeting glances of art and the occasional sense of grandeur, the trip proved that even quick glimpses can capture a city's soul.....a reminder that adventure thrives on curiosity and not just time or money.

Find the videos on www.youtube.com/@thewheretogo



The outside cover if you enjoyed this guide.....



The Magical Mystery Tour is just one of a growing series of documentary travel guides collated under 'The Where To Go' banner. The following titles are presently available or coming really soon.....

