

sea symphony

Passengers who board the *Crown Odyssey* cruise ship are ditching deck quoits for Debussy, as *Classic FM* presenter Mark Griffiths discovered

It's a trick that would make Houdini proud: check into four-star luxury accommodation, unpack your things just once, and languish in comfort while visiting some of the Mediterranean's richest cultural destinations. No hire cars and no airports. Such is the magic of a cruise holiday.

From the moment we boarded the *Crown Odyssey* at Barcelona, we were spoilt for choice, planning our week from an itinerary of shore excursions, musicals, recitals and films. Our journey would take us to Nice, the Italian harbours of Civitavecchia and Sorrento, Malta's Valletta, and the Greek island of Santorini, finally docking in Piraeus, the port for Athens. And with 470 staff looking after 1026 passengers, we wouldn't have to lift a finger.

We weren't planning to watch the ship's entertainers play quoits. In fact, we were looking forward to hearing them play Brahms. A cruise is not just an effortless way to visit some of the finest cities in Europe, it's also a chance to soak up some of the best classical music.

The *Crown Odyssey's* Top of the Crown lounge and Monte Carlo Court are ideal venues for listening to

Debussy and Chopin. Pianist Stacy MacAdams plays classical as well as jazzy pieces by Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Rodgers and Hammerstein and Cole Porter. He's used to pleasing the crowds. 'Two years ago, I did a soirée in the Green Room at the Café Royal,' he proudly told me. 'I was spotted and immediately signed up to play here.'

The *Crown Odyssey* is home to musicians from all walks of life. Christian Bistriceanu formed the Concerto Strings Trio five years ago, while at University in Romania. They work on the *Crown Odyssey* for five months at a time, playing classical music, jazz and dance. 'We prefer to play classical music and are responsive to what passengers want to hear,' said Bistriceanu. 'We get a lot of requests for popular melodies and music by Strauss that people can dance to, but we're open to everything.'

We soon discovered how easy it is to relax to music on the *Crown Odyssey*; even the dancing is done for you, with gentlemen hosts spinning ladies round the dance floor into the wee small hours. The ship's four hosts are required to attend all dance classes during the day and all dance sessions in the evening. They have been

auditioned for their conversational skills, as well as their ability to dance. 'We think of the gentleman as the frame and the lady as the picture,' one host told me.

Our itinerary included some of the treasures of the ancient world. I opted for the Grandeur of Rome day tour, which included coach transportation from the port of Civitavecchia on Italy's west coast, two tour guides, lunch at an Old Town taverna and visits to the Coliseum, Roman Forum and the Trevi Fountain. Our guide told us to fill whatever containers we had with Trevi Fountain water, saying it would keep us young and virile. I took her advice, but sadly left my bottle behind in the taverna.

After lunch we were taken to St Peter's Basilica in the world's smallest state – Vatican City. We arrived amid tight security; thousands of novice priests had descended on the cathedral for a special Mass given by Pope John Paul II. Swiss guards vetted those who approached the barrier, but our guide beckoned us forward and, after she had sweet-talked the guards, we entered the Basilica for a glimpse of the Pope celebrating Mass.

STOPPOFF: BARCELONA (right)

There's no shortage of music in Barcelona. Places to visit during your stopoff include the Liceu Opera House and the Palau de la Musica. For an unusual eating experience try the Lupino Restaurant in Calle Carne. The Arab-Spanish food is served in retro-futuristic airport lounge surroundings by waiters dressed like the team from *Star Trek*

Later, all ears were on the ship's Mikel Orchestra, one of many ensembles onboard. 'Variety is key,' said cruise director David Lawton. 'We put on big productions, like a rock and roll show and *Around The World*, which takes its theme from the ports of call on our itinerary.'

By the end of the cruise, we were almost too relaxed to move. We had dined on fine foods – the lemon cello cake is not to be missed – and supped fine wines. To redress the balance, we treated ourselves to an invigorating

'HOSTS SPIN LADIES ROUND THE DANCE FLOOR INTO THE SMALL HOURS'

pumice massage (just right for a cruise that takes in Mount Vesuvius and volcanic Santorini) in the Mandara Spa. Whether you dance the night away or just relax on deck, there's something for everyone on a cruise. Who knows, you might discover a little *Water Music* along the way. ■

• *Crown Odyssey* cruises the Mediterranean and Greek Isles until 13 October 2002, and from 19 April to 30 October 2003, departing from Barcelona, Nice, Venice, Civitavecchia (Rome) or Piraeus (Athens). Seven-night fly cruises start from £8.45 per person; 12 nights from £1,675 per person. Prices include return scheduled flights with free connections from main UK regional airports and, in 2003, will also include onboard gratuities. Shore excursions cost from \$38, Mandara Spa treatments from \$89.