

Participant Comment

Elderhostel Adriatic & Aegean Treasures (14920)

by Robert Fabian

The tour began poorly with an ill-planned transfer from the airport in Venice to the ship. It took the tour leader some time to find the bus. When it was eventually found, the driver deposited us at a location some distance from the ship. In our journey to the ship, we discovered that one of the people on the tour was restricted in his ability to walk. That should have been an indication that special arrangements would need to be made for this handicapped member of the tour.

Our first day in Venice was painful. Our handicapped tour member held up our walking progress through the city. We had to spend considerable time (and emotional energy) waiting for him and making sure that he and his wife did not get lost. It should have been obvious from our initial experience at the airport that he would not be able to keep up. And special arrangements should have been made. No such arrangements were made, nor was it possible to make such arrangements on-the-fly. This lack of planning cost us much of the potential enjoyment of our limited time in Venice, and meant that we were not able to see everything promised.

Day two was almost as bad. Our handicapped tour member again seriously held up our walking progress. Again, no plans were in place to allow the tour to proceed as planned. By day three, our handicapped tour member was successfully discouraged from holding up the rest of us. But why did it take two “failed” days before something was done to limit his ability to impact everyone else’s enjoyment of the tour? It appeared to be another planning failure. It also raised questions about what would have happened if a tour member had suffered serious problems.

By day three, our handicapped tour member was no longer an active problem, but we were then treated to our first problem with the person who was to be our tour lecturer. Twice during one afternoon she held everyone up by wandering off on her own and failing to return to the tour bus at the appointed time. We lost some 45 minutes that day thanks to her repeated failure to pay attention to the time, and again were not able to complete the planned day’s events. This would have been unfortunate in a tour member, and should never have happened with a staff member.

The failure of Elderhostel to provide a tour lecturer who was able to return on time was unfortunate. Her inability to deliver a coherent lecture was more than just unfortunate. One of the important features of Elderhostel tours is a significant and meaningful educational component. This is a basic part of what participants should expect from an Elderhostel tour. All of the scheduled lectures did take place, but no tour member reported any satisfaction with any of these scheduled lectures. The failure of these lectures may not have been literally a fraudulent misrepresentation on Elderhostel’s part, but it does mean that we were cheated of the educational experience we were clearly led to expect.

How bad were the lectures? The first lecture began with the question that could be paraphrased, “Can someone tell me the difference between communism, socialism, marxism, and democracy?” The question was not all that well-formed, and led to no meaningful distinction

between the terms. The lecturer seemed to have in mind some simple, and limited, definitions. The first lecture went downhill from there. The lecturer made assertions that were impossible to defend, e.g. "Communism can be recognized as a system of government that does not allow elections." When questioned about the fact that elections were a regular feature of the Cold War Communist regimes, she did not retract the assertion or provide an explanation to justify the assertion. In addition to clear and frequent misinformation, her first lecture was filled with irrelevant snippets drawn from her personal experience some twenty years in the past. I don't think think that I have ever been subjected to a lecture of such clear and obvious negative value.

It should have been obvious to anyone who attended her first lecture (which included the tour leader) that she was incapable of providing a meaningful educational experience. We would have been much better served by an open discussion amongst tour participants (excluding our lecturer with her irrelevant interjections). No further lectures by this person should have been scheduled. Despite a clear proposal to our tour leader for open discussion sessions, no such discussions were scheduled. The disastrous lectures continued, and the tour leader capped the experience by explaining away the lecturer's failure by pointing to the limited time she had to prepare. In effect, Elderhostel continued with a plan that could, and should, have been predicted to fail, and compounded the failure by providing a lame excuse for the failed lectures. The lectures were an unmitigated failure, imposing a serious cost to all tour participants. We didn't get the educational experience we paid for.

The actual tours were generally reasonable. With the exception of a very high quality Delos tour guide, no local guide was particularly insightful, but most seemed to be competent, albeit with an often strong local bias that provided a less than accurate description of the local political, social, or economic realities.

The ship is clearly an "aging princess". Most of the surfaces may have been repainted or refinished, but even the new surfaces are beginning to show signs of wear, and external surfaces were thickly encrusted with paint. Noise was a problem in cabins that could only be described as tiny. Based on anecdotal evidence, it appeared that many of the (tiny) cabins on the lower two floors suffered a noise problem. Food would be best described as bland and unimaginative. The ship's education program was reasonably interesting (and vastly superior to than that provided by Elderhostel). The ship's entertainment was not to our taste, but that may be a result of our strong classical bias. The big problem with the ship concerned its attempt at providing WiFi access to the Internet. Such access has become an almost necessity for many.

WiFi access was promised. Indeed, one of the reasons that I purchased a new netbook computer was because such access was promised. Once on board, we discovered that the cost was relatively high, but that might have been acceptable if the service were to have been reliable. It was not. Most of the time, the WiFi network was down, or was unable to successfully connect to the Internet. The alternative access though strongly locked-down desktop computers was so limited as to be effectively useless, at least for me (I was unable to use port 2082 to access the backend of my email server). I view this as a major failure to deliver a promised service. The problem was addressed, not by fixing the WiFi, but by a refund. At an absolute minimum, the possibly unreliable (and very slow) nature of the WiFi network should have been spelled out to participants before they signed up for the tour.

Our tour lecturer had several unfortunate experiences in Istanbul. First, she fell on the street, doing considerable damage to her face and needing to have two facial cuts stitched. There were reported further balance problems during our time in Istanbul. And she fell on exit from the bus at the airport, doing some additional damage to her face. In addition to her problems as a lecturer, she appears to have significant health problems. She should never have been engaged by Elderhostel.

Overall

Elderhostel has clearly not been able to deliver a high quality tour, with a meaningful Elderhostel education component. The planning was weak; the Elderhostel “education” was pathetic.

Has Elderhostel expanded beyond its ability to deliver quality? Based on the evidence of this tour (and our one previous Elderhostel tour), the problems appear to be systemic. At an absolute minimum, there should have been contingency plans in place to cope with the problems we experienced. As a result, we did not receive full value for our money.

I would be reluctant to sign up for another Elderhostel tour - the absence of an effective quality guarantee is telling. I would also be reluctant to recommend an Elderhostel tour to anyone else - based on our experience, Elderhostel is not able to deliver a consistent, high quality product.

That’s unfortunate. Elderhostel had a widely recognized ability to deliver high quality, educational tours. It was a name to trust, especially for “seniors” who wanted educational tours. Quality is no longer guaranteed, nor are contingency plans always in place to cope with problems. “Seniors” are best advised to look elsewhere for high quality, educational tours.

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