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TOURISM IS A DELICATE FLOWER that needs a certain degree of political and economic stability to thrive, and the halcyon days of the Pax Romana—roughly 30 B.C. to A.D. 200—is the longest unbroken period of peace that Europe has ever managed. In fact, the first two centuries A.D. form one of Western culture's rare windows of calm—an interlude, in retrospect, of ghostly serenity. Safe transit around the Mediterranean was a unique dividend, and Romans came to accept it as their birthright. In fact, around A.D. 140, when a celebrated orator named Aelius Aristides announced with Panglossian assurance that humankind was enjoying "the best and most perfect times that ever were," he stressed that the ease of travel was one of Rome's greatest triumphs.

"Cannot every man go wherever he wishes, without fear?" he floridly mused. "Aren't all our harbors busy? Aren't the mountains just as safe as the cities? There are no rivers that have not been bridged, no ocean gulfs that cannot be crossed. Even the sandy road to Egypt presents no obstacles; no terrifying mountain pass, no torrents or savages block the way.

"Homer once prayed: 'The world should be open to all men.' That wish is now realized. To be the Emperor's subject—to be a Roman—is the only passport one needs."

Aristides happily noted that piracy had been stamped out. Highway robbery was rare; barbarian incursions unthought of; civil disturbance all but nonexistent. He went on to suggest, rather less convincingly, that life under Rome was so good that its subjects did not even mind paying

In some respects, travel has not been so easy since. With the entire Mediterranean politically unified for the first—and, so far in history, only—time, citizens had no need to carry documents. The imperial currency (gold *aurei* and silver *sesterii* and *denarii*) was standard in lands the *curo* has yet to penetrate, from the deserts of Morocco to the border villages in Iraq. Conveniently, the Empire had two common languages: Latin prevailed in the west, Greek in the east. Educated citizens were bilingual and could discuss a dinner menu as easily in Spain as in Syria. And the sheer volume of Roman *viatores*, or *peregrinatores* (wayfarers), would not be equaled until the modern era. The Empire's great highways, which formed a granite ring road around the entire Mediterranean coast, were in constant use, their stones worn and rutted by the ceaseless passage of iron wheels. The waves were just as busy: "Look at the sea covered with ships!" marveled one author. "There are more men afloat these days than ashore!" Students traveled to famous academies; patients journeyed to health spas; artists were in perpetual motion, seeking out commissions. Celebrity orators like Aristides went on long lecture tours, their performances as wildly popular as those of Wilde and Dickens in the nineteenth-century United States. Athletes flocked to competitions, actors to theater festivals, poets to readings.

But the most distinctive growth was in travel simply for the sake of seeing—tourism. For the first time in history, sheer pleasure became a worthy motive of travel.

THE SOPHISTICATED WAYFARER

To visit sumptuous temples full of treasures and relics, we brave the dangers of land and sea. Greedily seeking the tales of early legend, we travel through every nation . . . happily reliving ancient times, gazing at stones which moved great artists to song and string.

Aetna, anonymous Roman poem, first century A.D.

The quest for the marvelous was taken up by Romans as soon as they had the opportunity, and is entirely recognizable to us today.

"Many of us endure all sorts of hardships," intoned the philosopher Seneca in the middle of the first century A.D., "to behold some remote sight. For Nature made us born admirers; her jewels would be lost without an audience." Romans had become both "migratory and curious," noted the scholar Pliny the Younger, setting out en masse to explore

their vast domain. And when the author Plutarch remarked with some bemusement on “globe-trotters who spend the best part of their lives in inns and on boats”—gadabouts who continuously “traverse unknown cities, sail new seas, but are at home everywhere”—I felt more than a twinge of familiarity.

Of course, modern travel is a notoriously democratic pursuit, at least within the industrialized world, first experienced most often by near-penniless backpackers. I’d taken my own initial trips during breaks from college, hitchhiking for weeks at a time with a twenty-dollar Woolworth’s tent. Those original Roman tourists were often young—in their twenties and thirties—and usually had a studious, almost pedantic bent. But they were always, by necessity, quite *rich*.

These first lucky wanderers were drawn from what historians refer to for convenience as “the imperial elite.” This group, at the peak of the Empire’s elaborate social pyramid, included both the traditional Roman blue bloods and aristocrats from the provinces—the well-born peers of Ephesus, Cadiz, Athens, and Marseilles, who had often studied in Rome and lived here for much of their lives. These imperial Brahmins formed a tight-knit, homogeneous caste, immediately recognizable—by their



Roman faces: the so-called Fayum portraits, preserved for two thousand years

choice of dress, their eloquence, their bearing, their hauteur and refinement—to one another and to their inferiors.

Never before had such a large class enjoyed such incredible wealth relative to the rest of society, or such extravagant personal (if not political) freedom as these ancient scions.

The *spertatores* (sightseers) came from every subset of this elite. There were refined youths combining tourism with foreign study (“It is a young man’s *duty* to see the world,” pronounced one pagan holy man). There were feisty Roman women—art lovers and socialites—who longed to see the Empire. Lawyers, poets, and generals taking a break from their routines. Middle-aged philosophers. Elderly antiquarians. For these ruling-class swells, running into a fellow tourist on the road was always a pleasure: They all knew one another’s families, had gossiped about their peccadilloes, and may even have dined together back in Rome. As a group, they moved confidently through the cities of the provinces, taking their enormous privileges for granted.

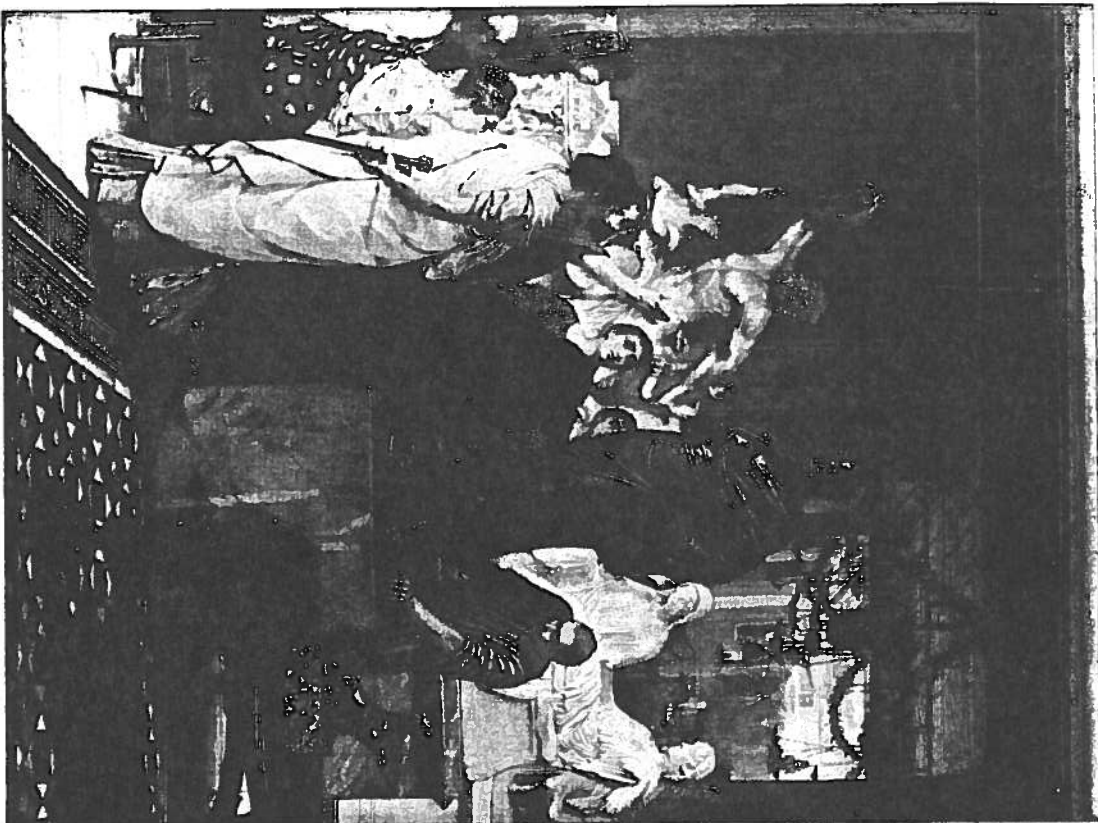
Wealthy Romans were the first true “citizens of the world”; they were conquerors on tour.

These aristocrats had no real need to work; leisure in ancient times was cultivated as an end in itself. Many *andelliones* happily frittered their lives away, keeping up a hectic social calendar of drunken banquets like foppish P. G. Wodehouse characters. But for the more intelligent and cultivated Romans, faced with an unprecedented amount of downtime, ennui could actually be a genuine problem.

“Idleness is wont to make men hate their lives,” sighed Seneca. Even at the most debauched parties, wrote the poet Lucretius, Romans suffered attacks of melancholy—“a bitterness arose, a pang among the flowers.” “*Carpe diem*,” said the poet Horace. But for some, seizing the day meant more than a relentless regime of wine, roast flamingo, and song.

Tourism was an ideal means of using time gainfully, expanding one’s education, and establishing the credentials for connoisseurship within that smart social set. Many Romans researched scholarly monographs while on their journeys—on religion, art, astronomy, or history. Some, like five Neoplatonist philosophers who signed graffiti in Egypt, traveled in study groups.

In fact, the Roman tourists were very much like the young European aristocrats of the eighteenth century who embraced the Grand Tour of France and Italy—and the children of American industrialists who continued the European touring tradition with even greater gusto in the



A Sculpture Gallery in Rome at the Time of Augustus (1867),
by Sir Lawrence Alma-Tadema, one of the great historical genre painters

A foreign sojourn was edifying, it was fashionable, it was prestigious. It was little short of a social imperative.

And what were the favorite destinations that satisfied these yearnings? Greece, Asia Minor, and Egypt, said Pliny, were the lands "beloved of the learned."

Much, it might be said, as they remain today.

The Once and Future Tourist Trail

OF ALL THE MODERN ECHOES of ancient travel habits, the most striking is that the favorite Roman tourist route remains the most popular trail on earth. In fact, when you map out that original itinerary, it looks like any Marvels of the Mediterranean package today.

It's as if, whenever the same conditions of peace and prosperity are met throughout history, the patterns of tourism reassert themselves with renewed strength, sprouting hydralike from the severed stump of the past.

The Grand Tour of Antiquity began, of course, in Italy. After an emotional farewell to their beloved Rome—travelers would, after all, be away for two to five years—they clattered on iron-wheeled wagons down the Appian Way. They paused at the Bay of Naples, the most fashionable beach resort of the time, whose carnal pleasures put modern Ibiza to shame, before reaching the port at the peninsula's heel. Here passenger boats embarked, just as they do today, toward the east. And it was on board, sails filling in the Adriatic, that the real adventure began.

The ideal Roman circuit can most easily be gathered from Germanicus, the immensely popular grandnephew of the emperor Augustus, who set off on a tour from A.D. 17 to 19. The handsome victor of many bloody campaigns against the German tribes—later idealized as

Claudius—Germanicus took advantage of the benefits package that came with his official post as consul, opting to take his wife, Agrippina, and five-year-old son, Gaius (the future Caligula), on an extended sight-seeing junket.

For Germanicus, like every Roman, Greece was the first stop: Those sacred valleys, their olive groves bathed in light, were the very well-springs of civilization. Here, the tourists showed that they were history lovers first and foremost, avidly seeking out all the Greek monuments, graves, temples, and relics that evoked the heroic past. "We are moved in some mysterious way by places which bear the traces of those we admire," wrote one of Cicero's friends, confessing that he found "the favorite haunts of distinguished men" more moving than their writings. The boyishly eager Germanicus found that he could, in the words of Tacitus, "re-enact in his own imagination mighty triumphs and mighty tragedies."

But "history" to Romans was never limited to the deeds of mere mortals. The myths and legends born in Greece were just as real to tourists—and their relics far, far more exciting. Whether it was the bones of detested Titans displayed in temples (probably the thighs of mammoths), the egg that hatched the beautiful Helen (probably an ostrich egg from Africa), or a shadowy grotto said to be frequented by Pan and his nymphs, the touch of the gods was irresistible.

Germanicus visits Athens for the Parthenon and to meet the great philosophers in vine-covered taverns. He goes to Delphi for its oracle; Sparta for its glorious military traditions; and even appears at the world's most illustrious sporting event, the Olympic Games, where he races a chariot around the hallowed stadium where Jupiter had once wrestled the Titan Chronos, and Hercules thrown the discus.

After Greece, Romans followed the siren call of the Aegean— island-hopping east to Rhodes, to inspect the remains of the Colossus (it had fallen in an earthquake two centuries before; today nothing remains).

After cruising the sensual coast of Asia Minor, modern-day Turkey, Germanicus weighs anchor at the site of ruined Troy—the pagan Jerusalem, setting of Homer's *Iliad*, and the most evocative of all ancient tourist sites. He inspects the relics of Trojan heroes, makes sacrifices at the war graves, and is rewarded, apparently, with a vision of Hector's ghost.

From Asia, tourists headed to the most hyped destination of the ancient world: Egypt. Romans were fascinated by this mysterious land and its silent monuments, where shaven-headed priests still worshipped

From the port of Alexandria, Germanicus bounces on camelback to the Pyramids, then signs on for a Nile cruise to Thebes, modern-day Luxor. In the dizzying heat, he clambers by torchlight into ghoulish tombs and listens to wizened priests tell stories of the Pharaohs—all no doubt intoned in the same solemn voice as that which is used in Luxor's kitschy light-and-sound shows today. At last, he reaches the sacred waterfalls of Isis, at the Empire's frontier: Beyond lies the kingdom of the Ethiopians, whose skin has been burned black by the setting sun—not to mention the cave-dwelling Troglodytes, the blood-drinking Massagetae, and the Blemyes, men with no heads.

Germanicus would have had no reason to doubt these confused reports—after all, those mythical African kingdoms sounded scarcely less fabulous than those he had already seen. But it is unlikely that he felt any urge to investigate.

Romans happily accepted their standard attractions as definitive. They still delighted in the timeworn Seven Wonders—the original “best of” list devised by an unknown scholar in the third century B.C. (and properly known as the Seven Sights, or Things to Be Seen). The first tourists liked to keep to the beaten path. They wanted to behold the pillars of their own culture:

In fact, they created the first Heritage Trail, whose specter would haunt European culture as persistently as any other achievement of the Empire.

THE ETERNAL LODESTAR

Since the end of the Second World War, the Western world has enjoyed the longest stretch of peace since the Pax Romana. When the economic quantum leap of the 1950s and '60s combined with cheap air travel to jump-start mass tourism, its focus was entirely predictable: The Mediterranean had history. It had natural beauty. It had glamour. Its lovely coastline became a testing ground for what would become an international pattern of annual tourist migration.

In fact, the continuities of tourism verge on the monomaniacal. “The grand object of traveling,” Samuel Johnson observed, “is to see the shores of the Mediterranean.” Then, Rome and Naples were the twin climaxes of the Grand Tour, but the Romantics soon repopularized Greece as the focus of poetic allure. In the nineteenth century, the rediscovery of Troy launched a thousand tourist ships. And when, in 1864,

British entrepreneur Thomas Cook devised the world's first international package tour, it was to that wondrous land so loved by Roman tourists—Egypt. In fact, Mr. Cook settled on the exact itinerary our friend Germanicus had followed in A.D. 19—Alexandria, the Pyramids, a pleasant Nile cruise to the Valley of the Kings. Johnson also observed that anyone who had not been to the famous sights would be “always conscious of an inferiority, from his not having seen what is expected a man should see.” The same might be said today: A sojourn in the Med is still a rite de passage, as much as it was for the pioneering Roman wayfarers—it's up there with births, weddings, honeymoons, and funerals.

The problem is, while there were once only a few thousand antiquarians drifting along those spacious ancient shores, the Mediterranean is now a giant whirlpool of a market.

The statistics are dizzying: According to the UN's World Tourism Organization in Madrid, some 700 million people now take foreign trips every year; by the year 2020, the figure will be 1.6 billion. And fully a third of the world's tourists still come to the Mediterranean. At last count, Italy clocks up around 36 million tourists a year. Greece, 12 million. Turkey, 9 million. Egypt, 10 million. And all the favorite Roman destinations—Capri, Rhodes, the pagan sites of Greece, the coast of Turkey, the Pyramids—remain the perennial sight-seeing hot spots.

Which is why, perversely enough, many of us have avoided them all our lives.

Rites of Passage

TODAY, THERE ARE A LOT OF GOOD REASONS to tackle the Mediterranean maelstrom, although your loved one's becoming pregnant probably isn't among them. At least that would be the conventional view. But I present myself as an extreme case study of the contemporary wayfarer, caught between the two opposing traditions of Western travel.

I was one of those people—a typical breed these days—who had been to just about every place on earth *except* the Mediterranean. I'd spent months in Zanzibar, Iceland, and Pago Pago but had never made it to Italy. I'd visited Tierra del Fuego five times but never seen Rome.

To some observers, this seemed vaguely pathological; to others, it made perfect sense. It was the only way to deal with the explosion of modern tourism that—as far as I could gather—had turned every sacred site of Greco-Roman lore into a multi-ring circus.

Of course, when I'd set off on my first round-the-world trip many years ago, I'd had every intention of ending among the sacred sites of antiquity—to gaze at “stones which moved great artists to song and string.” I had actually spent long years studying classical history in Sydney, Australia, where I was brought up, and been among the last generation of adolescents to have Latin verbs thrashed into me by deranged Irish-Catholic priests. I'd pored over the Greek poets, even transcribed hieroglyphics. But once I hit the road, there was no chance of my getting anywhere near Rome or Athens. I made it as far as India and stayed for months. One glimpse of Old Delhi convinced me that the world was

THAN HOLIDAY

Those hallowed shores suddenly seemed so predictable and stale. So expensive. So overrun. So picked over. So written about. So . . . finished.

How could you see anything new there? Who could look at it afresh? Instead, I ended up living in South America, wandering the back blocks of Asia, and finally moving to the capital of the Third World, New York. When I started taking trips with Lesley, I still refused to go anywhere near southern Europe. She suggested Venice. We ended up in the Colombian Amazon. Provence sounded charming . . . but Tanzania was where we went.

Like most people, I never gave up on the Mediterranean. I always assumed I'd get around to seeing the Colosseum, the Parthenon, and the Pyramids sometime. But the trip could always wait. It was a lot like the idea of having a kid, in fact. Why do something everyone else is doing? There was always a good reason not to. Always next year, or the next.

Two events shattered this blissful dithering. First, I discovered all that archival data about the ancient Roman tourists—and it occurred to me that a modern traveler could retrace their route with a sort of double vision, seeing the same historical sights and using more or less the same forms of transport. Perhaps it really *was* possible to explore the Med in a way that was vaguely original.

Second, one midsummer's night in our little East Village apartment, Les showed me with some astonishment a little plastic strip that displayed two blue dots instead of one.

Here we were, with one last chance to travel in the old style—just the two of us—before the very act of movement would resemble Napoleon's army breaking camp. And if we had only one big journey left to make, to where else could it be? The choice felt inevitable—like the outcome of that pregnancy test. The most timeworn of trails was beckoning, and it had a certain ring to it: heavy with child in the cradle of civilization.

What's more, the Mediterranean would presumably be easy traveling. After all the Third World hellholes I usually dragged her to, Italy, Greece, Turkey, even Egypt should be a breeze. (Hadn't Germanicus' wife, Agrippina, been pregnant on their journey, and even given birth en route? Hadn't Cleopatra been carrying Julius Caesar's child on their famous cruise down the Nile?)

Lesley—and her obstetrician—had only a couple of small conditions

"No terror," Les insisted matter-of-factly. "No squalor." "Sure," I promised, calculating just how little money we had to spend in four months on the road. "No terror. Minimal squalor." It did occur to me that, even for those wealthy Roman tourists, many of their archetypal travel experiences—like arriving in strange cities, looking for hotels, bawling guides, getting lost—were not entirely comfortable. But that has always been part of the challenge.

The Empire on Ten Denarii a Day

IN SEPTEMBER OF A. D. 66, coincidentally enough, the emperor Nero himself sailed off to Greece with his wife, Messalina, to savor the pleasures of the Grand Tour. The pair spent over a year to take in the various arts festivals—staying in the lap of luxury, moving around the Greek countryside with a caravan of retainers like a horde of ravening locusts. Formal banquets were prepared at every stop, and the emperor's wine was chilled with snow carried down from local mountains. The Olympic Games were even held a year late to allow Nero to compete; he added poetry reading to the athletic events and, not surprisingly, took home the laurels himself.

Sixty years later, when the restless emperor Hadrian traveled from Rome to the Nile on a six-year-long sojourn—like his peripatetic subjects, he wished "to see with his own eyes all he had read of in any part"—he received almost as lavish treatment. Even lesser VIPs like Germanicus were given royal welcomes from local governors, who personally arranged their sight-seeing tours.

The routine was rather different for the average Roman tourist. Far more typical was the affluent citizen who set off alone—or with a companion or two—and a handful of servants and slaves. These wayfarers had no special entrée to the official circles of power. They had to find inns along the way and whatever dining was available. They had to hire their own local guides and arrange their own wagons, their own berths on shrine their own Arabian cruises

Which made those Romans on the road true pioneers—the guinea pigs of Western travel—at the mercy of the incipient tourism industry.

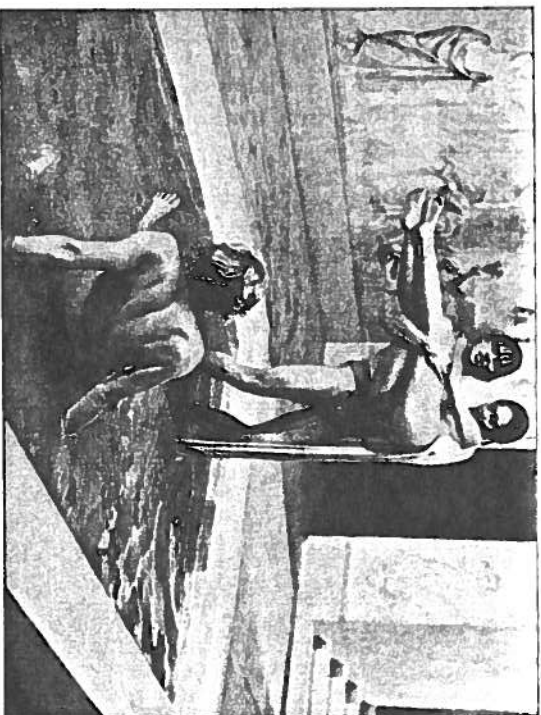
POSTCARDS FROM THE PAST

Where can we find the words of these unsung heroes? Before I left New York, I'd filled an extra bag with arcane Latin volumes and photocopied texts. But as any historian admits, when it comes to antiquity, we're working with the merest fragments from a once-vibrant literary culture.

Time has savaged the oeuvres of even the most prominent ancient authors. For example, only half the writings of Tacitus and Cicero survive. Dozens of lesser literary lights are known only by name. (The situation is even worse for the ancient Greek writers so dear to Roman readers: Only a tenth of the plays of Aeschylus are still with us, a mere 7 percent of the works of Sophocles.) And the cultural gap when reading what does remain is vast. The ancient literati are often mind-bendingly dull for modern tastes, their sentences rigid with eye-glazing displays of learning—which is why they often need to be paraphrased, or chopped into literary sound bites, to be digested. Worse, they rarely recorded their own personal emotions or impressions. Accounts of the most lavish scenes can seem oddly clinical—cold data, about as entertaining to read as a shopping list.

Luckily, some Romans could also be hilariously funny about their joys and misadventures on the road: they loved obscene jokes, and had a captivating sense of wonder at their strange world. The fresh observations, juicy comments, and witty asides are scattered through the archives of the world's libraries like silver coins below the shimmering waters of Rome's Fontana di Trevi.

Among the many unexpected gems, we find a travelogue in verse by the literary master Horace, recounting a misbegotten road trip in Italy (“Because of the drinking water, which was horrible, I declare my belly a public enemy and wait, not very happily, while my fellow travelers finish dinner . . .”). There were novels in Greek and Latin, including the lurid *Satyricon*, about a traveler trying to find a cure for impotence in a denimonde of thieves and prostitutes. On a more edifying plane, there was the poet Ovid remembering his youthful wanderings in the Aegean (“Whether we plowed the blue waves in a brightly painted boat, or roamed the countryside in a speeding wagon, our charter made time pass quickly,” he recalled in a letter to his old road companion. “It’s a won-



A thematic depiction of Romans relaxing and unwinding at the baths, from Federico Fellini's 1970 version of Petronius' first-century novel, *Satyricon*.

derful bond to have braved the sea's perils together—together to have fulfilled our vows to the Gods—to have shared great experiences, and be able to joke about them later . . .”). Among the more practical sources were a copy of the world's oldest guidebook, the *Description of Greece*, dating from the second century A.D.; an ancient highway map of the Empire, reproduced on a scroll over twenty feet long; and a Greek-Latin phrase book intended to show travelers how to behave at the baths. There were lists of graffiti scrawled in the brothels of Ephesus and edited volumes of papyrus letters that had lain for millennia in the town garbage heaps of Egypt. And just to round off the collection was the bizarre biography of a traveling pagan prophet named Apollonius of Tyana (“Even the Gods don't spend all their time in Heaven,” Apollonius pompously announced, sounding like an ancient travel agent coming up with a jingle. “They take journeys to Aethiopia, to Olympia, to Mount Athos . . .”).

The reports from women tourists, meanwhile, were rare and usually oblique—casual mentions of Germanicus' wife appearing at official dinners, for example, and the graffiti of a centurion in the Valley of the Kings,

who signed on behalf of his wife and daughter. There was proof that some feisty Roman women did travel alone: Marcus Agrippa's wife, the spirited and bohemian Julia, went to Troy—but we know about this only because she was nearly drowned in an accident (she was being carried on a covered litter across a raging river) and there was an official furor about the lack of a bridge. There was a Greek comedy skit about two women inspecting a temple-museum, who with a change of scene sound remarkably like two New York grandes dames loudly commenting on the objets d'art in the Met ("My dear! Look at these statues! Why, that naked boy looks like he'd bleed if I scratched him!"). Some references suggest that women even clipped their hair and traveled as men, like the heroines in Shakespeare's comedies. And there may have been many more as feisty as a certain Eppia, who apparently left her husband to travel to Egypt with a rich gladiator. ("She eats dinner with the sailors," the satirist Juvenal noted gleefully, "walks the quarter-deck, and hauls rough ropes like a navy.")

All in all, there were enough literary shards to vividly reconstruct those Roman journeys and to discern the tourist infrastructure that sprawled across the Empire.

A BED FOR THE NIGHT

The most fundamental element was accommodation—the sine qua non of leisure travel, and in Roman times, no less than today, a matter of inexhaustible variety and interest to tourists.

On the major highways, matters could not have been easier: An elaborate system of roadside inns had been built by the first emperor, Augustus, to help communications through his vast domain. These clean and comfortable hostleries—located twenty-five miles apart, the average day's journey—were designed to accommodate government officials and couriers, but if rooms were available, Roman travelers "of the better sort" were more than welcome to stay. Likewise, at major tourist attractions like Olympia, there were luxurious establishments waiting for new arrivals, with spacious rooms built around leafy courtyards. A recently excavated establishment in Murecine by the Bay of Naples—dubbed by Italian newspapers the Grand Hotel Pompeii—offered suites with colorful frescoes of the Muses, statues of fauns, decent meals from the kitchen, and special quarters for the servants and wagon drivers. The inn even had its own thermal baths.

In large provincial cities an informal old-boys' network supplemented

hotels. Roman writers seemed always to be running into drinking partners from their younger days—foreign students who had returned home, or Italians who lived as expats—and hitting them up for hospitality. They presented distant friends of friends with effusive letters of introduction ("Sir, I beg you to look upon this man as if he were myself," began one papyrus). Naturally, this casual approach was hit-or-miss. The novelist Apuleius called on one such contact, but the host turned out to be a "smelly old bore" whose meals were paltry ("I dined only on conversation").

Of course, nobody could rely on friends for every step of a long journey. There were times in smaller towns, excursions along lesser roads, and nights when the comfortable hotels were full. That was when even the very wealthy Romans fell back on the more typical classical inns, insalubrious places often named after animals—the Camel, the Elephant, the Cock, the Crane—with signs accompanied by graphic illustrations and occasionally with advertisements:

INSIDE, THE GOD MERCURY WILL BLESS YOU WITH WEALTH,
APOLLO HEAL TH, THE OWNER SEPTUANIUS FOOD AND A BED.
NOBODY WILL REGRET WALKING IN THESE DOORS.

Despite such valiant attempts at P.R., the dismal standard of lodging was the single favorite topic of complaint among ancient tourists—a litany of hard straw mattresses, leaky roofs, smoky kitchens, mosquito plagues, and demented innkeepers running informal brothels. Hotel restaurants had an even worse reputation than today's establishments. Rumors were reliably passed on about human flesh being added to stews, with unhappy gourmets finding fingers and knuckle joints in their meals. Another sign warned:

STRANGER!
BE CAREFUL WHERE YOU STAY!

It may seem extraordinary that wealthy Romans would tolerate these heaps for even a single night, but necessity made the affluent flexible. Ancient inns were like the rough-and-ready Elizabethan coaching houses where nobles would often put up on journeys; even in the nineteenth century, European aristocrats accepted the reality of basic lodging when on the road.

And today—well, when you're tackling the Mediterranean on a limited budget, it's best to be prepared for anything.

Lucian Takes a Sex Tour

WHAT WAS BEING AN ANCIENT SIGHTSEER really like? Among so many shattered fragments lurks an intact travel story attributed to a Rabellaisian satirist named Lucian, who cruised the coast of Asia Minor around A.D. 160, stopping at the cultural hot spots en route. Written in the form of a dialogue, his account provides a sort of “Day in the Life of an Ancient Tourist”—and happens, as an added gift to posterity, to be quite funny.

It’s set in the port of Knidos, today a lonely ruin on the Turkish coast, whose opalescent waters are overshadowed by Miami-style summer resorts at beaches nearby. But in ancient times Knidos was a flourishing tourist trap. Its big draw was the original X-rated artwork—a sculpture of Aphrodite, the winsome goddess of love. The sensational *Aphrodite of Knidos* had been the first female nude in Western art (previously the Greeks had depicted only male gods naked), and in Lucian’s time, more than five centuries afterward, it was still regarded as the most provocative depiction of a woman ever made. A mere glimpse of the statue turned men weak at the knees: Stories abounded of youths trying to grope the goddess’s limbs and smother her face with kisses. (Sadly, the original sculpture has been lost, but Roman copies can be seen in Naples, the Louvre, and the Vatican museums, although there is no record of their inciting the same reaction.)

Lucian made a special point of visiting Knidos with his two unusual travel companions using Greek names with the romane-twisting names of

Charicles and Callicratidas. In his account, Lucian presents his friends as intriguing case studies in contemporary sexual tastes. Most ancient men were what we would consider bisexual—it was considered quite acceptable for adult males to sleep with women or adolescent boys. But the eccentric Charicles was attracted exclusively to women, Callicratidas only to the lads (women he avoided as a “pit of doom”).

The pair’s debate about the romantic virtues of each sex creates the framework for Lucian’s story, called *Affairs of the Heart*: For ancient tourists, every port of call was a chance for intellectual stimulation, and Knidos with its love goddess promised to be a gold mine of material.

Omens for the visit were propitious—Aphrodite herself guided the ship into port with placid winds—and at dawn the next morning, the touristic trio ventured ashore. The merchandisers of Knidos were already busy, cashing in on their city’s fame by selling erotic souvenirs. Lucian and his friends “found no little amusement in the wanton products of the porters”—just like tourists in the Aegean today, where gift shops overflow with soft-porn postcards and marble dildos.

At last, the stimulated trio make their way to the splendid Temple of Aphrodite. Like all ancient precincts, this resembles less a place of worship than a pagan entertainment complex, run by sunny-faced priestesses wearing scarlet robes and garlands of fresh flowers. Its high walls protect a verdant garden sanctuary with paved cloisters and sweet-scented groves of myrtle, a tree sacred to Aphrodite herself. Luxuriant grapevines drape the walls, homage to Dionysus, the Roman Bacchus, whose wine was a notorious “promoter of love.” And at the heart of this Oz-like garden stands a gleaming marble pergola, home to the temple’s *raison d’être*.

Lucian and his friends excitedly climb the steps, pass through bronze doors, and drink in a heavenly vision: the immortal Aphrodite, stark naked on a dais.

Like all ancient statues, she was painted from head to toe in lifelike tones: Her skin was alluringly smooth, her hair golden, her eyes glistening with a “joyous radiance”—even her arrogant smile was bewitching.

Reproductions of the image seem demure to us today, and Aphrodite’s expression oddly inert; Romans would certainly have seen more brazen images every day of their lives. But the statue was an erotic classic, towering like the first *Polyboy* nudes of Marilyn Monroe over the subsequent army of mass-produced *Sports Illustrated* calendars.

The heterosexual Charicles becomes so excited that, in Pavlovian fashion, he leaps up to kiss the goddess on her rosy lips.

The Knidians knew how to milk every coin from their marble sex kit-

ten: In order to gain a rear view, one of the temple guides had to unlock a separate room, for a special fee.

Until this point, the pederast Callitridas has been unremoved by the goddess's charms. But feasting his eyes on the posterior perspective, he lets out a gleeful cry: The divine bottom is strikingly boyish.

"By Hercules!" he says, quivering. "What slender hips! How delicately molded the buttocks! How sweetly they smile!"

At this point, the guide, an elderly woman, hovers back into view. Lucian has noted an unsightly dark stain on Aphrodite's milky inner thigh, and the attendant, fishing for her tip, breathlessly relates a famous anecdote about how it appeared.

Many years before, a young local nobleman had become romantically obsessed with this gorgeous incarnation of Aphrodite. He began to visit the temple daily, staring fixedly at the statue and carrying on whispered conversations with her.

Eventually, as his passion grew more inflamed, the young man scratched love messages all over the temple walls. He brought everything he owned to the altar as offerings to the goddess. In the end, the violent pitch of his desires turned to desperation, and audacity became his pimp.

At dusk one night, he slipped in behind the door and hid in the inner sanctum—keeping still, hardly even breathing. When the attendants closed the door as usual, he was locked inside alone with the statue. But what need is there for me to spell out the sordid act committed on that unmentionable night? These stains from his amorous embraces were seen the next day; the blemish on the goddess's leg proves what she's suffered.

The young man concerned is said to have thrown himself off a cliff and vanished utterly.

Marveling at this tale of carnal frenzy, Lucian and his friends retire to the shady garden and recline on the couches provided for the faithful. There, over a jug of wine and bowls of fresh berries, they consider what lessons can be drawn from this famous work of art.

The topic: Which is the finer, conjugal love or pederasty? Surely women can arouse invincible passions even when made of stone! Not so, retorts the misogynist—the love-besotted male made love to her statue from behind, "as though to a boy."

The argument lurches on for pages, riddled with *recondite* references

from Homer and Euripides. Finally, torn between the rhetorical calisthenics of the pair, the judge Lucian awards victory to the pederast: Sexual desire for a woman is fatally muddled by mankind's brute need to procreate, he agrees; the passion for a young boy, by contrast, is closer to friendship, focused and pure.

"Thus ended our stay in Knidos," Lucian contentedly sighs, "with its combination of gay earnestness and cultured fun." As the day's heat rises, crowds of local worshippers start arriving, so the trio of sightseers head back to their waiting boat.

In the pagan world, dense with wonder, there was always another attraction on the horizon—and another intriguing debate to exercise the mind.

ON THE VIA DEL COLOSSEO

And then, there we were, back from the Pompeii McDonald's, ricocheting in a taxi through the dark streets of Rome. I was determined to maintain my newfound perspective as I tackled the physical world of the ancient tourists—starting with the divine, unprecedented, impossible city that shaped their hearts and minds.