







WHILE  
READING  
THE ILIAD,  
A FATHER  
AND SON  
CRUISE  
AROUND  
GREECE  
IN SEARCH  
OF A NEW  
MYTHOLOGY.

# THE HERO'S JOURNEY

by **PAUL GREENBERG** photographs by **THOMAS PRIOR**

*Oia, a seaside village on the island of Santorini, is a port-of-call for the Tere Moana cruise ship.*

# “IF WE MISS THE CRUISE BOAT,” ASKED MY SIX-YEAR-OLD SON, LUKE, “CAN WE RIDE THE DONKEY AGAIN?”

“Only,” I muttered, “if the donkey can swim to Troy.”

I had booked Luke, my partner, Esther, and me on a cruise through Greece that had deposited us on the blood-red and ochre island-volcano of Santorini. We had ridden donkeys up the face of the caldera, then taken a bus down the other side, and finally put our faith in a little skiff that had dropped us off on a remote swath of rock called Black Beach. And now our lovely cruise ship, a trim French number called the *Tere Moana* from the Paul Gauguin line with fawning staff and even a piano player who sang Beatles duets with my son, was about to depart for Troy without us.

A round-bellied Greek in a Speedo confirmed that this was indeed the case.

“When there are touristic people, there is boat,” he said, scanning the wine-dark sea. “But now,” he said, “with crisis . . . no boat.”

There were plenty of Homeric adventures in Greece I’d wanted to share with my son, but losing my ship in the Aegean was not one of them. Way back in 1975 I had cruised

the Greek islands at about Luke’s age as part of a mythology tour I’d taken with my mother. In those disco days, Greece had been ascendant, with a flourishing tourism industry churning to keep pace with the international jet set. I had been thoroughly seduced not only by the country’s beauty but also by the myth of the Trojan War, that most foundational of travel stories. How the Greeks set sail across the Aegean Sea with the largest expeditionary force in history. How hot-tempered Achilles, history’s original sore loser, had been forced to give his war prize—the maiden Briseis—to King Agamemnon and refused to fight. And how Achilles finally joined the battle, vanquished the great Trojan hero Hector, and dragged him around Troy’s high walls.

Decades later, I hoped that Achilles’s story would trigger my son’s inner adventurer. This was Luke’s first big foreign trip. He had no idea what a country was, what history was, or why one civilization conquered another. It was a voyage during which all of this could come alive for him. Or he could

end up bored and disappointed. And while the highly structured megacruises that have become the industry standard in Greece would have insulated us against unforeseen experiences (like losing our ship), I didn’t want a packaged experience. So I’d booked us on a more improvisational trip that would start in Athens and range across the islands until we reached Istanbul. Along the way we would read *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and piece together a travel mythology of our own.

But now, with our cruise boat on the verge of leaving us behind, we were about to fall off the page into a completely different story.

**WE HAD BEGUN OUR** trip three days earlier in Athens without a hitch. Yes, there’d been a swarm of police cars circling the Acropolis protesting the dismissal of thousands of police officers and other civil servants. And yes, we had been goaded into buying a Greek soccer uniform for Luke and had watched while he joined a pickup game with fancy-footed local kids. And yes, when we finally persuaded Luke, who, like Achilles, is prone to rages, to mount the Acropolis, I’d been required to put all 50 pounds of him on my shoulders and haul him and his stuffed animal Daddy Pooh to the top.

Fortunately we had prepped enough to establish a beachhead against Luke’s boredom. Not only had we read the classic *D’Aulaires’ Book of Greek Myths*, we had also spent an afternoon at the new, glass-walled Acropolis Museum. Literally walking over ancient ruins (the floor is transparent, too), we were given a child’s backpack that contained a treasure hunt centered on the museum’s different Athena sculptures. With the hunt came an explanation of the fight between Athena and the sea god, Poseidon,





*Elaborate appetizers, top left, are standard fare aboard the Paul Gauguin cruise ship Tere Moana, seen anchored off Santorini, top right. In Athens, bottom left, an infantryman marches during the changing of the guard at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier.*





"I WAS REMINDED  
THAT IN HOMER,  
WHENEVER SOMEONE  
IS ABOUT TO TELL A  
STORY, EVERYONE FIRST  
EATS AND DRINKS."





over the naming rights to Athens—a long-standing god-grudge that spilled over into the Trojan War.

Afterward, sitting in Café Yiasemi, a restaurant built into the Acropolis's hillside, we discussed how the Trojan War began. How Eris, the goddess of discord, who was the only deity not invited to the wedding of Achilles's parents, tossed a golden apple to Athena, Hera, and Aphrodite with the inscription: FOR THE fairest. How Paris declared Aphrodite the most beautiful and was rewarded with Helen, setting off 10 years of bitter international conflict.

"And that's how it started," I said as I surveyed the suave Greek intelligentsia blowing cigarette smoke out their nostrils.

"So?" Luke said, "It doesn't matter."

"I think it matters."

"Why?" he asked.

Silence. Why did it matter? Why was it that all Greek third graders study mythology for an entire year before they even approach history? Why were the buff-colored chunks of the Parthenon inherently meaningful?

"Dad," Luke said finally, sensing my confusion. "Are the gods real?"

I thought for a moment of my long-ago Greek adventure and how it had influenced me over the last 38 years. The way I'd hidden away a tiny pebble of marble from the Temple of Poseidon in my suitcase. When I thought about it now, I realized that little stone had been a talisman. That tiny shard of the sea god's temple had focused my vision of the world, maybe even compelled me to become someone who spends his working days writing about the glories of the ocean.

"The gods are real," I said to Luke finally, "if you believe in them."

A few days later, now on Santorini, scanning the horizon for the little boat that would take us back to our cruise ship, I very much needed the sea god's help. What would it cost to hire a speedboat to catch the cruise ship on the open sea? Luke, in blissful oblivion, couldn't have cared less.

"Look, Dad!" he shouted from the waves, "I'm swimming in Poseidon!"

Just then, as if hearing my thoughts and Luke's words, Poseidon sent a little skiff around the corner of the adjacent cliff. A surge of tanned bodies fought to get aboard and soon we were riding low in the waves.

As the boat pulled into the village of Akrotiri, we found a taxi and blew past the 3,000-year-old Minoan ruins. We got to Thera in minutes, and even Luke was thrilled that—unlike in the '70s, when a donkey was the only means of return transport—there



According to *The Odyssey*, Sparta's King Menelaus buried his ship's helmsman on Cape Sounion, where the Temple of Poseidon, above, was built around 440 B.C.E.

was now a cable car that whooshed us down the caldera to our waiting cruise ship.

**WHEN I WENT TO** Greece in the 1970s, no special dispensations were made for children. We were expected to civilize ourselves and learn the history of civilization in the process. I was pleased that, today, our Paul Gauguin cruise had a similar mind-set. At first Luke was irritated that we made him dress for dinner and put a napkin on his lap. More problematic, he had entered an Achilles-like phase in which he constitutionally could not stand to lose. He railed bitterly at any setback

when playing Monopoly with Esther in the game room and choked with anger if he ever lost his property. But whenever he got near the breaking point, the French passengers made *les gros yeux* (big eyes) at him and shut him down.

I also liked the fact that the boat actually felt like a boat, just as it should for someone trying to convey what it might have been like to sail a ship to Troy under the power of wind and oar. In the years since my last Greek cruise, an arms race has completely changed cruising. In the 1980s, 2,000-passenger vessels became standard. Now, to carry 4,000 passengers is common. By comparison, our boat looked like a Boston Whaler. Though the Greek feast the crew threw at sunset, complete with bouzouki player in traditional getup, was a little hokey, I felt the same surge in my heart I had experienced in the '70s, when I was a child and nothing felt hokey. When I'd danced with my mother under the stars off Crete while the waiters twirled sparklers, the smell of olive oil and wild sage in the air.

**ON RHODES, HOME** of the sun god, Helios, we got back to the business of studying the Trojan War. We'd made the crossing to Rhodes at the halfway point of our cruise during a roaring nighttime burst of the Meltemi, the harsh northerly winds that



Paul Gauguin Cruises offers seven-night voyages aboard the 90-guest *Tere Moana*, from Athens to Istanbul, embarking May 31, 2014, and Istanbul to Athens, June 14. [pgcruises.com](http://pgcruises.com)





*Among the Tere Moana's ports of call are Istanbul, opposite, and Rhodes, Greece, where an Italian couple swims in Anthony Quinn Bay, above.*







sometimes blow in summer months. All around the boat the crew thoughtfully lined up little barf bags along the bronze railings.

Still feeling the rise of the sea, we disembarked in the morning and traveled to Rhodes's less-visited end with our guide, Chrysa Peritogianni, who had led travelers to ancient sites all over Greece. Our first stop was the Valley of Butterflies, a narrow ravine that is a migration stop for *Euplagia quadripunctaria rhodosensis*, a beautiful red-and-yellow moth that resembles a cross between a *Star Trek* emblem and an Armani cigarette case. As Luke grew transfixed by first one, then another, then thousands of butterflies, I asked Chrysa about how I

might get Luke truly interested in mythology and Troy.

"For children, you have to try to make the place come alive," she said, as the landscape literally pulsed with life. "You have to relate it to the things they know. And you have to repeat it again and again. Eventually, he'll get it."

Later, after we left Chrysa and took another dunk in Poseidon on the family-friendly beach of Faliraki, I took Chrysa's advice as Luke and I dangled our feet in the "fish spa." Fish spas, in which your feet steep in blue aquaria while tiny fish called garra rufa nibble your toes, were all the rage in Rhodes. The craze had come from

Japan a few years back, and now a dozen fish spas lined Ermou Street all the way down to the beach. And weirdly, it was while going through this bizarre exfoliation that Luke and I started to get to the underlying meaning of the Trojan War.

"I'm bored," Luke said when he couldn't take the fishes' nibbling anymore and pulled his feet out of the aquarium.

"Want to read *The Iliad*?"

"Well, you could," he said. "But . . ."

"I know, I know," I said, "It doesn't matter." We both laughed.

Again I explained to him what had started the Trojan War, and then, taking out our children's edition of *The Iliad*, I read the passage in which Achilles, insulted after having had his war prize stolen by Agamemnon, refuses to fight.

"Why was Achilles so angry?" Luke asked.

"He didn't like to lose."

Silence.

"Do you know anyone else who gets really angry when he loses?" I asked.

The ends of Luke's ears turned red.

"Yes," he admitted. "But Agamemnon. He was really mean."

"Why was he so mean?" I asked.

"He was very selfish. He didn't think of anyone else."

Exactly, I thought. Now we were finally talking about civilization.

**AS WE NEARED TROY**, Luke and I crammed to get through the rest of *The Iliad*. I wanted to get to the final battle where Achilles, after being so rageful, finally decides to go all in after his friend Patroclus is cut down by the Trojan hero Hector. At that moment, Achilles realizes that by not participating in the war, he has done himself and his country a great disservice. And here, I thought, could be a lesson for Luke. By hanging back, by using his standard "So, it doesn't matter" line, he was cheating himself.

When we finally pulled into Troy's port of Çanakkale in Turkey, I worried that I had built everything up way too far. I was particularly spooked because the day before we'd had a dismal visit to the tourist-crammed site of Ephesus, perhaps one of best-preserved Greco-Roman towns in the world. On that vast blazing plane of marble, Luke had wandered desultorily, rudderless without a story. In desperation I'd turned to the guide and asked him if there were some kind of myth connected to this place that he could tell Luke, to engage him. "My friend," he replied. "You do not take a *child* to this place. You should take him to the water park."

## TIPS FOR MULTIGENERATIONAL CRUISING

AFAR's cruise expert Judy Perl on how to plan a family voyage that will be a hit with the whole gang.

### Which cruise company is best for traveling with kids?

**Royal Caribbean Cruise Line** ([rccl.com](http://rccl.com)) and **Disney Cruise Line** ([disneycruise.disney.go.com](http://disneycruise.disney.go.com)) are the best for families with young children. Their kid-friendly programming and facilities are staggering. Royal Caribbean has complimentary activities for every age group: DJ training, beach volleyball, karaoke, and pirate nights. And their ships have zip lines, water parks, rock wall climbing, simulated surfing machines, mini golf, and ice-skating. The best part? There's also an adults-only area for peace and quiet. **Holland America** ([hollandamerica.com](http://hollandamerica.com)) is a good choice, too—check out their family reunion packages for eight or more staterooms, which include benefits like beverage credits and upgrades. Holland's ships also have an "adult-free zone" for teens and a club for eight- to 12-year-olds. Every age group starting from three-year-olds has its own programs.

### What about travel with my grown children?

**Regent Seven Seas** ([rssc.com](http://rssc.com)) is my top pick for all-

inclusive luxury cruises for adult groups. Their cabins are among the largest in the industry, every one of them a suite with a balcony and a walk-in closet. With Regent, it's easy for groups to control their budget because everything is prepaid: open bar, gratuities, shore excursions, air, and a precruise hotel. If you want to plan something really special, **Crystal Cruises** ([crystalcruises.com](http://crystalcruises.com)) just launched Crystal Celebrations, which will organize elaborate events on shore as well as on the ship. They'll handle everything from renting a Tuscan villa for the grandparents' big anniversary celebration to hiring a caterer or live music.

### How will I keep everyone entertained?

Pick a trip with activities that are all over the map, and the more the better. A Mediterranean cruise out of Barcelona is a good choice. There are world-class cultural and historical sites, beaches, plus great shopping, restaurants, and nightlife. Check out **Norwegian Cruise Line's** *Norwegian Epic* ([ncl.com](http://ncl.com)), which sails from Barcelona.

Or, cruise **Oceania's** ([oceaniacruises.com](http://oceaniacruises.com)) *Riviera* from Barcelona to Venice. Another great trip for big families is an Alaskan cruise out of Vancouver. It's soft adventure, the lady and gentleman's way to explore the last frontier, and it appeals to all ages. Itineraries on **Regent Seven Seas' Navigator** ([rssc.com](http://rssc.com)) go as far north as Seward and include shore excursions.

### I'd like to plan a private trip for my family. Possible?

It's called a takeover, and yes, there are plenty of ways and places to do it. My expertise is in planning exclusive, bespoke cruises, and matching up the right boat with the perfect location. My favorites are: For a group of around 18 people, rent a sailboat in the Galapagos such as the *Grace*; for a group of around 12 people, cruise the turquoise coast on a traditional Turkish wooden yacht called a gulet; for larger groups of around 40, book a riverboat on the Peruvian Amazon, such as the *Aria*.

For more information and to book a cruise, email Judy at [judy.perl@afar.com](mailto:judy.perl@afar.com).





Scenes from a contemporary Aegean odyssey include an Egyptian fisherman in Paros, Greece, and teas for sale at Istanbul's Spice Bazaar.

Now, on the bus headed toward Troy, I feared we were in for another disappointment. But as the fields opened up into an incredible golden lushness, I started to feel a certain something in the place, and I saw Luke press his face to the glass. “Is this Troy?” he asked. And when we met our guide, Burak, a tattooed man of 24 with a tongue stud, who was a self-described “Troy maniac,” I felt better.

“So Hera, Aphrodite, and Athena, they get this golden apple,” Burak began in sweetly mangled English, “and they tell Zeus, ‘You choose. You tell us who is the really beauty one.’ But Zeus, man, he’s a smart god. He says, ‘Guys, I’m not the one for choosing beauties. Ask Paris. He’s gonna choose.’”

I saw Luke smile with the glimmer of recognition of a story he’d heard again and again throughout our trip.

Moving inside the gates now, Luke

seemed to loosen his hold upon Daddy Pooh but ever so slightly tighten his hold on a small replica of the Trojan Horse that we’d bought at a shop outside the walls.

“Most people, they say there’s nothing to see at Troy,” Burak told us. “They come for, like, 20 minutes. You go with Burak, you’re gonna spend two hours at Troy.”

“Two hours?” Luke gasped.

“I’ll put you on my shoulders,” I told him. And then Burak led us in. Unlike in Ephesus or the Acropolis, there was no huge marble showpiece. The main thing to contemplate were the walls themselves: high, maize-colored honeycombs of interlocking stones. Rounding a corner, we came to a magnificent bluff where you could almost see the Greeks beaching their ships.

As the fierce winds whipped Luke’s hair around his face, Burak explained that it was these same breezes that made Troy

important. Ships sailing from the Black Sea into the Aegean would get stuck, thanks to these fickle winds, for months, forcing them to trade and allowing Troy to build up mountains of gold—vast troves that in all likelihood still lay buried beneath this largely unexcavated site.

Finally we came to the culminating point, to the rubbly remains of the Scaean Gates, where Achilles had battled Hector. Luke asked to get down off my shoulders. He walked over to the spot where it all might have happened, and just pondered, with Daddy Pooh in one hand, the Trojan Horse in the other.

That evening, as we sat in the lounge before dinner, Luke seemed relieved that the excursions were over but also oddly contemplative. He said that Troy had been “the least bad excursion of all.” And then he asked if he could take the room key and get





The New Mosque, or Yeni Cami, overlooks the Istanbul harbor, above. Revelers dive from a platform moored off the Rhodes coast, opposite.

dressed by himself. For 15 minutes, Esther and I held hands at the back of the boat in a rare moment of childless intimacy.

A few minutes later, Luke appeared in his evening clothes. Everything just right, except for an errant button. Descending now into the restaurant, we took our usual places. The waiters hovered as always, asking Luke about his day, filling his bowl with endless pasta. And I was reminded that in Homer, whenever someone is about to tell a story, everyone first eats and drinks. When things are settled and the company, in Homer's words, "puts aside desire for food and drink," the stories begin.

And thus they began.

"Dad," Luke asked, "what happened after Achilles killed Hector?"

"The Greeks destroyed Troy."

Silence.

"And what happened after that?"

"The Greeks went back to Greece."

"And did the Greeks last forever?"

"Then the Romans came."

"And what did they do?"

"They conquered Greece."

"And then what happened?"

"Well," I said, "Rome was around for a while and then Rome was conquered."

"And then what happened?"

And on and on we went until late into the night. Question after question, working our way to the Ottoman empire conquering Greece and then Greece winning itself back through a war with the Turks and then losing itself again in a war with the Germans. And this led to questions about our country, the wars we had fought, why we had fought them, and when we would fight again. Before we had come to Greece, my son did not know of countries, of time spans longer than a month, of the fact that billions of people

had lived before us and billions more would live after us.

"It's like," Luke said, "people get really angry. And they fight. And people die. And a lot of times, it just doesn't matter."

Finally too groggy to learn any more, we stumbled back to our cabin. We tucked Luke into his bed. I read him the final pages of his children's *Iliad* and put the book aside and kissed him on his cool forehead. As the last flicker of consciousness played across his face, he murmured something I couldn't quite understand.

"What's that?" I asked.

"I said, tomorrow can we start reading *The Odyssey*?" **A**

Writer PAUL GREENBERG is profiled on page 14. Photographer THOMAS PRIOR's work has appeared in *New York*, *Men's Journal*, *Popular Mechanics*, and other publications.



"LOOK, DAD!" MY SON  
SHOUTED FROM  
THE WAVES. "I'M SWIMMING  
IN POSEIDON!"

