

ADVENTURES ABOARD THE NIEUW AMSTERDAM

By: DOMINICK and SUSAN MERLE



Swiss Guard

ROME—As if the Pope doesn't have enough problems... Now there's a lady kleptomaniac running loose in the Vatican, striking in the Sistine Chapel itself where tourists are dazzled by the masterpieces of Michelangelo and most off guard.

And so far, the vaunted Swiss Guard can't catch her.

«It seems like one woman is the culprit,» said our guide, Luca, «because the theft is usually a purse and nothing is left behind. She simply walks out wearing it. «Some even think she's disguised as a nun.»

Since it costs about \$20 to enter the Vatican, the lady is also optimistic that she'll recover her initial investment many times over. «It's pretty much of a sure bet,» Luca said.

And her chances of being caught? Slim to none. The Vatican is a

nation-city and Italian police have no jurisdiction there. Likewise, the Swiss Guard have no jurisdiction once the lady strolls back into Italy just a few yards away.

«The polizia are too busy drinking their espresso anyway,» Luca remarked with a shrug, «and the Swiss Guard...well, it's pretty hard to run after a thief wearing those puffed knickers and stockings.»

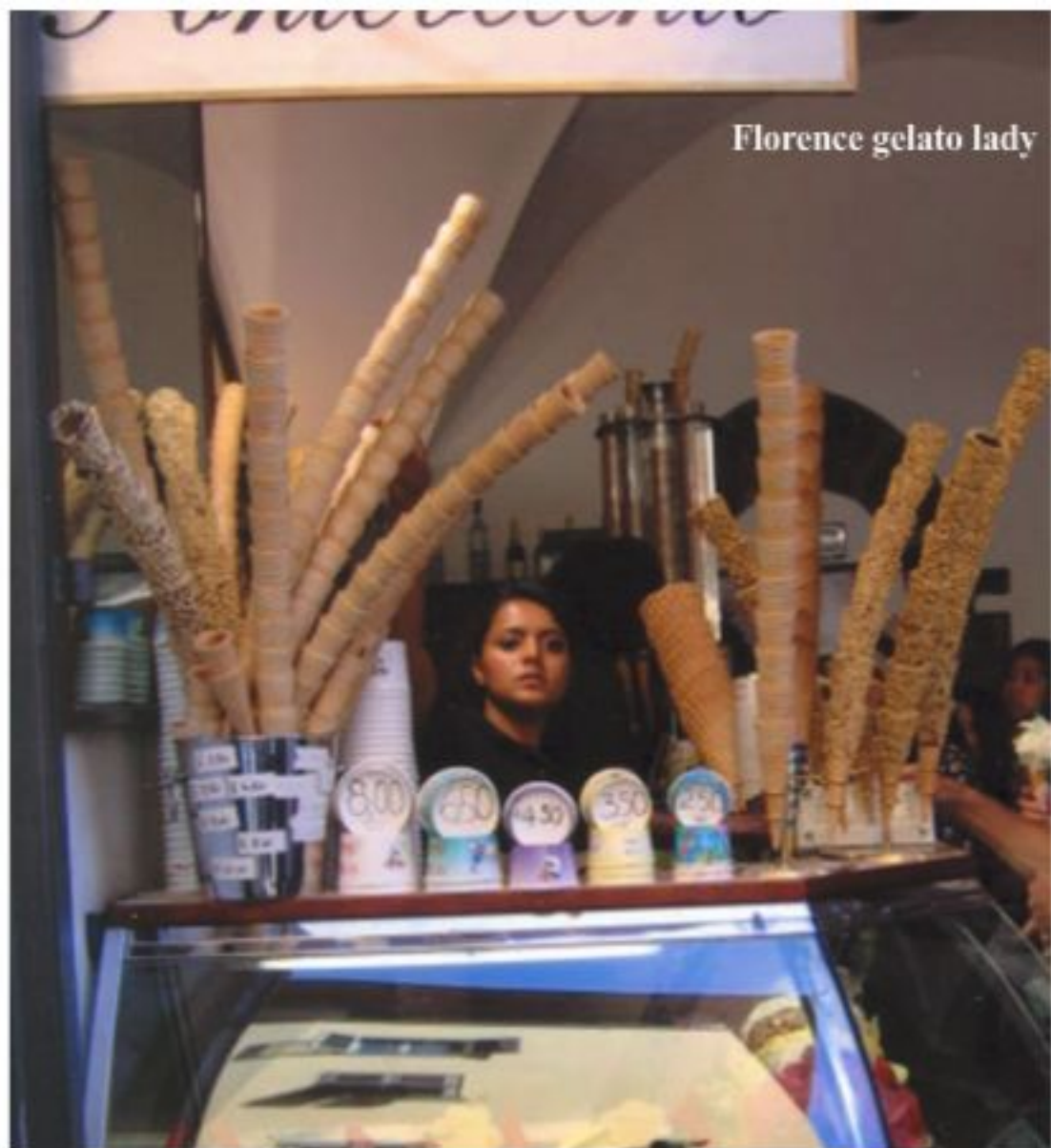
Sadly, petty crime has long been a sore spot for the Vatican but the Swiss Guard—despite those snazzy uniforms—do make their share of arrests.

But the M.O. of the Sistine Chapel

Nieuw Amsterdam docked in Sicily



Florence gelato lady



Snatcher, as Luca described her, suggests one woman sacrilegiously making visits and pickups about three times a week.

She actually struck while our group was in the Chapel, and it

was the talk of the ship once we got back aboard the Nieuw Amsterdam during our 12-day Mediterranean cruise.

«Next port, next chapter,» said John Primeau, a spokesman for

the Holland America Line cruise ship. «I do this all the time and, just like you, never know what to expect.»

Chapter One began a few days earlier in Monaco and its famed Monte Carlo where the sweet smell of wealth and royalty still fill the air (think \$100,000-a-day to charter a yacht once owned by Onassis).

That was no surprise. But nearby Nice on the French Riviera isn't quite so nice anymore (think panhandlers, graffiti and rundown areas where the rich and famous

once roamed). In fact, it's a little naughty.

After reading all those horror stories about Greece's economy, sailing into the Greek ports of Nafplion and Katakolon evoked more eye-openers. There didn't seem to be any downturn here... shops were humming, cash registers were ringing and even the locals could be seen tapping their feet to the constant blaring of Zorba the Greek music.

Much the same for the Greek island of Corfu. At Spianda Square in the town center there were more



St. Mark's Square, Venice



Nice

elegant shops and sidewalk cafes than we saw in Nice.

Want to buy your own private island? You can do so at our next stop on Croatia's Dalmatian Coast. Only you better act fast, because celebrities have their checkbooks in hand.

The Dalmatian Coast is rapidly becoming the new hideaway for world celebrities. Bill Gates slips in and out on his yacht virtually unnoticed. So do actors Steve Buscemi, Richard Gere, producer Steven Spielberg and James Bond himself (Roger Moore).

«I think we owe it all to our own John Malkovich,» said Mirjana Darrer of the Dubrovnik Tourist Board.

The renowned actor Malkovich, of Croatian descent, has been dividing his time between the U.S. and Croatia for years.

«He mentioned it to other movie stars like Sharon Stone and Clint Eastwood and Tom Cruise and, well, you know how that goes,» Darrer said. «But so far,» she knocked on the table, «no paparazzi.»

There are actually more than

1000 islands off the Croatian coast with only 10 percent inhabited. All are for sale with restrictions on building construction to preserve the beauty of the coastline.

Our final port is perhaps the most beautiful port in the world to enter,

Venice. I know, I know. It's crowded (15 million visitors a year), vendors are pushy and gondola rides go for \$150 an hour (when he sings, it's extra).

But if there's a more magnificent port to enter, I'd love to see it.

Monaco Palace guard change



Venice neighborhood



In all, we hit 11 ports beginning in Barcelona and ending in Venice. Our cruise ship, the Nieuw Amsterdam, is a 12-decker that's fresh from its inaugural cruise last July and left little to be desired. It still had that new smell and new feel.

The ship included a full casino and first-class floorshow that changed nightly, a spa, seven restaurants, shops, two pool decks and a basketball court and soccer court on top. Food, glorious food, was available around the clock.

Primeau, a spokesman for

Holland America Line, suggested that the way to avoid the usual pound-a-day weight gain is to make use of the entire ship, not to get too comfortable in the dining areas.

«We have a wonderful variety of food, but we don't want you to eat all day,» he said. «We also have beautiful staterooms, but we don't want you to sleep all day.»

There were about 2000 cruisers aboard, at least 75 percent U.S., and 1000 crew members, about 75 percent Indonesian. Events on board usually began with tai chi

exercises at dawn and ended near midnight at the Showroom and disco lounge.

New activities take place every 30 minutes or so—dance classes, yoga, acupuncture sessions, singles and solos meetings, afternoon tea and, of course, bingo, or, for the heavier bettors, the casino featuring slots, craps and roulette.

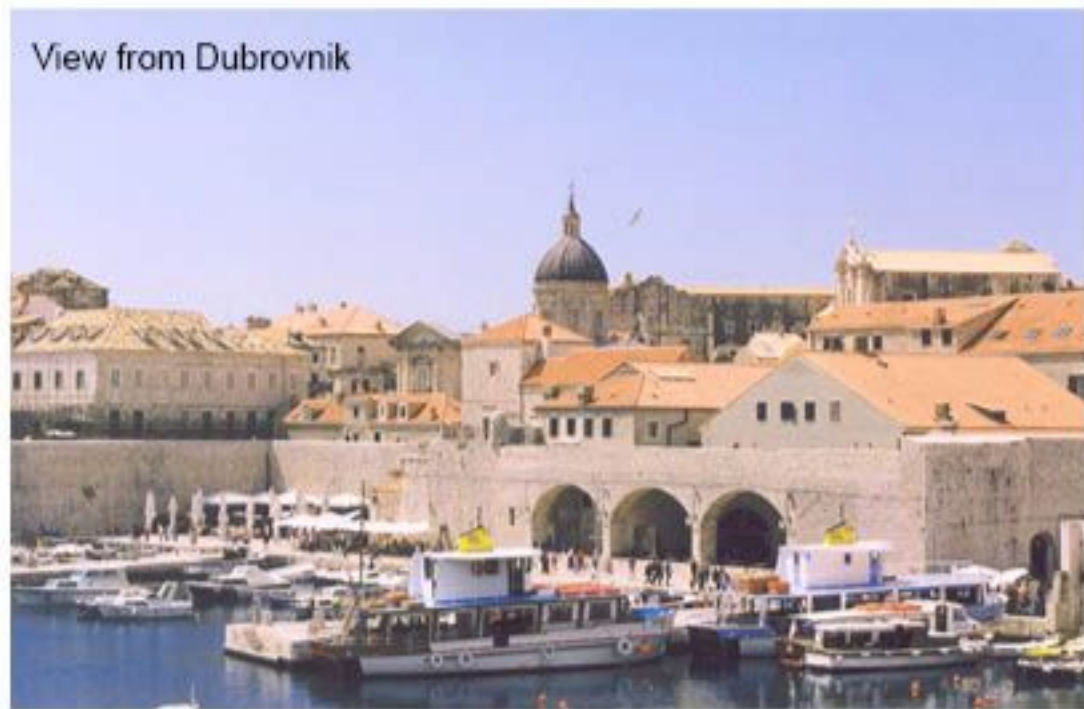
Escorted tours can be booked at every port, but can be costly. While the Nieuw Amsterdam does not run the tours, it contracts them out to operators. A tour for two to,

let's say, Monaco and the French Riviera, runs about \$400.

So if you sign up for enough of these tours, it would cost you as much as the cruise itself. But with a little advance planning you can save a lot of money.

There are a number of cruise websites (try cruisecritic.com) that put you in touch with independent tour operators and other cruisers. Then you can make your own deals. Team up with six or eight other passengers and you can bring a \$400 package for two down to less than \$100.

View from Dubrovnik



**View from
Nafplion,
Greece**



**Wash day
in Corfu**



Or, you can venture out on your own, using public transportation, and do your own private tour. Maybe even write your own next chapter.

(Dominick A. Merle is Canadian Director of the International Food

& Travel Writers Assn. and is based in Montreal. Email: dmerle@videotron.ca)

For more information on the Nieuw Amsterdam and its itineraries, go to www.hollandamerica.com