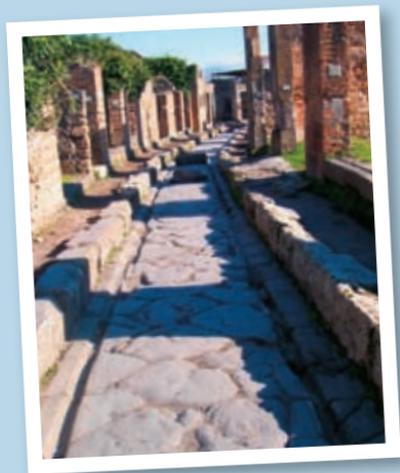


# GOING PLACES

JOHN COONEY



## ANCIENT RUINS & BURIED TOWNS



There's a part of me that's always wanted to be an archaeologist. (True, there's another part of me that thinks that's a stupid idea. Because of the jokes, mainly. Like "An archaeologist is someone whose career lies in ruins!" and "An archaeologist will date any old thing!") But, all joking aside, there's something seriously irresistible about ancient ruins. And I get a real buzz when I'm poking around Dusty-Old-Sites ...

**F**or example, down the left-hand side of Italy, by the ankle on its 'boot', lies the knock-your-socks-off, grab-your-camera Amalfi Coast. And along that beautiful coast, near the sapphire Bay of Naples, lies Mount Vesuvius. And at the foot of that mountain, as a stark monument to a very violent event, lies the ancient ruins of **Pompeii** ...

I don't know how good your history is but, on August 24 in the year 79AD, Vesuvius erupted. *Wow, did it ever!* Pompeii, a well-to-do Roman town of 20,000, was buried deep under volcanic mud and ash. And that's where it remained, entombed and forgotten, for 17 long centuries, until a local farmer happened to unearth some Pompeii bits-and-pieces while digging himself a well.

This petrified memorial is probably the most famous excavation anywhere, a unique window on a long-gone civilisation, with villas, shop-fronts, theatres and residents all frozen in time the day the mountain blew up.

And as we wandered one weekend amongst the dug-out ruins, I kept getting goosebumps. Lots of them ...

**W**e strolled through the Forum (town square) with its archway, basilica, and temples of Jupiter and Apollo. We found ourselves in the *Stabian Thermae* (public baths), where Mr & Mrs Roman once lounged with their friends and played knucklebones. We stepped out along ancient cobblestoned streets, complete with ox-cart wheel-grooves down each side. And we dropped in on the Vettii family for a look-around what was left of their elegant 2000-year-old villa.

We eyeballed a bakery (complete

with grinding stones), a theatre (where gladiators fought it out), a brothel (where ... well, you know), and some genuine 1st-century graffiti (in Latin, of course).

We even got up-close-and-personal with some spooky plaster body-casts of residents who didn't quite get out in time. Their facial expressions were fixed forever, and it wasn't hard to imagine their horror!

**A**nother ancient ruin that sent my spine tingles up and down my spine is **Ephesus**, along the southern coast of what is now Turkey. This place was founded a zillion years ago by women (the mythical Amazons), became a major port during the Greek era, had a population of 250,000 in its Roman heyday, and remains the grandest and spunkiest Dusty-Old-Site in the Mediterranean.



Prior to their busy harbour silting up (the city's excavated remains are now 8kms from the sea), the Ephesians were a prosperous lot. They constructed the famous Temple of Diana (*Artemis*) ... a vast outdoor theatre (that seated 24,000 screaming fans) ... a colossal gymnasium (paved with mosaics and boasting hot'n'cold water) ... a horseshoe-shaped stadium, the *Hippodrome*, where athletes (not hippos) ran for gold ... and the grandiose two-story Library of Celsus (with shelf-space for 12,000 scrolls).



Anybody who was anybody in the ancient world went to Ephesus: King Croesus of Lydia, Alexander the Great, the Egyptian Queen Cleopatra, the Roman general Marc Antony, to name a few. The Apostles Paul and John both took up the quill near here (Paul upset the local jewellers, sparked off a riot, and got himself all-but killed) ... and Mary (Jesus' mother) is said to have spent her twilight years in a tiny house back in the hills.

**T**here's not a heck of a lot left, of course. Most of Ephesus has collapsed, toppled, corroded, been stolen or turned to dust. And yes, I know: one man's priceless relic is another man's pile of rubble. But archaeologists have done some thrilling reconstructions, and if you've got a halfway-decent





imagination, it's hard not to feel a wee bit overwhelmed.

I tell you, walking along the marble remains of the city's main street (the Arcadian Way) is like stepping back in time. Standing under the glorious façade of the library makes your head spin. And sitting on the cold stone steps of the amphitheatre, you'd swear you can hear the roar of the crowd.

**T**he show was almost over for another unforgettable Mediterranean day, and our ship was waiting for us back at the dock. But we Kiwis couldn't leave this powerful, eerie, thought-provoking place without doing one more thing.

We gathered as a group on the stage of that 2000-year-old auditorium, cleared our throats, and sang Pokarekare Ana ... ❀



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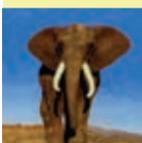
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