

Greece Is the Word

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I have noted in other memoirs that during the time that I was employed as an English instructor for UMUC that my favorite spot on the planet was Athens. The reasons for that go all the way back to 1960, the summer when I was eighteen and my Fond du Lac city library purchased a copy of the newly available set of books entitled The Complete Greek Tragedies in four volumes published by the University of Chicago Press. I was the very first patron to check out the first volume devoted to Aeschylus, which I read for the two weeks allowed and then had to renew in order to finish all seven plays. By the time that I moved on to the Sophocles' volume, I was hooked. I likely spent two renewals devouring that one. When I got to the first of the two volumes devoted to Euripides, my summer was almost over and I never did finish reading all seventeen of his plays. However, I did find a Pocket Books copy of Edith Hamilton's Mythology for fifty cents which I carried in my back pocket all through that next freshman year in college. With her assistance, I was finally able to understand some of the complicated relationships of the gods and goddesses to the humans/heroes/heroines that the playwrights had first presented to me. I vowed then and there that if I ever got to visit Greece, that I would make my pilgrimage to the Theatre of Dionysus and worship there, renouncing all other religion in the process.

Well, that wish came true when I was sent to Kagne Station in 1967 out of Boston's Logan Airport, and the very first stop was a full-day layover in Athens. I was checked into my hotel along Glyfada Beach and immediately sought out the concierge about the easiest way to get to downtown Athens. It turned out that the #1 bus stopped a half block away and the end of the line was Syntagma Square. So nothing could be easier. I changed some money at the desk and began to ask around if anyone wanted to accompany me. Almost to a person, they wanted just to sit around the hotel, relax, and drink beer all day. I was not about to waste this golden opportunity. Finally, I found one other like-minded GI named Donald Chester and together we made our way to the heart of Athens. We walked around and took in the crowds of Greeks ambling about in the afternoon sunshine. We also spent about half an hour checking out the Evzones marching back and forth in front of the very impressive Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, with their quaint white costumes and even quainter measured military steps. Then we asked directions to the Acropolis, which was about three kilometers away on foot. So we decided first to find something to eat. A convenient taverna right on the square looked inviting and so we ventured inside. Instead of the waiter bringing out a menu, we were ushered into the kitchen and told to point to what we wanted. I was in love with Greece even more. My meal of moussaka and some stuffed grape leaves along with a delicious Greek salad washed down by some retsina fortified me more than enough to tackle the long walk.

Suffice it to say that the rest of the day climbing around the Acropolis, which back in 1967 meant that one could actually amble peacefully among the standing pillars, brought those Greek plays rushing back to my mind. Of course, we also were able to go into the Theatre of Dionysus down below and walk across the orchestra where the ancient Greek actors had trod and I even sat in what had to be the honored stone judges' chairs and had my photo taken. I was in heaven! (Those days, sadly, are long gone as everything now is cordoned off due to tourists who ruined it for everyone after them by chipping away little "souvenirs" of their trip.) Once the site closed for the day, we walked back to Syntagma Square and caught the #1 bus heading back to the hotel on Glyfada. But that day merely whetted my appetite to learn more about Greece, to check out the plays of Euripides and Aristophanes wherever I could find them, and when my tour of duty was over at Kagnev Station, I stayed on for one more term with UMUC as a GS12 civilian until fate dropped another opportunity in my lap. The late Ted Sullinger, a Marylander colleague, was assigned to teach sociology at Kagnev but had a problem. He was leasing a nice villa on the Greek island of Hydra and needed someone to stay in it for a couple of months. The person staying there presently had been his male nurse when he was hospitalized in Germany and during his six months there had been observed using the eight-bedroom estate in a way that the only hotel on the island saw as destroying its business. This young man had a system of sitting on the dock and meeting the two boats that came in every day from Piraeus and inviting any attractive young females to have a free stay in one of the available bedrooms, with "benefits" for him, so to speak. It got to the point where he was so well known back in Athens and Piraeus that the news of this illegal policy had caused several angry and threatening letters to be sent to Ted in Asmara. Someone needed to go to the island, walk up to the villa, and summarily evict its current resident. Who better to do that than yours truly?

So began my second serious encounter with crazy MAC flights that I touched on in my previous memoir. Armed with an eviction notice, I kissed Toni goodbye and presented myself at the Kagnev MAC office. I was being sent out on a C141 down to Addis Ababa, which was already 500 miles in the wrong direction. But who can argue when the flight is free? The crew was staying overnight at the Addis Ababa Hilton, so I checked in to the cheapest room available and ate a nice meal in the dining room. I did a walk around town, but not far from the hotel and around the corner there were dirt roads and tuguls, the mud and bamboo huts typically found in the Ethiopian countryside. Here was American luxury practically next to abject poverty. A couple of drinks at the bar helped me to sleep that image off. The next morning, the crew and I went to the airport for the long flight up to Adana AFB. I spent about half the eight-hour flight in one of those uncomfortable troop seats, but as I was their only passenger, the pilot and co-pilot invited me into the more relaxing cockpit. From there, I had amazing views of the desert over Saudi Arabia and when we got to Turkey, the pilot even pointed out Mt. Ararat, the snow-capped Biblical so-called home of Noah's Ark. Obviously, no photos could be taken from that privileged vantage point. Landing at Adana was smooth. However, the first big snag hit as soon as I entered the terminal. Direct flights from Turkey to Greece were forbidden!

The cause was not some new war between these ancient enemies. It happened that a cholera epidemic had broken out in Turkey and so Greece reacted accordingly. My two options were either Tehran or Torrejon. I took what I considered the safer option and flew to Spain. Since I was on an extended break from teaching and not on emergency leave at Torrejon this time, I could easily abide the stay of three days until I was able to find a MAC flight out. It gave me a chance to take a bus into downtown Madrid and to explore the city on foot, taking in the Plaza Major, the Plaza de Toros, and also to sample eating in a tapas bar for the first time. Had I spent my time more profitably, I would have taken in the Prado Museum, but it was not to be on this visit.

After that extended Spanish layover, I finally caught a flight up to Wiesbaden, a major hub of MAC traffic where another two-day layover finally got me headed in the right direction by going down to Naples. From there, it was an easy hop over to Athens, so that technically, even though I had been in Turkey, I was not entering Greece directly from there, coming in the back door now, so to speak. A taxi got me to Piraeus where I then found the three-hour ferry boat going out to Hydra. The cost was all of thirty drachmas—the equivalent of one dollar in US currency! What a bargain! The ferry landed first at the large island of Aegina, where some passengers disembarked and others came aboard. The next stop was Methana, which was actually on the Peloponnese Peninsula. After that, we docked briefly at another island called Poros before finally going on to my destination of Hydra. My first view of the island came as the ferry swung into the horseshoe-shaped harbor, and it was both breath-taking and still unforgettable. The beautiful white homes stretched almost to the top of this car-free (and carefree) island above the many businesses that encircled the harbor.

My directions were simple from there: walk straight up the lane to the left of Lulu's Cafe, making my way up the hill past the island's only cinema and keep going until I ran into the backside of the Greek Orthodox church. From there, it was just a short dogleg to the left and at that point I had my first glimpse of the villa where I was to stay for the next two and a half months. It was surrounded by high stone walls topped with embedded glass shards. I pounded on the large metal door and it was answered by the young man that I had come with the authority to evict. I believe that he already knew of what was to happen as he simply packed a bag, handed me the keys and walked away back down towards the port. Because the ferry boat always made one more stop at Spetses before making the return run to Piraeus, he likely just waited down at the port and caught it about an hour later, leaving me in charge.

After I locked the villa down, I spent a fitful first night alone in a place with eight bedrooms and the only American-style shower on the island. Unfortunately, I chose the one bedroom on the ground floor, leading to the first of several strange incidents that will best be covered in a separate memoir. It was November on Hydra, but the orange and lemon trees in the courtyard were still blossoming. Fragrances I had only dreamed of ever encountering were there at the tip of my nose. My reverie

was broken by a pounding on the large metal gate set into the outer stone wall. When I answered, there stood a young American girl who had come up from the port on the morning ferry, having heard of this place on Hydra with free bedrooms, all the way back in Athens. It absolutely pained me to turn down her offer of being willing “to do anything” to stay for a couple of days. But I could hardly pick up right where the just-evicted male nurse had left off. I was sure that the neighbors were watching. This same sort of incident happened a few more times during my stay there, once even with a pair of tourist girls inquiring about the free room that they had been told about. There was one other person who was allowed to stay, however. A UMUC speech teacher, the late Jerry Cranford, was teaching during Term II at the Athens base and would show up on the Friday morning ferry and stay until Monday morning. He brought two bottles of wine that first Friday and we soon got acquainted over a couple of glasses of retsina apiece. I hope that some other ex-Marylanders had the chance to know this kind and gentle soul before he sadly left us a few years ago.

To have some sense of just how picturesque the island of Hydra was back then, one would need to watch some of the many movies filmed there. Jules Dassin’s retelling of the Phaedra legend, with Melina Mercouri and Anthony Perkins, gives some sense of its beauty. However, it was filmed in black and white. A better view comes in the color film Boy on a Dolphin with Alan Ladd and the lovely Sophia Loren. Incense for the Damned with Patrick Mcnee and Peter Cushing would be another option. Hydra also had its share of celebrities in residence, the most famous of which was the singer and composer Leonard Cohen, who did not happen to be staying there during my time from November, 1970, to January, 1971. The best-selling author, Gordon Merrick, was in residence then and I recall him waiting at the port for the latest New York Times lists to see where his then-current novel, And the Lord Won’t Mind was ranked. One more quasi-famous person that I did meet at the lavish Christmas party at her place was the ex-mistress of Cuban ex-dictator Fulgencio Batista. Her closet had at least twenty full-length mink coats hanging in it!

So many memories linger still of this extended break from teaching for UMUC at Kagnew Station for over two straight years. House sitting could be a real chore, but not when it is happening on a fabled Greek island. Thanks to Ted Sullinger, who was leasing this villa while he was having a new home built up higher on the island, I was given a golden opportunity not only to stay in Greece but also to do so on an Aegean island. Occasional runs into Athens and visits to the Acropolis and elsewhere (especially Odos Dionysiou, of course) only instilled in me a deeper love for all things Greek. The reason why this villa was even available had to do with its owner, the president of Brandeis University, who bought the place for himself and his wife and who had the American-style shower installed just for her. However, when she finally arrived, she stayed for less than two weeks. Her reason for leaving so abruptly: the place was haunted! I went there not knowing that at all, but due to several spooky incidents, I soon discovered that she may have been right. But again, that is fodder for perhaps a future memoir. I can only say that my time there is still fondly remembered, enough so that to me, “Greece Is the Word!”

P.S. I have had the good fortune to go back to Hydra twice since my time there some fifty years ago. The occasions came about when I was leading tour groups to Greece and an island cruise was included in the package. However, had I not been employed by UMUC, I would never have enjoyed my initial stay in this most marvelous of Greek islands. Fran Sullinger still owns that house that her husband Ted had built. She returns to it every fall. On my visits back to the island, I have discovered that Lulu's Cafe is still running, with its prices increased tenfold, but gone forever are the cinema and also the walls that once surrounded the villa, along with those fragrant lemon and orange trees. I had my son Christopher photograph me in front of that villa as it now stands. Sadly, in this world, nothing stays forever. C'est la vie!

