

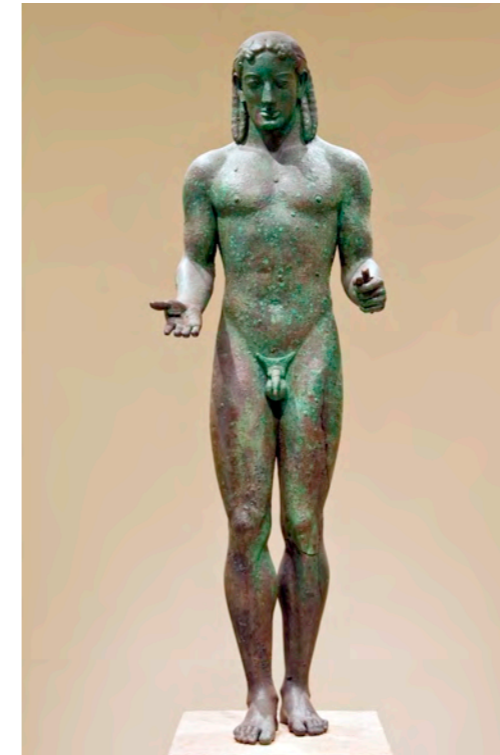


a brief account of travel in greece

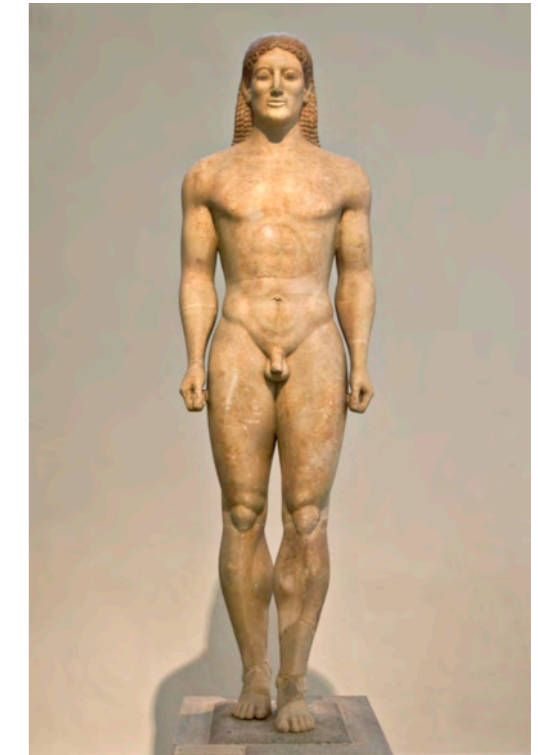
Athens, Thursday, April 29, 2010

After some 28 hours of travel, I arrived yesterday totally exhausted at the Alma Hotel. At Frankfurt airport, I had arranged to meet my niece and for a little over two hours, we had coffee at Starbucks and talked, job, house, and family. Lufthansa was uninterested in my having had to miss an earlier flight to Athens due to Iceland's volcanic wrath, but the black lady was sympathetic to my frustration, without shedding tears. At Aegean Air a lot of back and forth, wrong flight first, wrong seat later, but a friendly lady sat next to me, difficult to understand her English, but she assured me, that tomatoes were still available in Greece. Even my luggage made it to Athens. I found the #95 bus to Syntagma. The bus driver advised taking a taxi to my hotel. He turned out to also drive it, his cab parked across the bus stop. I think with 25 Euro he overcharged mightily, but repeatedly welcomed me as an American visitor to Greece, and I saw a variety of late night street life, including some ladies blocking our route to make themselves and their charms more noticeable. At 23:15 local time, I arrived at the Alma Hotel, my room number 708 reserved. At 30 Euro a night the hotel does not hide its age, but the desk clerk, unshaven since antiquity, spoke good English. The advertising photo of the room on the internet is a masterpiece of space control, but the shower worked and the toilet too. The restaurant next door offered Mythos beer and a select street view of shady characters, my friend Jean would have immediately identified as Albanians despite jackets and T-shirts advertising everything in the world except place of national origin. I didn't go outside to ask. Too tired to eat and deciding to be on a Mediterranean diet, I ordered ouzo to finish what the beer had only started, however, sleep did not follow. Around 4 o'clock, the street noise miraculously stopped, partly thanks to ear plugs. I dozed off with a distinct sense of déjà vu.

I got up at 7:30, tired and still exhausted, found a restaurant close by, recommended by the desk clerk of the day, patronized by Athens workforce, and chose a little baguette among tantalizing options, a cappuccino and an orange juice. I tried to sleep again, gave up and walked the short distance to the archaeological museum. They had been waiting 49 years, and what did they have to offer! The Kykladiks, the Kouroi, Korai, the Poseidon - now considered Zeus in person. And still I complained, the Apollo is missing. The young lady wasn't sure what I complained about, obviously I spoke of life before her time, but when I explained the Apollo having been unearthed 1959 in Pireas, that I had seen the figure here in 1962, she cleverly suggested the Pireas museum. Even more exhausted I walked back, found the Alma Hotel and tossed and turned trying to sleep till 18:30 when I gave up and went back to the 'taverna neon grill', where the man in charge now greeted me with a handshake. Clearly, it had been good instinct last night not to snap my fingers and calling him Sokrates, as Jean insisted it being done now in Greece, the guy is easily 2 times my body weight and very clean-shaven. I ate, not yet tomato salad, had two Mythos. Two intellectual looking Russian sat down next to me, read the menu, ordered to eat and a bottle of red wine. An American dressed couple checked the menu from outside but went to the more Bistro looking place across the promenade, with white table cloth instead red-white checkered plastic table cover. They ordered, the waiter came the few steps over to the 'Neon' to pick up the dishes and the customers are now eating, hopefully at a satisfyingly higher price. I will try the connection in the internet room at the Alma and then hope to be able to sleep. Otherwise, there is more ouzo and Mythos to be had from my waiter-friend next door. Life is good.



Apollo 530 - 520 BC



Kouros 540 BC

Poseidon - Zeus 460 - 450 BC



Friday, April 30.

Just had my first tomato salad at the 'Neon Grill'. The cheese, olive oil was wonderful, bread too and the beer. The tomatoes, unfortunately, tasted all too American, and I don't mean those, my passionate gardening friend Baroody manages to grow, of which I expect he will share when I am back in Santa Fe.

The New Mexican pollen allergies had followed me and made for another difficult night. At four in the morning, I gave up and tried the cream my niece had given me in Frankfurt against nosebleed as well as allergies. It worked, but still exhausted I went around 9 o'clock to my now favored Ristorante, for a dark roll with smoked ham, cheese, lettuce and tomato, an orange juice, which the attendant pressed, while she most efficiently produced a cappuccino at the same time. Having my breakfast sitting outside, watching Athens workforce go to work, I tested my resolve to sleep or not, decided instead to try the metro. Two elderly Swedish couples were experimenting with the ticket machine when I joined them. Surprisingly, it all became clear to me when one of the ladies pointed out the 'English' button and even pressed it. Together we made it to the Akropolis station, three stops. The Persians most likely didn't care how they got to the top, we however pondered various legitimate alternatives, till we found the ticket booth. Identifying myself as a European Senior, thanks to an appropriate second passport, I paid half price, offered surplus years to my Sundsvall friends, but to no avail. We separated, and I took time maneuvering my way through armies of school children and history lovers.

Fascinating to view the restoration effort. I was tempted to step into the cordoned off area to check on the progress, but decided not to be example to the new invaders.

Considering the Elgin marbles, it is astounding how much has been left after all. Of course, the means for total destruction contemporary bigots are known to apply, were not yet available to earlier zealots, as much as they tried, but in 1687 the Venetians nearly succeeded, even if not motivated by divine devotion. Still, the Akropolis Museum makes it all too clear, what has been lost to willful destruction as well as negligence throughout the ages. The museums' architecture makes one miss a Perikles. It is heavy, if not brutal, a tomb rather than a temple. The Elgin marbles, their present setting and display in London, well lit, should remain as and where they are, I hope.

Saturday, May 1.

The Navajo curse is gone, I can breathe freely. Apollo is on my side, but not the Pireas archaeological museum. After an arduous trip by metro - bus - metro, a section of the metro line being out of service, a long search, locals don't seem to know there is one, the museum was closed. Two German ladies and I arrived at the same time, door open, a guard, standing in front of it outside at the top of the stairs, spoke only one word: closed, nothing else, no tomorrow, not ever again, just one word. His is one salary Greece can do without.

Dripping with sweat I made it back to the Alma, had a shower, slept an hour and am now ready for the 'Neon' delights. I picked up my ferry tickets in Pireas and decided for Monday morning at 6 to order a taxi to the harbor. Getting out of the metro, I was



treated to a very loud demonstration of unimpressive size and demeanor, with impressive riot police formation in the rear. The demonstrators had a solid line of protectors walking backwards, holding on to a rope across their line, in their free fists clubs decorated with pieces of cloth, red of course, facing the riot police in green, no-nonsense uniforms, helmets, not those in bronze, and plastic shields, no Gorgon heads, but most serious looking guns. Once they had disappeared out of sight, I heard firecrackers going off, hoping that's what they were. The otherwise bored, hanging around fellows at Omonoia square rushed not to miss a thing, but that was it, those guys in uniform looked professional, not to be provoked by firecrackers, song and little red flags.

A lost day for further museum visits. The son of a bitch at the museum in Pireas was totally uninterested, except to say closed. If it were not for Apollo - I will try tomorrow.

A small, thin man with a gray-green skullcap, black shirt, very erect, jeans tightly belted high over his waist, arms delicately swinging in step, walked by twice. The same young woman in red pants, lower left teeth missing, who yesterday drank coffee with an old regular at the 'Neon Grill', walked by too.

It's early evening, still light, trees in the walkway lush green, insects of various size very active, red umbrellas, meant to shade the tables outside during hostile daylight, advertise in white letters the 'Club Neon', that is the place across, the bistro looking one. Tourists are clearly more drawn in that direction. The food, other than pastry, will be carried over.

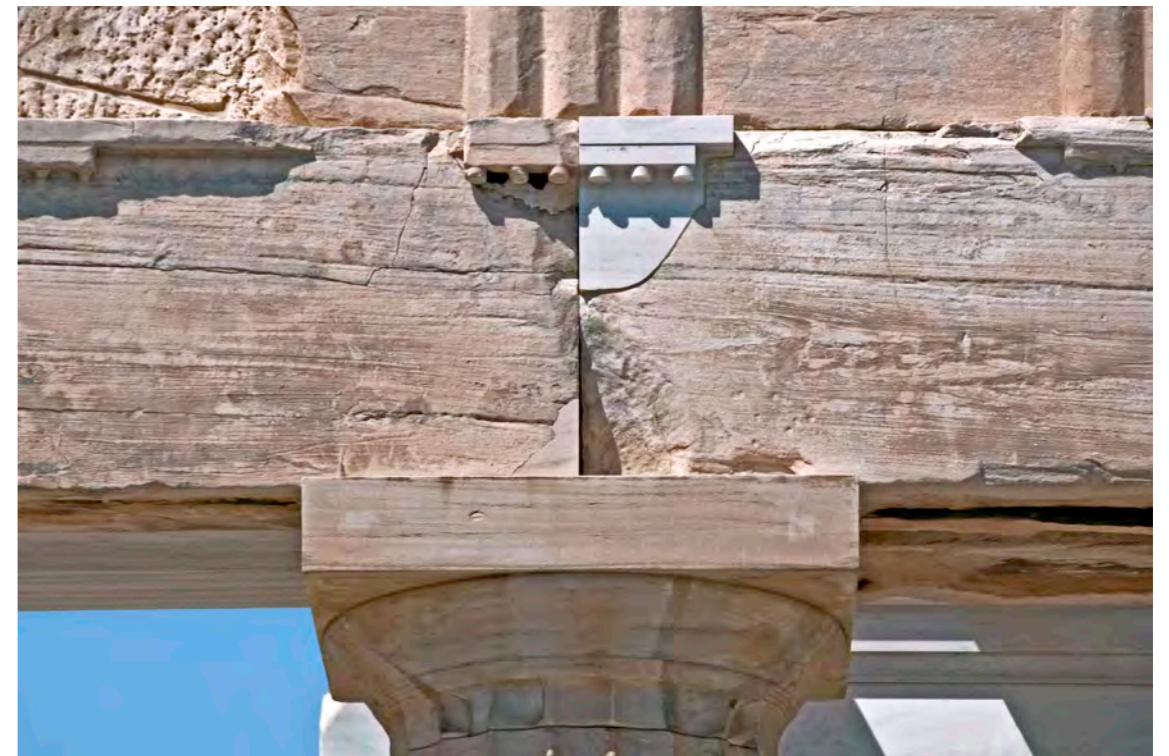
I like my waiter, will not call him Sokrates, the way he opens bottles, the final gesture when removing the bottle cap, like a pianist finishing at last. He attends to lingering potential customers outside instantly, menu in hand, not at all complaining when the discriminating connoisseurs decide instead to make their way over to the 'Club Neon' across from me. The food will follow shortly, never mind.

What surely has ancient roots, an uninhibited, oratorical communication mode, if delivered in other tongues would make me turn my hearing aid off, but here it's music, if not too loud. The lady in red pants walked by again, facing towards me. Her upper right teeth are missing too. I am not alone, one man in years sits outside with a carafe of red wine, facing me, separated by a glass wall, the other regular, inside, with a glass of ouzo, ice untouched, is watching TV. The half-liter white wine in front of me offers the necessary identification, our eyes meet fleetingly, an ever so slight nod and a bond exists. If it wasn't for us, who would know? But for the dogs! This one, outside, body, and head flat on the ground, eyes half open, ears twitching. Mind what you say!

Sunday, May 2.

Left for Pireas at 7:30 in the morning. The museum is free, being the first Sunday in the month. The people are most pleasant and friendly towards the only visitor so early in the morning, even the villain from yesterday smiles - my apologies - and the Apollo is waiting in all his glory.

Making it back dripping wet but content, I went straight to the Ristorante around 10:30. The girl at the coffee machine, a streak of her otherwise black hair neatly colored blue,



knew my order without asking, and I had a late breakfast, took a shower at the Alma and went a second time to the archaeological museum. Jean is right in his e-mailed complaint, my photo of the life-size kykladik figure is out of focus. Sweat dripping into eyes, panting, it is next to impossible at a ripe age to hold the camera still long enough, the light being dim, flash not allowed, the sculpture in a glass cage. I surely earned my carafe of wine for trying. Tomorrow off to Mikonos and Delos.

The Akropolis, destroyed by the Persians in 480 BC, its reconstruction commissioned by Perikles in 447 BC, mostly paid for out of the treasury of the Delian confederacy after transferring the cash to Athens, so they say. Lord Elgin, the ownership argument. How far does it go? Milet, Ephesus, Priene etc., why just the ruins, claim the land too? Does it come with the ruins? What about people, descendants? Smyrna 1922? Is Strasbourg heritage of the German Federal Republic? Danzig? Would Russia take Polish demands seriously? Did the Fascists have a claim to ancient Rome, the Nazis to Charlemagne? And then there is always someone's holy land. The Elgin marbles? They are very well displayed in the British Museum, witness to a human past, to be seen, studied and photographed for free, in London, so be it.

Had a Greek salad again, this time very good, lots of olive oil with bread. Finished my Mythos beer, the wine already on the table. The light outside is now a subdued gold, hardly any noise, it's being Sunday. Seven mature Greek ladies sit next to me on the other side of the glass wall under the venetian blind, smoking after coffee and pastries. A patina from moisture and neglect, colors muted, faded, foliage aggressively clinging to facades, blending into an aroma. The ladies left, not before rearranging chairs and tables, very proper, the architecture stays, melting into the dark.

The image, the posture of the young Hoplite brothers in the Pireas museum, killed 420 BC in the Peloponnesian war. What never-ending waste.

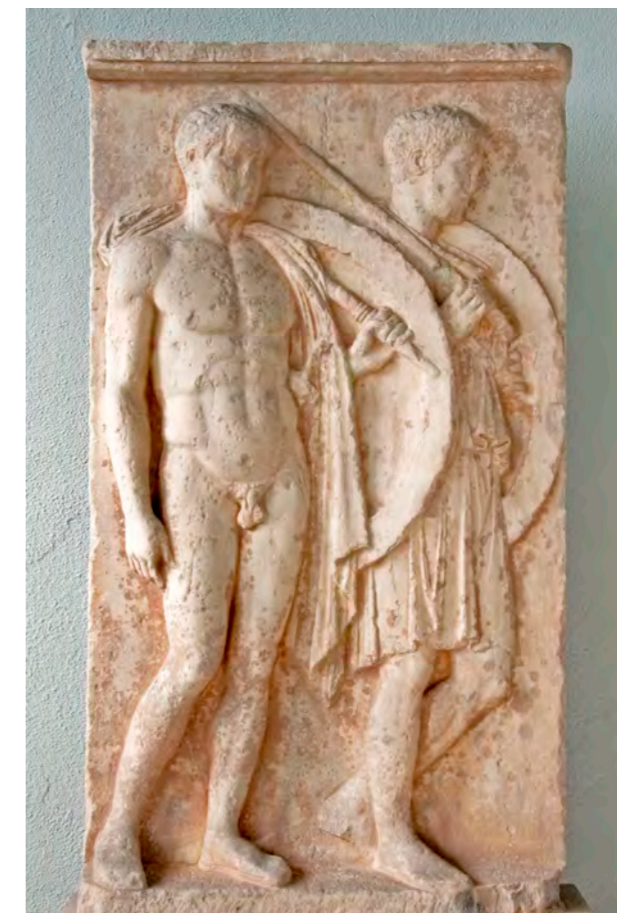
My regular insider offers a smile, raising his right hand slightly. The lady in red pants just joined him, red top this time, white undershirt, quite chubby in the tight fit, certainly not lacking speech. A call on her cellphone separates her temporarily from the father figure. Her remaining teeth are quite small. Cellphone packed away, she speaks with determination, even charm, seems to have the full, silent attention of the regular, smokes. What does she have to say? O God! She gets up and is coming over. She asks if I am writing a book, what it is about, how she could get a copy. She speaks English, father German, mother Scottish, has lived in Athens for 12 years, has a daughter. Some I didn't understand, after she sat down again, joining the regular a couple of tables away. How much more comforting to have the distance, just watch, guess, and still wanting to know.

Tuesday, May 4.

17:30. Went out regrettably without camera, still miffed because the Delos museum was closed. Down the steep road from Andriani's guest house, I went left on the main road out of Mikonos proper, down to the sea, turned right, passing a few local ruffians drinking beer at the shore, no Nausikaa in sight, no Odysseus either, but a lot of trash. To the right of the path a resort, ladies sunning on cushioned recliners sipping cocktails, on my side of the wall a strong smell of urine. The windmills on the edge of



View towards Club Neon



Hoplite Brothers

a dusty parking lot, and then the view of 'Little Venice', the oldest part of Mikonos. The sun low, sharp contours, gleaming colors.

I am passing a string of restaurants along the harbor, looking for a singles table in the shade, they all seem to be meant for ten or more. There is one, in the far corner, a middle-aged lady with a National Geographic magazine occupies it, but just now gets up and leaves. I sit. Next door to my right, the Apollo restaurant, most likely the one from 1961 and 62. In front, fishing boats, freshly painted, across the bay the beach where I used to sleep, now under gray concrete, a marina under construction.

I order a grilled fish fillet, no salt, no pepper, just lemon juice, olives, oil and bread, a beer, 'Alfa'.

Yesterday, after being picked up at the ferry and driven to Andriani's, I showered and slept an hour. The room has a view, is spacious and quiet, no earplugs needed, except in town because of the abominable scooters and four-wheelers buzzing through every walkway, leaving the passersby in blue and stinking exhaust, and the noise! At a still quiet plaza, looking at the menu nailed to a tree, a young waitress addressed me in pretty good English, I could not resist. I was shown an assortment of fish in the freezer, chose one looking most like swimming, 14 ounces, and had it served grilled together with a small tomato salad, a beer first, a glass white wine later. I asked my beautiful waitress if she was from the island, Romania, she replied, here for the season.

At 9 o'clock this morning I took the boat to Delos, went straight to the museum, a Kore fragment there, being the reason for my visit to Mikonos. A woman talking on her cell-phone outside saw me approaching, went into the museum and locked the door just as I arrived. My advice to the IMF: sell the island to the highest bidder, with the one requirement to keep the museum open. After all, the 15 Euro boat trip, 6 Euro fee to the island, the money Mikonos makes on tourists, and they can not keep the little museum open? For lack of personnel? No wonder Perikles took the cash away.

In the news, a picture of strikers occupying the Akropolis, a banner showing hammer and sickle says PEOPLE OF EUROPE UNITE. A new play by Aristophanes? A Delphian saw?

Tomorrow back to Pireas and off to Crete. I will now start my strenuous, waist trimming walk from the harbor up to Andriani's.

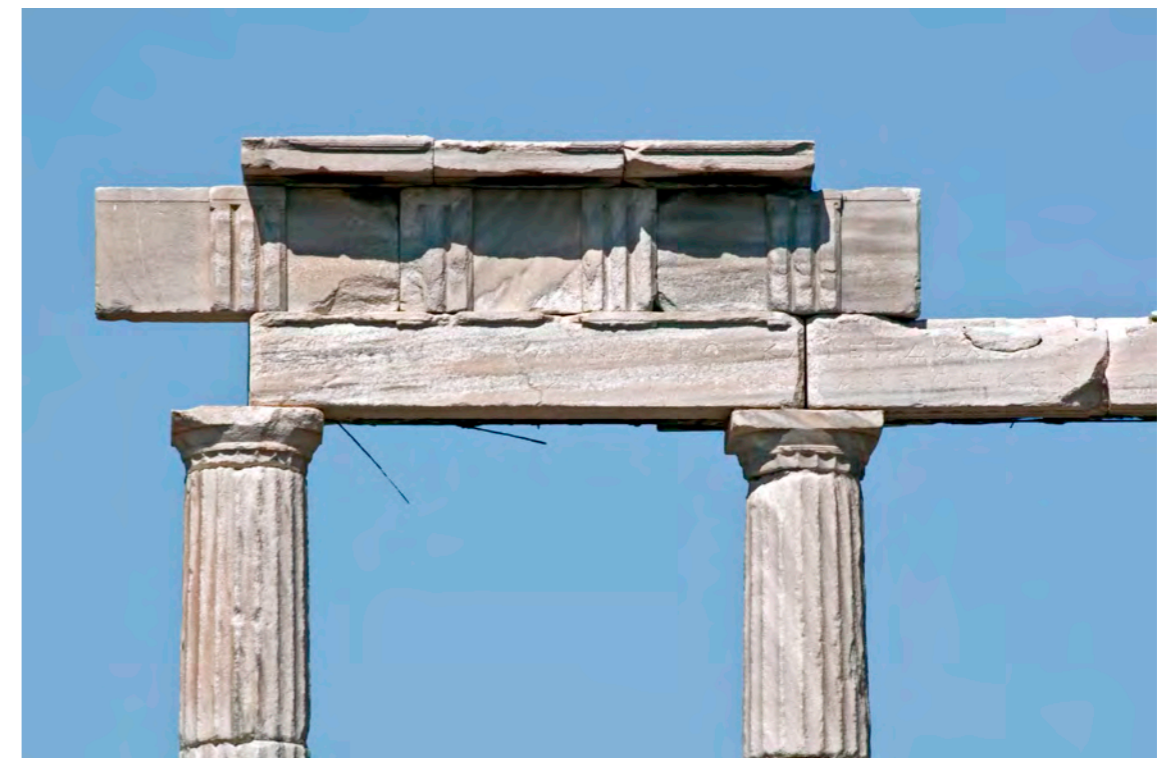
Alas, the light is soft, at 19:15 the terrace still mostly empty, the music, some American bang-bang stuff, turned down at last, the fish fillet still in my memory, I stay with a glass of white wine and a small plate with cubes of cheese.

Wednesday, May 5.

Another strike, next ferry tomorrow. Andriani's matron, friendly, patient, accommodating, makes the calls. Down at the harbor is my refund. I try a different line direct to Crete for tomorrow, but it is fully booked, so I am told. Back again for a new ticket to Pireas, get it for half price, but it is little consolation for one lost day in Crete. Went once more to Little Venice, found a singles table and ordered a Greek salad and cappuccino.



Delos



Two American couples from a cruise sit down a table away. One specimen asked for a Michelob beer, the other wants Budweiser, they don't get either and drink Amstel, order pizza. They talk of past adventures. The Michelob guy reports on his trip last year to Australia. France will have to suffer him next year. Neither speaks of here and now. Cigarette smoke everywhere, death ignored, but everybody else has to suffer too. The waitress, blond, quietly beautiful, deserves her tip, so far they all do, no exception, for friendliness, courtesy, and mostly endurance.

Memories of an island without plastic, a landscape without villas, no trash, dead or living, a clean beach to sleep on, a small, open boat with a handful of committed seekers, a Delos museum, open, a keeper allowing us to spend the night on its terrace. A paradise found twice, but no more.

Again a walk along the outer reaches of the resort, two female bathers at the seashore in skimpy outfits, the rear not even skimpy, must have scared the ruffians from yesterday. Recommendation to require proof of age and shape for purchase of such outfits, at least permission to wear such. A photo now would plagiarize, if not insult Botero.

It's early evening, two cruise ships are still blocking the harbor, I do not dare to descend downtown, instead give in to temptation and order, at my nearest neighborhood provider, a pizza, feta, olives, tomato, bell pepper on thin crust and half a liter of local white wine. Being the only customer, we discuss the news from Athens, Molotov cocktails, three dead - one woman pregnant. I ask if they caught the bastards, the owner shrugs, a crowd, Athens.

My view across the terrace is on traffic, buses, cars, four-wheelers, scooters, noisy and stinking, maybe this is the busiest intersection in the upper regions of town. Schoolchildren with their backpacks, on their way home, all beautiful, laughing. Adults, very few overweight, tourists up here mostly youngish, I too feel lighter, it may not show yet, so what, when in Greece! The wine is good, besides I still have that steep way up to Andriani's with half my pizza in a box.

Friday, May 7.

The trip by ferry from Mikonos to Pireas was an ordeal, hot, uncomfortable chairs and incessantly loud, uninterrupted shouting and smoking. You attempt to avoid the drift from one direction, only to get the nostrils blasted from another. At least the Kriti II leaving an hour later from Pireas to Heraklion had 'no smoking' signs inside and after a polite, but waiter enforced wait, business first, everybody stretched out wherever possible to sleep. At six the ferry arrived, and I made the mistake trying to walk to the Europcar rental, misunderstanding the address, but finding my hotel for the 13th.

The friendliness of people stands in contrast to the trash on the streets. The first person I asked for direction instantly waved for a taxi. The cabdriver charged only 5 Euro because, at this hour, wanting to get out into the countryside, I was, in his opinion, roughing it. Getting my rental car was more difficult, the address being incorrect. After a long wait, someone noticed me, even understood I had been misinformed and drove me to the airport. I was glad to sit in the somewhat run down Suzuki, bits of the dashboard missing, and after paying for some extras, lack of sleep makes one vulnerable, drove



Mikonos - Little Venice



off. I missed the turn to Knossos, didn't want to become familiar with the idiosyncrasies of the car in city traffic, and drove on to Malia instead.

The palace ruins are now more extensive, but for the unprofessional not any more impressive than in 1961. I even found the spots, I took photos then, including the 'sacrificial' stone still in place. Ever more confident after discovering the reverse gear, I drove roads, assuming they would lead, where I should get to. A couple more ruins, most impressive for their setting in the landscape. Not only pre-Columbian cultures had that uncanny sense of choosing locations for settlements, which to us seem aesthetically most beautiful.

I had my first swim between Crete and Egypt, ate at the only beach side restaurant in sight, occupied by two other customers, asked for a room, was directed to a house close by with an 'apartment' for five at 40 Euro, went back to finish the evening in Xerokambos with a half liter of white wine, fighting some mosquitoes, from Egypt I suppose.

Saturday, May 8.

Slept wonderfully, dreamt standing at a booth manned by two locals, one of them my host, paid for a fried chicken, wrapped up in foil to take with me the next day. In the morning the chicken is gone, the host took it to a demonstration to be shared with friends. The other local offers instead to fry me a large, very flat crab, however, I didn't get to eat that one either, I woke up, fell asleep again, had more dreams, without crab, without chicken. Instead, I later ordered the omelette 'special' for breakfast with two cups of coffee, filter.

Driving a dirt road along the coast out of town in westerly direction, I passed the Munich couple I had met last night at the restaurant, riding their impressive mountain bikes, dressed professionally, including helmets, I called out a very good morning to them, before I had to turn back for lack of road.

Landscapes at times barren, blessed abundantly with rocks, the roads too. Olive trees carefully irrigated, views at times from high up down to the coast, plastic greenhouses as far the eye can see. Some roads some time very good, others made to give you nightmares, sections washed out, fissures, at least in the asphalt they show, reaching all the way across, an instant of sudden trust in Gods, Apollo owes me, and the abyss is avoided. It's not easy to recognize the correct road, what looks like one may seem to peter out completely, and, voilà, asphalt appears again in pure glory.

In mountain villages old women sitting on doorsteps, watching the world go by, wear black. So they did in my early years at the Mosel, signaling widowhood, instead of wearing bright, flowery dresses, enjoying life at last. But how could they, at least in public, the priest wore black, setting the tone, threatening with a last judgment.

Hungry and thirsty, I stopped in Tertsia in front of a taverna. Speaking slowly, I asked the young woman if she understood English, 'of course' she answered, fresh pressed orange juice? 'Of course', a Greek salad? Only an exasperated nod. The best salad so far, tomatoes tasting like tomatoes, green bell peppers tasting like fruit, herbs I could taste but not name.



Malia

View towards Xerokambos



Had diarrhea twice, hiding between rocks, big enough to lean on.

Now, after a shower, a beer first, then a half liter of white wine, I am looking at three Almiriki trees and the sea beyond.

When I got here, to Tsoutsouros, I drove up and down and up the waterfront looking for rooms instead apartments, got stuck while turning around in gray sand, not recognized as such early enough. Grabbing dead leaves and twigs on the ground in support of the wheels did not help. An elderly, small but fine looking mustached local, black bandana wrapped around the head, wearing wide, black, Cretan pants, high boots, approached, offering a few, but impressive sounding words, some very distinct gestures, walked away again to sit down in his plastic seat overlooking the scene. After ever more futile attempts to free the car, I humbly approached him. He had been waiting, and before I reached him, he called to his three sons, sitting beer drinking on a terrace two stories up an unfinished building, from where they had been calmly watching my ordeal unfolding. Their pickup did the trick. Back on solid ground, I thanked each one and gently tapped the bandana man on his shoulder, while he had a few more words to say.

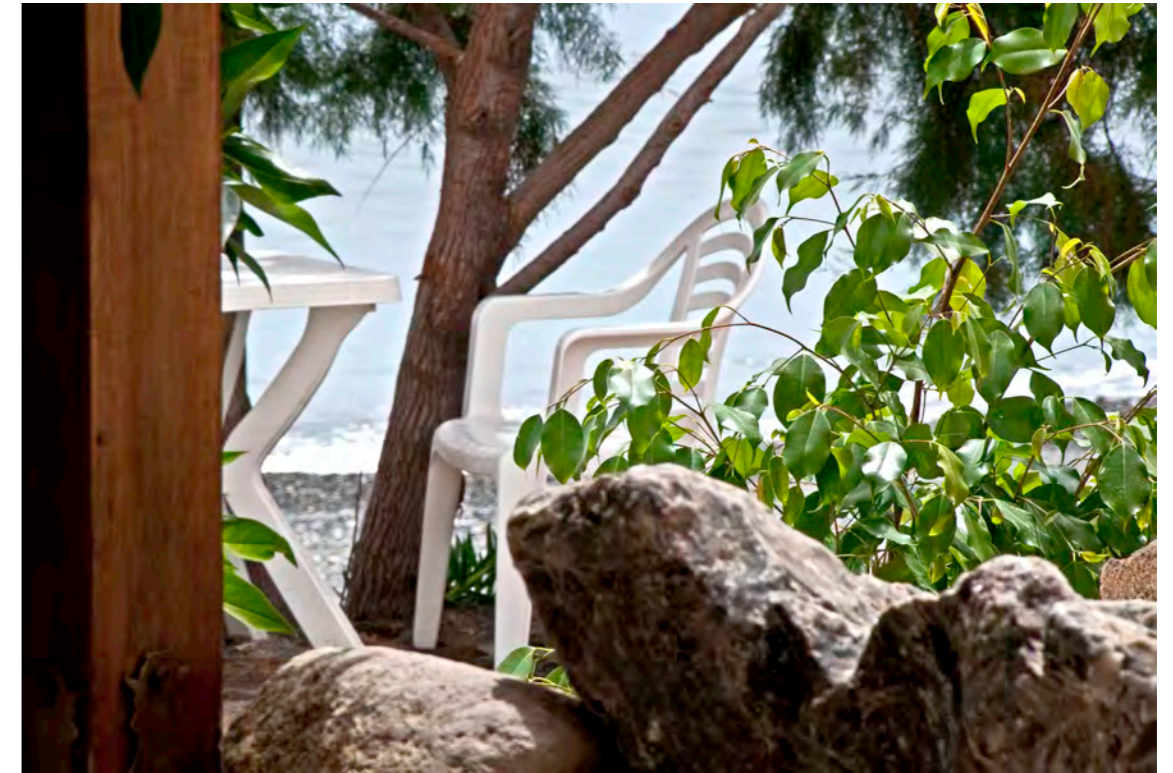
Driving to the other side of town, where my shame would not yet be known, I was offered a room at Zobras for 20 Euro, had to wait for it to be prepared, being the first guest this year, but calmed myself with a cold Mythos beer. The offer to eat I declined, referring to an uneasy stomach, but gladly accepted the house wine.

Sunday, May 9.

Went straight for Phaistos, got there at noon, as did plenty of others in busses and rental cars. I asked for the senior discount, got it without showing a passport, with the comment that I was quite young looking, to which I responded, Greek salad was to blame, which caused the Frenchman next in line to claim an Old Testament like age. Here and there some trees offering shade for contemplation, however not for long, and someone will come close enough to interrupt your thoughts with spoken noise.

I missed Agia Triada, no signs in sight. A few more times I missed a turnoff, went in wrong directions, humid and hot, mountain tops disappearing in haze. Agia Galini already filled with tourist buses. Lost my way again, turned back, stopped to ask an elderly couple leaving a taverna at the crossroad to Agia Galini, only to be told in German, that I had been on the correct road in the first place. A lengthy conversation in the middle of the road, the lady lives here for some twenty years, the man on visit etc.

Up towards Spili, down to Plakias, a blood pressure raising road up again to Sellia, at times very steep, narrow, first gear only, sharp and ever steeper curves, as usual without any side rails, a nightmare to think of a stalling engine. But the landscape! At Kato Rodakino I take the turn down to the coast. At the far right some quite fancy looking outfits, tourists sitting on a terrace eating, overlooking a rocky beach, plenty of very clean cars in the parking lot. I try the opposite direction, and at Korakas Beach, at the end of the road, no cars in sight, I ask if a room is available. Thirty-five Euro, with a spacious bathroom and shower, quite new, above the restaurant with terrace, entrance stairs to the side. A scrubby islander, smoking, drinking a beer in the far corner, speaks enough English to let me know where the fridge with beer is to be found, to keep a



Tertsia

Tsoutsouros



conversation going and translate to an older and one younger woman in charge. I finish my beer and go swimming. The beach, part gray sand, part polished stones, the water clear, aquamarine, somewhat cool. The beach ends among steep cliffs, forming a little harbor with some deep caves. Was Odysseus here? May this be the place, where 1944 Fermor and Moss with their kidnapped German General were picked up by a British motor launch and taken to Egypt? Later I see my weathered drinking acquaintance urinating and arranging himself for the night outside one of the caves.

A long shower, tiny bits of shell stick where it's difficult to reach, and I am ready to eat. The man of the house has arrived, a landscape of a face, hairy, discusses food with me, brings samples to taste. We agree on a small Greek salad, half of which I have to forgo, grilled pieces of chicken, rice, and herbs wrapped in zucchini blossoms, some in wine leaves, little bits of potatoes, as vegetable 'leaves from the mountain' and zucchini. I eat very slowly, have my half liter wine and a long conversation with the owner, land prices, houses, he also runs a construction business, tourism, and of course corruption. We discuss breakfast in the morning, no, not at eight, he has to look first after two goats, chicken etc. Nine o'clock it is. At half-past eight I am in bed, terrace door open, the ferocious wind has died, only the sound of waves and the view of stars.

Monday, May 10.

The day is clear, no wind, the sea gleaming. Breakfast of two fried eggs, sunny side up, yokes deep yellow-gold, the olive oil tasting like no olive oil tasted before. The farewell handshake itself is an experience, my hand disappearing in his, too large to get a grip on, not so with the younger woman.

From Rodakino - Frangokastello - Komitades into the mountains again, part nightmare, part feast for the eyes, if one dares take them off the road. Out of a trail metamorphoses a dream of an asphalt beauty, alas, never for long. Askifou, down to the northern coast, skipping Hania. On the old road to Kolymbari, in search of a cash machine. Cash, not credit card, means no receipt, no taxes. At last, a bank. The cash machine declines my card. A friendly woman inside directs me to the manager, who takes no interest in my problem and short of losing my temper, I give up. Close by an Internet café, a compassionate school boy assisting, and Microsoft opens up in English. I send out a cry for help to my support team back home, to see if visa is protecting me again. A second cash machine around the corner again denies the 'credit'. I drive out of town, find a cove down at the sea and feel stranded, beached. The view helps, I drive back and try every button, and voilà, by pressing 'checking' the machine spits out 100 Euro, I try again and get 200 more. My friendly Los Alamos National Bank team would probably have offered me a chair, coffee and cookies, had they seen me so stressed out, sweating and confused.

On the other side of Crete, I never had to search for long to find an isolated, memorable spot to stay, here in the most western part it seems near impossible. Elafonisi crowded, hot and humid, dust and sand, a furiously blowing wind. In Elos the nearest gas station, 55 Euro worth of gas, must have been driving on the last drop, and off to Paleohora.

I drive up and down the strip, find a small hotel, a room for 30 Euro, nearby an Italian



Phaistos

Korakas Beach



restaurant, two young fellows are on the Internet. We agree a password requiring connections is not a most friendly gesture when traveling, theirs is open, but via satellite, and the connection is iffy. I go back to catch my laptop and skype Jean. The bank had already assured him, my visa card was working. I applaud their dependability, courtesy, not going into details.

I am invited into the kitchen to see what's to be had. This time it's a Mythos, spaghetti with beef in tomato sauce, and a half liter house wine.

Tuesday, May 11.

After a hearty breakfast, served by a young blond, whose soft looking body promises to be considerably more substantial in just a few more years, it's off, up the mountains, curve after curve, rock face after rock face covered with flowers and down through herds of goats and a few sheep to Sougia, a small enough place, however, much favored by even early tourism, mostly in hiking boots.

It's still mid-morning, but I decide to stay, a room for 25 Euro. Inside, it takes five fine marble steps up to a small but sufficient bathroom with shower. A balcony with a view over the ever in progress and as such not taxable contemporary architecture and onto the sea. By eleven o'clock I am swimming, frying over-easy on the rocks, swimming again and ready for a nap.

Sougia



Korakas Beach

Near Elos





Sougia

After a tedious struggle with the internet, but a breakfast of two fried eggs, two sausages, what delicious sausages, filter coffee, I am off direction Hania again, Rethymnon and back over Spili to Hagia Triada. What a charming place, few tourists, the sea at a distance, a gigantic mountain range, not overwhelming since far enough away, plenty of stairs, testimony to a complex, multilevel architecture.



Dripping with sweat at one o'clock, sitting under a shady tree, a cool breeze. 3500 years ago it may not have been as strenuous for a visitor, the architecture would have offered shade and comfort, maybe even more. History records mostly wars, what was it like in between? Those trading across seas, those making a living, good enough to commission art?

Hagia Triada





Hagia Triada

An ordeal along the coast to get here, Lentas. Wrong turns, rocky trails to nowhere, long detours. Stubbornly insisting on spending one last night at the seashore, I get there at last. An old woman in black accosts me before I can turn around. A room? Follow me, I hesitate, she calls her sister, a worse option. I decline and make it back to my car and escape without being transformed into a swine.

I take the other turn, east, and there is my beach. A long-haired, bare-chested young man, I take him to be a local, seems to know his way around. I ask for a room, he directs me in pure Bavarian to a young blond, somewhat tattooed, somewhat pierced, with some bits of metal in ears, nose and tongue, dreadlocks woven into her hair, Nausikaa from Estonia.

A room is prepared instantly, and soon I am in the water somewhere between Crete and Libya, for a long and pleasant swim.

Nausikaa invites me to sit with her at the open-air bar, we talk. I drink two Mythos. How about fish? Nausikaa is not yet confident how to clean them, fry non-vegetarian stuff. If I am willing to wait the owner's arrival, I may be in luck. She assures me she likes fish, not necessarily dead ones, but she is willing to learn.

The owner arrives. A large Canadian couple has been waiting too. He, the Canadian, claims to have a knack for catching fish, wants to try it here, with tuna, the owner has been recommended, when and where can they do it? At a private moment, I asked the owner what could have been meant with where, mountains on one side, the other the sea? He tosses me a tangerine in reply. I ask if tuna is not a protected species here, he bursts out laughing, replying Greeks to top that list now.

I got my fish, four, in fact, cleaned and grilled by the owner himself. To transmit the complete course of delights, language does not work, suffice it to state one by one: Nausikaa, the swim, the beer, the fish (all four of them) the wine and the double ouzo.



Nausikaa's Beach

Lentas - Anatoli





Lentas - Anatoli

Nausikaa makes breakfast at 8 o'clock and asks how I slept, like a rock is my reply, she, on the other hand, had slept like a baby. I wished her a wonderful summer, not to worry when the place would fill up with German tourists, to send them right away for a swim, to ease the pressure on the kitchen, and with that I said goodbye.

Lentas



Knossos

Knossos was a horror, long, multiple lines in front of a single ticket booth, tourist guides shouting doctrines in every language bus tours require. I left soon, dropped off the car at the airport, not before I got totally lost, and a friendly scooter driver called out to follow him. From the airport by taxi to my hotel and under the shower, followed by a nap.



The archaeological museum is being renovated, it offers a slimmed down collection, wonderful pieces nevertheless, including the Phaistos disk. A beer at the Venetian harbor, a change of ticket to cabin at the Minoan line in the hope of getting a full night's sleep on the way to Pireas tomorrow night, and back to the hotel for a second shower and nap. A Greek salad, a large Mythos draft later in the center of town I get to talking with the waitress, from Moldavia. She counts the other restaurants in line, Albanian, Albanian, Rumanian, Ukrainian waitresses. She herself lives in Heraklion already twelve years, has a good life, as long as there is work.



Phaistos disk



Saturday, May 15.

After several tries, I found a place on the coast, the Peloponnesian, far enough from urban noise, in Tyros. A room for 35 Euro, after a shower, change of clothes, some washing, a nap to clear my mind of the Pireas harbor nightmare. Sleeping in a ferry cabin is no pleasure either, but better than the floor or some sat-through seats. I was in bed by 21:30. One other passenger came later to occupy the cabin for four.

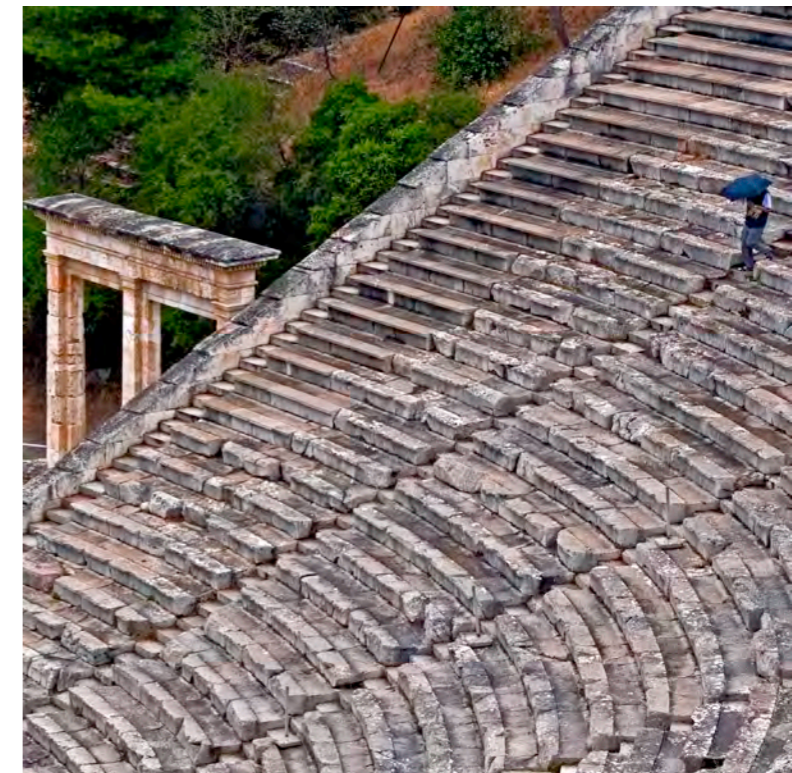
Five o'clock I got up to be on land to meet my rental car delivery but could have slept some more hours since in spite arrangement the guy showed up at 8, and saved myself some grief. Instead, I searched in the rain for a possible place the guy with my name on a sign might be waiting. Taking shelter under the canvas of a taxi stand, I saw a Minoan Line kiosk, and gone there, asked some people, who had no idea either where a rental car may wait for a client. Intending to walk back, I turned around, and my rucksack was gone. Everybody shared in my distress and somebody pointed out a couple of policemen on motorbikes, BMW, who took my description of the red backpack before taking off in different directions to search within the harbor compound. No sighting was made. I described the content, laptop, camera, air tickets, medication. Fortunately, I had already taken a blood pressure pill that morning. Should this be the end of my trip? The police were sympathetic, very friendly, short of offering to fly me back home, they explained where to go to report the theft. Cooled down by rain but dazed, I walked back to the taxi stand, which by now was empty of passengers except for taxis, and there stood my beautiful red rucksack looking definitely left behind. Apollo's present, if there ever was one! Still hesitating to believe my eyes, I decided to accept the situation, as if the nightmare had a reset button, but to be pious when in Delphi.

The rental car showed up shortly after, without a name sign. We looked at each other for a while, looked for alternatives, till I walked over with all my luggage and asked. We signed the papers. After loading rucksack and bag securely into the trunk, camera on the front seat, he gave me directions, and I took off in a 2100 km old Suzuki, no rattling, no shaking, dashboard intact, determined to follow from now on Jean's advice very carefully and look out for Albanians.

Epidavros, crowded, rain on and off, never mind, it sweeps you off your feet. In 1961 and 62, as a student hitchhiking, I had hoped to hear Maria Callas in Medea, but could not afford the tickets. This time it was enough to sit and watch.

Tyrins, Mikines, overwhelming to contemplate the effort, the vision of those intending to be remembered - forever? The Parthenon, Athena's virgin chamber, took nine years to be completed, thanks to a most sophisticated trained workforce. Mikines? Atreus tomb, a masterpiece demonstrating economy of means. Was this their way of thinking, or to ensure eternal respect, once dead? Reaching the parking lot, I could not even sweat anymore. How do the hundreds of Japanese do it? Chirping happily away, dressed in business suits, hats, with heavy camera bags, under umbrellas? Argos I crossed four times, trice in search of Mikines, once more after a blond gas station attendant offered me her best guess how to avoid ending up in Tripoli.

Sitting on a terrace in Tyros, in fresh clothe, eating calamari, not realizing it would be deep-fried and breaded, the wine compensating, I am watching an aggravated sea,



Epidavros



Epidavros

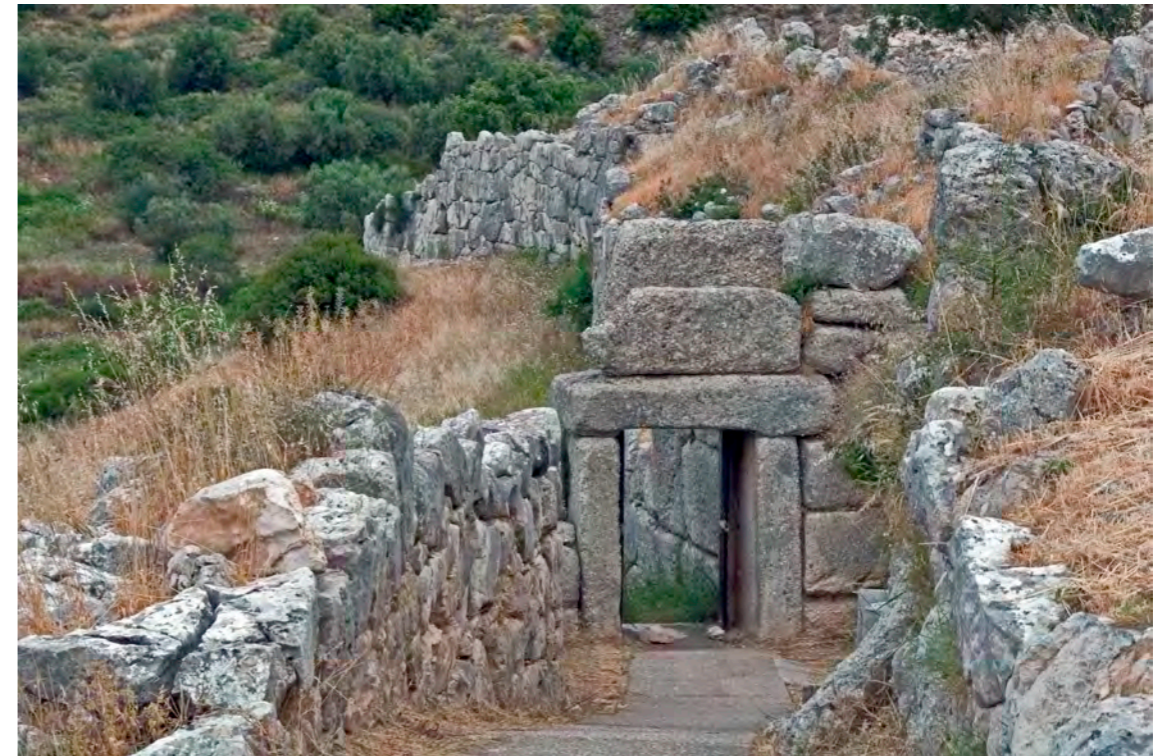


Tiryns

Mikinean Bridge



Mikines



listening to a most Swabian sounding conversation from the next table, attended by a most wonderful host. When I sat down, being still the only guest and asking right away, if he had Mexican beer, he laughed and knew I meant Mythos, then talked about his time in San Diego, California.

The black silhouette of mountains against a still blue but darkening sky, the sea now only to be heard not seen, about two glasses worth of wine still waiting.

Sunday, May 16.

My intention was to start the day with two fried eggs, a glass of orange juice and coffee, sitting next to the sea. Instead, the waitress brought two glasses of orange juice and two coffees, no eggs. I drank one glass of orange juice and one cup of coffee sitting next to the sea and left.

Street signs are sometimes placed to be seen only coming from one direction, sometimes the other. Turning back, therefore, can be an advantage. However, I decided to ask at a crossroad anyhow, got very loud instructions and a Greek salad.

The archaeological site of Sparta seems Athens final revenge. Part fenced in, part not, with sufficiently large holes making the fence no defense, here and there traces of long ago excavation, however, the site seems to have been large. The impression is of a hard if not crude architecture, how much of it is Roman? Few traces of sculpted details. Did Lacedaemonians think of themselves as Greeks among Greeks? Part of a common world?

The absolutely only visitor that day to look for traces of ancient Sparta, a sexually preoccupied couple inside a large, ancient American automobile, disqualified, I found a discarded bra, the color red still noticeable, the usual plastic, some human feces and the screaming of two cats in heat. The landscape is about all that is left to be shared with Leonidas and this incomprehensible society, which did not write its own history but seems to have shared in the talent of opportunistic betrayals, making it Greek after all.

Looking for but deciding against a number of places for the night, criteria strictly emotional, till there were no more rooms to rent signs to be found, except for one at the edge of the world family compound, not far from the ferry to Elafonisos. A room is made ready, floor washed, furniture dusted, very clean, 20 Euro. Some building in a state of construction is proof, the son has aspirations. Close by a campground with restaurant. The owner, one more relative, offers a most unmemorable homemade something, which one of the ladies in a group of four elderly campers recommended highly. It is windy, dusty, dull. The place is filling up, Germans all, judging from their greetings, already quite familiar with each other, since there seems nothing else to do, but to get to know everyone and talking of past trips, experiences sounding equally dull like the food. I will sleep, be gone and never return.

Monday, May 17.

And a very few kilometers back and down the road, a beautiful quiet village, Archangelos, a restaurant overlooking the sea. Besides two well-behaved dogs, I am alone on



Tyros



the terrace this early in the morning, waiting for two fried eggs and coffee. I could have had fried fish last night. The eggs came from house-chicken, the lady replied when I complimented on their taste.

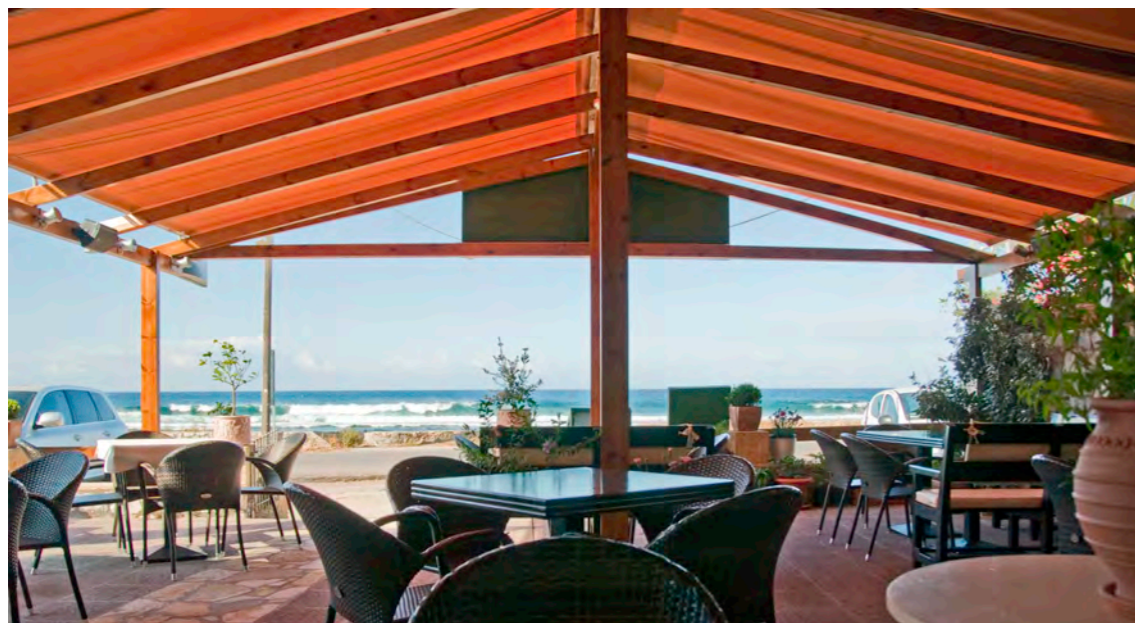
My map is a Neolithic piece of crap, gas stations have not yet heard of maps, I drive mostly by instinct, forgo Diros Cavern frightened off by lines of buses, drive on to the very end of the Peloponnesian middle finger, Mani. Giddy from heights and narrow curves, it's tempting to close both eyes once in a while, if it wasn't for the sight of a rough, whipped up sea, such as Odysseus already feared, fortress-like stone buildings, towers, some ostentatious new ones, the old ones hinting at a complicated past, the new ones at tax fraud.

At Agios Nikolaos I find what I am looking for, Xenios, turning left on the beach. He sits with two delivery guys, pays bills, asks to wait a moment, then shows me a room, 45 Euro, I take it, shower, go downstairs, and he greets me with a cappuccino on the house.

Later he sits at his table with a couple from Friesland, I can overhear their conversation, can ask a question, and he invites me to join. Dinner will start at six, the lady recommends the swordfish, knocks even on my door, when the time has come, so I may not miss the pleasure by oversleeping. We sit together for the rest of the evening, No Frisian jokes, instead, we talk electronic media, some politics. The mosquitoes give a damn.



Xenios



Archangelos



Tuesday, May 18.

Xenios makes breakfast, two 'Spiegeleier', sunny side up, with a little tomato salad, herbs, feta, toast, and coffee. He joins me at my table. He worked for some 34 years in Germany, first in Aachen, later in Berlin, where he owns a restaurant in Charlottenburg, run in his absence by one of his sons.

When the time was right, he went back to Greece to get married. He now has four children in Berlin, all made their German Abitur, their high school diploma, and afterwards the Greek one too. They are at home in Germany. In late spring, he drives to Agios Nikolaos for the summer season, then drives back to Berlin. At 64, he enjoys his life in two places. We talk about the Greek system of taxation, the German, and Berlin, which he likes very much, one granddaughter already growing up there.

A storm is the reason I could not swim lately. He shows me the sand from the Sahara on the roof of his VW Touareg. It is still very windy, the sea very rough.

Olympia, incredibly crowded, seems unchanged since 1962, except the town itself and the parking lots, but far too small and overflowing. The museum, well organized, beautiful small figure sculptures in clay and bronze, lifelike, narrative - what do they have to tell? Lots of war objects, donated by survivors I assume. The Praxiteles I still don't care for, sculptural acrobatics, the reliefs from the Apollo temple in contrast clear and sober, marvelous.

Mistaking the date, assuming to have only one more day, I decided to drive directly to Delphi, crossing the impressive bridge at Patra, a wonderful span over the Corinthian sea, the design and the near sensuous curve of the roadway. No obvious place to stop and photograph, but worth the 12 Euro in toll.

The towns where I hoped to stay overnight, looked all uninviting, outright ugly, all the way and including Itea. Delphi seemed the last hope when I turned off to the right into a village, driving narrow roads and up a hill expecting only to leave again, and at the very end the 'room to let - taverna' sign.

Two greasy old slobbs were the only sign of life, sitting in a dark room, in dense, fatty smoke from something large roasting over an open fire. English, as well as German, proved useless, but upon some yelling from the fireplace, a young guy who did not speak at all appeared and guided me out of the house, down a breakneck driveway and up some stairs to a room.

I showered and went down the stairs and up to a terrace to take my chance with food. After some hopeless gestures and some more attempts with language, the young man took off, taking the menu with him.

A confidence restoring English-speaking human appeared soon after to let me know, not to mind the menu, only Souvlaki with french fries was to be had, some of which I ate with the help of a 'Kaiser' beer and one ouzo. The wine, whatever its archaeological value, did not look drinkable in a half empty, not quite transparent bottle standing in an ancient refrigerator advertising Coca-Cola.



Olympia



Sitting on the terrace, in my jacket, with one more ouzo against a cold wind, looking down at Itea, wondering about all those coming by sea to find answers, justification for whatever unholy business, in Delphi. Clouds hanging over the mountains, the speck of sea down there at Itea, the light fading, it is not difficult to sense some awe if not fear, the honest seeker must have felt, approaching a fateful answer.



View towards Itea



Delphi

Wednesday, May 19.

Breakfast at nine in my room had been promised and paid for. At 9:30 I left without.

Delphi, how to describe, what cannot be imagined anymore. The setting itself is awe-inspiring. Delphi, its function in sophisticated, conniving politicking, sealed by the necessary oracle, for a price off course, it played its part in identifying that Greek world, destined ultimately to self-destruct, as Thukydides lets us know. The embassies and their treasures, the content, of which fragments in the museum only give a hint, show how serious business had been.

In the theater at Delphi, a group of French schoolchildren enacted some Greek recitations, in Epidavros it was a somewhat older German group. I watched and listened to both.

And then there is the battleground at Thermopiles, two sulfurous springs filled with Japanese bathers in various combinations of undergarments, the sight, the smell, I walk on in search of that treacherous path. Feces on both sides make one believe, the battle is still raging, I turn back. Trucks parked in some shade offer drivers a last repose before Athens. Roma setting up camp for a longer occupation. The memory of Leonidas and those three days?

Stranger, do not go to Thermopiles, the place stinks.



From my table in Kamena Vourla, I can see the tip of Euboea closing in the bay. The Greek fleet was not far away in those days, yet could do little but escape intact to fight a conclusive battle at a time and place of their choosing.

The sun is setting, the houses down the coastline reflect a golden light, on the beach a Lacedaemonian tramp in military fatigue, much oversized, has gone through various exercise routines, of which combing his long white beard and longer hair is not even the most noteworthy.

I can still feel laying on such pebbles, falling asleep to the sound of the sea.



Kamena Vourla

Thursday, May 20.

This time, in the morning, after a night fighting mosquitoes, unsuccessfully, my pretty Albanian waitress understood enough English to provide a wonderful breakfast. My Lacedaemonian beach-bum is also in the process of packing up and taking off.

Finding traces of Marathon was not easy, and rather by chance I ended up at the Soros, the burial mound for the Athenian dead. The site is clean and somber. The museum I did not find at all and decided to follow instead the coast to Sounion, not easy either and closed because of yet another strike. A couple just returned from the closed ticket booth and pointing at the sign, I suggested the strikers too could have thrown themselves into the sea, in response to which the lady counseled to be careful, and after one further remark from me, she warned, that she may take offense, adding some German for good measure. We exchanged, to ease the situation, the where from where to, and to my Santa Fe she countered their Durango, and we laughed.



Marathon



Nothing else to do but to look for a place to spend the night, the last one, if possible, without mosquitoes. My hope for a memorable place close to the sea, a place to eat close to or on the beach, went unfulfilled.

Halfway to Pireas, so it seemed, I turned around, stopped at a restaurant, the waiter crossing the street with a tablet, to ask him about hotels. Not speaking English, he turned to his sole customers for help, foreigners speaking Greek, and here were my acquaintances from Sounion. I joined them at their table, and we compared our travels, where we had been, where to we were going, with recommendations, except that this would be my last day before flying to Prague. Since both were teaching at Fort Lewis College in Durango, we shared a common disdain for administrators, their bloated salaries and the plight of those who do the work, how very Greek. We exchanged addresses in the expectation to get together in Santa Fe for a glass of beer or wine.

The Eden Hotel in Anavyssos, supposedly half an hour from the airport, is at 75 Euro the only extravagance I allowed myself during this trip. I anticipated a good night's sleep, but the ruckus of pleasure-seeking young beneficiaries of ill-gotten money launching around bar and pool, the nauseating, mind-numbing noise from the pool speakers is all penetrating and even earplugs, closed doors, drawn curtains do not offer relief. Mosquitoes have not been the worst after all.

Another strike, this one at the airport, should be over by morning, and I will be gone. The hotel next door had been recommended through my Durango friends translation in Palea Phokea as reasonably priced, however, I missed the sign and entered the Eden driveway to ask for direction. The lady at the reception gave me the correct location of the hotel, next door, but told me that it had closed, so I signed in at the Eden, only to discover later while taking a walk, that it was open. Internet was promised but did not work. I complained. The lady informed me, 10 Euro was required.

I am looking forward to the airport.



Cape Sounion

