

Travels with Anzie: Isles of Greece

April, 2016

Yasus! Hello!

During our travels around the islands we encountered several women who lived there, but were not Greek. They were from Holland, Germany, Norway, etc. “Why did you settle here?” “Well, I came to Greece on a visit. I fell in love with a Greek, and I married him.” Yes, the Greek people are an attractive bunch.

“Where are you from?” they ask. “Boston”, we respond. “Ahh, Boston Celtics!”, is the normal reply.

The island of **Paros** is the traveler’s ideal of what a Grecian isle should be: white stone rectangular buildings with cerulean blue shutters and doors –the colors of the Greek flag. They overlook a matching Aegean Sea. The sky a cerulean wash; the aroma of herbs: rosemary, oregano, thyme blended with honeysuckle, jasmine and chamomile. Much of the soil is rocky. Steep stone cliffs arise from the sea looking as if they first saw the light of day yesterday. Inland some would call them mountains, even though they’re covered with scrub to their tops.



Paros is famous for its white, translucent marble. Venus de Milo was sculpted from Parian marble, as was Napoleon’s Tomb. The interior of our villa is covered with it, as are the exterior sidewalks and steps. Despite the rough terrain, much of the area is cultivated with vineyards and olive trees.

Paros is located in the **Cyclades** (pronounced *kiklahdays*), a group of islands south of Athens and north of Crete. The third largest of the group, it’s an island you can get your arms around – not too small, not too big – about the size of Martha’s Vineyard. We rented a car to explore, and we’re glad we did. We’ve discovered the biggest towns: the port city of **Parikia** and the charming fishing town of **Naoussa**. We’ve found little seaside villages like **Piso Livardi** and **Alyki**, that sport a string of cafes and restaurants that border the water. Despite the rocky geography, there are several sand beaches. The **Golden Beach** is home to a kite- and wind-surfing center. We’ve experienced a couple of windy days where these surfers get a lot of air beneath their boards.

Several monasteries and at two convents (called female monasteries) are located in hard-to-reach venues. We managed to visit two. The first is St Gregori. We put our little Skoda rental car to the test climbing a steep, rocky, rutted road that was more like a cowpath up the side of a mountain. We arrived, climbed up rocky steps to the church that was perched on a steep drop-off. What a view! The church was open. No one

was around. We entered, lit a candle in thanks for our blessings, sat and meditated for a bit, and left. The only other soul we saw was a dog, who seemed less than interested in our presence. The second was Longobarda, or the Holy Monastery of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Life-Giving Spring. This visit was so extraordinary that I will treat it in a separate journal.

How did we find Paros? Friends Anne and Forrest Speck have vacationed here three times. We're staying at their favorite spot: **Anezina**. The owners, Maria and her son Stavros, couldn't be nicer. As soon as we arrived we felt like members of the family. Our "villa" includes living room/dining room, kitchen, bath and terrace. Stavros runs the kitchen, which puts out delectable dinners of unlimited variety. Every week he and Maria put on a cooking school teaching Greek cuisine. It's the only school I've attended that offered unlimited wine. It wasn't just show – students watching the chef do everything. We all participated: chopping veggies, kneading dough, preparing sauces, etc. Anzie and I were two of eleven students. Lots of laughs, plus we learned something.

It's mid-April and the weather is still a bit brisk. The resorts and restaurants are preparing for the season. Plenty of cleaning and painting going on; must be a boatload of whitewash being applied. Stavros claims that Chuck was the first person to use the swimming pool this year. He had to really talk to himself before he dove in. He claims that only his fingers and toes were touching the water during the first lap. Things don't really get going until Greek Easter, which is May 1 this year.

On the subject of religion, the Greek Orthodox religion is a strong influence here. We couldn't count the number of chapels that dot the cities and countryside. There must be over 100 and they are built and privately owned by the landowner family. We visited the famous **Our Lady of 100 Doors** in Parikia. No, we didn't try to count the doors. Suffice to say there are a lot of them. The church was built in the 4th Century under the direction of Emperor Constantine in memory of his mother.

Born and raised Roman Catholic, several differences impressed me: the tabernacle is behind a screen, so the preparation of the Eucharist is secretive (The Roman Catholic service was a bit like this until Pope John at the Ecumenical Council (1964?) turned the altar around so it faced the people); the number of icon paintings with their liberal use of gold; the aisles are covered with oriental carpets; worshippers receive communion from a communal spoon (seems unsanitary).



We ran across many Greek Orthodox priests during our travels, all dressed in black cassocks and the distinctive black hat, none without a beard.

Wines: I remember drinking Greek wine while in my 20's. At the time I would drink anything alcoholic, as long as it was cheap (Thunderbird, Ripple anyone?). The only Greek wine available was *retzina*, which was made from pine resin. It was probably the best paint thinner I ever tasted. I probably got through two glasses before I switched to something a bit better, like a urine sample.

So, color me surprised to discover that the Greeks make wine from grapes, and that their wines, especially their whites, are pretty close to exceptional. The reds can be spotty. Some are too tannic; others carry a strong hint of the old *retzina*. Anezina's house red is good.

We discovered a great winery in Naoussa – **Moraitis**. Their whites are good. Their Vin Santo dessert wine is exceptional.

Other Islands: Paros is an important ferry hub. Most all the islands in the Aegean are accessible from here. We took advantage:

Antiparos: This sister island lies less than a mile off Paros. We took our car over on the ferry. We then drove ten kms. to the **Cave of Antiparos**. This is worth the visit. The cavernous mouth leads you to the first of 411 steps that take you over 300 ft. to the bottom. You pass many fantastic formations. It's a shame that so many stalactites have been broken off, probably as souvenirs. At the bottom we found several inscriptions with dates like 1670, 1840. Legend has it that Alexander the Great hid out here.

The main town has the charm of other beach towns: a string of restaurants and cafes ring the seaside; narrow alleys are filled with the same plus shops. We stopped in at **Manos**. Manos is the name of the owner, a handsome 28-year old. Our lamb shish kebab and chicken souvlaki were excellent.

Tom Hanks has a house on Antiparos. He tries to disguise himself in a hat and dark sunglasses around town. Most of the locals recognize him, and greet him with: "Hi Tom!" He responds with a friendly wave.

Santorini: A breathtaking geological marvel. On 1613 BC, + or – ten years, a series of massive volcanic eruptions caused the center of the island to sink into the sea. Further eruptions caused two volcanic islands to develop in the middle of the three-mile wide caldera (ocean-filled crater). The rim of the caldera rises 1200 ft. above the sea. Plato originated the story of the Lost City of Atlantis based upon this cataclysm, so legend has it. Since what was once dry land now lies 1300 ft. deep, detailed exploration has yet to be done.

Our catamaran ferry took three hours traveling south from Paros, stopping at Naxos and Ios islands. We had a choice of transport to our hotel on the rim, **Tzekos Villas:** taxi, van or donkey. We chose the cheapest – the van. Took us half an hour to climb 1200 ft. behind tour busses that had to stop, back up and move forward to make it around the hairpin turns.

Santorini is not for the physically handicapped: plenty of steps up steep inclines. Our hotel is perched upon several terraces that cling to the side of the rim. It was a workout

each time we had to climb to the street level. But it was worth it. Our room had its own terrace from which we could gaze for miles over the sea below out to the volcanic islands, the opposite rim of the caldera and other islands way in the distance. The silence and tranquility were utterly relaxing.



What's wonderful about most of the cities we visit in the islands are the labyrinthine narrow alleys where it's fun to get lost. These are chock full of tiny shops vending jewelry, clothes, ceramics and plenty of tourist kitsch. A T-shirt I spotted: "I don't need Google. My wife knows everything!" Another, obviously geared for a well-endowed female: "I wish these were brains!"

We never had a bad meal. Of course the Greek cuisine is fabulous. Christy at our Santorini hotel recommended the **Ouserie**. An excellent choice. Ouzo is that famous Greek liqueur with the flavor of anise. An ouserie is a restaurant that usually serves mezes, or small plates – like tapas – along with ouzo. It is often mixed with water, which turns the drink milky. We drank wine in lieu of ouzo, and enjoyed a delicious dinner.

The next day we sampled the abundant hotel buffet breakfast, swam and sunbathed at the pool, and checked out. We took a taxi to the port so that we could stop and take photos of the extraordinary vineyards on the way. Santorini is famous for its white wine. Because of the dryness of the volcanic soil and the extreme summer heat, the Santorini wine growers form the vines into a curving basket shape with the leaves protecting the grapes from the sun. The basket shape captures the limited moisture. At age 20 I lived for a summer with a wine-making family outside of Bordeaux. I spent many a day "defoliating" the vines, using a hand sickle to cut away the leaves so that the sun could shine directly on the grape clusters. Such a difference geology makes!



Speaking of food, last night we went to one of our favorite places – Piso Livardi, a small fishing village nearby – and had a great meal at a mezze restaurant, **Markakis** – a place that serves small plates. I had fresh anchovies, and Anzie had Greek sausages and a beet salad. They gave us baklava for dessert as a present. This happens often in Greece. After we ask for the check and pay, we are brought raki or ouzo or a traditional dessert. In New Orleans they call this a lagniappe. Then we went next door

to the Brazil bar, sipped ouzo and listened to jazz. Great way to end another perfect day.

The Economy: We see and hear evidence of Greek's foundering (or is it floundering?) economy on a daily basis. The hills and beaches here are dotted with the concrete skeletons of abandoned housing projects.



The only bright spot is tourism. Most all restaurant workers here are from the mainland. They live here from April to late October. Why? "No work on the mainland," is the normal response. Friend Alexi, who lives on Paros, tells me about his son, a charter boat skipper living in Athens. He has been out of work for a year. The sales tax has risen from a hefty 19% to an even heftier 23%. We filled our ten gallon gas tank for \$45.00. Still the price of wine and restaurant food is reasonable. Let us pray for a turnaround in the near future.

Next, on to Crete!

Adio,

Chuck & Anzie

P.S. – More photos to come