

Our Holiday in Greece Continues by Spiro Liacos Sunday May 18, 2008

(see index page at www.meanttobemusicals.com.au/Greece)

Mount Athos or Άγιον Όρος (Holy Mountain) is a peninsula which extends southwards from Macedonia proper into the Aegean Sea. It contains about 20 monasteries and a handful of smaller groups of houses called Skittes. The monks devote themselves to prayer and to the upkeep of their monastery. Monasteries were established there just over 1000 years ago. Pater Christodoulo, the Parish of Clayton's former priest had organised for us to come and visit him and live the monastic life for a few days. The drive to Ouranoupoli, which has the port from which ferries leave for Mount Athos, was long and windy, but very picturesque. Greece is very mountainous and very green. We drove into Ouranoupoli knowing that we needed to find accommodation quickly as it was about 7:30pm. As soon as we arrived, we saw a man was waiting outside a hotel staring at us as we drove past. He was obviously the owner. Do you have any rooms? "30 euro each room". And it had a kitchen. We went to a few other places, most of whose owners approached us before we approached them and ended up returning to the first place. I find that a kitchen is very useful. A fridge, a few bowls to have your cereal in, spoons etc. However, the shower didn't have a shower screen. I can't stand this practise that both Italian and Greek rooms have; you have a shower and the whole of the "bathroom" floor, as well as the toilet and the wash basin, is completely wet. Ridiculous. Anyway, we hired two rooms and went out for dinner. As we walked down the street, the restaurateurs were calling out to us to come into their establishment. It seems money is very tight and everyone is out to grab a piece of the very small tourist-money pie.



Monday May 19, 2008

I woke up before everyone else and purchased breakfast cereals, bread, cakes, pites and fruit. A massive breakfast for 23 Euro; much better value than the rooms which include breakfast and you get a bit of bread and butter and some stale corn flakes! And there was heaps left for the next day.

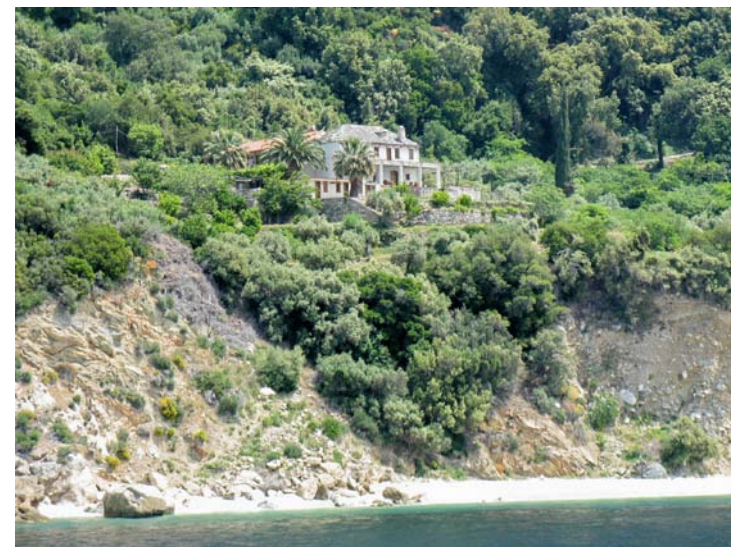
We then, as planned, walked down to the port and met Pater Christodoulo. He had been our parish priest for about ten years so we knew him quite well. To enter Ayion Oros, you have to make an



application to the authority and get permission. Pater organised everything for us, so I just had to go to the office and pick up my “passport” to enter.

Pater put us on the slow boat which stops at every port and monastery all the way down to the Skiti of St Anna. (A monastery is a place where all the monks live in the same building; there are 20 on the Mount Athos peninsula. A Skiti is a collection of smaller buildings, like houses, where the monks form a community but essentially live separately.) Pater himself stayed back to talk to Georgina, Fanoula and Anna. Women aren’t allowed to enter the monasteries, or even board the boats that take passengers to the various “ports” that each monastery has. I’m told there are roads that enter the Peninsula but they are used only rarely. Ships are the only means of transport.

There were 4 others who were on their way to Pater’s Skiti, one of whom was a priest, Father Thimitri. Pater rang him up from the pier before we boarded and told him to come down to the entrance to the boat and to look after us. He was a very friendly priest and so too were his three companions. The ship took off from the port. Along the way, sea gulls were flying close to the ferry and eating bread from a guy’s outstretched hand. Others were catching the bread that he was throwing into the air. This must be a fairly frequent practice. The boat stopped at all the monasteries along the way;



our destination of Agia Anna being the second-last stop on the western side of the peninsula. The monasteries themselves are very impressive. The peninsula is very mountainous and covered in forest and the large, walled monasteries look a little like castles. Father Dimitri explained to us that the monasteries were built that way to guard against pirates.

They looked fantastic. After a two-hour journey we arrived at the port of the Skiti of Aghia Anna. (When I say “port” in this case, I mean a simple concrete pier approximately 15 metres long with a concrete space on the mainland and a few old buildings.) We helped

unload the stuff that our companions had brought (olive oil, eggs etc.) and then saw Pater Serapheim, the former Melbourne boy who had accompanied Pater Christodoulo when he returned here about 10 years ago. He was with two mules. A few days ago I had marvelled at the use of mules in Makrinitisa near Volos; Now I was actually helping load them up. There are no roads here so everything has to be carried by humans or mules. The boys took turns at leading the mules up the paths to the house that we were staying. The building looks like a large house and is surrounded by gardens and orchards. It has a small church inside (St Eleftherios), a kitchen, dining room, lounge room,



and, upstairs, dormitories. From the front veranda, you can look out towards the sea, and, higher up the mountain, the other houses of the Skiti are visible. The whole Skiti is built on the slope of the mountain and looks like a village. We met Pater Christodoulo in the kitchen peeling the potatoes that we were going to eat for lunch. Though the life of a monk is essentially about prayer, they still have to eat, and they still need a home. He gave us a warm welcome and we chatted for a while. After lunch, we prepared our dormitory room and we went for a walk up the mountain to the church of Aghia Anna. This was quite a long climb. When we got to the church a monk there offered us some coffee and loukoumia. We entered the church which has some bones believed to be those of Aghia Anna. We then climbed further up to a small, sorry-looking house where Pater Tryffon, a monk, was staying. Pater Tryffon was from the same town as Pater Dimitri and the others. He too welcomed us warmly, offered us a glyko, coffee, and water and they chatted about how things were going. We returned to St Eleftherios, had a long church service (vespers, cheraitismi, and the hours), and later had dinner. Everyone has been exceedingly friendly. Only one problem: the dormitory toilet has a shower hose for showering (what else?) but no shower screen!



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Tuesday May 20. Visit Dionysiou monastery. Return to Skiti. Help in the garden.

Church services at the Pater's Skiti begin at 4am. I was awakened by a knock on the door, and shortly afterwards by a ringing of the bell. I'm kind of getting used to the Greek practise of late lunches (3pm) and late dinners (10 pm), but suddenly being confronted with a 4am wake up call is hard going! Hauling myself out of bed, I went to the church service just after it started. We took turns at reading the various prayers and chanting. The whole service lasted about three hours, but the pace was good; I don't like it when some chanters take too long to sing a particular hymn. After breakfast, we boarded the ferry and visited Dionysiou Monastery. This was a huge stone building. It was very well maintained and looked beautiful, both from the outside and from the inside, where the stone-paved courtyard was surrounded by various stone buildings. We were told by Pater Christodoulo to ask for a particular monk, who would allow us to proskynisi the hand of John the Baptist. The monks here



were also very friendly. They were approaching the kids and asking them where they were from and that kind of stuff. We spoke to one monk who had lived in England for a while and whose English was quite good. He invited us into the kitchen/dining/guest room and we chatted for about half an hour, while the kids were eating the loukoumia he had offered us. These monks have chosen a life away from the rest of the world, but they still love meeting people and discussing things.

We returned to The skiti, had lunch, and then helped Pater Serapheim in the garden. After an afternoon tea, everyone went for a siesta, except me and the boys, who filled in their diaries. After an hour or so, I fell asleep at the table as they wrote, so I decided to have a lie down as well. Ten minutes later, we heard a knock on the door: time for Vespers!

Already! After vespers, we went back to the garden to help fix the watering system. After dinner, there was a brief church service and the boys went to bed. Pater Christodoulo and I stayed up and chatted. He described the life and monks on Ayion Oros as “oloi ston agona”; everyone in the struggle.

There is nothing magical about the place. The monks live their lives trying to maintain their monasteries and continue the work (to ergo).



Wednesday May 21.

After another 4am start, we had breakfast at about 7:30 and packed up our things. We farewelled everyone and caught the ferry to Grigoriou monastery, another tall, stone-walled monastery. Pater had told us to visit this monastery to visit the church of St Anastasia, a miracle-working saint, and to collect some holy oil for Anna. The monks there were also very friendly. One of them asked what our plans were and, after telling him that we were leaving Ayion Oros, invited us to the trapeza, the refectory, for a meal. He put on fish, potatoes, kourabiethes, salad, bread and water. Unreal.

The trapeza's walls were covered in icons and



out of the windows you could see the sea and the cliff faces. We then went down to the port and caught the ferry back to the “world”. The monks use the expression “byikes exo”; you went outside (to the rest of the world). The family was reunited and we stayed near the pier for a while discussing what we had done.

Anna was playing on the pebbly beach nearby. The girls had gone on a three-hour cruise yesterday and had seen the monasteries. They went to the beach and went for a few walks. It seems we had a better time than they did! Our visit to Ayion Oros has been yet another highlight of this holiday.

We went back to the hotel, unloaded, and went to the beach at Ouranoupoli. It was quite sandy and we had a good time. A beautiful orange sunset (since the beach was facing westwards) finished off a beautiful three days at Ouranoupoli/Ayion Oros. Tomorrow the plan is to drive to the site of ancient Delfi.



Thursday May 22, 2008

We stopped off at the monastery (for nuns) of St John where the body of Pater Paisios is buried. We met a nun that Pater Christodoulos had told us to ask for. Very friendly and very warm. She took us into the archontikaki and offered us sweets and a book. The monastery was established by Pater Paisios, a priest who died in 1991, and who is considered very holy by everyone who knew him.

We then drove past Thessaloniki (again), Mount Olympos (again) and The Vale of Tembi (again). This time, though we stopped. Tembi is a narrow valley between the Olympos range to the north and the Ossa range to the south. The national highway runs through this valley. We crossed the suspension foot bridge that passes over the river. Steep cliffs rise up on either side while, below, the greenery of the trees that line the river provide a beautiful contrast to the blue sky above. There is a church built in the cave in the cliff face, a playground, a cafeteria and a lovely path that runs along the river. Quite impressive. Driving on, we took the turn off for Delfi just after Lamia. The scenery here, yet again, was absolutely beautiful. Tall mountains covered in dense, green forest punctuated by rocky outcrops and broad valleys.



We arrived in Delfi town, perched half way up a huge mountain, and found ourselves two rooms in a beautiful hotel which, after a little bargaining, we hired for 100Euro total, breakfast included. Their list price was 90 euro each plus 10 Euro each for breakfast.

We went to a beautiful restaurant with a balcony overlooking a mountain to the south and a valley stretching down to the Corinthian Gulf to the South-West. I can't remember ever sitting in a restaurant with a nicer view.



Friday May 23, 2008

After our hotel-provided breakfast, we visited the site of Ancient Delfi. Delfi was the home of the famous Oracle of Delfi. The ruling classes and the rich from all over the Greek world would come here in ancient times to ask for advice. Magnificent. The advice seekers often left rich gifts and kings donated funds for the construction of grand buildings. It is built, like the modern town, half way up the mountain with each little section higher up the mountain than the previous. At the first level was a series of temples. The Treasury of Athens, which looks like a mini temple has been partially reconstructed. The temple of Apollo has had some of its columns restored as well. Higher up sits the impressive Theatre and higher still is a running track. Some 200m long and 40 metres wide it had stone tiered seating. We were allowed to sit on a small section of the seating but weren't allowed to walk (or run) on the track. Thus we saw the three things that the ancient Greeks held dear: Religion (the temples); the Arts (the Theatre) and Sport (the running track). The whole site was all the more pleasant for the fact that it was situated on the mountain with great views over the valley below.



We visited the museum next. We have seen plenty of museums in Italy and Greece, but this one was also very good. Fantastic sculptures, paintings and other art work that has been found on the site is on display. The pride of place is held by the bronze statue of the chariot rider. A tour guide was saying that it was lost because, after an earthquake, it was buried, and since it wasn't famous, no-one bothered to look for it! How good must the famous ones have been?

We then walked to the other section of the site of Delfi and saw



the ruins of the circular temple which is probably the most-photographed temple of the site. Three columns have been reconstructed and it looks great.

By the time we saw everything, it was about 3:30 and we hadn't even had lunch. We went back to Delfi, had our lunch at a souvlatzithiko (all except for me; I am maintaining the tradition of not having lunch if a breakfast is included. I just eat a very big breakfast).

We then left Delfi for Olympia. We drove along the beautiful southern coast line of Sterea Ellatha and crossed over to Pelopponisos over the new 2- or 3-kilometre-long Rio-Antirio Bridge. We made it to Olympia at about 9 o'clock, found a room and went out for a late dinner.

With our late lunch and late dinner it seems we're becoming more and more Greek; and what's worse, both meals were bought. It's tough maintaining cheap eating habits when you're on the move.



Saturday May 24, 2008. The visit to Olympia.

After a visit to a local bakery and the super market, we ate our fruit- and tirropittes-breakfast in the Olympia town square. We then drove off to the ancient site of Olympia, the home of the Olympic Games. (Olympia, I found out, was named after Mt Olympos, where the 12 gods used to live.) Stunning. Ruins everywhere spread out among lovely treed pathways, partially reconstructed temples, good information signs at every spot, and the running track that we were allowed to run on. The family had a race from the starting





point to the end of the track. The seating for the spectators was just the two hilly lawns that lined the track. It was very nice.

We then walked to the museum, which house the magnificent sculptures and other art work that used to adorn the temples. One room contains pretty much all the frieze sculptures that used to adorn the temple of Zeus.

Georgina was particularly impressed with Apollo's six pack. I'm afraid I'll never be able to compete with him!

We then visited the museum of the ancient Olympic Games. This museum is housed in a beautiful neo-classical building with a façade supported by columns. The museum had really good informative boards describing the organisation of the Games, from the politics involved, to the life and the preparation of the athletes. Georgina pointed out the razors that were used by the athletes to shave their chests. Is she trying to tell me something?

It was really good!

We drove back past the town, bought our lunch (it was about 3pm; bloomin late Greek lunches), and drove off to Ligourio. Once again, none of Georgina's relatives (this time on her mum's side) had asked us to stay at their house, so we expected to hire a room in either Nauplio or Ligourio, the actual town that Georgina's mum was born in. There was less worry this time (compared to our drive to



Volos); finding a room has been very easy everywhere we've been, and if anyone offers to take us in, it'll just be a bonus.





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