

TIME TRAVELLING THOUGH GREECE



Greece: antique, frozen in time? Yes. And no. Just one of the discoveries 54 NASers would find, setting out on July 2nd, 2015 to explore the rich history of art, architecture, myth, and mystery built over the ages on this curve in the continent over the Mediterranean, not to forget its dozen-plus islands scattered over that ancient sea. Then toss in the drama of being in the birthplace of democracy just at the moment it is in the throes of a continent-wide conflict over its economic future.

Off from NYC, Hawaii, France and Germany flew 38 singers, 12 of whom were returning alumnae -- including two whose romance began on the very first NAS tour -- to Greece in 1985 (NAS has a long romantic history all its own) -- plus 16 non-singing spouses and friends, all eager to carry music to places whose names sing of history and fable alike: Athens, Delphi, Piraeus, Mykonos, Ephesus, Rhodes, Crete, Santorini!

Friday, July 3

Athens, just days after Greece defaulted on its debt. Bussing in from the airport, the city seemed oddly quiet.

"As though people were holding their breath, waiting to see what would happen to their country."

In two days a referendum would ask citizens to cast either a Yes or No vote to the E.U. recovery plan. As outsiders, all we could do to help was provide some diversion. A little

more than 24 hours before our first concert and hours after landing we had our first rehearsal. Sleep anon.

Saturday, July 4.

Off by foot for a guided tour of the Acropolis. Spectacular in its ancient glory, and fortunately near the hotel.

The first concert. Clara, as is her custom, programmed two local songs for the troupe to sing. Firm was not exactly the word to best describe the grip our folks had on Greek pronunciation. Fortunately, we were hosted by a local chorus, with whom we rehearsed, which was not only fun but gave us a great boost in confidence. There are still gods in Greece.

Oddly enough, the land that gave western drama the Greek Chorus does not have a strong musical choir tradition. Singing choruses are typically sponsored by a corporate entity, and our host choir this night was drawn from employees of the sponsoring Public Power Corporation.

The Greek chorus surprised us with a medley of American music, starting with "Somewhere Over The Rainbow" -- tears erupting in some NAS eyes -- and going on to "Phantom of the Opera," and "Fiddler on the Roof." The show stopper was the performance of the touching duet from Fiddler, "Do You Love Me?" performed by their charismatic conductor with a soprano from his group. They ended with a selection of Greek songs in the difficult 7/8 rhythm common to Greek folk music, a great deal of fun for sing-

ers and audience alike. Happy 4th!

We opened in Athens,

And then off to Delphi --

**Sunday, July 5.
Referendum Day**

In respect for the importance of this day, our previously scheduled concert was moved forward five days. Athenians would be focused on voting and tracking the returns, so a good day for NAS to tip toe away and explore.

On the road to Delphi the lack of traffic was unmistakable. Alexis, our very knowledgeable, very personable guide used the ride to bring our group up to speed on the economic history of his country, what was at stake, and where it stood at the moment. As one of our group later recalled:

“Not only were we awed by Greece’s extraordinary art and history, but by conversations with shopkeepers in empty shops and bartenders where we were the only customers.”

Modern Delphi is a beautiful town, a tourist attraction itself, and further up Mount Parnassus sit the dramatic ruins of the site of the fabled Oracle. The hike upwards (“Quite a climb for an aging group of singers” puffed an anonymous NASer) was well worth the effort, offering beautiful, expansive views of olive groves, forests, marshes, and of course the sea. Archeological sites in Greece are standing sets for a theatrical mix of myth, magic, and history. What might Pythia, the fabled Oracle, foresee for today’s referendum we wondered? Alexis, our always helpful guide, cautioned:

“The Greeks are a very calm people and you shouldn’t expect rioting.”

We arrived back in Athens to find celebratory crowds in the streets, waving flags and singing songs. The No vote was victorious and people were relieved, but only one shoe had dropped; the future was still uncertain. Some of the more intrepid NASers made their way to Parliament Square to experience the moment first-hand. There they were greeted and embraced by singers from the Greek chorus we sang with on Saturday. Friend-making is something we can do also.

**Monday, July 6.
From Athens to Piraeus
Then off to Mykonos --**

At Piraeus, The Port City of Classical and Modern Greece, NAS set out on the Argonaut por-



tion of its quest – along with 1,400 other passengers! Over the years we’ve become accustomed to traveling mostly in our own company and were somewhat overwhelmed by the tour boat scene. Clara thought one of those moments, standing in strict formation wearing lifejackets for a lifeboat drill, was captured well in a line from *The Mikado*:

“Our warriors in serried ranks assembled, they never quail or they conceal it if they do.”

No census of quailers and concealers is available at this writing.

Mykonos is an island of color and beauty with iconic windmills, and like everywhere in Greece a mix of the ancient and modern. It is now possible to purchase T shirts emblazoned with erotic messages.

**Tuesday, July 7.
Farewell to Mykonos,
And so on to Ephesus**

And in the spirit of ancient & modern mixes, today NAS sings at the ancient amphitheater in Ephesus, Turkey, once the trade center of the ancient world and renowned for the 25,000 seat theater built in the 3rd Century BCE. We sang a verse each of “O Mistress Mine” and “Ride The Chariot,” which resounded through the outdoor theater’s splendid acoustics to the delight of singers and tourists alike. Quite a kick to sing from Shakespeare to modern tourists on a stage 24 centuries old.

The Lavatorium, a particular tourist draw, is a communal toilet providing cheek-to-cheek accommodation to ancient posteriors. One might wonder if ancients encountering our modern facilities would find the privacy wel-





come, or shun it for its lack of fellowship. By the by, some research suggests such ancient communal facilities were unisex.

It's Turkey, and a particularly theatrical event is a visit to a rug factory. After a demonstration of the long ago weaving techniques still practiced today, the manager has his men bring out one rug at a time. Its merits are discussed in detail. Gradually more and more rugs are brought out, all shapes and sizes, some wool, some silk, some a mixture of the two, each tossed and flung through the air as if magic carpets so their craftsmanship and sheen are exhibited from different angles. Out of the pile of 50 to 100, several of our group now have beautiful hand-made rugs. Clara mentioned to one salesman a trip she and Bevis made to Siberia to see the burial mounds where the Pazryk (the oldest intact carpet ever found) was discovered.

"Excitedly, he took me to a drawer and removed an extraordinary miniature rug, 12 by 12 inches, which was a replica of THE PAZRYK in silk. It was beautiful indeed. He was astonished -- could not believe I wasn't going to purchase it for my husband for a mere 8,000 Euros. He got quite bent out of shape and I had to get very firm."

**From Ephesus
To The Island of Rhodes --
Wednesday, July 8.**

Rhodes, like other islands is home to many scrawny cats. Here also was an unmistakable sign of poverty: very young boys and girls sitting in tourist areas "playing" small accordions, simply pushing the bellows in and out, free of anything that could be called music, their empty caps on the ground before them pleading. Greece's financial woes are suddenly made less abstract.

Several members of our group set out to find the synagogue, dating from the 16th Century, that served as a worship place for the 4,000 Jews of Rhodes and Kos who lived there until the Nazis came in 1944. Two fascinating elders were there to help tell the story of the Greek Jews who

perished under Nazi occupation. Mrs. Levy is 93 years old and lived in NYC for many years. An 84 year old French-speaking gentleman whose name we did not catch was 13 when the Nazis rounded up his family and friends. Both survived the camps and take seriously their work as volunteers keeping the story of the Jews of Rhodes alive. Within the small museum attached to the synagogue were photos of them, their parents, friends, and cousins, along with family memorabilia that included Mrs. Levy's mother's wedding dress. Mrs. Levy was pleased to tell her new friends that a week before our visit, a family from South Africa came to celebrate a bar mitzvah under the beautiful chandeliers in her synagogue. There are angels in Greece.

Guess who was booked to perform on the M/S Celestyal Olympia that night? A first for NAS, which typically performs in churches and more standard concert venues. So, in addition to selections from our traditional repertoire we did a bit of cabaret. Especially well-received was Andre Guthman's "Ain't Got Time To Die" and the ever popular, though seldom heard, "Don Jose from Far Rockaway."

Apart from some sound system flaws, and chatting from some of the audience during the singing ("Isn't there supposed to be gin in a gin & tonic?"), NAS added another arrow to its quiver and took a well-earned bow. This first-hand comment from one of our singers sums it up:

"It was kind of a kick to be cruise ship entertainment. We started behind a silvery curtain and sang on a curved stage under multi-colored lighting in a lounge. It was all a bit surreal."

No business like you know what.

**Thursday, July 9.
On to Crete and Santorini --**

Timing allowed a too brief survey of Crete, home to the Minoan Civilization during the Bronze Age. The Palace of Knossos is the largest archeological site and considered Europe's oldest city. Within its ruins, art and mythology mix as everywhere in Greece. The surviving imagery and statuary of The Minotaur, a head of a bull on the body of a man, is still sharply visible among the ruins, there long, long before it became irresistible to Picasso.

A short sail across the Aegean wedge of the Mediterranean brought Santorini looming into view. And what a view, beginning with a dark slit of land sneaking out of the sea at the southern end, rising northward into an impressive 1,312 foot high cliff, a remnant of an ancient volcano

whose real eruption has been folded into the myth of Atlantis. It's so easy to get caught up in myth at Santorini because it looks so magical with seemingly inaccessible houses perched high on the cliff, bright white, like snow on a mountain. Even more magical (spookier) are the doorways atop the cliff that open on to nothing.

Friday, July 10.

And we open again, where?

Home to Athens, and a morning tour of the beautiful, ultra-modern Acropolis Museum, which provides a stunning showcase for the many antiquities on display and will (it is hoped) offer a permanent home to the sculptures from the Parthenon currently on view in London.

The Final Concert. No particular mix of ancient and modern this time, but certainly a mix of emotions as our view was shifting homeward. The local choir, employees of the Bank of Greece, some of whom looked distinctly unhappy, due to recent economic breaks or the broken air conditioning, we couldn't be sure. Already dripping with sweat, we stepped onstage and the hot lights required us to produce even more. Whew.

But then, unexpectedly --

"Some members of the Greek choir at our first concert paid us the ultimate compliment by attending, and even came up onstage to join us in the Greek songs again!"

"Amazingly, this was by far our best concert. Perhaps we knew that we had to up our game to do our best."

And from Clara....

"One thing that made the trip worth it for me, beyond the sights, was the singers working so hard to make the music come alive, including the difficult, for us, singing fairly complex arrangements of folk songs in Greek. Another was my getting a chance to talk with many singers -- during those interminable waits, as well as at meals -- since there is never time for much socializing during rehearsal during the regular season. Wonderful people to travel with. And no one got sick!"

And some NASers even learned Greek dances! Oppa! (Hooray! Greekwise)

-- *Stateside Anchor: Ed Schultz*

Editor: Donna Zalichin