

A MODERN AEGEAN ODYSSEY

Greece, the Greek Islands of Mykonos, Rhodes, Patmos & Ephesus in Turkey

26 August -- 6 September 2005

Saturday, 27 August 08:05, found Jim, Carol, Laveta and I at *Schiphol* Airport gate C13 waiting for our KLM flight 1575 to Athens. The 10 hour flight, beginning on Friday the 26th from Seattle to Amsterdam, spanned the first leg of our journey. It was smooth and eventless, but long- very, very long. The onward flight from Schiphol to Athens departed from a gate located right next to the one where Laveta and I caught our Berlin flight the year before! The *Athens* leg of our flight took us over Bavaria, Austria, Yugoslavia and Croatia before bending southeast over the *Aegean*, then circling the Athenian coast in a complex landing pattern. Strong wind gusts made for an exciting landing!



Laveta, Jim and Carol in the Titania Hotel

Hailing a taxi which turned out to have a friendly English speaking driver, we were whisked the 35 kilometers or so to the *Titania Hotel*, located on 52 *Panepistimiou street* in downtown Athens. The *Titania* is a large modern hotel with a beautiful lobby- though the rooms were rather ordinary. We had dinner in the hotel at the *La Brasserie* restaurant. After dinner and a couple of glasses of wine, we managed to find the way back to our rooms and crashed for the night.

Sunday, 28 August: Up early, we headed down to room "E" for a buffet breakfast. Armed with a

map that Laveta picked up at the front desk we headed into the street to discover downtown Athens. Since it was Sunday morning, not many shops were open (sometimes a good thing since it precludes shopping). Besides being uncrowded, the morning turned out to be cooler for walking than later that afternoon. Our first stop was *Omonia Square*, then we meandered our way South on *Athinas street*, lined with shops filled with touristy things. The central food market (*Kentriki Agroa*) was closed but it led us to another discovery- the ruins of Hadrian's library which was built by the roman emperor *Hadrian* in 132 A.D. to house his Athenian book collection. The ruins were photogenic and surrounded by many small shops, some of which were beginning to open.

We also discovered the *Plaka* district at the Northeast foot of the *Acropolis*- an area filled with outdoor eateries. Making our way back to the hotel we turned onto *Ermou street* which led us to *Mikri Mitropoli*, a little church built in the 12th century. Constructed of brown colored stone, it sits in the middle of a large metropolis that slowly over the centuries grew up around it. We continued down *Ermou street* until it ended at *Syntagma square*, where we arrived at the Greek parliament building. Turning unto *Panepistimiou* with help from Laveta (the street names on the map were in Roman letters but the street signs used Greek letters- very confusing) we made it back to our Hotel. Not bad for a morning on our own!

Later that evening we met with our tour group, after sitting with a wrong one touring the Balkans! There were complimentary drinks made with *Ouzo* which tastes at first like *Niquil*, or bathroom disinfectant... though it does improve after a few sips.

We ate dinner under the stars at the *Olive Garden*, the 11th floor rooftop restaurant of the *Titania*.

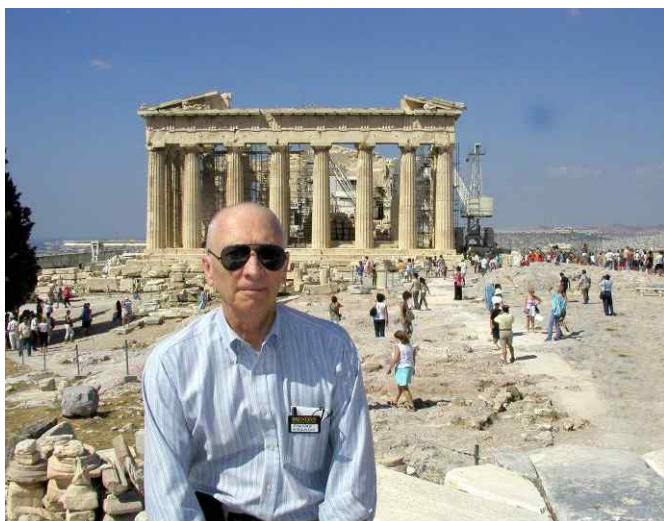
We arrived before sunset at 20:00 hrs- the weather, a meteorological masterpiece. The *Parthenon* faced us from the top of the *Acropolis*, less than a kilometer distant. As darkness fell, the now floodlit Pantheon and the lights of the city sparkling below were memorable indeed.

Great company, great food in a magnificent setting! Live entertainment included a beautiful female vocalist singing “Summertime”. And yes, the living was easy indeed. We made to back to our rooms around 22:00.



The Acropolis at night

Monday, 29 August: I woke up with a sore throat (it would be a bother the whole trip). Our bus left the hotel at 9:30 heading for the South side of the *Acropolis*, where we ascended (on foot) up a paved and winding path of many steps.



Me at the Parthenon

The path is wide and snakes its way upward through olive trees. Showing our tickets at the gate, we entered the site by walking through the ruins of the *Propylaea*- built as the main entryway in 443 B.C. *Everything* on the Acropolis plateau is

impressive, including the view of Athens spread out in all directions about 170 meters below. The Parthenon is magnificent even in ruins and when attended by the ever-present construction cranes. The esthetic excellence of classical Greek architecture is exemplified by this building- the distilled essence of perfection. Standing about 100 or so meters away is the *Erechtheion*, (which sounds like “erection”) a much smaller temple that’s been partially reconstructed. It’s famous for its porch roof, supported by six female statues. These were surely virgins, so in contrast I posed Laveta and Carol in the foreground for a photo. That evening Jim, Carol and Laveta went with our group to a *taverna* for a Greek dinner and entertainment (my throat was still bad so I stayed in the hotel). As our tour went on, I heard more and more reports of Jim’s dancing that evening, though I guess that’s what Greek men do in tavernas- besides drinking *Ouzo*... a shame that all the photo’s were blurry.

Tuesday, 30 August: Our bus left Athens at 8:30 through a maze of downtown streets before heading north on Highway One through the *Marathon Valley* where in 490 B.C the Athenians defeated twice their number of invading Persians



Laveta, Voula (our guide) and Carol

Taking a lunch-stop break near *Thebes* we arrived at *Delphi* early afternoon. It’s hot, even at an elevation of 1000 meters or so, and seeing Delphi required a lot of walking. Carol used her bright yellow umbrella as a sunshade.

The temple is spectacularly sited high above the port town of Delphi on the Ionian coast- the sea blue to the horizon, contrasting with steep rocky mountainsides. Our party ascended up the marble paved “Sacred Way” to the temple ruins above. The marble path- polished by the feet of petitioners for the last 3000 years, is smooth and slippery. It begins near the *Rock of Sibyl* where the oracle was first consulted then ascends past the reconstructed *Treasury of Athens* and up to the remains of the *Temple of Apollo* with its nearly intact black marble altar. Strange (and wonderfully so, I think) that Apollo’s name is now forever linked to the program that first put a man on the moon- millennia after his temple collapsed. Jim and I worked on the Saturn-V moon rocket at the Marshall Space Flight Center in New Orleans in the early ‘60s. You could say that we worked on, rather than worshipped Apollo.



“Sphinx of Naxos” - Museum at Delphi

Just above Apollo’s temple is a beautifully preserved 2500 year old stadium. After seeing the ruins, we walked on modern marble walkways to the Delphi Museum where there is a great deal artwork on display, mostly in stone and nearly all of it 2000 to 3000 years old. After which our waiting bus took us to the hotel just a few miles up the road. We ate in the hotel at 19:30. As has been normal on this trip- the food was great. Later, I headed straight to bed as my throat still hurt. Jim and the

girls went into town for some shopping and for nighttime views of the port and town of Delphi on the Ionian coast.

Wednesday, 31 August: Laveta and I woke up early (06:30). I’d managed a good night’s sleep and felt much better. The four of us had another great breakfast and set out for Olympia at 8:30. Driving east along the Ionian coast dotted with many beautiful towns and houses, we stopped for a break at *Clovino Beach*, where we were amazed at the clarity of the sea water in the shallows. We crossed over to the *Peloponnese* peninsula at *Pio* by way of the longest (largest in Europe) and most beautiful cable suspension bridge I’ve ever seen. We kept driving along the peninsula’s northeast coast through the port city of *Patra*. More coast driving, until we reached the large port city of *Prigos* where we stopped for a break near the Greek Orthodox church of *Saint Andrews*. Although the church was built only recently, it is lavishly and beautifully decorated with mosaic covered walls, floors and ceilings. Side rooms held relics, including Saint Andrew’s skull encased in a great covered silver urn. Chris, our bus driver backed his rig around an impossibly car-clogged street and intersection- an amazing feat of driving. As our trip continued, such feats seemed normal- Just amazing! Our break over, we motored southeast towards Olympia.



Carol & Jim at Olympia

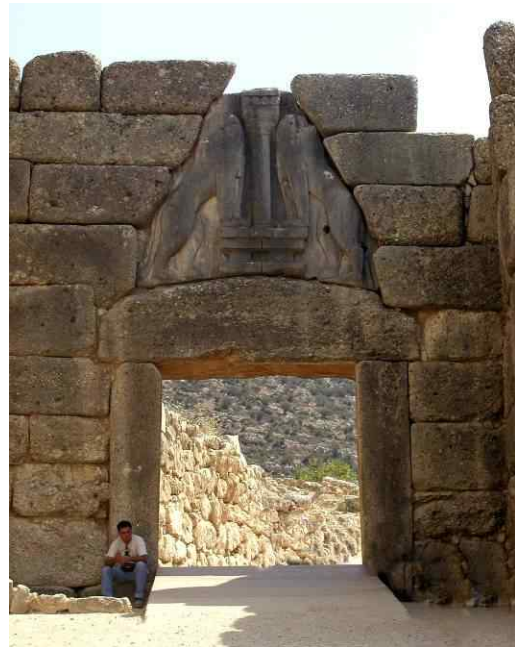
Olympia is set in a flat, tree filled plain. The ruins are extensive and for centuries were covered silt from the nearby river- which also aided in their preservation and protection from looters.



On the original Olympic field

Most impressive are the remains of the temples of *Hera* and *Zeus*, and that of the *Gymnasium*. The stadium (which we entered through a tunnel) has no seats except those for the judges, but rather sloping “grandstands” for spectators. The original grooved stone starting line is still in place! Two youngsters, one from our party, raced up and down the field to the cheers of our group. The winner was “crowned” with a wreath of olive branches! It all seemed rather surreal. We were shown where the modern Olympic flame is started by the Olympic “High Priestess” using sunlight and a magnifying glass. Walking over to the museum we saw recovered artwork and artifacts. The most beautiful was *Praxiteles’* statue of *Hermes*, but there were many others. I took lots of photos. Chris, our bus driver met us at the museum and carted us off to our hotel, the *Europa*, where we enjoyed an outdoor dinner with our bus-mates. The evening weather was perfect and our tables set among the olive trees! As dusk approached, candles were lighted on each table. Another wonderful dinner!

Thursday, 1 September: We pulled out from the hotel early (07:30) for what would be our longest day. Chris headed east, taking our bus through twisty mountain passes and across ridges overlooking beautiful valleys carpeted in citrus and olive trees. Passing through *Megalopolis* continued driving through the *Arkadian* Mountains until finally dropping into the *Mycenae* Valley where we stopped at the remains of *Agamemnon’s* Royal Palace and fortification. One enters the citadel by passing under the stone carving of two (now headless) lionesses. This is the 3400 year old *Lion Gate*- the oldest stone relief monument in Europe. Very impressive indeed! Laveta and I even managed to walk all the way to the top of the Citadel and were rewarded with great views of the ruins and the surrounding plain. The adjacent museum displayed many recovered treasures. Finally we took a side trip to see the *Beehive Tombs*, a huge underground, three stories tall treasury room. But the day was not yet over.



The Lion Gate- Mycenae

Reboarding our bus, we continued southeasterly through a rich agricultural region, finally arriving at *Epidaurus* where we viewed the 2,300 year old open-air theater. Surprisingly well preserved, its stone seating accommodates 17,000 and with electric lighting, it’s still used for concerts and

plays. Of course we toured the (now to be expected) adjacent museum.

A short 40 minute bus ride to *Nauplia* and the *Amalia Hotel* ended a very long day. We pulled in about 19:00, suffered an indifferent dinner in a too warm dining room before crashing for the night. We're becoming adept at crashing!



The theater at Epidaurus

Friday, 2 September: Departing our hotel in the dark, we worked our way northward towards *Corinth*, stopping for a break at a “quickmart” only about 50 meters from the *Corinth Canal* which links the (Gulf of Corinth) Ionian Sea with the Aegean. The canal is about 27 meters wide and a hundred meters tall. The view from the bridge spanning it (linking mainland Greece and the *Peloponnese Peninsula*) is impressive, but Photo's just don't do it justice. We picked up four, then six lane expressways as we continued east heading for *Piraeus*, just south of Athens. Piraeus is easily the busiest, most crowded port I've ever seen.

We managed to find our ship, the *Perla*, collected our luggage then cued up for Passport Control, which proceeded quickly- and in no time at all we're aboard. Up close, the *Perla* shows here age inside and out. She's small as cruise ships go, only 700 or so passengers, but the staff is very friendly and the food, if not excellent, is still good. We slip our moorings about 11:00 and head into the Aegean. There's lots of ship traffic going and coming from Piraeas lots of islands on the horizon. The

Perla's a fast ship, and as we overtook another liner, *Laveta* and I were treated to the antics of porpoises riding the overtaken vessel's bow wave, jumping like they enjoyed it immensely.

Arriving in early afternoon, we looked to see the island of *Mykonos* with its famous windmills and whitewashed buildings. Disembarking on the dock, a shuttle that quickly took us a few miles to the most picturesque place I've ever been. The buildings, streets, shops and restraints combine with the island's hills, sea and sky to produce a most pleasurable experience- that will charm even the most jaded traveler. This is a very “artsy” and unique island- a fun place to discover. Each of us had a camera and took lots of photos. Back aboard, we moseyed up to the dining room as our little *Perla* prepared to head into the Aegean darkness.



The Island of Mykonos



The four of us on Mykonos

Saturday, 3 September: Another day, another island. The Perla traveled all night and arrived with the sun at the island of *Rhodes*. We headed out by bus for *Lindos*, about 40 minutes distant and close by *Mt. Philerimos*, crowned by the ruins of the temple of *Athena Linda* and later middle-age fortifications.



Athena Linda- Rhodes

Old Town in Rhodes however is the island's star attraction. Rhodes is the largest and the capital of *Dodecanese* islands in the eastern Aegean. *Old Town* dates back to the arrival of the *Knights of St. John* in 1306. In the following 200 years they created a walled city topped by the *Palace of the Grand Masters*. This is the largest, most intact medieval city in Europe. We walked its length taking lots of photos. The walled city is really quite extraordinary. We walked back to the *Perla* which was docked near the *Old City*. Before sunset, the *Perla* departs for the island of *Patmos*.

Sunday, 4 September: Two stops today: the first, in mid-morning at *Patmos*, a small rocky island with three villages and 2500 people. Inhabitation on the island dates back Mycenaean times. *Patmos* though, is famous for one reason. In 95 A.D the Roman Emperor *Domitian* banished *St. John* to the island. While there he had a vision (or rather heard a vision) and according to tradition wrote the *Book of Revelations* in a cave. The cave was later incorporated into the small *Monastery of the Apocalypse* which we visited. Feeling some-

what out of place -we walked (silently and respectfully) around the cave though a service was taking place (it was a Sunday). The Eastern Orthodox service seemed rather exotic, at least to our uninitiated eyes and ears. *Patmos* has no water. Rain-water is captured on rooftops and water is brought in by tanker.

Even with such disadvantages, the island seemed a wholesome and peaceful place- a great place to relax and recharge those internal batteries. After a couple of hours we departed this island of white-washed houses, famous monastery and grotto- re-boarded our ship and headed for *Kusadasi*, Turkey and the ruins of *Ephesus*.



Monastery of the Apocalypse -Patmos

We docked at the port city of *Kusadasi* in the Western Anatolia region of Turkey. *Kusadasi* is a clean, modern city with lots of new construction. You can tell the town is used to tourists, since many signs and outdoor advertising are in English.

Our local guide met us at the bus and we set out for the ancient Roman city of *Ephesus* about 35 km out of town. At its height, a quarter million people lived in *Ephesus*- lived in a city built out of marble. The ruin is in the process of being restored and is by far the most intact and best preserved "ruin" we have seen on this trip.

We walked down marble streets (yes, real marble streets) and gazed upon marble pillars and walls. We even set our bottoms down on marble toilets- at least some of us did. Carol had marble toilet aversion.



Roman toilets in Ephesus

Our guide informed us, that on cool winter mornings, the more affluent citizens had their slaves sit on those marble toilets to warm them up for their masters- most impressive! Ephesus is a positively marvelous place.



Another of Hadrian's library's - Ephesus

Monday, 5 September: The Perla traveled all night and arrived at Piraeus near Athens about 8:00 in the morning. There was a bus strike in Athens but our tour director *Denise* arranged for a privately owned bus to get us back to the Titania Hotel. Later that morning we ventured into the city and bought some Greek fast food (good) and relaxed in our rooms. There were 18 of us for the final banquet that evening.

After a bus ride to Piraeus we ate at a restaurant reserved for our group- called "Memories". The food was ordinary but the view of the Acropolis was great. Wine flowed, a piano played live music and a good time was had by all. Our wakeup call was set for 01:30, bags out by 02:00 and our plane lifts off for Amsterdam at 05:30.

Tuesday, 6 September: Over the Atlantic, I thought back over the trip, many things a blur. Good thing I took photo's and notes. It was wonderful to do something adventurous again with our best friends and nice to see places we've seen only on TV, or read about in books.



Carol & Laveta: Roman Theater- Ephesus

English must be a second language in Greece since nearly everyone spoke it to some degree. Most signs and advertising are in English as well as in Greek so getting around was easy. But there are good reasons to take a guided tour. Our *Brendan (Globus)* tour package included airport transfers, both Bus and ship transportation, many of our meals and of course our guides- who were great. In the limited time available, we would have never seen or learned so much on our own- but the pace was fast, leaving little time for rest or reflection.

Greece is a beautiful country that is on the whole clean and orderly, though it suffers from Graffiti (not as badly as Italy or parts of Germany) and from the litter of discarded plastic water bottles. Athens certainly is a livable city- and how many cities can boast of an Acropolis and Parthenon to crown their skyline?

Most city apartments have decks, many with awnings. The decks (and windows with planter boxes) are often crowded with greenery and flowers. So even in crowded cities, Greeks display a love for the outdoors- to unusual and commendable degree.

Traffic seemed only moderately heavy by big city standards, though dangerous in the same way Rome traffic is dangerous- to pedestrians and all those scooter riders. Most drivers we observed, exhibited consideration, ability and aggression in equal measure.



Departing the Perla by tender- Isle of Patmos

The Greek countryside is varied and full of single family homes- unusual from what I've seen of Europe. The Greek islands are stunningly beautiful, and Greece itself a fusion of mountains, valleys, the surrounding sea... and history.

Greeks generally are good looking, fun loving and courteous to strangers. They've had a long and at times difficult history having been invaded and occupied by the Macedonians, the Romans, and for 300 years or so the Ottoman Turks- who even turned the Parthenon into a mosque. In the Second

World War, they were invaded by the Italians and occupied by the Nazis. But through it all Greeks managed to preserve their "Greekness"- an extraordinary accomplishment, helped I think by their (still strong) Eastern Orthodox beliefs.

Greeks are of course Western European and Greece does feel like Europe, though it doesn't smother their heritage.



Homeward Bound

The memory of classical Greek achievement was long lost to the West in the dark ages- but thankfully preserved in the Middle East. Its rediscovery, a thousand years later kindled the Renaissance. Classical Greece is where Western Civilization began. Greek words, architecture, philosophy art, science and democracy have become an inseparable part of who we are. Any thoughtful person of western heritage will feel very much at home here. It is after all... our birthplace.

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