

## 8 – SANTORINI

Saturday, 22 May

I woke late this morning after a sound sleep to discover that I now had new next-door neighbours: a couple of French girls whom I espied in various stages of undress as they went in and out of their room. I washed, shaved and dressed at a leisurely pace; as I had made no plans for the day, I decided to just relax and do little or nothing, for I was now in a lazy mood.

As soon as I was ready, I sallied forth and greeted the girls in French. Like me, they thought that this little corner of the island was heavenly; they could not get over the silence and the peacefulness. After I had spoken to them I ambled off, climbing up and down steps as I made my way through the now familiar alleyways. The place was as sleepy as usual; few of the locals were about and the only sound was Greek music coming from radios inside some of the houses. Here and there cats stretched themselves out in the morning sun on the flat roofs of the little houses. One house had a colourful array of washing hanging out to dry on a line. By now I had noticed that there was always washing hanging outside this particular house.



*Oía, Santorini*

In the main square I discovered that a lady had just opened the door of a large church for a couple of American tourists. It seemed that they were Greek Orthodox, for they kissed the various icons and lit candles. They both spoke Greek and very

kindly translated what the old lady was telling them about the church. As the original church had been destroyed by an earthquake in 1956, this modern one had been built – hence the rather garish frescoes. However, the very impressive iconostasis and other furnishings were original. We were told that some of the precious silver lamps and icons had come from Russia. Indeed, there was something quite awe-inspiring about the decorations. The Americans and I then fell into conversation and I told them about the wonderful cathedral that I had seen in Tinos. The couple asked the lady where and at what time there would be an Orthodox service here on the following morning. The lady explained that the service would be held in another church at the far end of the town as they alternated between the two churches on a weekly basis. I was advised to be there between half nine and ten, but no later than ten. I thanked her and we all left.

Still conversing with the Americans, I brought them to where I was staying. They had a quick look around, took some photographs, wished me goodbye and hurried off, for a taxi was waiting for them. I thought that this was a very short visit for a couple who were so interested in the local culture and customs.

I returned to my room, collected a couple of things and then made my way to the local travel agency, where I changed just ten Deutschmarks, for I had been carefully calculating how much money I would need for today and the following one. Afterwards I went off in search of a public telephone and finally found one in a restaurant outside the town. After many tries and a good deal of waiting, I eventually got through to Christopher Travel in Iraklion and checked my flight home on the coming Monday morning. There was a long delay while I waited for the girl to come back to me; when she did, she told me that she had mistakenly put me on the list for this evening's flight. After I explained that there was no way that I could return to Iraklion today, she told me to be in the airport at three o'clock on the Monday morning, ready to check in for the flight that I had originally booked.

Afterwards I returned to my little den in order to escape from the intense heat and asked the lady in charge, who had made one of her regular appearances on the balcony above, for a plate, knife and fork. I went up to her house to collect them and, when I expressed my admiration of her very tidy room with all its bric-a-brac, she proudly showed me around and pointed to an old photograph of her parents who had been killed during World War I in 1914. It was a very homely and cosy little room, full of furniture and various bits and pieces.

Back in my humbler abode I ate a spartan meal of bread, which I had bought earlier in the local bakery, with some cheese and a tomato, which I washed down with some of the deliciously cool well water. After I had cleared up, I stretched myself out on the colourful sofa, read for a while and then took a long siesta.

I woke still feeling groggy, but roused myself and sat down at the other end of the room to draw a picture of the room (see page 72 in the previous chapter). It took me a while to do this and brought the time up to about five o'clock, when the two French girls returned. Much to their amusement, I drew water from the well for them and then presented them with half of my loaf of bread, for I had bought too much for myself. I then returned the plate, knife and fork to the lady, changed another ten Deutschmarks in the nearby 'Tourist's Office' (where I got a better rate of exchange) and afterwards set off for my evening walk, now that it had become cooler.



*Oía, Santorini*

This evening I went down the steep and winding steps to the port, where I sat by the water's edge listening to the gentle lapping of the waves, watching the sun set and gazing at the dramatic rock formations. After I had relaxed here for a while, I began the arduous climb uphill, which caused me to pant quite hard. Because of the heat, it was necessary to move slowly.

I rested at a castle at the top, where I enjoyed another splendid view, then made my way to the main street, passing the Kyklos restaurant and a house that displayed a notice that read, 'The Entrance is Forbitten'. Somebody had written a tiny <sup>t</sup> over the 't' in the last word. I had seen plenty of examples of faulty English spelling here; in the local buses were advertisements for 'Yours Hostels' (the Youth Hostel) in Perissa. In addition, I had seen many different spellings of Greek words and place names which, at times, could be quite confusing.

I now wondered where I should go for my evening meal. Should I splash out and enjoy a really good one in a nice touristy restaurant with a view? No, I decided to go to a genuine Greek restaurant. I therefore made my way to the nearby Milos restaurant where, I realized, I would have a good view of the sunset yet enjoy a meal at a reasonable price.

There were only a handful of Greeks there when I arrived; they were already eating and talking noisily. When I asked the lady in charge if I could eat here, she shook her head and then, much to my amazement, began to tell me what was on the menu. It took me a moment to realize that, as I had questioned her in Greek, she had replied in the same language and had used the usual shaking of the head when she had said, 'Ναί' ('Yes'). There was not much choice; I decided on fish, a tomato salad, and some white wine. I was given a good plateful of tomatoes, bread and, as usual, a very light orange-coloured wine. Then came a veritable mountain of tiny fish, probably sardines, with a segment of lemon. The simple meal was quite delicious – and very filling. It took me some time to eat everything; at last I sat back, full, and relaxed. A tiny girl played noisily with some toys and was fed by the lady in charge, and the

Greek diners continued to talk animatedly. By now some background Greek music was being played from a cassette tape recorder.

At last I paid the bill (just 137 drachmas) and left. I walked along the main street and stopped to buy a tub of yogurt. I ate it sitting on a wall while enjoying the silence and gazing at the last rays of the setting sun. After a brisk walk I returned to my room, where I found the French girls outside studying the stars and checking them against a chart. I chatted to them for a while, then went indoors and went straight to bed, where I soon fell fast asleep.

Sunday, 23 May

After a long sleep full of strange dreams, I rose at seven and, after a spartan breakfast of some bread (now stale) and an orange, I left for the church. I had expected to hear church bells and to see people out and about, but found all the nearby churches locked. It seemed as though nobody here was interested in religion any more or else the locals were wary of opening churches for fear of pilfering and vandalism. There also seemed to be a scarcity of priests. The American couple had spoken about these issues to me on the previous day. It was apparent that the old way of life was on its way out; because of tourism, which was undoubtedly boosting the country's economy and providing plenty of jobs, Greek hospitality was quickly vanishing and interest in traditional culture was waning. Live folk music could no longer be heard in the *tavernas*, for radio, television sets and tape recorders had put an end to that. I had noticed that most parts of Greece (with the exception of some small villages like Oía) were full of unfinished hotels carelessly constructed using concrete and rusty iron rods, and that the smell of petrol and diesel fuel permeated the larger towns and cities. The local people were now intent on learning English and were turning to Western modes of dress and fashion. Traditional music and dress had now become tourist attractions.

I ambled along slowly in the pleasantly cool morning air, stopping at various places to admire the views around me for the last time. Of all the places that I had visited during this trip, Oía was the most enchanting and peaceful.



*Church in Oía, Santorini*

When I finally arrived at the church at the other end of the town at a little after nine o'clock, I discovered that the service was already in progress. Annoyed by the misleading information that I had been given, I quickly went inside to attend the tail end of the ceremony. The aisles were packed with people, old and young, all of whom were chatting among themselves. The priest chanted and sang continuously while another voice could be heard chanting and singing in a completely different key, quite tunelessly. The result was quite cacophonous. I observed the service from my vantage point in the nave of the church, surrounded on both sides by single files of elderly men. Although I was determined to see and hear as much as I could, the long service soon became rather tedious. It was a pity that it had not taken place in the other church, for this particular one was not so splendid inside; most of the icons were modern works of art of poor quality.

The service finally finished with holy communion at a quarter to ten and everyone made their way outside, chatting gaily. I sat down outside to admire the view, then walked to a spot that I had not seen before. I now found myself in a rather exclusive part of the little town, where luxurious houses were being rented to wealthy visitors. One such house had an outdoor swimming pool. I recognized the occupants: some members of the American photography crew. I had seen them on the previous day photographing a slim black girl against a white wall. Surely they could have done that at home? An apparition of a woman in a light, colourful cape now floated past me and headed towards one of the houses.

I now walked back to my humble abode, where I packed up my things, tidied the room and, taking one last look at the wonderful old town, made my way to the main square and waited for the twelve o'clock bus. Soon I was aboard and travelling back to Firá. I got off at Firostefaní to look in the Milos restaurant but, as they were not serving a meal until later, walked on to Firá. There I had an indifferent meal of chicken, chips and salad in a side-street restaurant and, instead of waiting for the official bus to the port at 3.30 p.m., I took the two o'clock bus to Pirgos, a hilltop village a little inland from the coast, which I had not seen properly. I planned to walk from there to the port, thus avoiding the crowded and expensive bus ride and providing some much-needed exercise.

When I arrived in the town, I sat down in a restaurant and, sitting in the shade, ordered a very refreshing ice cream and then a Turkish coffee. At three o'clock I left my luggage in the restaurant and went walking around the town. Although it was pleasant, it was not exceptional. The churches looked impressive from the outside; the only one that was open was not particularly interesting inside. I met two ladies who were cleaning the place. One of them had a lot to say to me in rapid Greek, but unfortunately I was unable to understand her.

After half an hour of walking around in the heat, I returned to the restaurant, collected my luggage and set off for the port. Fortunately it was cooler walking on the road. Having passed through a stretch of relatively uninteresting scenery, I now approached the steep cliffs and began the descent along the zigzagging road that led to the port and the sea. Although the walk down took much longer than I had expected, I thoroughly enjoyed the view of the cliffs and the smaller islands in the bay.

I reached the port just before the bus arrived and was the first person to clamber on board the ship. I was shown the way up to the deck; when left to my own devices,

I walked to the other end of the ship and went down the staircase to the comfortable little first-class room that I had discovered previously. Leaving my luggage on the seat that I wanted, I went up to the deck again in order to cool off, sit down and then watch our departure from Santorini. Although I was now leaving the island for the third time, I still derived great pleasure from watching it recede into the distance.

Once we had left the island behind, I went down again to the first-class area, where I found a shower and made good use of it. It was very pleasant to feel clean and fresh once again. I changed into clean clothes, then sat down to write my diary and bring it up to date. By the time I had finished doing this, it was eight o'clock and time to eat something.

I now made my way to the bar, where I bought a can of beer and some basic food, then sat down to eat a simple meal of what I had purchased and a couple of items that I had brought with me. When I had finished eating, I spent the rest of the journey reading.

The ship finally arrived in Iraklion shortly after ten o'clock. The few people that were on the boat gathered at the door, which could not be opened properly. Because of this, another door had to be used and a narrower gangplank had to be fetched. Eventually we disembarked.

As there were taxis waiting on the pier, I decided to avail of one and travel straight to the airport, for I had no desire to hang around Iraklion once again. The car that I selected took three Germans to a hotel in the city centre before I was driven to the airport. However, a Greek man stopped the taxi en route and the driver reluctantly agreed to take him to his destination, which was not too far away. When we had dropped him off, we doubled back and at last I arrived at my destination. The driver chanced his arm and asked for 200 drachmas but I beat him down to 100.

Taking my luggage out of the taxi, I now wandered into the almost deserted airport. As two men were on the point of closing a news stand, I quickly selected a book on the Archaeological Museum in Iraklion, for which I paid 300 drachmas. However, when I discovered that it was a guidebook with tiny photographs and too much text, I returned and had it changed for a more general book about the museum. This one cost me only 200 drachmas.

I then made my way to a deserted lounge where only a few lights were switched on and settled down for the night. I now began to read my new book, which I found very interesting. By this time some people had checked in and were seated in the departure lounge; I could hear Irish accents in the distance. I stayed where I was, for I wanted to sleep if I could before checking in for my flight to Dublin at 3 o'clock on the following morning.

Thus came to an end my holiday in just a few of the many Greek islands. I had been disappointed with Crete and parts of some of the islands, but overall I had enjoyed the experience of being in this fascinating part of the world. A visit to the capital, Athens, would probably have been interesting, though I realized that I might choose to go there at some other time in the future.