

A few days in the Dodecanese

October 14

The sign outside the ferry office door advised, "Bodrum to Kos everyday 9 a.m." The man in the ticket office said, "9 o'clock, but be here at 8:30," and 9 a.m. was clearly printed on our tickets. But when we arrived at 8:20 a.m. we were told to "hurry please, to passport control" where, waiting in line behind a confused gaggle of girls from Britain, our passports were taken from us and we were rushed aboard a fully loaded boat. We stood on the ferry's tail, temporarily stateless. A man, running, reached across the watery gap with our passports, and the ferry chugged away from the dock. It was 8:37 a.m.³

We had arrived in Bodrum the day before, hopping from town to town on three different midibuses in a journey that took nearly five hours. This was our first visit to Bodrum since our arrival in Turkey three months ago. Then we had little time to look around. Now we see that Bodrum has changed a lot in the three short years since our last visit. The main pedestrian street is newly paved and there are new sidewalks and new palm trees; but the town is still filled with ill-clad holiday-makers on cheap package tours, tacky tourist shops, and booming discos. Only the Bodrum dogs, the castle, and a few long-time shops remind us of the village we first saw and enjoyed nearly ten years ago. Tourism has brought gold into town, but it's in the process of destroying the goose.

Kos Town, capitol of the Greek island of Kos in the Dodecanese, is also touristy, but it has the advantage of being a larger town with a longer history of tourism and is, therefore, more settled, less hectic, and less overbuilt. Greek and Roman ruins sprout unexpectedly all through the little city, and spacious parks still bloom with bougainvillea and red hibiscus. We arrived about 9:30 a.m. and took the first room offered us by a woman who met the ferry. It was a small room without amenities, but it was in the heart of the old town, and had direct access to a rooftop patio. We were satisfied. This trip is a required one: our Turkish visas are only good for three-month stays and so we must leave the country and re-enter with a new visa. Traveling to Greek islands is a commonplace for the foreigners who make Turkey their home. And for foreign residents living in nearby Greece, a trip to Turkey is likewise a common event.

It doesn't take long for even the dullest tourist to ascertain that Kos was the home island of Hippocrates. Tee-shirts emblazoned with the Hippocratic oath, in every language and color, flap in shop-awning breezes. The ruins of the 4th century B.C. Asklepium, or hospital, are just outside the city. Downtown near the castle is a large plane tree, its branches propped up with steel poles and surrounded by protective fencing. This is said to be the very tree Hippocrates stood under as he taught. We agreed it looked old, but were not convinced it had lived more than 2,300 years.

The island itself is long and narrow and flat, except for a rugged spine of mountains running down one side of its length. There are a number of small villages on the island, in addition to the city of Kos, and the island's population, according to a brochure, is 21,334. A 14th-century Crusader castle echoes the one in Bodrum a few miles across the sea and occupies one arm of the town's small harbor. Its long, high stone walls offer a smooth face to the Aegean, with few of those turrets or crenelations that make castles so picturesque. Inside though, it's a different story, for the walls hide a deep moat and

inner fortress. Both of us love castles, so we spent most of the morning wandering around the ramparts and investigating hidden tunnels and stairwells.

In the evening we walked through the ruins of the Roman baths. Here was a well-preserved mosaic floor, and one almost-complete marble tub for two, with three pristine white steps still leading from each side into the deep basin. The remains of red tile plumbing could clearly be seen all around us. From the baths we climbed up to a small plaza, past a Byzantine ruin, and had ouzo in an outdoor cafe before moving on to dinner in the square.

After spending three uninterrupted months in Turkey, we found ourselves awed by the sophistication of Kos. So many goods in the stores, such a look of orderliness, so many cars. We spent most of the following day wandering around

ooh-ing and ahh-ing over the modernness of Greece.

The next morning we caught an 8 a.m. excursion boat to Nissiros for another two-night stay. Nissiros is a small island with a volcano at its heart. There are only four villages here, housing a total of about 1,000 people. Our hotel, a nice three-star affair that closed for the season the day we left, sat on a hillside overlooking Mandraki, the largest town and only port. There is no natural source of water on this island; it is shipped in from neighboring Kos. The hotels, therefore, extend their supply by adding sea water to the tap water. Since we usually drink bottled water when traveling the only noticeable effect was to our hair, which stiffened and ballooned to abnormal proportions.

Mandraki is not one of those picturesque villages you see on postcards. Not every building is sparkling white, and not every door is blue. Nevertheless, it is charming. It sits on a hillside under a tall cliff crowned by a monastery and a castle ruin. Its tiny beach is littered with brightly-painted fishing boats, and the four or five tourist shops are scattered along the winding, arms-width-wide streets. It's an easy place to get lost in, and in fact we did. The weather cooled while we were there, but not enough to keep us from the outdoor cafes. We had our before-dinner ouzo beside the sea, and dinner in the town square higher up the mountain.

On our second day on Nissiros, early in the morning, we rented a motor scooter and went up to the volcano, 17 kilometers away and 2,100 feet high. This is Polyvotis, named for the fiery titan who "so incurred Poseidon's wrath that the sea god ripped off a piece of Kos with his trident and hurled it on top of Polyvotis as he attempted to swim away. This became the island of Nissiros and the miserable Polyvotis, pinned underneath, eternally sighs and fumes through the volcano which took his name."

For someone who suffers from a fear of heights, the volcano road was terrifying. It wound upward through hairpin curves with the sea sickeningly far below. When we topped the caldera we lost the sea view but won a steep descent down into the massive crater, through yet more hairpin turns. The inside of the volcano, about four kilometers in diameter, is no longer cultivated, but as we traveled the twisting road downward we were surrounded by narrow terraces separated by crumbling rock walls and old, bent olive trees. Here and there we saw the remains of stone houses, but the residents left long ago, and the worker in the lone cafe overlooking the oozing mud of the inner, still active crater had the vast sunken valley to himself.

We parked our sleek yellow scooter and hiked the 100 meters down into the smaller crater, where sulfur fumes, hissing steam, and bubbling mud are the only signs of life. We and one other couple were the only tourists at this hour, though later in the morning busloads of daily excursionists would make a brief stop.

The Greeks love to put small churches in inaccessible places. I don't know what belief, or personality quirk, inspires these sitings but their stark-white outlines against a cobalt sea or sky make them compelling to the traveler. From the depths of the mud-caked crater we could see one of those blue-roofed buildings high on the outer crater rim, so we climbed out and boarded the scooter and started up a rutted dirt road. The church at the top is a tiny one, but its location on this narrowest bit of rim means there's a view of the crater on one side and the sea on the other. Not surprisingly, and despite the terrible road, there were hints of a closed restaurant adjoining the church. On this day, however, there was no sign of life and the wind whipped around us with unpleasant speed. We left Polyvotis to his eternal sighs and went to the village of Nikia for lunch.

Nikia is even more charming than Mandraki. It sits high on the steep slope of the island and its streets, fit only for donkeys or motorbikes, wrap themselves around the whitewashed cube houses and lead into a tiny enclosed square. Here the inevitable bougainvillea blooms, and a blue-doored cafe serves light lunches and drinks. There are no tourist shops, and we shared the village with just a few other foreigners: three Americans and a Greek-Swiss family from our hotel. We wandered until we found a second cafe overlooking the sea and the island of Tilos. The tables in the shade of a large tree proved irresistible, and we settled down to a leisurely lunch before heading off on the scooter for more exploring.

Several hours later we were back in Mandraki, deciding that we had better find out about the ferry to Rhodes. This proved difficult, as the Greeks have the civilized notion of closing everything in the afternoon, from 1:30 or so, until around 5 or 6 p.m. Faced with this dilemma we did the only thing possible: we went to the hotel and took a nap. In the

evening we ventured out again, asking several travel agents and shop owners where the ferry office was, or what they could tell us about the schedule. Anyone living on a small island, we assumed, would surely know the ferry schedule by heart. Well. Turns out no one knows for sure, but they think it leaves at 7 a.m., or maybe 7:30, or possibly 8 a.m., and they think you can buy tickets on board, but there's a woman who sets up a table outside someplace down on the wharf in the morning and you can buy from her, or maybe you can find the office which is somewhere up this street. . . .

Persistence pays, though. We did find the ferry office, closed, so we had our evening ouzo by the sea and went back and it was open. We learned that the ferry would depart at 7:30 a.m., but maybe later, depending on how things go, sometimes it's delayed, it must come from Piraeus, and yes, here was our ticket, paid, in our grasp at last.

Determined to not miss the boat we rose before sunrise the following morning and left the hotel shortly before 7 a.m., as the sky began to lighten. The village was still quiet and the clatter of the wheels on our small suitcase echoed down the cobbled streets. On the wharf we found ourselves alone except for the driver of the island bus, warming his engine. We took seats at a cafe table and waited. By 7:30 other passengers had arrived, the shipping agent had indeed opened her ticket book on a cafe table, and the sun was hinting that it would, eventually, rise over the rim of Polyvotis. Around 8:30 we spotted the big white ferry boat on the horizon, and shortly after 9 a.m. we left Nissiros for Rhodes.

It was a perfect day. The water was glass smooth, the sun uninhibited, the wind nonexistent, and the ferry uncrowded. We rubbed on sunscreen and pulled our white plastic chairs onto the stern deck. As in almost every part of the Aegean, land is always in sight, and we could clearly see the islands of Kos, Nissiros, and Tilos, and the distant shore of Turkey. These islands are primarily desert where, before tourism, income was earned by fishing, sponge diving, and olive growing.

The ferry made a brief stop at Tilos, which has only two small villages but boasts seven castle ruins and a monastery. The entire population is about 500 people so if you're looking for quiet this is the place. Our view from the deck showed a pleasant little town with several cafes, pensions and hotels, and our guidebook says there's a good beach nearby.

The next stop was Simi, with a tiny, almost square harbor surrounded by an Italian hill town. Italy occupied Simi between 1912 and 1945, and left its architecture behind as a reminder. There are high peaks that drop precipitously into the sea. Several islets lay just outside the harbor, making it feel cozily protected and intimate. We decide we will definitely return. The economy here, unfortunately, is driven by tourism, and excursion boats from Rhodes arrive throughout the day during the summer, since it's a quick hour-and-a-half trip (30 minutes by hydrofoil).

Pulling into the Rhodes harbor you practically bump into the most obvious remnant of the island's long pedigree: the medieval, walled city built by the Knights of St. John at the end of that most useless debacle, the Crusades. They had fled from Palestine to Cyprus, and thence to Rhodes, where they stayed 213 years. After a six-month siege in 1522 they surrendered to Suleiman the Magnificent and escaped to Malta. About 6,000 people still live and work within the old city walls, and shops sell everything from designer gold and leather to pornographic coasters and cheap plastic goddesses. Fortunately, the shops line only a few streets. We walked through the huge gates at dusk, determined to find a non-touristy restaurant and see something besides stores. Clouds had filled the sky and rain was probable. It was still pleasant though, so we struck out into the cobbled back lanes.

Truly, this is medieval. The narrow streets twist in haphazard ways, the old buildings lean and tilt at odd angles, the stone is golden and brown and warm to the touch. It is much bigger than we expected. Some alleys are crossed by stone arches, wide or narrow. Everywhere there are discoveries: a bizarre piece of carved marble high in a stone wall; a hidden, blooming courtyard; a glorious pink bougainvillea framing a grayed wooden door. We succumbed to a first-class art gallery and by the time we dragged ourselves away it was dark, and distant lightning and thunder provided a theatrical backdrop to our wanderings. Few people were about. Verily, Sean Connery in monk's robes might step round the next corner demanding that we hie ourselves back to the Scriptorium. The old gas lights, now electrified, were glimmering along the alleys, and we drifted left and right, not knowing or caring where. Occasionally we passed restaurants or small pensions, but nothing appealed. Then we found a tiny hole-in-the-wall cafe and stepped inside.

It was brightly lit, with three tables and a counter dividing the kitchen from the customers. A couple, eating, occupied the table nearest the door. A man, woman, and child looked at home at the second, and a child's toys littered the third. We hesitated, but the woman quickly rose and cleared the toys, insisting we sit down. She offered the basic Greek tourist menu or the food cooking on the stove so we chose the latter—a dish of stewed vegetables—and settled in.

This was like eating in someone's kitchen; in fact, we probably were. The woman in charge identified herself as the child's grandmother. Grandpa sat at the family table, minding the boy—a four- or five-year-old who was the center of everyone's attention. But grandpa was tired and kept dozing off. Pretty soon the daughter came in and prepared dinner for the child. Then a friend dropped by and there was much loud, animated discussion. (The Greeks are great at this. Sometimes you think they're going to haul off and slug one another, but instead they kiss and walk away perfectly happy.) Our food arrived and was delicious. Throughout our stay the thunder grew louder and the lightning flashes more dramatic, and when we finally stepped back into the stone alley we agreed that the weather, the dinner, and the setting were perfectly matched, and we couldn't have asked for a better evening in Rhodes.

The clouds next day decided us against exploring the island so we went back to the old town and it rained.

"This is unusual," said the shop owners.

"We never have rain in October," they said.

"One year we had NO rain all year!" said one.

Well, it didn't just rain, it opened up and poured buckets.

When the water rose to a depth of one-to-two inches we thought maybe we should buy an umbrella. We stopped in a small clothing shop, picked one out, paid for it, and returned to the door. The water in the street was now ankle deep and getting deeper. It poured out of the medieval gargoyles in great arching torrents. It raced down the hilly streets, rippling over the rough cobblestones like any mountain brook. It ran clear, then muddy, then clear. Merchants rushed to bring merchandise inside, and trapped tourists gazed longingly out doorways. We spent 40 minutes watching all this with two friendly saleswomen; then the sun came out, the water ran off into the harbor, the shopkeepers restored their displays, and the tourists went back to shopping. We found the inevitable cafe in the inevitable tree-filled square, and had lunch.

The next morning we took the hydrofoil from Rhodes to Marmaris, Turkey, a 55-minute trip that was only a half-hour late departing. We breezed through customs with new three-month visas, walked a few blocks to the otogar, and after a two-hour bus ride we were back in our apartment by 1 p.m. The sun was shining, the sky was clear, and we figured we had each gained about five pounds. A pretty good adventure.