THE AEGEAN: A MAGIC CIRCLE

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Amorgos, Sifnos, Serifos, Sikinos, Naxos, Folegandros... the special music of the Cyclades. I had been thinking of making a trip out to some of these less touristy islands where there might still be some element of Greekness in the experience. When I found the only place I could get a last-minute flight to was Mykonos, my heart sank! Package tours and cruise ships, the gay Mecca of the eastern Mediterranean... the epitome of tourist hell I imagined.

I arrived on June 5, eight days short of the 38th anniversary of my only other visit. My diary for that occasion says: "Some 40 or 50 tourists. Don't notice them. Seems funny after two months (I had been wandering around Greece) to see women in trousers and scarves and men in shorts. First seaside-type tourists I've seen."

Things have changed, obviously. The town has spread. The terraces overlooking the harbour where I pitched my tent have long disappeared under the foundations of villas and hotels. Rooms cost upwards of Drs 10,000 (£21), whereas then they cost Drs 10. Ferries dock in the harbour; then they anchored at sea and fishing boats came out to fetch us ashore. There are now more motorbike rental shops than grocery stores, more bars and restaurants than churches and more jewellery and dress shops than all other categories put together. And you need to multiply the numbers of people by a factor of several hundred, even for early June.

My intention had been to leave immediately. There was, I discovered, a boat for Naxos within an hour of my arrival. Still in western train-catching mode, I hurried down to the harbour, only to find there was no ticket office or information available there. I dashed to the first travel agent. "No boats to Naxos today. Tomorrow afternoon." "Isn't there any other way to get there? Aren't there any Dolphins?" (Dolphins are the universally applied name in Greece for hydrofoils.) "You'll have to ask at the Dolphin office." It was practically next door.

“Yes, there's a Dolphin at three o'clock and a boat at five." "Can you tell me," I asked, "why one travel agent tells you there is no boat and the next one sells you a ticket?" "They only know about the boats they represent." "But isn't there any central source of information? I've got this timetable from England...” They laughed. "People publish books, but we don't know ourselves what's happening from one week to the next."

That was not the end of the saga. The Dolphin never came. At 8pm we learnt that it had sucked a *paragadhi* into its filter, one of those long fishermen's lines with thousands of subsidiary hooks.

I used my enforced stay to get on with some exploring. I turned into the old lanes behind the waterfront that still curves so prettily round the bay. No more than a couple of metres wide and paved with flagstones outlined in whitewash, they wind their labyrinthine way between walls of radiant whiteness, articulated by the garish splash of bougainvillea and the blue of shutter and stair, the blue the Greeks call *thalassi* – the blue of sea and sky, an azure purity that roofs the island world. Here and there the vaulted coolness of a chapel provides a haven from the bustle of the street. On the seaward side, the five famous windmills look down on a strip of beach where the blue waves break along the walls of balconied

houses in a scene of such photogenic prettiness you would not dare to invent it.

When evening falls, it brings not the violet hour that suffuses the hills in other parts of Greece, but something softer, a blush from within that turns the houses a golden, creamy buff.

The night owls, showered and oiled from the beach, begin to appear. Outside darkened doors, women sit and chat, their lives separated as by an invisible screen from the tourist crowds that pass within arm's length. And then it's restaurant time, followed by bar and clubbing time, right through to daybreak. It is not what you would call a typical Greek village, but even I, through the fog of my prejudice, could feel a certain buzz of excitement in the air. The only time when the place does still seem like a village is early in the morning, when a small market appears along the quay, and in the cafés the older generation, sailor-capped, thickset and weather-beaten, take their coffee, a different breed from the sons and daughters who have grown up on the richer pickings of tourism.

Next day the wind was too much for the Dolphins and I had to go to Naxos by ship. As in Mykonos, the main town – the *khora*, as the island capitals are always called – has sold out to tourism. Assailed by women touting their "rooms", I made straight for the bus to Filoti, a village high in the interior among olive groves and vineyards, where tourism has made little impact. Commerce and social life take place along the road in the deep shade of plane trees; domestic life belongs to the steep stairs and alleys that climb the foothills of Mount Zas, at 1,000m the highest point of the Cyclades.

Having found a room and taken a nap – a crucial and delicious habit in this climate, for that way you get two days in one: the first for work, swimming, sightseeing, the second for hanging out in the cool of the night – I set out to climb it. It was about six o'clock and the evening sun was beginning to gild the stones and the rampant vines and the low, spiny bushes of sage and spurge, broom and cistus, all starting to dry out now in the summer heat. The path starts about half an hour above the village, by a chapel on the road to Dhanakos. It is one and a half to two hours to the top and an hour to come down. The summit is at the end of a broad stony ridge, where the ground falls sheer in a dramatic precipice. In the west, Paros and Andiparos lie across a burnished strait, with Naxos town winking in the sun on the nearer shore. On a clear day you could see half the Aegean.

You get a powerful sense of place from walking the land like this, and of history, too. There has been no industry, no large-scale farming, no intervention by machinery. The landscape is today as it was 5,000 years ago, when the Cycladic civilisation fashioned those translucent marble figurines of women and lyre-players. The paths you tread are the paths people walked in Roman, Byzantine and Turkish times. The islands you look out upon are those that Homer wrote about, and Herodotus and Thucydides.

Next morning, as the plangent cadences of the Sunday service resonated under the plane trees, I walked through the olive groves to the village of Khalki with its thousand-year-old church and brooding Pirgos Barozzi, one of the big fortified houses built by the Venetians who ruled these islands from 1200 to 1500. Beyond, the path climbed through a sun-baked, rocky valley, past semi-troglodytic buildings to the jagged hill of Pano Kastro, crowned with ruins from classical and Venetian times.

Not far below lies the oasis of Ano Potamia, where a powerful spring gushes up by the church. I sat in the shade beneath white oleander and blue trumpets of morning glory and sipped a coffee. At another

table, a neat mustachioed man in a loud shirt recounted theatrical stories of hunting prowess to a group of friends: "...*daka-douka*... the dog skidded... I had my eyes 14 [*i.e.* very alert] ...I fired once, *bam-boum*, I fired twice... the hare spun five times in the air."

Sparrows chirped. The spring purled and gurgled. Worry beads clicked. They can keep their paradise beaches, I thought.

An hour later, by a beautiful signposted path, I came down to the next valley, where, in a glade of gardens and fruit trees loud with the clamour of crickets, lies a *kouros,* a colossal statue of a young man. Half-formed and spotted with lichen, it has lain here, where marble once was quarried, for 26 centuries. Somewhere nearby it has a twin, which I could not find. The road and bus route pass nearby, but the old path still exists, following the valley down to the villages of Mili and Kouronohori, lush with running water and gardens of beans and marrows, peaches, pomegranates, lemon and orange trees.

Back in Naxos town I explored the vaulted lanes and steps of the Venetian citadel, whose nobler houses still bear their families' coats of arms. I came by chance on the marble entrance of the Hotel Pantheon, an island hotel in the old style, furnished with wooden sofas, lace and old photos. I had coffee with the elderly proprietors and we lamented the too-rapid changes that tourism has brought: the abandonment of the old ways, of all other activities. "They
gave up their potatoes [Naxos was renowned for its potatoes] and built hotels, with no knowledge or tradition. At Ayia Anna they have built like a workers' housing estate."

Ayia Anna is the nearest of the stunning beaches that stretch south from Naxos town. I went and had a look. The sand is as beautiful as ever, but there has been a lot of random development. You need to go to Plaka and beyond to get anything like that pristine sense of a vast unpeopled beach of the pre-tourist days.

"To efkolo khrima – easy money," that is what you hear Greeks themselves say, who are critical of the effects of tourism. "People have been corrupted." Of the islands I visited, Paros and Ios have gone far down that road. Ios has long been known as a place for the partying foreign young. Its *khora* remains one of the loveliest, but the whole place is dedicated to sun, sea, drink and dancing, a sort of Camden Lock on the Aegean.

Paros, though bigger, is similar, with the addition of some of the most aggressive and unpleasant touts – such a contrast to the gracious, sun- drenched streets of the old town, where doors stand open on quiet courtyards full of flowers. Lefkes, a large inland and upland village, is beautiful but in danger of becoming the showcase "traditional" outing. On the east coast I found some undeveloped coves that were great for swimming, but most of the level parts of the island appear destined for sale as building plots. As for Santorini, it is best seen from a distance or from the sea-filled crater of its volcano, with its extraordinary parti-coloured cliffs and the drifted icing sugar of its villages along the rim. One landing per decade is enough in my book: to see the Bronze Age town at Akrotiri, scooped, like Pompeii, from the preserving dust of volcanic eruption.

"But we only work for 50 days in the year," said a woman, explaining the scramble for money. And until 20 years ago there was not even that; all the young went away, to sea, to Athens, to Germany and Australia. But it is not just the "easy money" that concerns the critics; it is the false image of the sophisticated life that the holidaymaking foreigners present to their own young people – of drink, drugs, promiscuity, all-night partying. I was listening to a young taverna owner telling me these things one evening as we sat in the dark on the square opposite Paros's beautiful and unusual Church of the Hundred Gates. A girl – English-looking – walked across the square, wearing a sort of diaphanous cloak, which floated out behind her, revealing a long, slim white body clad only in a skimpy top with a triangle of glittery material about the loins. My companion raised his eyebrows: "She's beautiful, but it's not appropriate."

There are no such problems – yet – on Amorgos, Folegandros or Anafi, the other islands where I stayed. Of the three, Amorgos is the largest. The others have scarcely more than a village and harbour each.

I got off the boat at Eyiali, Amorgos's northern port, seduced by the tranquil air of this inlet enclosed by a strand of tamarisk-shaded beach. In such a small place you soon make friends. Once a hippie a haven, Eyiali still attracts a summer fauna of vaguely alternative Greeks, who hang out at the café facing the fishing boats, the one that plays the old Greek songs of the hashish dens and the bitter-sweet laments of doomed love: "That first kiss of yours... *to proto sou filaki,"* which just has to rhyme with *farmaki,* poison. I think they found my activity rather manic. Up before dawn to walk the old path to Khora and the Hozoviotissa monastery, back for a swim, up to look at the white villages hanging on the hillsides above Eyiali.

It was 4.30am when I set off up the mule path through the village of Potamos. I could see quite clearly in the moonlight. The air was warm. Cocks were beginning to crow already. A donkey brayed and an owl let slip its call like two drops of water on the night, one longer, one shorter.

I reached the monastery in about four hours. Tall and narrow, it is, as it were, spliced to an orangey-pink cliff 300 metres above the sea. Only three monks live there now and they receive you with the traditional proffering of a glass of water, *raki* and a *loukoum*. Their windows open onto a huge silent blueness, of sky and sea, that seems to turn your whole face into eyes. Below, red domes of spurge and thickets of prickly pear with yellow flowers around their leaves tumble precipitously to the sea.

A fourth monk, frail and old, lives now in the *khora,* a half-hour climb beyond the monastery, beneath a line of windmills built to catch the restless breeze that keeps these high villages cool. Pretty, white and full of churches, it is not as free of the *fasaria* – the bustle and hubbub – that tourism brings as one could wish, though its native population still largely belongs to a more innocent age, when people were, if not related, at least known to each other, and seldom ventured far from home.

I hate *fasaria*. No place catering for local Greeks ever plays nonstop music, but every place trying to attract tourists thinks it is *de rigueur*. It is hard to find somewhere to sit any more where you can listen only to the waves or the wind. And even such a place as Folegandros's lovely *khora* is treading dangerously close to the line. Perched on the edge of its beetling cliff, more secretive and turned in upon itself even than most *khoras,* it has too many taverns and bars for its size. However, escape from *fasaria* is not difficult. Early rising is a one sure way. The other is simply to walk out of town to the scattered

farmsteads of Ano Meria a short distance to the west, where traffic is donkey and crops are still grown on the terraces. I saw men winnowing and phalanxes of donkeys and ponies threshing the barley with their galloping feet on the old circular threshing floors. And just beyond the café that marks the limit of the bus route, a path leads down to the wonderful cove of Livadhaki.

But my idea of bliss is Anafi. There is no music, no fancy bar and one short stretch of road from harbour to *khora*. Every other journey, including going for a swim, has to be done on foot. Even getting there was special. The moon, three-quarters full, laid a path of silver across the dark swell. As the lights of Santorini fell astern, a greenish flush, the first sign of breaking day, spread up the sky, sharply silhouetting the pyramid of rock that marks Anafi's eastern tip. The morning star hung bright and huge above, defying the spreading blaze of day. The tiny breakwater could not protect us from the running sea and we only landed at the third attempt.

I had wanted to come here ever since the days when I used to stay in Anafiotika, a sort of working-class shantytown built by Anafiotes on the slopes of the Acropolis in Athens. When I awoke from my first exhausted sleep, I had a perfect Cycladic view: a white terrace, sharp shadows, a pot of red geraniums and a barren rock set in that infinite blue. And when night came, instead of spending it sensibly in bed, I borrowed a blanket from my landlady and spent it at the Kalamiotissa monastery on top of that 450-metre pinnacle at the island's eastern tip. I cannot say I slept very much. The ground was hard and the wind chill, but, more than anything, I was intoxicated: by the sense of airy isolation, by the huge vault of stars, by the moonlight and, at daybreak, by the excitement of watching the sun rise – "orange, red, red erupted," as Ted Hughes graphically put it – from the distant rim of the sea. I could see Crete and Kalimnos, Karpathos and Astipalaia, the white blur of the monastery in the cliffs of Amorgos and way to the west as well.

Returning the following morning, I stopped at the lower monastery, built on the foundations of a temple of Apollo, to report to the goatherds that there was indeed water in the cistern higher up for their goats to drink. Then I stopped to swim off the strands that bar the mouths of the jungly stream gullies that, most unexpectedly, water the dry hillsides. Anafi, I learnt, is in fact renowned for its springs.

I returned to Mykonos, spent a glorious day wandering the ancient sanctuary of Delos, was treated to an excellent dinner at the Kivotos Hotel and finished the night on the terrace of the Oniro Bar, looking down on the lights of town and harbour. Eight islands in 14 days: eight distinctive little worlds separated by sea journeys – it felt as if I had been away for weeks.

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