



Athens

We were glad to arrive in Athens via Bangkok after two 10 hour stretches on a plane. The trip was uneventful but we both had sore rear ends from economy class travel.

We managed to navigate the local trains and got to our hotel, but it was still only 9am and we couldn't get into our room. We left our bags and went walkabout. We decided to buy 24 hour tickets for a tourist bus which stopped at about 20 places around the city where we could get on and off. We did the complete tour and saw lots of small Sunday markets in progress. We got off the bus to look at the gardens and parliament house and got there just in time to see the full changing of the guard, complete with lots of guys in very short pleated skirts and pompoms on their shoes – very Greek. These elite soldiers are the Evzones who are known for their distinctive uniform which evolved from the clothes worn by the patriots who fought the Ottoman occupation of Greece. The kilt-like garment is called a fustanella.



The parade of soldiers was quite long and the streets were busy, but there seemed to be no real plan to accommodate the parade. A number of police stood in the middle of the road blowing whistles and waving their arms around to indicate that all cars and pedestrians should get out of the way. If anyone did not do as they were told, there was a lot more whistle blowing and gesticulating. Somehow it all seemed to work.

The buildings vary widely from old run down, old restored and very modern. It is very different from the Athens that I remember from 1975 when most women wore black, men all carried worry beads and girls didn't go out alone (even in groups). It is much more like other European cities and quite cosmopolitan, although a few men still carry worry beads.

We moved into our hotel and then got back on the bus and went up to the top of the Acropolis to the Parthenon. I can see why they built things up there, it has a great view.



It seems quite different from when I was there before, they have done a lot of restoration work but there are also hand rails etc around the site. They haven't commercialised it which is good, there are no stalls selling drinks or tourist junk anywhere near the site. After that we spent some time in a museum and then had a souvlaki for tea. We found out that souvlaki and gyros are actually the same thing, they just have different names in different areas. It was the easiest, cheapest meal and they are available everywhere. Using the free internet connection in the lobby of the hotel we caught up with the rest of the world, then it was definitely time for an early night.

We woke early the next day – still hadn't completely adjusted to Greek time. After a full breakfast of eggs and bacon we headed off to Piraeus, which is the port in Athens. We collected our tickets for the ferry the next day and walked and walked and walked. I don't think I have ever seen so many ferries of all sizes. We also saw a cruise ship and a Greek naval vessel.

Next we walked up a very steep road and down the other side to a small bay filled with expensive yachts and ocean cruisers. We found a small supermarket where we bought a bit of bread and cheese for lunch, which we ate sitting by the beach before we kept walking. We were pretty hot and tired by this time so we caught a bus and train back to Athens and sat in the gardens for a while.

The public transport system is efficient, clean and affordable. A daily ticket was 3 euro (\$5 in 2008). There were buses, trams and trolley buses everywhere and a modern train network which is underground in the city centre (built for the 2004 Olympics). There were lots of small cars and motorbikes and scooters which dart

around the city. Indicating to turn seems to be optional, but there are lots of horn blasts indicating that someone is not happy.

Next stop was Plaka – this is a very touristy area, but it is not too tacky. This is the oldest part of Athens and has quaint narrow roads and some picturesque buildings. We spoke to a store keeper who was very adamant that the Greeks in Australia were still living in the 1950s while the Greeks in Greece had moved on. We have seen women in the band for the changing of the guard and in the police force, so they are certainly equal to Australia in that regard.

The Plaka has lots of jewellery and Graham got bored waiting for me, so I determined to go back there at my leisure one day when he would be at the conference.

Our island adventure begins

The morning was an early start as our local ferry left from Piraeus at 8am. It was easy to get to by train and we saw more of the harbour than yesterday as we sailed away. It became obvious just how polluted Athens was as we got further away. We were on a large vessel, but fortunately there were very few passengers and we could sit wherever we liked. There were probably more staff than passengers.

We sailed into and out of Paros, Naxos and Ios before arriving in Santorini (Fira) at 6pm. All the islands have traditional Greek towns at the ferry landings, with white buildings and blue trimmings. It was a lovely relaxing day on board.



Paros, Naxos and Ios were all fairly quiet but Santorini was a hive of activity. It has a very small port at the base of a cliff (about 600m high). The cliff is actually the side of a crater of an old volcano. The towns are perched on the edge at the top. The zigzag road up the cliff, on the left in the photo, is the precipitous road up from the port which is congested with tourist buses, trucks, cars and motor bikes, but the view out to sea is spectacular. The ship in the photo below is one of a constant stream of cruise ships that visits the island daily.



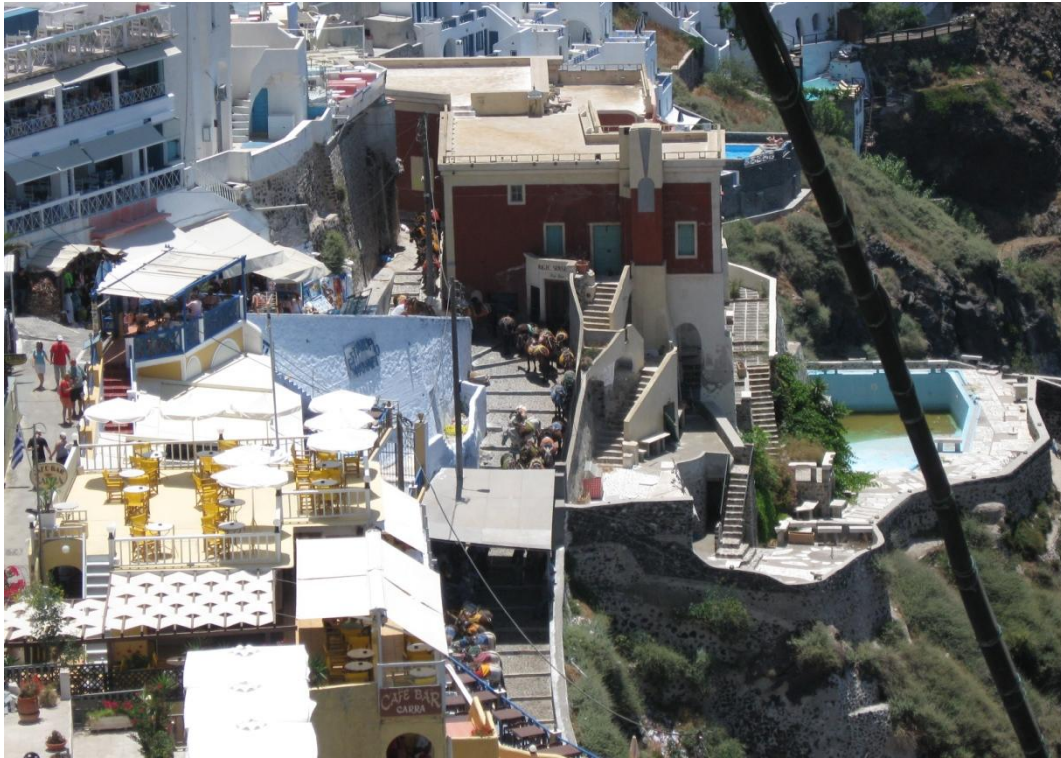
Santorini

Our hotel was not on the main drag but 20 minutes walk away from the town of Fira, surrounded by nothing much at all but with a view to the sea on the other side of the island. We arrived hot and tired but soon felt refreshed after a swim in the hotel pool. A short walk from the hotel we found a quaint little place to eat – pizza and local wine for 10 euro (\$16). The menu told us that the “whine” was local. You can buy it in the supermarket in 1 litre plastic bottles.

Very little grows on the islands as the soil is poor. The vines here are not on trellises, just lying on the ground. Other plants we saw included lots of oleanders, geraniums, bougainvilleas and gum trees! There are very few flies and no mosquitoes so we slept with the doors wide open and let the cool breeze blow in and woke up to the sun shining. It really is picture postcard stuff.

Our first full day on Santorini was spent getting our bearings. We walked up to the main town centre of Fira avoiding heavy traffic, complete with policeman on point duty at the main intersection. Once you get away from the main road the foot traffic is just as heavy. The tourist shopping area is a mass of twisting cobbled lanes lined with shops. There are the obvious tourist knickknacks but also clothes, manchester and lots of jewellery shops. Much of the jewellery is garish and too “sparkly” for my tastes, but there are also some very nice pieces. The prices aren’t too bad considering where the shops are.

We went back to the hotel in the afternoon for a rest and decided what to do tomorrow. In the evening we walked back to Fira to eat at one of the many restaurants which have a view of the caldera and the sunset. We had fried cheese, fried tomato balls/fritters and prawns in a spicy tomato sauce. All very nice.



Fira has its own port (not the ferry terminal we came into yesterday), but the town is at the top of the cliff and there are three ways to get down to the port: walk the 588 steps, ride a donkey or take the cable car. Look carefully to see the donkeys on the steps in the photo above.

We walked down those 588 steps avoiding the donkeys going up, ferrying people who had just landed off an ocean cruiser. It was a long way to dodge donkey droppings so we took the cable car back. Then we went on a boat tour of the other islands that form part of the volcano. The first stop was the central island which is uninhabited; we walked around and saw lots of black rocks and fuming volcanic vents (craters). The second island doesn't have a port but it has hot mud springs on the shore. The only way to get there is dive or jump off the boat and swim to the shore; which we did - it was lovely clear salty water. The springs were interesting, but the swim was wonderful. The third stop was on a small island where we had a lunch of Greek salad and stuffed tomatoes. It was a most unusual restaurant, just posts and a shade cloth roof attached to a small shop, pebbles on the floor and a stray cat wandering around.

The houses of course are white with an occasional pink or pale yellow. The white houses all have blue trimmings. We even saw a painter in white overalls and the only colours on his overalls were white, pale blue and dark blue.

The food on the island is very nice, but there are laws governing what to put in a Greek salad, that is why they always look exactly the same wherever you go. One of the reasons for these laws is to keep the fast foods out, and it has been very successful as we only saw one Maccas in Piraeus. Graham took a liking to the local beer and we worked out that if we buy a can of lemonade as well, I could have a

shandy which was great in the heat. Santorini is supposed to be famous for its wines, but we have not found any that are really worth drinking. I still have not been able to get a "long black" coffee but we have found that *frappe* (ice coffee) is very nice. Other options are Greek coffee, espresso (which is very small), filter coffee or Nescafe.

We have had no trouble with language at all, English is very common. There are tourists here from Italy, Spain, France, Germany, UK, America, Argentina, Brazil, various Asian countries and of course other Aussies, but the common language used by everyone to communicate is English. We also had two Albanian waiters. Apparently there are lots of illegal immigrants in Greece but no one really cared.

After the cruise we walked back to the hotel and enjoyed another swim and a rest before venturing out for dinner. This evening there was no power on the island for a while, it seems to happen regularly, but you can always get a Greek salad. Graham had sword fish tonight, which he said was more like pork. The flesh did not look like fish at all, but he enjoyed it.

On our last day in Santorini we caught the local bus (with no locals, but lots of other tourists) to Oia, the town on the northern tip of the island. It is even prettier than Fira, this is where all the pictures of Santorini in tourists guides and postcards are taken. We walked up and down some picturesque laneways and steps, visited a naval museum and an old Venetian castle ruins, and saw lots of magnificent displays of bougainvillea. The bus came back to Fira by a different route so we saw a bit more of the island.

The afternoon was spent relaxing, reading and having a swim in the pool. We finished off dinner with some yummy baklava. We have learnt not to order two full main meals as this is too much, a salad and one main meal is plenty.



Each day since being here I looked at a small orchard on the corner of our street and tried to work out what the trees were – I found out today that they are pistachio nuts. In South America we saw brazil nuts and cashews growing. They are all so different, the pistachio tree looks like an apple tree with bigger leaves and the fruit grows in clusters a bit like grapes. Tomorrow we head for Milos using the local ferry service.



Milos: The home of the Venus de Milos – but they sold it to the French in 1820.

We arrived at Milos after stopping at Ios, Sikinos and Folegandros, Milos is so very different from Santorini. On the dock we found a number of people offering accommodation; we chose a small family B&B in the back streets but within walking distance to the central area, just up a steep hill! Our room was up high with windows that allow plenty of cool air through. Up here we heard the church bells ring and the cock crow – both morning and evening.

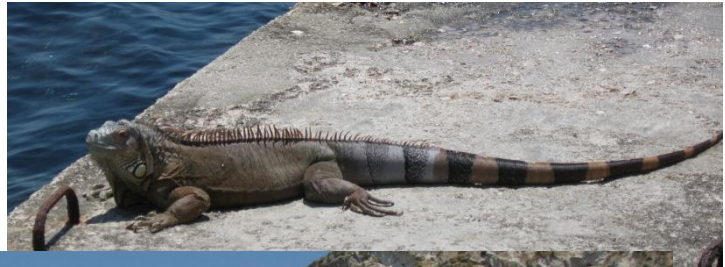
Milos does not rely on tourism as it has a lot of mining of minerals used in manufacturing. In fact different races have been mining on Milos for 10,000 years. Today we walked through some old mines down near an eroded beach that looks more like a moonscape because it is so barren. The cliffs and rock formations all over the island are quite impressive.

We stayed at the little port town of Adamas and had hoped to take a boat tour that goes right around the island and stops at some of the most interesting spots. However the wind came up on the day we arrived and did not let up. The good thing about that is that it feels cooler, the bad thing is that only the big ferries are venturing out to sea. Adamas is in a very protected bay so it doesn't affect us too much here. Today we went to Pollonia which is in the northern tip where the wind has been much worse.

The other thing that is different from Santorini is that there is far less English spoken here – in Santorini shop assistants and waiters greet everyone in English, here we are greeted in Greek. Many of the tourists are Greek and Italian although there is a sprinkling of Americans, British, Germans etc. As we could not go out on the boat we

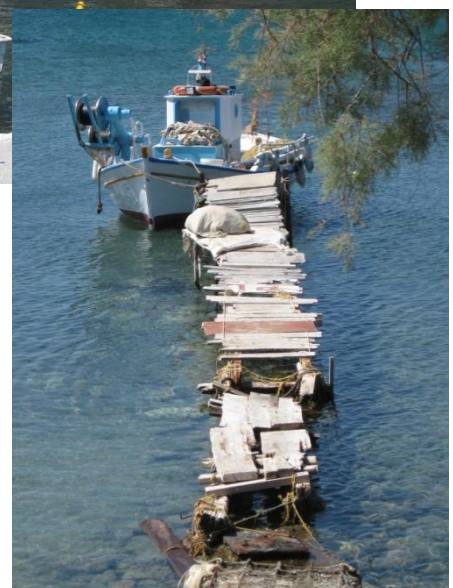
decided to hire a car to see more of the island. We didn't want a car in Santorini as it is pretty chaotic but the traffic here is much more manageable. So off we went and hired the car only to find that Graham had left his driver's licence in Melbourne and without that he was not registered to drive. He was very good and did not get angry while I re-learnt to drive a manual, a VW Polo which I've never driven before and neither had I driven on the right hand side of the road.

Well, I managed with the driving and apart from the scenery and churches we also saw some catacombs, an ancient roman theatre and some quaint fishing villages right on the water front. They have brightly coloured painted doors with room for the boat and working downstairs at water level and they live upstairs. At one of these villages we saw a huge (1 metre long) Iguana lizard sunning on a little jetty.



The jetty here shows that maintenance is not a high priority!

We continued to enjoy the Greek cuisine although the wine was now definitely off the menu, we were sticking to beer, soft drink and water. Most places it is recommended not to drink the local water so we bought 6 packs of 1.5L water from the supermarkets and took two of these each day on our outings – on some hot days even that is not enough.



On our last day on Milos we visited some of the beaches we had hoped to visit by boat, but the wind was against us. They are the sort of beaches that you see in advertisements and travelogues, magnificent sand, crystal clear blue / green water but at the bottom of a cliff! After looking at a couple of them we managed to find one that we could park near and walk to. It was called Firiplaka, it was a small bay which I swam across to a large rock on the other side and then swam back. It was wonderful.

We ended the day with a visit to Plaka, the high point on the island where we witnessed another magnificent sunset. We went to a small museum in Plaka that had a very talkative attendant. She told us that some of the new paving outside the museum was actually repurposed marble from the ancient roman theatre, as they were replacing the old marble in the theatre with new marble. Greeks view history and some of the artefacts very differently from us.

The day we left Milos the wind abated slightly and the tour boat went out while we caught the local ferry to Sifnos. Actually the ferry was an hour late and we saw a fiery exchange between one of the waiting passengers and an official from the coast guard. We have no idea what was being said but the body language and tone of voice made it clear that the passenger was not happy.

Sifnos

We landed at Sifnos after a brief stop on Kimolos. Sifnos is very different again from Santorini and Milos. Sifnos is the most fertile island in the region and the valleys are covered in miles and miles of dry stone fencing and terracing where people have grown fruit and vegetables for thousands of years. Unfortunately that has now changed as more and more people work in the tourism industry. The low flat areas are still being farmed but more difficult terraced areas on the side of the hills are left bare. The main crop is grapes for the wine industry, there are also a few fig and olive trees and a few vegetables. There are also more gum trees on Sifnos.

After a week of walking up and down slopes and thousands of stairs on Santorini and Milos, we decided to opt for accommodation close to the centre of town in Kamares, the port of Sifnos. It is a very small village with one street which is barely wide enough for a bus and car to pass. There are no footpaths so the road is also used by people looking in shops etc. Fortunately the only time the road is really busy is when a ferry arrives and all traffic has to pass down this street. Our room was



on the first floor of a hotel right in the middle of the town. Across the road there was a selection of outdoor restaurants and the beach; our window looked across the small bay to the mountains on the other side. Quite idyllic and just what you would imagine a Greek island to be like. We had also been fortunate that the season had been fairly slow to start so there were not too many tourists around and hotels had lowered their prices.

We saw some interesting building work around, including a door with the latch installed back to front so it wouldn't stay closed and a man using a jack hammer while wearing scuffs. On the other hand the bus drivers here are amazing, they manage to manoeuvre down the narrowest of streets and turn in a very small space.

Today we caught the bus to Appollonia and Kastro, two other villages on the island. Kastro is the site of an old walled castle dating back to about 1100. Over the years parts of the old buildings have been used to build new ones and you can see ancient marble pillars as part of much more modern buildings. There is a small museum, but it really doesn't add much to what you can see just walking around the streets, which includes a number of empty stone burial casks just at the side of the path.

Small chapels are found on every island throughout the area, some in quite remote places, but all picturesque.



One thing that we learnt on Milos and Sifnos is the benefit of have a siesta. Many shops and museums close between about 2pm and 6, but stay open until 10 or later in the evening. Siestas allowed us to escape the worst of the heat. We read or dozed and then enjoyed the evening more; dining, window shopping and walking in the busy streets with the shops all open until late.

We tasted cheese balls, fried cheese, cheese pies, spinach pie, onion pie and a chick pea dish which is a specialty of Sifnos, but could not come at the octopus on so many menus. In some places you can see the octopus hanging on the line next to the washing. Graham also had some rabbit stew which he enjoyed.

Our last day and a half on Sifnos was spent swimming, reading and walking around the town. It was very relaxing. On Friday afternoon / evening five ferries arrived with lots of people coming for the weekend – Sifnos is only 3 hours by fast ferry from Athens, it was obviously going to get busier.



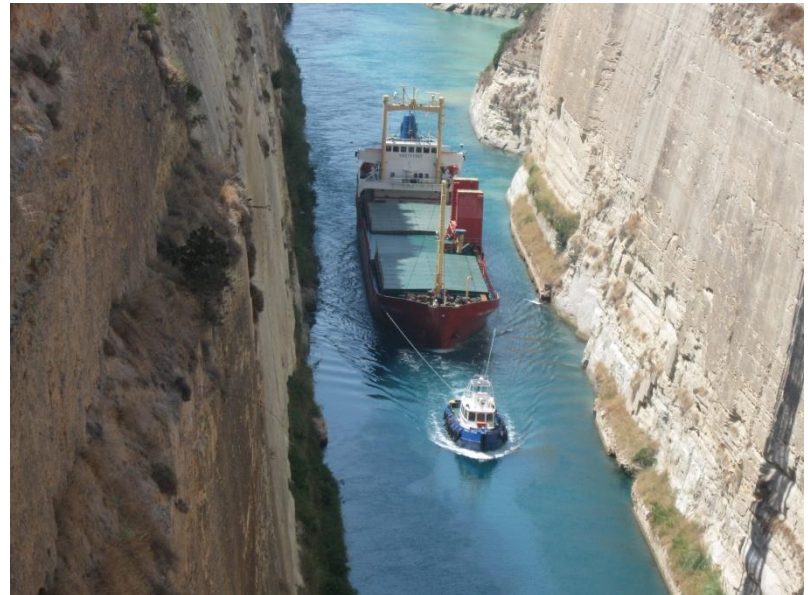
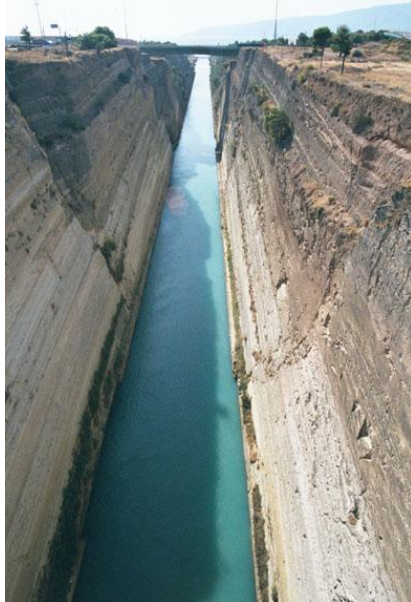
Back to reality in Athens

It was very difficult to go back to the heat, dirt and traffic in Athens but Graham was there to attend a conference and enjoyed catching up with the people that he knew from all over the world while I continued to explore Athens. One of the challenges was crossing the road, there are a lot of pedestrian crossings but pedestrians often don't wait for the light to turn green before they go across and motor bikes don't necessarily stop just because they have a red light. You just have to have your wits about you when crossing the road.

Sunday was the flea market which was interesting but not that different to flea markets in Australia and very similar to one we saw in Brazil. Today I went to the main shopping precinct; one of the amazing things when walking around these streets was that every now and then you turn a corner and find a site or building of historical significance. The tourist books say that Athens is a shopping paradise. I have seen so many small shops selling clothes, shoes, manchester, home wares and religious icons. Then there are the department stores as well. One stretches between Syntagma and Omonia squares.

The conference dinner was held on the sea front. The setting was a small man-made peninsular with trees all around the edge; tables and chairs were set up outside on the lawn; I have never seen such a large number of people served dinner so seamlessly. The setting was unique with water on three sides; I could imagine a big Greek wedding being held in this location.

We had a couple more days in Athens. Thursday we went to the Benaki museum, Benaki was a wealthy collector who gave his collection to the country when he died in 1954, since then other people have added to the collection. It has an amazing range of jewellery, sculptures, tombstones and pottery dating back to the 5th century BC. It also has a large range of elaborate costumes, jewellery, paintings and some maps from the 18th and 19th centuries. It is all housed in Benaki's grand old home near Syntagma square.



On Friday we took a bus trip to Corinth and a Greek winery. This allowed us to see more of the mainland including groves of olive trees, orange trees and of course, lots of vineyards. The first stop on the tour was the Corinth Canal (photos above), a 21 metre wide man made canal; the 6.3km canal avoids the 400km trip around the Peloponnese peninsula. We saw a large ship being pulled through by a tug boat. Quite impressive. Interestingly the canal is too narrow for many of the large modern vessels. The next stop was ancient Corinth where we saw the remains of a whole market area and more temples.



The last stop was a winery where we found that there are some nice wines made in Greece; it's just that they are only served in expensive restaurants at exorbitant prices. It was a nice way to finish off our tour of Greece.

As we were not leaving Athens until late in the afternoon, we went for a walk on the last morning to the Central market. It was mainly meat and fish; one stall was selling every internal organ of a sheep, sheep heads were also popular. It was fascinating. There were very few fruit and veg stalls, not sure why. And the variety of fruit and veg is much more limited than I am used to in Australia. On the way back to the hotel we came across two other interesting shops, one was selling a wide variety of rices and dried beans and peas – all available in large bins, to be bought by the gram / kg. The next shop had similar bins full of an amazing variety of herbs, the smells were wonderful, the main one being camomile, but also cloves and lots of other things that I could not identify.

Greece was a fascinating journey of history, food and culture. It was well worth the research we did before leaving home to selecting the islands we wanted to visit, avoiding most of the big party and touristy places like Mykonos.