



Athens 2024:

Ancient Greek, Antiquities and Culinary Delights

When I finally convinced Frau Eitel to propose an Athens trip for students interested in Ancient Greek last August, we were hoping to attract the required minimum of six students. By the deadline for registration, we had twenty. It was clear that it had become an entirely different ball game. Whether for booking flights, restaurants or hotels online, the automated response was, “Please contact your travel agent.”, or, “Please call to make the reservation.”. And so, the phone calls and emails to Athens began. For the flights, the Chrisway travel agency in St. Gallen did an impeccable job at the fairest rate without hitch or hassle.

With five days and six nights to spend in that ancient and modern metropolis, we decided to focus our sightseeing itinerary to the canonical musts. Accordingly, presentations needed to be prepared on the generalities of Pre-hellenic and Hellenic art, architecture and archaeology, as well as those specific to the Acropolis and Ancient Agora to permit students to wander museums and sites freely with some knowledge under their belts. A text also needed to be selected for the linguistic better half of our planned endeavour. We entertained a number of prose options, whether Herodotus and his histories or Pausanias with his travel guide to that same ancient city way back when. We settled where we almost always do, in Homer’s Odyssey. We chose Book X, the episode on Circe’s isle, full of magic, transformation and divine intervention. It may not have been a holiday, but that was no reason to keep anyone from having fun.

Our nights were spent at the Titania hotel, where, not only was everything on our itinerary walking distance, were able to hold our seminar in one of their conference rooms, but they also served an ample breakfast. Students were able to have their morning meal and then saunter up in their slippers to get to work, giving the affair a rather homey feel.

Each of the four full days were divided in three. One part was spent in translation coupled with the relevant presentation for the days sightseeing, a second spent visiting with the

students free for lunch in between and the third was dinner at various traditional Greek Tavernae.



With one site or museum per day the choices were easy to make. We visited the National Museum with its significant collection of Mycenaean artefacts, the Acropolis Museum which is a marvel to behold for both its collection and architecture, the Acropolis itself and the Ancient Agora with its own little museum in the reconstructed and refurbished Stoa of Attalos which includes some of the finest proto-geometric and geometric pottery anywhere.

In all the years I have had the pleasure of traveling in Greece, I have eaten badly only once and been over charged for good food only twice. My first passage through was in 1993, I was nineteen. Since I have recently turned fifty, I wonder if I may have missed something. I am certain that I have missed plenty, but being responsible for the dining for a group as large as ours aged from sixteen and up, I had to know if any had allergies or dietary restrictions of some sort, being confident that a traditional Greek kitchen can accommodate all and any. Gluten allergy? Avoid dishes like pastitsio and moussaka. Vegetarian? Have more fava for your protein. Muslim? Avoid pork. What surprised me were those vegetarians for whom either lamb or fried calamari were not only good, but the calamari were never enough.

In order to guarantee that everyone had a taste of everything and anything, I ordered practically everything on the menus for the group, preparing them for the last of our suppers where they ordered for themselves. The only serious and understandable complaint I had had was that there never was enough bread and pita at table. Either I had not ordered enough or the waiting staff would forget the extra orders.



At that last dinner, the students grouped themselves at tables while Astrid and I had our own where we enjoyed a cheese selection and some chorta with a glass of wine. While waiting for our food, we were approached by the waitress who enquired whether the students could really just order anything they wanted. “Of course.”, I answered, “Why?”. “Well,”, she answers, “they ordered a lot of bread.”. “Oh!”, I replied, “They can’t get enough of it! The last few nights it’s never been enough. It’s alright.”. She shrugged an OK and walked off.

Twelve. One table of six had ordered a full dozen baskets of pita! They had assumed, being Swiss I imagine, that 1.50 Euros was the price per pita wedge, and they were not going to be deprived! They went around from table to table looking for takers for the baskets they could not eat, and takers there were.



Whatever apprehensions I may have had about guiding a group of adolescents that large through the megapolis that is Athens, it was laid to rest by their genuine interest, respect for each other, and the sensible footwear they chose for the inhouse sessions. They felt at home and I felt, as I made sure to tell them that last night going from table to table, that it had been a privilege and a pleasure to have been a part of their introduction to one of the world's omphaloi.

