

Recent Trip to Greece, France and England

It is indeed with great pleasure that I will write a short account of the first leg of our journey leaving Brisbane on 23rd August, 2010 to fly to Athens, Greece.

We caught a bus from Athens to Patras to catch the ferry boat to the Island of Ithaca (Ithaki), which is the fifth largest Island of the Ionian Islands. The sheer beauty of this small Island cannot fail to capture the hearts and minds of any visitor. The pace of life is slow and laidback, visitors cannot help but be drawn into the ambience of this beautiful Island. Exploring by road, the views are breathtaking, the contrasting mountains and olive groves with tiny pebbly covers and Indigo Blue and Turquoise waters below. Across the sea, clearly visible are the surrounding islands with the mainland behind you. These highlands often drop precipitously down to the sea or otherwise descend gradually onto sandy beaches and small natural harbours. You will discover the desolate beauty of remote mountain villages where time stands still and there are attractive busy waterfronts with sailing boats



Sunset light on the rocks at Koutoupi.

and luxury yachts. We were lucky to have as our hosts my relatives, who welcomed my friends warmly, and who had their own little resort right on the water's edge. Their backyard was the Ionian Sea. The Islands opposite could be clearly seen and at night the lights would flicker like fairy lights on a Christmas tree. We descended into this tranquil slice of heaven where the waters were calm and clear so that you could see the pebbles and small fish swimming. The magical peace of indigo blue and turquoise waters wove its spell on one. We entered into this paradise down a homemade road that led from a small village called Lefki that clings to the western slopes of the highest mountain of Ithaca called Neritos to this privately owned beach home on Koutoupi.

My cousins loved entertaining and cooking great feasts on a daily basis. Under the huge sprawling Olive Trees of over a thousand years old rests a festive table. I call it a festive table as our hosts daily served remarkable "Babette like" feasts on this table. With the meals my relatives serve their own wine from their own "Bousouli" Vineyards, to ensure we never forgot the taste of their own 2007 Cabernet Sauvignon and the feeling of pleasure when the wine and food compliment each other perfectly.

Ithaca was inhabited since prehistoric times. During the Neolithic period (4000-3000 BC), there is no verified information regarding the first inhabitants apart from the ruins of buildings in the Northern part. Proto Hellenic civilization (3000-2000 BC) shows signs of organised society on engraved potsherds found at Pilikata, bearing Linear A writing. In the Pre Mycenaean periods (2000-1500 BC) the island was also inhabited in its southern section, as evidenced by the ruins of walls and buildings. Ithaca reached the pinnacle of its prosperity during the Mycenaean period (1500-1100 BC) according to the finds of excavations carried out in the 19th and 20th centuries. The Island fell prey to the Dorians (1100-800BC). Roman hegemony recorded (180-394 AD). During the Byzantine era (394-1185 AD), the Christian religion was established and churches and monasteries were built. In the years immediately before the capture of Constantinople by the Franks in 1204 AD, conditions had become desperate inside the Byzantine Empire. Ithaca had become a den for pirates. The inhabitants left the Island or moved up high into the mountains. Vathy, the present day harbour, was traditionally considered as an anchoring place for pirates. In 1185 AD the Normans captured Ithaca and the surrounding Islands. Venice dominated Ithaca for 293 years (1504-1797). During the period of Venetian Rule of Ithaca the greater part of Hellenism was under the Turkish yoke. The Ithacans looked upon their enslaved brethren with sympathy and participated in all their struggles against the Turks. In 1797 the democratic French broke Venetian dominance in Ithaca and the other Ionian Islands. The Ithacans welcomed the French as liberators of the Greek race. However, when Nelson, the English Admiral destroyed the French fleet in 1798, the French built fortifications at Vathy to defend the Island from the English. The Treaty of Paris (1815) placed this Island under English protection. The Ithacans fought for the Greek Struggle for Independence but also fought for their union with Greece. In 1863 the Ionian Parliament voted for Union. Since then Ithaca has been part of the fortunes of the Modern Greek Nation.

Ithaca is world famous through its legendary King Ulysses the hero of Homer, who was renowned for his courage, wisdom and love of homeland. The Adventures of Ulysses are described by Homer in the epic poem "The Odyssey". Ulysses was away from home for twenty long years; for ten years he had been besieging Troy and another ten years he spent wandering in unknown lands. Tossed by tempestuous seas, attacked by sea monsters, delayed by a cunning siren yet helped on his way by friendly Phaeacians, Ulysses finally landed on Ithaca. Here disguised as a beggar, he teamed up with his son Telemachus and his old swineherd, Eumaeus, and slayed a castful of conniving suitors who had been eating him out of home and fortune while trying unsuccessfully to woo the ever patient and faithful Penelope, his long suffering wife who had waited 20 years for him to return.

On August, 20th 2010 Archaeologists reported they had actually found the Palace of Odysseus. There is no doubt that the diggings have found evidence that it is a discovery of a Mycenaean Palace. That in, and of, itself is of historical significance.



The location of the find, according to the Greek Archaeologists, fits Homer's description of Odysseus' Palace. The next stage of Archaeological investigation begins in 2011. If the evidence does support this find then this will be of local, national and international historical significance and sadly will be responsible in changing the current face of Ithaca.

After four wonderful weeks on Ithaca we left the main port Vathy on the Ferry boat that took us a short journey across to the port of Sami on one of the largest and most beautiful Greek Islands, Kefalonia (in the past the Island received a lot of publicity due to Louis de Bernieres' novel Captain Corelli's Mandolin). From Sami we travelled to the capital, Argostoli where we stayed overnight in order to catch the small plane leaving in the morning to fly us to Athens to start the next leg of our journey to Paris, France. *If you make this journey that I gave to Kay, Ithaca will not disappoint you, indeed the journey will always stay with you. Beulah*

The first good fortune we had on this trip was to use the advice of travel agent, Jan Angus. Jan runs Travelmarket from Level 11, 141 Queen St, Brisbane. Phone: 3210 0323 or Email: jan@travelmarket.net.au. On Jan's advice we purchased special flights that gave us Business Class travel on Emirates from Brisbane to Dubai and Dubai to Brisbane then Economy Class tickets with Emirates from Dubai to Athens and London to Dubai. Business Class for the long haul made the trip and arriving in Athens so much more pleasant. We actually caught some sleep and enjoyed the food. Being able to raise your feet and stretch your legs meant no swollen feet when we arrived. Another good tip from Jan was to purchase a return flight ticket from Athens to Paris even though we were only travelling one way. This particular ticket was at a much reduced rate.

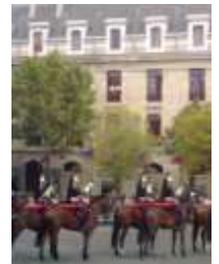


In Paris we stayed with friends who rented an apartment at Place Des Vosges, in the Marais district of Paris. The history of the Place des Vosges goes back to 1604 when King Henry IV, of France, built a royal pavilion at the southern end of the square. The building was designed by Baptiste du Cerceau. The King ordered all 35 other buildings bordering the square to follow the same design. The result, an early example of urban planning, is a symmetrical square surrounded by buildings with red brick and white stone facades, steep slate roofs and dormer windows, all constructed over arcades. Now the arcades are full of a wide variety of art galleries, coffee shops and restaurants.

Many famous Frenchmen have lived at Place Des Vosges. Among them Richelieu, from 1615 to 1627 and Victor Hugo from 1832 to 1848. 'Maison de Victor Hugo' is now a museum. We spent a several hours visiting the rooms where Victor Hugo wrote most of 'Les Misérables' and we explored the displays of souvenirs, drawings and books, all in chronological order, from his childhood to his exile between 1852 and 1870.



We took life at a leisurely pace in Paris. For example it took us three days to walk from Place Des Vosges to the Musee D'Orsay. Not because of the distance although we did get a taxi on our third attempt. On the first day we followed the crowd, as you do in Paris, and were treated to a massed dressage display by the mounted gendarmes. We just missed the motorbike gendarme riding display.



In Surrey we were hosted by another of Beulah's wonderful friends, Carole. We visited Windsor Castle and Hampton Court Palace. It may have been the drenching rain at Windsor that made Hampton Court Palace so much more appealing but, in truth, I think it was Hampton Court and its presentation that won me over. The palace is rich in history.

Thomas Wolsey (of Cardinal fame) acquired Hampton Court in 1514 and quickly turned the manor house into a palace. In 1525 Wolsey presented Hampton Court Palace to Henry VIII. Charges against Queen Anne (Bolyn) included adultery committed at Hampton Court. On your visit you can be a 'guest' at the Henry VIII and Kateryn Parr's wedding and explore the palace as a 'wedding guest'. We were impressed by the guides who wore period costume and had obvious teacher training. They kept the groups of school children enthralled and under control as they gave them history lessons.

Carole took us to St James Church at Shere, a village close to where she lives. 750 is the first mention of a church at Shere. St James figured in the Doomsday Book but there are no visible remains of that structure. The present church dates from the 12th century and took its original form in 1190. It has a Norman tower with a medieval shingle spire. St James' Church, and its Sir Edwin Lutyens-designed lychgate, feature briefly in the wedding scene at the end of the film Bridget Jones: The Edge of Reason. Shere village itself featured in the 2006 film The Holiday, starring Cameron Diaz, Jude Law and Kate Winslet. Famous connections continue at Shere. The William Bray restaurant is owned by former racing driver and sometime Stig, of Top Gear fame, Julian Bailey.

Kay Francis and Beulah Castan