

## **HOW IT ALL STARTED .....**

### **1978-2001**

Actually the story begins at the end of the Seventies. After the revolt against the Colonel's Junta, it is politically correct to visit Greece again. The BBC-series "Who pays the Ferryman", broadcasted on Dutch television in 1978, accelerates tourism enormously. In 1980, a quarter of a century young, I find myself in Greece for the first time. Immediately I am impressed by all the old cultural monuments of the country. Here, I realize, I stand at the birthplace of our modern Western society. Ten years later, F. gets equally impressed as he visits Greece for the first time.

During these years we will return to Greece more than once: Athens, Attica with Marathon and Sounion, Delphi, Peloponnesos with Epidaur, Corinth, Tyrins, Mycene, Sparta, Vassae and Olympia, Crete with its Cnossos, Phaistos, Malia and also Santorini.

### **2004 – 2005**

F. gets interested in Greek scientific philosophy, partly because it is a new subject to teach at school. I just feel like going to Greece again, visiting a so far new and unknown place. Samos it turns out to be, there are a lot of archaeological sites, Pythagoras was born there, it has been of strategic importance in ancient times and quite a few of the archaeological sites of Asia Minor on the Turkish coast are only a day trip away.

### **May 2005**

We take a charter flight to Samos during F.'s May Holiday from school. I picked an apartment at a motel at the edge of Samos Town, to ensure good public transportation throughout the island. But just before we leave we receive a telephone call that we are transferred to another apartment in a motel in Pythagorion, because the owner of the motel in Samos Town has died suddenly. F. is excited that we reside in the birth town of the mathematician/philosopher.

"In" Pythagorion is somewhat exaggerated, motel Anastasia is a stiff 5 km on a winding road outside the small town. But the location is beautiful: it is a remote building between fields full of flowering poppies and a lovely view across the Aegean and at Turkey on the other side of the sea. Because it is orthodox Easter there are no buses so we walk a lot the first few days. To the sanctuary of Ireion, where we are almost alone to admire the excavations. And to Psili Ammos, a paradise-like beach hidden between pine trees – likely to be very busy in summer. And everywhere nature has risen from its winter sleep in an overwhelming abundance of flowers wherever you look. It is a lust for the eye, even though there is only one flamingo left in the salt lake.

It is love on first sight between Samos and us.

We take more tours when the buses ride again: to Samos-town and Mytilini with its small private Museum of Natural History (three-toed horse). We take the ferry to Kusadasi and then a taxi to visit the beautifully conserved ancient sites of Priene and Milete – almost on our own.

Next to our apartment eccentric Greek Stelios runs a small restaurant with the help of his half-French daughter Jade. We dine several times at his place and promise him to come and live on Samos when we are retired.

On our last night it rains. "See?", I tell Stelios, "the island cries because we are leaving." Like a real Greek he is convinced that it is a clear sign from the higher spirits.

### **2005 – 2006**

I regularly browse the internet to see what houses are for sale on Samos. When a nice little cottage in a mountainous area is sold, I really regret it. I also read websites which concern the matter of living in Greece as a Westerner.

Greek language (New Greek) can be learned at the Provincial Centre for Language Education in Hasselt, Belgium, some 35 km from our house. In September 2006 a new course starts, very thorough, one evening per week during a whole year. The price is ridiculously low: 60 euro per person, even for us non-Belgians. After three years you can even apply for a State Exam at the Greek Embassy ....

### **Spring 2006**

Originally we plan to do polar bear spotting in Canada in the autumn, but that does not work out the way we want so we switch to Samos again. This time not with a charter flight (those end mid-October)

but with a regular flight by good old Olympic Airways and a hotel to avoid restaurants already closed at the end of the season. This time we pick Kokkari at the northern coast, to explore that part of the island.

### **September 2006**

We subscribe to the Greek course in Hasselt after some difficulty in finding the right Faculty of the Highschool of (Belgian) Limburg. It's in a huge building; there are courses in numerous languages I the evenings. Six from our group are from the Netherlands (Limburg). It's in good old fashioned Belgian style: qualified teachers, lessons from 18.15 until 22.30 with a 20 minute break. Attendance is compulsory in order to take the examination at the end of the year. You are only allowed in the next course when you passed the exam of the previous one.

So from now on it is a matter of carefully planning our Tuesdays to be able to leave home at five - it is almost a one hour drive from our side of the city to Hasselt in the rush hour. I decide to work at home on Tuesdays whenever possible. Though sometimes F. has to pick me up at the railway station from the 5 o'clock Intercity train

### **October 2006**

And we pass another week on Samos. And again the accommodation is changed at the last moment – this time due to autumn closing of most of the hotels. We now are taken to the Dorissa Bay Hotel at the edge of Pythagorion town. We rent a car to explore the island a little bit more – and are introduced to the Greek way of driving. Impatient, macho, winding mountain roads and almost no place to park the car. In Vourliotes I get stuck in the little streets of the centre and only after some uncomfortable minutes with much headshaking and shouting Greeks I am able to free the car. We visit a building plot but it is between the hairpin curves of a busy road. The waste deposit is situated in a beautiful location with a breathtaking view of the north coast but God knows what sort of chemicals have dripped into the soil and how much it would cost to clean it.

We practice our first Greek words with the waiter from the hotel – who immediately teaches us words spoken with a thick Samian accent – “*kótchino*” in stead of “*kókkino*” (red) – it sounds almost Italian.

We experience a remainder of the stormy weather which hits Crete and the mainland – at Samos it is not more than a few submerged footpaths at the hotel. At the end of our stay the temperature has risen to such a degree that I take a last swim in the warm Aegean Sea.

In the meanwhile another man has joined our study group of the Greek language. When we get to know him, G., we learn that he could only start now with the course because he still was at his house on .... Samos! He is retired and lives on Samos half the year in a village called Pevkos, on the sea shore. He tells us some of his experiences so that we adjust our plans. Not rebuilding an old house but buy a new one. Not in the touristy east part but in the south-west. Koumeika seems a nice place nearby Pevkos, a little bit higher up the hills. No bother from airplanes or northern rains.

On the internet I find some pictures of Pevkos and Koumeika and make them my desk top background on the computer.

### **January 2007**

The mid-term test for the course in Greek is not easy, but we succeed pretty much okay. The group has shrunk from 24 to 13 people however, the diehards. The teacher says it is still a relatively large group; last year she had only 6 pupils in January.

I design a sort of house (*To Spiti Mas* version 1) with the aid of Apple Works on the computer.

### **April 2007**

We leave for Samos; this time we rent a cottage in Pythagorion which I found on the internet. It is from the grandmother of Thassos and Kordula, a Greek-German couple. Sandy provides us with a little car again.

### Saturday 28 April 2007

The news last night predicted the busiest time of the year at Schiphol Airport today because of the start of the May school holidays. But we fly from Brussels Airport Zaventem. According to the internet it is warmer over here than on Samos, has been so for the whole month of April.

We take the bus from Amby at half past 7 in the morning and continue with the slow train to Liège. There we change while squeezing past the construction works for the new TGV-station. Whenever will

that be finished? On a tiny quai we wait for the Intercity to Brussels and wurm our way to the first class compartment. We arrive at Brussels North a bit late so we miss the planned direct train to Zaventem. We take the next one, a slow train, and almost get out at the wrong station, Zaventem-Village instead of Zaventem-Airport (never knew a village with that name existed too; there is no Schiphol-Village in the NL). Checking in is a bit annoying since a whole French-babbling school class of teenagers takes the plane to Athens too. On the plane we're right in the middle of them.

The flight from Athens to Samos is delayed for 15 minutes because of seagulls on the tarmac. Crossing the Aegean See by air always gives beautiful panoramas on the Greek islands: an uninhabited one with only the remainders of an ancient temple and as a contrast Mykonos crammed with hotels and apartments on the shores.

We approach Samos Airport by passing some fifty meters right over the temples at Ireion; of course no camera at hand. .... Across the sea, at the other side of the straight of Mykalis, we see an enormous red Turkish flag flapping in the strong winds. Something new??

Sandy awaits us at the airport and drives in front of us to the rented cottage in a narrow street just behind the main street and the ancient Agora in Pythagorion. We unload and I park the car at the public parking at sea, aligned with the authentic remainders of Doric columns. After unpacking we find ourselves pretty soon on a terrace at the harbour side for dinner. We have to keep our coats on because the evenings are still chilly this time of year. At the neighbouring terrace we have a subsequent cappuccino – I spill the first one on my new shirt because of the design but o so unhandy Lilly cups & saucers. Meanwhile we follow the sports on tv – the rules of cricket remain somewhat of a mystery to us.

#### Sunday April 29 2007

After a not so good night of sleep (because of the hard mattress) we calmly awake above breakfast at the table in the far corner of the garden, out of the wind, against the white plastered walls of the neighbouring yards, where the sun already shines. We agree to have a lazy day. I call G. for a rendezvous and driving directions. F. catches up on his Greek lessons. We take a sunbath to get a bit of a tan on our white legs. The sound of the church bells and the singing of the “*popes*” from the monastery on the hills behind us strengthens the Sunday morning feeling.

For lunch we take a stroll to the harbour. Near to the museum a group is singing and dancing on the music of a little band; we cannot discover the occasion. After lunch we walk to the new marina a little bit further up the coast. We still are amazed at the enormous flag clearly visible on the Turkish coast.

For an afternoon drink we slowly walk back to the old harbour. The waiter recognizes F. from previous years - by his moustache. We try some Greek language on him.

Back in the cottage we take an afternoon nap and after dinner at the harbour we admire the stars in the clear sky before we turn in.

#### Monday April 30 2007

The night's sleep went better this time because I slept in the spare room where the mattress is softer. The wind has gone; we have breakfast in the sunshine.

For a visit to the flamingo lake we take the car. We reach the lake in no time but it is completely dried out with crusts of salt on the rims. No flamingo in sight as well. Later Kordula tells us that last winter there were about 60 of them in the lake. We continue to the far southeast corner of the island. In Posideinio the only thing that moves is the ripple of the seawater against the shore. We return to Pythagorion for a lunch of his always delicious *pittas* filled with gyros and fries and salad and *tzatziki* at Robinson's. I buy a box of saffron for G. and his wife who we plan to visit tomorrow. A bit further on the main street I ask at the bakery in my best Greek at what time they'll open tomorrow (Από τι ώρα είναι ανοιχτό αύριο;) but get an answer in English....

After that we continue our sunbathing from yesterday. I listen to some Greek songs on the iPod; eventually you start to recognize some words, sometimes a complete sentence. It concerns “*kardiá*” (heart), love and sorrow on many occasions.

The neighbour woman applies anti-lice drops on het dogs; when her goats get too nosy she drives them away by hitting their heads with a branch from a tree. Later on she calls them back (*Éla*, “Come!?”) because she has a bag filled with goodies for them. F. waters the citrus trees and other plants in our yard.

We dine at Fakos, a little bit further east at the harbour, where we have a nice after dinner talk with a couple from Friesland.

## Tuesday 1 May 2007

Early in the morning a charter plane (Air Berlin?) lands with a lot of noise. The tourist season has opened! At a quarter past 10 we leave for a visit to G. and his wife D. in Pevkos. Till Neochori the road is excellent; after that we have to drive down a small winding road with little asphalt on it. We doubt the correctness of our interpretation of the directions G. gave us, but there is no alternative. Foot on the brake and a bit of sweat in the hands we slowly take the hairpin curves. Later on we arrive at a “normal” road. (Later on G. tells us with a big smile that he always directs people via that road the first time, to see if they have character .....) After that G.’s sandy coloured house is easy to find. He shows us around and takes us to a building project a bit further down the road. The 2-floor detached houses are reasonably priced but built very close to each other.

We have coffee on G.’s terrace with a panoramic view over the Aegean Sea. After that we walk to the Bella Vista *taverna* for lunch. D. tells us of the decades old feud between *taverna*-owner Thanassis and his brother who runs a bed-and-breakfast next to him. Nobody knows anymore why they try to make each other’s life miserable ....

It is busy with parked cars on the road to the *taverna*; it is the first opening day of the season because of Labour Day. G. has arranged that a small table is kept for the four of us; we just fit in. The place is overcrowded so it takes a while before we are served *mezze* (marinated octopus and meat balls). Later on we have freshly baked fish and goat stew. There are a lot of stories to tell so we don’t get bored. G. and D. tell that they were only accepted in the village, some years ago, when they had participated in the rituals for the funeral of a well respected member of the small community; which can stretch out over a week. A baptism may also take some hours while baptism is practised literally: the baby is submerged in the water for some five times and after each time new clothes are put on.

At the end of the afternoon old Thassos joins us; with his small vocabulary of English he tells us stories about how G. “helped” him with fishing in his boat; he encourages us to come helping with the grape picking in September. In the meanwhile a little rain has started so the tables outside are squeezed in between the ones inside. The noise only decreases when the grandchildren of “the brother” come to buy an ice cream. G. gets his jeep to drive us to his home. There we have a last coffee and then drive back because it is starting to get dark already. The road is so steep at one point that I have to stop and put the little car in first gear to get above.

Within an hour we are back at the public parking in Pythagorion. We walk to the harbour and after a light dinner we watch the semi finals of the Champions League over a cappuccino.

## Wednesday 2 May 2007

We collect the sheets etc. and take it to Kordula; the old *γιαγιά* (grandma) opens and I ask politely my rehearsed: “*Η κυρία είναι στο σπίτι;*” (Is Madam at home?) Fortunately she understands and calls upstairs instead of giving me a whole sentence back in top speed.

At 20 past 10 we take the bus to Samos Town. The tourist season has definitely started with yesterday’s plane; lots of Dutchies and Germans await the buses on the new banks at the *στάση* at the ruins of Artemis’ temple in town. In Samos Town I inquire in the little KTEL office when the summer timetable will start. “Maybe next week” is the typical Greek answer.

We walk to the Archaeological Museum. I buy a jar of honey on the market; the salesman is not impressed when I tell him (in Greek) that it is for my 89-year-old mother. On the *πλατεία* in front of the museum three turtles slowly wander around in the warming sunshine. A cat lies sleeping under a tree; it does not interfere with the turtles.

In the museum we re-enjoy the nice collection. Afterwards we stroll on the boulevard looking for the bookshop where we bought the nice exercise books and notepads with Greek philosophers on the cover. After some research we find them but not as cheap as I remember. Eventually we do find them for the same price in the bookstore in the mall behind the boulevard. After lunch we do some more strolling. F. buys a few *κομπολοῖ* (rosaries) I buy a bracelet with the symbol against the evil eye painted on the beads and a *κομπολοῖ* for S. with the same motive. At a *περίπτερα* (kiosk) I buy the Samos newspaper with an article on the Turkish flag on the front page (“Provocation!” the header shouts, I learn after consulting the dictionary).

After a *φραπέ* on a terrace next to some Dutchies we head back to the bus station for the bus to Pythagorion. Across the street from the bus station I suddenly remark a pastry shop (*ζαχαροπλαστείο*) where I buy a large ceramic bowl filled with *καταΐφι* (sweet honeydripped pastry topped with sugar threads) for our Greek study group. The young saleswoman is visibly pleased with her foreign clients; she wraps it up in a nice box with a ribbon and we get a piece of complimentary *μπάκλαβα* each on the house.

On the bus back some young students are clearly audible present. One of them is eating a large piece of chocolate when one of his mates enters the bus and calls: “Τρώς!” which means: “You eat”, literally, freely translated by me as: “Well well, look who’s eating this nice piece of chocolate...” We have a short siesta after the ride back and then enjoy a cappuccino while watching the other semi finals of the Champions League.

#### Thursday 3 May 2007

Today’s programme includes the Paleontological Museum in Mytilini. We are the only visitors; I wonder who pays for the maintenance of this building. Must be the hobby of some rich Greek ..... We take a good look at the exhibition in the botanical department. The specific Samian plants are mainly found high on the mountain hills; there are not many islands in Greece that have mountains over 1500 m.

For lunch we visit unbeatable Robinson’s. In the newspaper shop we get involved in a discussion on the enormous Turkish flag across the strait. “Handy”, says one, “now it is easy to see the direction of the wind.” “They suffer from an identity crisis” another one is convinced. “The first flag was torn to pieces after a week already because of the strong wind” a third person knows.

Back at the cottage it’s lazy time again; sunbathing, studying some Greek. At night we watch the third semi finals; this time the UEFA Cup. The temperature has risen so we don’t need our coats anymore.

#### Friday 4 May 2007

For our last day we decide to be a bit more active. We walk to Stelios’ restaurant outside Pythagorion, close to the little church of Pros Panagia Eleousa in Potami. We try to find our way along the shore, but get stuck just after the new marina. We turn inland, in the direction of the main road, and zigzagging from hill to hill we suddenly arrive on a deserted little stretch of beach. A stray dog strays around and decides to adopt us spontaneously. Eventually we get to the entrance road to Stelios’. I chase the stray dog away by throwing a (small) stone towards its head.

Stelios sits on his usual chair drinking his usual pint like no two years have passed since we last saw him. His daughter Jade is not in, unfortunately. After some spicy stories (a new girlfriend in Amsterdam who had to be taken to hospital so he had to take care of her baby and got 800 euro per month from Dutch welfare to do so and an offer of half a million euro for his land from a land project developer to build a hotel on this spot) he prepares us a nice lunch. After that he tries to call the taxi company for us – we don’t feel like walking back – but the telephone number has changed and even the information service doesn’t know it. Muttering in Greek he drives us back downtown himself. He drops us in front of the local taxi stand and then starts shouting at the taxi drivers that it is a bloody shame that they have changed their number and that nobody can find it anywhere and ... at least, that’s what we think for our Greek is far from sufficient to understand it and besides that we try to get away from the scene as unnoticed as possible ....

Back at the cottage F. waters the plants for the last time. I pack an unripe lemon as a souvenir back home. Two very late oranges have fallen from their tree, we eat them on the spot. So sweet they taste!

The last evening we spend, as usual, on a terrace at the harbour. We bump into Robinson himself on the way up who smiles broadly when we tell him (English mixed with Greek) that we leave tomorrow but will certainly come back next year.

#### Saturday 5 May 2007

We leave our rented car at the airport as has become the habit. During the stopover in Athens I try to get hold of a little booklet I read about in the Athens News. The shop attendants think it’s way too early to serve customers and don’t lift a finger; one is actually sleeping between a pile of newly arrived books. Well, I’ll order it via internet then.

When we have landed at Brussels there is a bit of a nuisance since the box with the *καταΐφι* has been standing lopsided in the hand luggage compartment and now a large part of the honey has dripped out. Sticky on all sides I get like hell out of the airplane and clean up in the toilets on the airport.

Far too soon we are back home and get used to the treadmill of the daily routine.

#### **June 2007**

We pass the exam for the first year of Greek; me with 100% score for the written part.

As a closure of the season we have dinner with the group at the Greek restaurant in Hasselt. I get all sort of information from G. about the daily experiences of life in Greece for a Westerner. After that we

have to deprogram ourselves from the Tuesday routine “hurry - get home in time – eat quickly - be in the car by 5 o’clock”.

*To Spiti Mas* version 2 is born – only ground level.

### **Summer 2007**

We visit Madagascar to see the monkey-like lemurs. During a stay-over at a nice hotel in bungalow-style at sea the French hotel-owner shows us his solar electricity supply consisting of 6 square meters of solar panels, a transformer and liquid batteries, altogether some €10.000. It supplies enough energy for half the demand of the hotel (he has a diesel generator for the other half). Mmmm... maybe something for our future house in Greece?

G. mails us a picture of his adopted Greek dog Stella - named after the Belgian beer - who lies heat-stricken on his terrace (it was thrown out of a car, pregnant). On Samos it is over 40°C; fortunately no bushfires as in the rest of Greece.

### **Autumn 2007**

We start with year 2 of the Greek course. 12 of the group of last year have continued; plus Patricia who already started year 2 in the past but did not finish it. I scan all my notes and mail them to G.; he only returns from Samos at the end of October.

We loose ourselves in the past and future tense, the subjunctive and the imperative, and gasp at the difficult reciprocal verbs.