

THE BUYING OF THE HOUSE

Spring 2008

At the end of the winter snow hits Greece from Athens to Crete. Chaos all over in the entire country, we learn from the Dutch news on tv. F. finds a newspaper clipping on the subject in *Ta Nea* which we study in our Greek class.

After our effort to organize a trip to Athens during the May holidays with our Greek class has failed, we book ourselves another trip in that period with a 3 day start in Athens followed by a week on Samos in the cottage from Thassos' and Kordula's *γιαγιά*. Car rented from Sandy, all arranged via the internet. G. won't be there, his grandson celebrates his first Holy Communion and his father is due for surgery during that time. While he's there around Easter he mails us that the sign "Πόλεται" (For Sale) had been removed from a nice plot of land nearby him. Sigh ...

I browse the internet for houses for sale at Samos real estate agents from time to time, but the prices are high. A new apartment in a building (!) will cost you €150.000 at least.

Google Earth releases a new set of pictures on Samos; the quality of the satellite photos has improved enormously so we can even detect G.'s house.

May Holiday 2008

Wednesday April 30 2008

Again we leave for Zaventem Airport near Brussels by bus and train. The railway strike in Belgium is off, fortunately. It takes a bit of organizing, but finally we have developed a system of me getting in the bus or train first, with a bag or small suitcase, then accepting the big suitcase which F. holds up outside, pull it in and take the next one etc. until F. gets in himself too. Getting out in the reverse order. Because it's a normal working day in Belgium - today is a public holiday in NL because of (old) Queen's Birthday (Juliana's) - there is a direct train to Brussels. Which, strangely, unannounced, unscheduled, also stops in Louvain. Still strange people, those Belgians

We fly across a clear blue Mediterranean so I can try the new camcorder to take shots from the window of some of the islands and the still snow-capped mountains of the Peloponnesos. When we start landing the airhostess orders me to put away the camera; explaining that it is no computer (*ordinateur* in French) does not help. How does she know there is a hard disc in it? And I read an article recently that switching of equipment is not really necessary because it does not interfere with the electronics in an airplane or hospital or whatever ... Oh well...

We plan to take the metro to Syntagma Square and change there, but we see a sign that it is a 10 minute walk to the metro station at the airport and that we will probably just miss the 9 o'clock one and will have to wait half an hour. In front of us is the direct bus to Syntagma Square who will leave in 5 minutes so the choice is easy. In my best Greek I order δύο εισιτήρια για Σύνταγμα (two tickets for Syntagma Square) from the ticket vendor who understands me instantly and answers in Greek that it amounts up to 6 euro and something. The bus makes a good speed, a.o. along the blue Ikea store where a young couple gets in with all sorts of goodies from the Swedish multinational. Half an hour later we stand on Syntagma Square. Suddenly we are very tired so we accept the offer from a taxi driver to our hotel. Which is only four blocks away, we find out later; that 15 euro is easy money for him!

We freshen up in our room and stroll into the nearby Plaka shortly afterwards. Greek Orthodox Easter was two weeks ago but the lantern poles still are decorated with neon lights in the form of Easter Bunnies and red eggs (!) Not many restaurants are open at this hour in April, so we dine at the first we find, Daphne's. Nice view on the Acropolis and nice prices, but what do you expect in a place where Hillary Clinton and Roger Moore seem to have dined

Thursday 1 May 2008

Ascension Day is on a different day than in Western Europe because of the different date of Easter over here. It is celebrated today, but it is also Labour Day so we assume all the museums etc. will be closed. This is confirmed when we walk to the new Acropolis Museum after breakfast - it does not open at its usual 10 o'clock. We postpone our look inside the new building - no antiquities exposed yet - to another day. We admire the windows with small

artifacts in the nearby metro station and take a stroll along the Acropolis to the little neighbourhood of Anafiotika at the backside of the hill. We take a few snapshots there. The weather is okay, some 24°C and sunny.

Back at the Plaka we have a nice cappuccino on a terrace in the midst of the tourist bustle. Then we slowly walk in the direction of Syntagma Square. At an excavation at the end of the Plaka I perceive a true rollator which seems to belong to an old Greek. When we look west at 'Οδος Ερμού (Hermes' Street) – which has become a pedestrian mall - we see the neon letters on the façade of good old Pella Inn in the distance.

We take a look inside the little old Byzantine church in the 'Οδος Ερμού. I buy a candle for 1 euro and light it – you might never know if it helps our quest for a house! F. rebukes me for using catholic rituals while being a devout atheist. Well, you never know

The nearer we get to Syntagma Square the busier it gets with black people selling bags and belts and other leather objects spread out on blankets in the street. At the end you almost stumble over it. What a difference with 17 years ago! On Syntagma the noise is overwhelming because there is a big parade for Labour Day. Music, speeches, slogans being chanted and so on. When a big group with banners starts moving towards Parliament it gets quieter.

We walk to the big bookstore on Venezilou Avenue but it is also closed. Returning to Syntagma I become aware of posters on lantern poles announcing a march of the communist trade union (hammer and sickle); a few moments later we are surpassed by the anti-riot squad of the police with helmets and shields. We keep our distance and observe the situation. Fortunately the crowds which are denied the access road to Parliament calmly divert to the Polytechnical – another historical landmark - to express their annoyance.

For us, we just take a picture of the sentry at Syntagma in his white skirt and pomponned slippers. F. buys a little Greek flag for in the car and we eat an ice cream at a *περίπτερο*. We stroll to Zeus' temple a little bit further down the road. We take some more pictures through the bars of the gate (also closed) with nice acanthus flowers on the foreground. After waiting for the crowds to diminish we also take the obligatory picture of the Acropolis seen through Hadrian's Arch.

Finally we walk to the Olympic Stadium renovated for the Olympic Games of 2004. It looks nice and the marble is dazzlingly white. It now remains in use for athletic games throughout the year. Walking back to the hotel I experience that Greek traffic rules do not include giving right of way to pedestrians crossing at the green pedestrian lights while turning left or right with your car. Even when I make a lot of fuss about the green pedestrian sign the cars keep trying to knock us over.

At the hotel room we take a short rest. We had an elaborate lunch so at the Plaka we just buy some *μπάκλαβα* and wine and consume it at leisure at the hotel room while watching – traditionally by now – the semi finals of the Champions League; this time with Greek comment which is very instructive for us.

Friday 2 May 2008

We get up early so at half past 8 we stand at the entrance of the Acropolis. But more people thought of that so there are busloads of tourists joining us. We take a quick look at the Herodes Atticus Theatre – I'd love to attend a play there!

We climb on and for a change now the Parthenon is completely covered in scaffolds. But, the Karyatides can be admired in full glory. Because of the crowds we don't stay long and on a side road we follow the construction of a new Ionic column out of a piece of marble. A few old ladies in black cross the fences and disappear into a cave. I sneak on behind them and see that there is a sort of gathering with singing and praying guided by a Greek *pope*. We end our visit of the site at Dionysos' theatre with beautifully carved stone seats for the high and mighty.

Then it is time for our first cappuccino of the day and after that we take the metro to Omonia where F. wishes to visit a comic book store where they might have old Asterix comic books in Greek. But there are only second hand comic books that are more of the modern hit-and-run type, as the no-English-spoken boss points us out. We return on foot and at the big new Stoa Artesiou arcade we find another bookstore with the Odyssey and the Iliad as comic books in Modern Greek. The owner is a friendly man whom I explain that we are Dutch and learning Modern Greek in evening classes.

After lunch we visit the now open Temple of Zeus and take some more pictures. We rest at the hotel room and after dinner we read the new books before we turn in.

Saturday 3 May 2008

We don't have a very good night's sleep because of the noise of the nearby discotheque so we get up a bit drowsy. A relatively cold shower brings us back to reality. We pack the suitcases and leave them at our room because we first want to visit the Cycladic Museum. At the change at the Syntagma metro station I take pictures of the antiquities in the glass windows between hordes of Japanese.

The museum has expanded to the neighbouring neoclassical house but so far it only contains the entrance and a lecture room. The Cycladic statues keep amazing me – even for the third time – and I take a lot of pictures.

After collecting our suitcases we take the metro to the airfield – we think. But halfway we have to get out in a hurry because it does not go any further. Obviously there are two lines: one with the long stretch to the airport and another one with the short stretch to the end of the suburbs. I get into a panic because I think I left my little backpack in the metro – but it turns out I have it in my hand under a pile of coats.

After a while we board the small plane and after another half hour of Aegean Sea we land on the now so familiar Samos Airport named after the Samian philosopher Aristarchos. I keep my camcorder at hand in case we fly over the Ireion temple – wrong side of the plane this time. Sandy hands us the keys for the small car and in no time we arrive at the cottage where Thassos awaits us. There are a lot of oranges and lemons in the trees this year. We unpack quickly and walk downtown.

The main street is a major disaster: completely broken up and only a quarter yet is covered with new marble tiles. Πω πω! Business is booming in Pythagorion; tourism (tax) pays off well! The part that is finished looks really nice, but the street obviously had to be ready before the tourist season started of course, and of course it is not. Now the first tourists have to clamber their way between piles of debris and pallets with tiles. Taking the sidewalk also is very risky because there are huge potholes in it for the trees to be planted. So don't look into the windows while walking! Later on we learn that the start of the reconstruction was planned in November, but, traditionally Greek, first the money didn't come and later on there was the same problem with the tiles. Now the shopkeepers are angry, tourists angry, all other inhabitants angry too. All as usual.

We shop at Grandma Dimas' minimarket and settle down in our favourite restaurant Ambrosia where we are welcomed as old friends. The same happens at the *Kalo Kairo* (Summertime) coffee & cocktail bar next door. There I try my Greek on owner Manolis: “Νομίζεις πως η Ελλάδα θα είναι πρωταθλήτης με το ποδόσφαιρο;” (Do you think Greece will be champion with soccer?) on which he replies “Πάλι;” (Again?) after which we continue the discussion in English.

To end all the well intended alcoholic complimentary welcome drinks we return to our cottage in due time. There we watch a DVD on the laptop and turn in for a snore.

Sunday 4 May 2008

A bit musty we get up. At a quarter to 11 we leave the cottage in the direction of Pevkos to see what's going on over there. After a bit less than an hour we arrive at G.'s house where I planned to park the car – assuming he left his jeep at the airport while returning to Belgium. But is occupied with his car so we park the car a little further up the road at G.'s friend H.'s place. We report to H. that we parked our car there; he assures us that's no problem.

It is not yet lunchtime at the *taverna* so we take a stroll on the little beach. We explore the shoreline till some big rocks stop us and I film the ever dominant Kirkis mountain against the deep turquoise sea.

In the *taverna* it is still quiet. We order lunch and suddenly my eye catches a sign that says (in English) “Plots of land for sale with construction of detached houses”. I almost fall out of my chair in astonishment and point it out to F., speechlessly. We ask the waiter, the owner's son, and yes, he says, it is still possible. We send a text message to G. to inform him and when we give G.'s greetings to Takis, the owner's son, the ice is broken quickly when he learns that we are friends of G.. We make an appointment for tomorrow at 2 o'clock to show us around.

Dumbfounded we have lunch and walk back to H.'s for our car. H. and his wife J. invite us up for some coffee so we stick around another hour. Back at our cottage in Pythagorion we still can't grasp the luck we seem to encounter. We have a small bite for dinner at a windy harbour and return home to watch another DVD. Halfway it gets stuck after which we go to sleep.

Monday 5 May 2008

We take a leisurely morning and study some Greek. After lunch we drive to the *taverna* in Pevkos; I park the car at H.'s who seems to be out.

Takis takes us to the location where we first have a look at plots α and β above the public road. The view is breathtaking but it is a relatively steep hillside which implies building in terraces and a house with floors. Besides that we prefer a not so steep piece of land, we have F.'s bad knees to consider ... At plot β Takis tells that his grandfather hid in the small cave during the Turkish occupation.

Plots $\gamma 1$ and $\gamma 2$ lie below the public road. The view on to the sea from the relatively flat plot $\gamma 1$ is blocked by olive trees but Takis assures us that they may be cut. There is electricity wiring going over the plot but that reduces the costs of the electricity connection, we learn.

After that we drive to the houses of some Swiss people a little bit further up the road on the top of a hill. It is where G. showed us around last year. The two houses are ready now; we are impressed by the blue shutters and doors made of recycled synthetic fibre ("composite"), the double glazing of the (normal and French) windows in vinyl windowsills, and the built-in roll-down insect screens in all the windows. The floors all come tiled with colours at choice; walls come white-plastered. The steeping ceiling is made of wood (light or dark) and roof tiles are terracotta. When Takis starts about a built-in kitchen I quickly point out that my brother-in-law will make our kitchen so we don't need that. The stove in the Swiss' house is half electric and half gas, the gas bottle has to be kept outside for safety reasons. Takis also knows a firm which can deliver a stove and a refrigerator and he also has knowledge of a firm which sells good second-hand cars When he starts of a garden design and a swimming pool we jokingly remark that we first have to get a small inheritance to pay for all that. In the meanwhile I take pictures of the windows and the ceiling and so on.

A third house is being built next to the two and there we photograph the isolating materials that are used in the construction.

Water connection and drains to a sewage pit are included, as are equalizing the terrain and constructing an access road – but that last one is not completely clear to us. The sandy beach of Psili Ammos (which means literally "fine sand") is a quarter of an hour's walk from here.

Back in the *taverna* Takis takes notes of our wishes on how many floors and rooms we want, sort of bathroom etc. He informs us on the average price of a lawyer, a notary, taxes, electricity and so on. He knows a lawyer who can provide us with personal tax numbers, so we don't have to arrange that ourselves. We clearly state – again – that we don't want a house right next to our neighbours like the Swiss people have, he ensures us that that won't happen. He shows us an example of a contract of which I take a picture to study at home ...

When I tell that we plan to celebrate the 25th anniversary of our wedding over here he gets all excited and wants us to renew our vows in the little church over here ... on which I discretely inform him that we are not catholic - although it would make a spectacular event.

Finally we promise him that we will go and talk to our bank in the Netherlands about financing the project and at the end of May we will inform him (by e-mail) whether we wish to continue or not. He remarks that there are other people coming to look at the plots this summer but if we inform him before that we have first choice. The building can start in September and by July next year the house would be ready. The beginning sounds reasonable, but the latter we don't believe for an instant. But that's no problem, F. has to work for another 2 years before his retirement and poor me some 3 1/2 years, so we are in no hurry (which we don't tell him). Things are speeding up far more quickly than we had expected already

Somewhat flabbergasted we drive back to Pythagorion.

Tuesday 6 May 2008

When we wake up and it appears that we have not dreamed yesterday's events we study Greek for an hour and then decide to open a bank account at the local branch of the Greek National Bank. On the internet I had already checked that they provide e-banking via a website in English and it is recommended on several weblogs from expats. Plus that it has branches in

Pythagorion, Samos-Town and Karlovassi and even in Marathokampos. After some questions we are helped by a serious but friendly horn-rimmed-spectacled young man who obviously is pleasantly challenged by this new task of helping these two EU-citizens with opening a new bank account including e-banking. At some points he has to consult his superiors, mainly because we do not yet have a tax number (AFM-number). But he works his way through steadily and after 1 ½ hour we are at the point where we can deposit a symbolical 100 euro (which I collect from the ATM outside the bank), from which 7 euro is immediately subtracted for the e-banking token. The cashier looks very stern while I deposit the money but I suspect him to put on a mask to hide that he's dying of curiosity, two Dutchies opening a real bank account at his office!

We are supposed to receive a password by normal mail after which we can activate the e-banking by calling a telephone number in Athens. We assume it will work out, and maybe Friday the mail will have arrived at the bank here, so we must drop by then.

We have a *πίττα με γύρο* at Robinson's who welcomes us as usual with his broad smile. In the afternoon the clouds disappear for the major part so we take a lazy sunbath in the yard and have a chat with our Dutch neighbours who booked a charter flight at Sunweb – Martinair the airline company does not sell charter flights itself. F. waters the trees and plants with the hose. The mothy angora cats from the neighbourhood all decide that's a good spot to come drinking before it disappears into the soil. As a matter of fact, the only not-mothy cat with a shining fur we saw in main street, with an anti-lice collar – must be from a Dutchy.

Wednesday 7 May 2008

We still have a feeling like "Pinch my arm, I'll wake up from the dream, it's not true, is it?" Because it's a bit cloudy and chilly we decide to drive to Ireion to see the progress in the excavations. That is not so easy since only recently they have started to mow the high grasses; only the entrance part is cleared so far. At the back we get stuck in thistles growing across the newly constructed narrow concrete paths. It is no longer allowed to climb the ruins. Instead we take pictures of the beautiful orchids flowering everywhere. I remind myself of the wish of having orchids in my backyard, and considering the amount we saw on the plots last Monday, this might come true just like that!

We drive to the flamingo lake nearby (south-eastern) Psili Ammos where this year there is water but no flamingo in sight. We must have been terribly lucky in our first year here to spot one! Well, if things work out, we'll have plenty of opportunity to spot (many of) them earlier in the year ...

We lunch at Stelios' where his daughter Jade recognizes us immediately, it is a hearty reunion. Stelios and a friend of us (which we met before, I think) shamelessly ask us about the prices of our house and the plot, it is not terribly overpriced we learn from their reaction. They offer us all sort of well-meant advice.

The afternoon we idle away and I sketch version 3 of *To Σπίτι Μας* in a newly bought exercise book. The evening is cold so we only have a drink at the harbour.

Thursday 8 May 2008

After breakfast I send a text message to S. to congratulate her on her birthday. We study some more Greek and then visit the little office of Olympic & Aegean Airways to reconfirm our flights home. The man in the office clearly does not feel like working today; he tells us that reconfirming is not really necessary. I decide to get the car and drive the little stretch to the airport. There only the Olympic Airlines office is open; Aegean staff will come only in the afternoon. The lady tries to find the telephone number of Brussels Airlines in vain. Instead she gives us the central telephone number of Athens Airport. They provide me with the number of Brussels Airlines, first a wrong one and then the another one which informs me repeatedly that the line is busy.

After a *πίττα* at Robinson's we take the bus to Samos-Town. There they have also decided to reconstruct the main street. We stroll around; I inquire whether it is possible to take the car on the ferry to Kusadasi. No longer possible because the ferry is now run by another company, I am informed. If you want to take your car to the Turkish mainland you have to go via Chios and Izmir (Smyrna).

In the little municipal park I try to call Aegean Airlines where at first try the lady tells me the computer is out of order. When I try again 15 minutes later the computer miraculously works

again and we can reconfirm our flights (she just had not switched it on the first time, I am convinced). After that I try to reach Brussels Airlines several times in vain.

While waiting for the bus back to Pythagorion I take a quick look in a store selling kitchen equipment etc. I see a small gas heater which is just what we might need on chilly evenings. I cannot see if they sell gas cookers with gas ovens in it.

I recognize the young bus conductor on the bus back from last year. I see the ferryboat leaving for Kusadasi, it is indeed significantly smaller than the ship we used to sail with two years ago. School students hassle about the rain outside all the way back like teenagers do everywhere.

When we dine at the harbour that evening we hear a lot of firework and it seems that a new ship for excursions is christened. A little while later a group of relatively young *popes* settles down on the terrace next to us for a drink. When we have our cappuccino over there the cell phone of one of the *popes* rings and - how very appropriate - his ringtone is a Greek church chant.

Friday 9 May 2008

I begin the day by calling Brussels Airlines: the line still is busy. I decide to call the central number of Athens Airport again and there I am provided with the telephone number which proved to be wrong yesterday – but yesterday is not today so on my first try I get connected and 2 minutes later everything is settled.

The weather is lovely today, no clouds or cold wind. Everybody is convinced summer has just begun. We have a lazy morning in the sun and stick to our usual *πίττα με γύρο* at Robinson's for lunch. He also is not overthrown by the price of our house.

Inquiry at the bank learns that the mail with our password has not yet arrived. We hadn't expected differently. When I want to take money from the ATM I find that my bank card is missing. At the cottage we check all the luggage but it is nowhere to be found. A logical deduction tells us that I must have left it at the ATM in Samos Town yesterday. The street was abandoned so I hope nobody saw it and the ATM just swallowed it. Blame it on the Greek ATM's: at one the card is returned before the money comes out, and at another it is just the reverse. And add that to all the fuss about the new house! Anyway, via the help desk of our travel insurance I get the telephone number to block the card; F. still has his card so we are not poverty-stricken.

We pack our bags and have a dear goodbye at our favourite restaurant and coffee-bar.

Saturday 10 May 2008

Kordula drives us to the airport with our car – she nowadays also works for Sandy. She offers us her help might we need to arrange for some papers or need a place to stay for a few days.

At the airport it shows that there is always a higher step in things. We are charged €3.90 each for a very mediocre cup of cappuccino. Even in Athens we did not pay that much.

Back at Zaventem Airport we get a well-meant advice to take the first train in the direction of Louvain instead of waiting for the Intercity in Brussels. The man forgets to mention the extra changes we have to make on stations with only flights of stairs and no escalators. We arrive home all sticky and sweaty and decide to take the car to the airport in the future – also due to the fact that it isn't more expensive than the train and because bus 5 to Amby leaves right in front of us at the station in Maastricht despite our waving to the driver.

But every disadvantage has its own advantage, as Johan Cruijff once said, 'cause in the next bus we meet our dear friend B. who kept our keys during the holdiday.

May 2008

Whit Monday I draw the latest version of *To Σπίτι Μας* on the computer. I nose around in the Ikea brochure, make up an estimate for the costs of new furniture, a car, lawyer, notary, electricity and all other extras and compare it with our capital. It seems possible but for the fact that expensive travels to exotic places are out of the question for a while. Besides that, we already have visited most of the places on our wish-list.

Next Tuesday I use my lunch break to order a new credit card at our bank and to make an appointment for next Thursday about financing our project. I come home exactly on time to sign for the special delivery of our password for e-banking from Athens. In the evening it is Greek class again and G. warns us to be really careful about unforeseen extra costs. Such as

tiles for the floor and foundation for the terrace If I must believe him Takis and his father Athanasios are big crooks who are easily offended. I do not sleep well that night and next morning I decide to use all my professional negotiating skills and all our experiences with other cultures.

F. and I discuss our financial possibilities and draw the conclusion that selling the small holiday apartment in Scheveningen to the bank with the option to rent it until we definitely retire is the most favourable option – with a loan for the rest until we sell our semi-detached house in Maastricht, also at our retirement. We gather all the necessary papers to convince the bank of our credibility (literally). At the bank we have a long conversation with an employee, mostly about irrelevant matters, and finally in the last 5 minutes he informs us that he foresees no problem about the loan when we provide proof of our long-term employment (which we send in a few days later) - and that the bank does not buy houses anymore.

Back home we arrange a new legal expenses insurance which also covers second houses abroad within the EU. At the Sunweb website I find a lot of possibilities for four day arrangements to Samos including hotel which cost only a few euro more than a charter flight. We book one trip at the beginning of July and another one at the end of August.

At school F. gets some pissed-off remarks of some colleagues who thought he was just boasting about our plans for a Greek house and now are green with envy. My phone rings in the middle of a meeting (oops) and it turns out to be Takis who informs me that the architect has drawn a plan which he will fax me the next day (I have revived the fax in my office; fortunately the ink had not dried). Later that day I call my neighbour next to our apartment in Scheveningen for a phone number of someone who had in the past expressed interest in buying the apartment. It turns out that the latter is no longer interested but a relative of my neighbour over there is. I get hold of this N. and make an appointment for a visit in two weeks. She seems eager to come so that means I must start with a relatively high selling price; around the one a neighbour a few houses further up the street asks for his somewhat better kept apartment. F. and I decide we will go a day earlier to finish some still-awaiting tasks.

The weekend is spent on studying Greek; the exams approach. Next Monday I get a message that the plans of the architect have been scanned and e-mailed. They have but on such a small scale that they are almost unreadable. It looks like a house with a veranda and a garage under the house. The price is added, including 4000 m² ground. I send a mail in return to fax the plans on the original scale.

Since we have to send our passports to the Russian Embassy for a visa for our summer holiday, we both get identity cards at the town hall which allow us to travel freely within the EU. I call the number of the National Bank of Greece to activate our e-banking. The message “your e-banking account has now been activated” is to be handled the Greek way: it is indeed activated, but not immediately, “now” means the next day.

At the Greek class we say goodbye to G. who is leaving for Samos. He explains that in the past he has put little in writing about his house in Pevkos, that was the main source of his troubles. He tells us that Takis and Athanasios now need our money very badly for some unfamiliar reason. He advises us the Athens lawyer the Swiss neighbours also employed.

The fax spits out the architect’s plans on Wednesday. The handwritten accompanying letter is illegible; so the telephone is used as well to explain things. The price has gone up a little bit due to the large piece of land we want with the house on a spot far from possible neighbours. In my head I draw a list of matters which should be included this way.

In the evening we scan and alter the architect’s plans so it nears our idea far more. No stairs or split-level rooms for us. I e-mail it back to Takis with some comment while Edwin van der Sar wins the Champions League for Manchester United almost single-handedly.

When we happen to be in the neighbourhood of Ikea’s at Heerlen we take an hour to look around for inspiration. The shiny white kitchen with acrylic top and sink in one piece we both like best. A few coloured accents in the form of different doors or drawers might be added. We also cast a glance at the dining table of frosted glass with transparent bucket seats and chrome legs. It will be a black and white design then, but with lamps, pillows and accessories you could add colours to it. For example with a shining red tv-table with shelves above in the lounge. The multi-coloured Kewlox chest would also like nice somewhere in a corner, like a bar with glasses and bottles of drink.

It is rather lucrative to buy things at Ikea’s here and pack it together with the other items to ship to Greece, for over there Ikea’s is about 20% more expensive. The specific costs of

shipping a container to Greece are a bit hard to find on the internet since all the moving companies offer “a specific price on request”. Somewhere in a blog I find that sharing a container costs about €5000. If you want to move the furniture yourself with 3 cars and 4 persons it adds up to at least €4000 for fuel and ferryboats without insurance. Renting a minivan will probably be even more expensive ...

On the other hand you could try to sell the furniture from the house in Scheveningen at Marktplaats.nl and buy everything new in Greece....But how do you make yourself 100% clear in Greek/English at Ikea's in Athens about for instance material and size of a kitchen top with sink in one piece? And what does shipping it all from Athens to Samos cost??

The Greek exams at the end of May go well; a bit more mistakes than last year. F.'s moody about his results, as usual.

We get a message from the bank about the loan and it seems reasonable. The interest is not too high so we decide to accept the offer.

The last weekend of May we spend at the house in Scheveningen to polish it until it shines. We don't have time to fix the pipe from the kitchen stove. N. arrives on Sunday morning to have a look around the house. When I mention the price she does not blink her eyes (should have asked more!). We agree that she'll let us know her decision before July 1st.

We e-mail Takis that we'll have to sell our beach house in the NL in order to get enough money for the new house in Greece but that we definitely decide to go through with it. A few hours later he calls us, obviously pleased. Yes, G. told us they needed the money badly.

June 2008

At the 10th of June we get our certificates from the second year course Greek. We say goodbye to teacher Joke because next year we'll get another teacher – 8 of us want to go on. Maybe even a fourth year is possible if there are enough students.

In the meanwhile I get the telephone/fax number of a lawyer in Karlovassi via a friend of G.'s, R., who has a house at Koumeika. I call this Giorgos Papakonstantinou for his help and advice and add a fax to explain our situation. He replies several days later and I send a second fax with all the details. There seems to be some things that have to be worked out like the dividing of the original (agricultural) plot into four building plots. We'll see him next month to prepare things and he'll accompany us during the negotiations. Faxing by the way is not as easy as it sounds for the connection fails from time to time – the more important the message the higher the chance that the connection will fail of course. There is another telephone number on his fax paper but when I call it one time a non-English speaking lady only knows that Papakonstantinou is “στο σπίτι”, at home.

In the meanwhile the Greek soccer team performs even worse than us at the European Championship. Bep and Frans return from their holiday on Samos and report that the Greek where in deep mourning when the team did not make it to the quarter-finals. But fortunately archrival Turkey was beaten by everlasting Germany in the semi-finals.

Papakonstantinou confirms all of our appointments by fax. We're curious to find out how a Greek lawyer operates compared to a Dutch one.

That's settled then and one off the list. Now the house in Scheveningen remains to be tackled.

July 2008

Prepared for obstacles in Greece we are caught by surprise that the major problem so far lies in the Netherlands. We hear nothing from N.. I send her an e-mail and a few days later I get one back that they are busy with the financing. So I mail back that I assume that they agree with the price then and that the second half of the money may be paid at the end of the year. When we leave for Samos I still have no answer

In Greece things work out smoothly – in the Greek way. We arrive the 8th of July on a hot Samos (36°C). After some arguing we can pick up our rented car immediately to drive to Karlovassi. We have a Greek coffee in the shade at the πλατεία where I ask for the directions to the lawyer's office (δηκτιγόρο) His family name gives no reaction from the old men, but when I mention his first name (Γιόργος) they directly point me to an office around the corner. We arrive exactly at 5 o'clock and of course we have to wait an hour before he shows up. On a bicycle in a jeans with frayed seams. “Well”, I remark to F. later on, “at least we don't pay for his Mercedes and his Armani suits nor for his marbled office”. For his office is small,

dusty and a complete chaos. But he is able to dig up our file, and after we discuss the procedures – interrupted by telephone calls and people dropping in - we return to Pythagorion. Tomorrow morning we'll meet again at the *taverna* Bella Vista at half past 9.

The next morning we have another look at the plot γI ; the borders now have been determined by the Greek Land Registry. Back at the *taverna* the negotiating about the price seriously starts, after we first have offered a bottle of Dutch *jenever* as a present – like we did yesterday at the lawyer's. The architect has adapted the plan according to our wishes but has shifted the two parts of the house relative to each other which gives a nice perspective. We receive a copy of the drawing of the plot from the Land Registry. The total area of 100 m² of the house exceeds our budget since the price is determined per square building meter, so we symbolically settle for 96 m². Athanasios, Thanassis for short by the way, writes down the total price on architect's plan which I subsequently carefully fold and put away in my bag.

G. nor H. are at home, they went shopping in Karlovassi for tonight there is a small birthday party for H.'s granddaughter. We drive back to Pythagorion for lunch. There I send a fax message to G. about the morning's events and he invites us back so we drive back to Pevkos again. There we exchange the latest news and continue to Samos Town where we stop at the Suzuki car dealer. It is closed but I learn that I left my hand bag at G.'s so we drive to Pevkos for the third time that day. Driving back to Pythagorion in the dark is not easy.

The next morning we drive to the lawyer's at Karlovassi where we continue the business together with Takis and Thanassis. Our planning of rounding up everything during our stay at the end of August is met by some mumbling of the lawyer that he might not be there because he has to pick up his daughter from summer camp in Athens (later Takis tells us that he just has planned a vacation then). But it is no big deal because his sister, the notary next door, will be present. We meet her in her neatly kept office.

Next step is providing is with tax numbers (AFiMi numbers) at the municipal office. After he's torn up several forms because of miswriting Giorgos finally produces two faultless ones and wants to hand them over to the clerk on duty. But today is no AFM-day; our numbers will be provided next Monday to Giorgos.

We drive to Pevkos and have a closer look at "our" plot together with Takis. From the junction of the beach road to our most western border lies a piece of about 10 metres wide which belongs to a neighbour. The total area is too small for a building permission. We situate the west side of our house another 10 m east of our western border. That implies that we have a back yard of some 80 meters wide along the upper road but a beautiful sea-view from the living, and no neighbours in front of us. We also have a look at the energy station of the Swiss neighbour uphill but we learn that it does not function to perfection.

We have lunch at the *taverna* where we are provided with some cappuccino cups, mountain tea and honey as presents to celebrate the transaction. G. is not home so we drive back to Pythagorion where we have our own modest celebration.

Back home there is still no message from N. I call her during the weekend but get the voicemail on which I leave a message. When that does not give any response, I call her brother, my neighbour in Scheveningen. Finally N. calls me with a muddled story about a stockbroker who will visit my neighbour and give an estimation – as if he might do that by just seeing the backyard of the apartment. I refer somewhat irritated to my e-mails sent earlier but she does not give any reaction but that she'll make an offer a week from now. But when we leave for our summer holiday there still is no reaction, nor when we get back two weeks later.

We are really pissed off by the situation. I try an internal electronic ad in the "for sale" section at work, but at this time of year everybody is out. This is a bit of a financial setback, since now we'll have to use the full loan of the bank to finance the first payments, a year earlier than planned. That accounts up to some 4500 euro extra interest we'll have to pay. We decide to postpone advertising on the internet until September.

August 2008

After some to-and-fro faxing we finally receive our AFM-numbers. I transfer enough money on our Greek bank account to deposit a first down payment to Thanassis and for the lawyer and notary costs plus possible other civil service charges. There seems to be a new clerk at

Ground Affairs who suddenly has decided that the distance to the sea must be incorporated in the value of the plot.

Oh well as long as the total price of our project does not rise

A few days later I want to check our Greek bank account via the internet but I am unaware of the notification that I have to change the password after two months of non-use so after 4 trials the account is blocked. Which leads to a telephone call to the helpdesk in Athens who promise to send a new password .. to the Netherlands, we don't prefer the risky operation of sending it to the branch in Pythagorion. Just to be sure I also put some extra money on our Dutch current account. Stupid!

When I call the bank for the loan to make sure we can deposit the first big amount of money in due time, we learn that they haven't done nothing yet. We must notify our notary ourselves that a supplementary mortgage document has to be prepared. So why do we have a bank? We leave for Samos after fixing the blown fuse of the table lamp that has short circuited half our house an our before we were due to leave. Murphy's 2nd law?

At the 19th of August we arrive on Samos where we first visit the bank. The AFM-numbers are processed and the balance is updated in our bank booklet - it took only two days for the money deposited electronically from the Netherlands to arrive in the computer systems of the bank.

The next morning we drive to the notary. There we learn that the plot has been re-valued but that the conveyance fees are to be paid by the seller. Thanassis is very much pissed off by this, we can tell from his face, but, I tell the notary in my sweetest voice, he has the benefit that he does not have to place a kitchen in the house. Clearly he does not get much consolation out of this. After that we visit the department of Ground Affairs in the municipal office which happens to be a little office next to the bureau were AFM-numbers are distributed. The lady clerk stares at the forms for an eternity, sighs frequently and discusses matters profoundly with Thanassis. Later on we learn that she wants him to pay for all four plots, but he – of course - only wants to pay for the plot he's selling to us. First she wants to think things over and decide next week but because Thanassis exaggerates and tells her that we fly back tomorrow afternoon we may come back tomorrow morning. The temperature in the office is in the high 30-ies (Centigrade) by the way.

We leave with a grumbling Thanassis and drive to the Suzuki car dealer in Samos Town. There a bored lady tells us that they do not sell Jimmy jeeps with automatic transmission and no, they cannot be imported from Athens. Only for the bigger – and more expensive – Gran Vitara type.

The next morning we drive to the *taverna* Bella Vista where we talk about olives amongst other things. Takis calculates that one full-grown tree can give about 2.5 litres of oil in a good year. He knows people who might want to work the trees to harvest the olives. I fail to convince him that we do not need 20 x 2.5 litres in a year. Maybe later I can persuade him or Thanassis to sell it to the factory and share the profit or something like that... We also meet C., one of the Swiss people who live uphill from us. He tells us, that, just like us, it was love on first sight between them and Samos!

So that Thursday morning August 21st we spend again at the Ground Affairs office. After another hour of lively discussions between the lady clerk and Thanassis – we just sit and keep the polite smile plastered on our faces – I get the feeling that it leads to nowhere. Just as I realize that next October is the first possibility for F. and me to come here again – the discussion rises to a climax. I am about to give up when the lady jerks open a drawer, gets out some stamps and starts angrily stamping the forms. Thanassis grabs them quickly, motions us to follow him and when we are outside he says, with a broad smile: "Okay!!" Totally stunned we follow him to the notary who – after a short update in Greek – confirms that the matter has been settled. Finally the documents for the ground and the building of the house can be signed. We now proceed to the stadium of several payments which have to be done but that only takes half an hour. To our amusement the notary hands us a scrap of paper with the amount of money we owe her – and she wants to be paid cash. I drive back to Pythagorion with a splitting headache from all the compulsory smiling in stuffy offices.

Back home in the NL we continue the process of organizing the supplementary mortgage for the loan. The notarial act is approved the 29th of August. We are perplexed when we find an amount of 0.1% of the loan as commision for the bank – bloody hell, we've arranged everything ourselves!

We try to earn some money back with a kitchen sales promotion at Ikea's, but it starts at €4500 which we by far hadn't planned to spend on our kitchen.