

DREAMHOUSE IN GREECE PART 4: 2010-2011

2010

The winter in Holland lasts long. Between half December and half March it is a continuous cycle of snow followed by thawing. Everybody is relieved when spring finally arrives. Apart from the usual requests for preplanned payment of money for the swimming pool, we here nothing from Samos.

April/May 2010

R&D are the first ones to fly to Samos for Easter. R. sends us pictures of the hole in our yard what one day will have to be a pool. Shortly after that Takis calls and tells us that the works are delayed because of the affluent rain that winter. The concrete can only be poured after the soil is completely dry. What a coincidence, that telephone call ...

We ourselves grab the plane to Samos on the last day of April. We reconnect the battery of our car and instantly it starts, to take us 'back home' after a stopover at the supermarket near the airport. We find that there still only is a hole in front of our house. As we open the blinds in front of the windows we hear a loud honking. It is good old Stamatis who almost falls out of his green tricycle pick-up car to greet us. A hearty welcome!

We pick up the garland of flowers to hang it over our front door. It is a habit to honour Demeter, the goddess of the harvest, who has her birthday on the 1st of May, Labour Day as well. We celebrate it with G&D; the rest of the παρέα is not present. R&D have returned to Belgium till July.

G&D had had to clean their house thoroughly because of the mould that had formed after the winter rains. We only found a green spot of the mould on the bed cover of the spare bed in the studio annex guest room. During the day we open all the windows so that the house is aired and warmed by the sun. Just before sunset we close them again so that the warmth stays in. the temperature at night is agreeable.

The grass in the olive orchard below us is already dried out; last year it was still green around this time of year. I wonder how long it is since the rains stopped. The abundance of rain in the last winter benefits the water supply during the summer, that's for sure. The tap water flows directly from the well near Koumeika, which in its turn is fed by the rain which has trickled down to the ground water. It is perfectly safe to drink it straight from the tap. We do not pour bleach into the toilet to disinfect it; cleaning vinegar also does the trick. The sewage runs into the septic tank whose contents also end in the groundwater. So no bleach for us!

We enjoy our beautiful house, the exuberant nature and the nice temperatures enormously. Skinny drops by, he survived winter. Hungry as ever he attacks the dry titbits of catfood from Lilian that we kept during the winter. It's really to his taste, we see. Which cannot be said of the coffee we make out of the can of instant cappuccino which was a left over of last year. The taste has gone rancid so we discard it.

We notice some special birds which we look up in our field guide. Some are migrants like the blueheaded Crezchmar's bunting. Samos, being so close to Near Asia, is on one of the major migrating routes from Northern Europe/Asia to the South (the other being over the coastal areas of the Netherlands and Belgium). The loud whistling blackeared wheatear is a stayer.

The magpies in the orchard below us fiercely quarrel from time to time, as usual. Probably to chase away the cats. We catch a glimpse of the two big birds of prey, the rare Bonelli eagles. They live in the mountain hills behind us. Their wingspan is about one meter and a half, the field guide says.

In the evening, we often hear the owl calling as we lay down in bed. We do not hear the rock partridges – maybe they were all killed in last hunting season. Overhunting is a massive problem in Greece. Like in many situations there is no staff to control the permits. A pity, it is such a nice sound in the morning to wake up with, their gentle cuckooing and rummaging through the bushes near our house. You hardly ever see them – they are very shy because of the hunting. Though that is why they were reintroduced several years ago. But still ...

Our cell phones with Greek sim cards do not work. When we visit the Vodafone shop in Karlovassi we learn that because of a new anti corruption law, every simcard has to be registered on a person, including prepaid ones. So we register ourselves. We also buy a 10 day prepaid 3G broadband internet card for the laptop. It works, but 3G speed in Greece is somewhat different from the Dutch one. Especially in the afternoon, at siesta time, it seems that the data are sent with the old-fashioned hand operated telegraph.

Takis has paid our road tax and hands us the 2010 sticker for our car. At the garage we make arrangement for the new car insurance. The lady from the house insurance is not in her office in Karlovassi so we'll see her in August then.

We drive to Votsalalia at the other side of the bay. It is the nearest place to find an ATM, so we are told. We do find it in this small village which actually only consists of a beach road lined with many bars, restaurants, hotels and waterbike-rentals. Scheveningen on Samos, we name it, the Belgians call it Blankenberge – Samos. It is much bigger than our next village Balos, which also has some hotels and restaurant but with a much more intimate atmosphere.

On the way back we stop at the little sleepy harbour of Ormos Marathokampos. A few times a week it is visited by ferryboats – we can see that from our house. Frequency drops down when the season closes. A cormorant floats around in the harbour, diving from time to time for some fish. At one side there is a little supermarket, the nearest for us if you don't count the small shop in Koumeika. When we are almost back home a big hare crosses the road.

One of the last evenings G. and D. take us out to Skouraiika, for a trip around the tavernas there. The car is parked at the beautiful cemetery where the mother of Thanassis is buried. We are well received and explain that we live in the new house. The wine and ouzo are poured freely, every man wants to boast about his financial capability to treat these ξενούς to a bottle of drink. As the evenings proceed an old Dutch proverb becomes true: When the liquor is in the man, the wisdom is lies at the bottom of the can. The frustrations about the economical crisis Greece flare up, and Merkel is called the new Χίτλερ. We wisely do not respond. Introspection and reflection are not Greek qualities, we conclude.

We do some odd jobs in our house and after two sunny weeks we fly back to the Netherlands. In mind we bear the thought that next spring we will be able to come at Easter, outside the season, because by then F. will be συνταξιούχος, that is retired!

June/July 2010

C. sends us a picture of the swimming pool. Some rusty metal framework has been made, nothing else.

R. starts his Summer holiday at the beginning of July and e-mails his adventures from time to time. After a small bushfire underneath Vathi, to our dismay a big bushfire starts in the hills near Marathokampos. It even makes the headlines in the Dutch news. The smoke clouds can be seen on satellite images. And for a change, the Greek join forces in brotherhood: police, voluntary firebrigade, civil servants, the army, shopkeepers, villagers, hotel staff and who ever can hold a bucket. All day and all night and another day long, united, without breaks, suddenly no quarrels nor reproaches. They can if they want!

Some 50 meters outside Votsalakia the fire is stopped. Everybody is relieved that the season is saved for Votsalakia. According to the rumours the fire was started by a fallen smoke-pot of a bee-keeper.

August/September 2010

We fly to Samos on the 10th of August for our Summer holiday. It is hot so we do the remainder of the odd jobs at a slow pace. During the week it gets even hotter, about 40 degrees Centigrade (over a 100 degrees Fahrenheit). We stay indoors the bigger part of the day. During the siesta we lie down on our bed with all the fans at maximum speed, watching some DVD.

It's the time of the year for the Perseids, the meteorite swarm, so one of the first nights I put out the garden chair in its reclined position, facing north, and, well covered with DEET, around 10 o'clock I lie down to watch the sky. In the next hour I observe a dozen or so beautiful "falling stars" lighting up across the sky. Next time I'll have to work something out to take pictures of this phenomena.

We settle the house and car insurance. Mrs Axiotis from the garage sends us the new receipt by e-mail so we can print it and put the copy it on the front car window. The man from the ρεύμα drops by on a moped to check the meter. We pay the bills via Takis.

Internet is quite a different story. We want to start a subscription and therefore we do not only need an ID or Residence Permit. We also need proof that we are legally residing here, and that means proof of evidence that you have paid your taxes. That can be proven by the fact that you are connected to the ρεύμα which in its turn can be proven by a bill for the ρεύμα. The second time we drop by the Vodafone store we hand the man a copy of the bill. Nothing happens concerning connecting the laptop to the internet. When we drop by for the third time we learn that the bill was too old, they need a recent one. This we provide on our fourth visit and hurray, one day later we are allowed on to the internet.

The first bill of the internet subscription shows that we have to pay the low price of the on line registration (which we were told was not possible as we dealt with it in a real, non-virtual store) and that we do not have to pay extra for the MB we used above our limit – which were accurately specified on the back side of the bill. Or maybe that is settled once a year? R. told us you may postpone your one year subscription when you are not using it – we'll keep that for the end of our holiday.

Only at the end of August the temperatures lower to an agreeable height so we can make some trips. R&D but also H&J entertain a lot of guests so there is always someone to welcome or say goodbye to over a dinner or a drink at Bella Vista or in Balos.

On one occasion we meet a young Dutch couple on holiday on Samos. The young man tells us that his father is the CEO of SBS 6, a Dutch commercial tv channel. We advise him not to tell that to any Greek, since it was SBS 6 who broadcasted the images of the fires near Votsalakia while emphasizing the evacuation of the nearby hotels. Which images went all the way around Western Europe. The Samians still are very angry about it, claiming that that is the way to ruin tourism. That they desperately need the tourist euros has become clear to them, eventually. Although we still don't understand that the prices of the drinks in the

tavernas in the tourist areas have gone up, again. You now pay 3.20 euro for a regular cappuccino in Pythagorion, last year it was 2.80 euro. And everybody complains that the terraces are empty this year. They cannot see the difference between making a one time profit of 1 euro or a profit of two time 65 cents Happy hour as a phenomena to lure tourists also is unknown to them .. Talking about market mechanism orientation ...

One day we drive to Lands End at the utmost western part of the island, over narrow unpaved roads. We arrive a sheltered for a nice swim. On the way back G.'s car won't start so H. has to wriggle alongside it on the steep road to connect the cables. It starts again and we drive to the nearby restaurant for a nice meal. We have to use a lot of DEET lotion since there are a lot of stinging flies.

It seems to be a good year for the insects, because we find a lot of scorpions on our terrace, even after we sprayed it with scorpion poison (some pyrethroid derivative). Often we have to beat one to death in the morning when we open the door in order to avoid stepping on them or allowing them to slip inside. F. thinks he steps on one inside the house during the night at a toilet visit, but it is a very large centipode. Which may have come out of the bathroom drain, so that is sprinkled with scorpion poison too. He was really scared – F., but probably also the centipode.

We do not hear rats running under the roof piles anymore, so we assume the rat poison which we put there last autumn did its job. And of course the closing of the holes underneath the tiles with plaster and netting also helped.

On the 23rd of August we attend the celebration of the Panagia at the little church above Pefkos; but only the first part as it goes on for hours and hours as we leave for a nice meal at the Cypriot restaurant at Balos.

A few days later we board a ferry at Ormos with the full παρέα and some more for a day trip to Fourni. On the way we see some dolphins tumbling over each other: our first! G. has phoned us a few times to report that we could see them in the bay from our house, but we always were too late. On Fourni we admire the little church and the Cycladic windmill and then sit down for Fourni's specialty: lobster with spaghetti at a fair price.

On the third of September F. celebrates his retirement with a dinner at Bella Vista. We tell Takis that we had originally planned to throw a pool party. He laughs sourly. When we arrived a few weeks ago we hadn't even bothered to ask whether they would continue to work at the pool. In August every man/firm/shop/ferry is on vacation.

To our astonishment Psylo Takis (Big Takis, the brother-in-law of the other Takis) shows up at our house one day to inspect the possibilities to connect our satellite tv. He'll send someone, he says, but when I leave in September no one has come yet.

As a goodbye for me we go for a pizza in Votsalakia on the 12th of September. I find it very crowded.

When I fly back, the hottest news on the island is that a film is going to be made of the life of Pythagoras, with Penelope Cruz in the leading female role. In October already!

October 2010

F. already is on Samos for 8 weeks when I fly to the island for the third time that year. The season is slowly coming to an end, so the last living creatures F. can talk to are a praying mantis and the newly planted fig trees. Before that he socialized with H.'s daughter K. her husband J., also an Apple fan, so they had enough to tell each other. The weeks prior to that I regularly received e-mails with stories and pictures of outings, drinking parties and suppers and so on. S. stayed for a while, the swimming lessons were held at R&D's swimming pool.

So on Thursday the 5th of October I land on Samos, with my eyes closed firmly, which is quite unusual for me. It is not a happy landing. To begin with, we arrive from the "wrong" side, towards the mountain instead of away from it. Secondly there is a fierce wind blowing which makes the airplane shake and shudder all over. When I open my eyes for a peek, we speed past the arrival hall so that I fear the plane really will not be able to stop at the end of the landing strip. Which ofcourse it does, fortunately.

The next day we go to Ormos for some shopping and afterwards enjoy the view from the terrace since it still is really nice weather. The hole for the pool lies abandoned; it looks more like a terrarium with the weeds sticking out half a meter between the rusty metal framework. When it had rained on the first of September and some water had remained after it stopped, F. had climbed down the hole shouting: "Hurray! I've got water in my swimming pool!"

Aris had dropped by during the month of September, but only to pick up some wood or tiles or returning them.. We had looked forward to swimming in our pool this summer but so far we wondered whenever it would be finished ..

After a siesta we get up and I mentally prepare myself for the job of installing the satellite dish and the receiver with the help of the newly bought Sathfinder, so we finally might be able to watch the telly. The man Psylo Takis had promised to send had only been interested in selling us his own equipment, nothing of our material was right according to him. So we had dismissed him. Exactly as I pull out the box with

equipment a white minivan stops on the road above us and drives back till our entry. It comes down the slope and out gets German J. He tells us that he has come to help us with the satellite tv. That was a promise he made in May ... but it appears that F. had met him in Bella Vista recently.

J. starts to work and after a short while he really gets things working. The free channels are available, for our subscription of the Dutch channels we have to call the Dutch cable company to reactivate the subscription. F. who has been deprived of television for two months watches it till late night.

The next morning we wake up by noise from the yard. It is Aris who is reconnecting the tubing for the concrete to be poured into the pool hole. Would it really ... we dare not hope. Instead we try the telly and indeed we get our Dutch tv channels.

Feeling sorry for all the hungry cats, F. had fed them all during my absence. I only allowed my friend Skinny to eat, and chased away all the others. But now it seems that a hierarchy fight has taken place and Vieze has won it. I had named it Vieze (Dirty) because it had a nasty, dirty wound at its neck last Spring. We don't see Skinny anymore, alas! But, so I hope, maybe he just wandered off. Last Summer we had waited three weeks before he showed up.

Next morning we rise early and soon Aris and a mate (his nephew according to F.) show up. And after another while a big truck with a concrete mixer arrives. Believe it or not, the concrete is poured into the hole while Aris and Nephew work themselves into a sweat to spread it out manually, with shovels and rakes. Thanassis shows up and has a big laugh when I tell him: "Ο 'Αρις πάντα δουλεύει πάρα πολύ" (Aris is always working very hard). When the boys leave after a day of heavy labour, they instruct us to spray the concrete another two times that evening.

Aris shows up next day and works all day long to finish the wooden formwork for the walls of the pool. He doesn't want coffee but a beer.

At the end of the afternoon German J. arrives to finish the work on the satellite tv. He attaches it to the piping of the electricity cables at the back of the house, so it is out of sight from the terrace. He also pulls the cables through the tubing behind the walls – via the little plates on the wall. That's what they are for!

As we clear out the waste disposal we discover that our spare gas bottle is missing – and it is said that people never steal on Samos?? J. stays for dinner – Fried fish with homemade mashed potatoes and salad and icecream for desert.

That Sunday is the definite end of the tourist season. The weather gives one more try so it is a beautiful day, sunny, about 26 degrees Celsius with a little bit of wind. We have an elaborate lunch and it tastes really good to me. Last Summer I had it three times a week and that was too much.

We chat with Takis and Thanassis, also about the work on the swimming pool. When I remark that rain is forecasted for next week, they wave it aside "That is only on the north side of the island, not here!" My story of the disappearing gas bottle gives them a fit of laughter. It appears that they have borrowed it last week since they ran out of gas in the restaurant and it seems the island is short of gas bottles lately. That may be correct since last time we passed the firm a little outside Karlovassi, we saw no bottles standing in the rack next to the entry. Probably a strike somewhere in the distribution line.

We end that Sunday on our terrace where we enjoy another beautiful sunset. The sun disappears behind the hills of Ikaria. The 21st of June it sets northeast of the highest peak of Kerkis mountain, G. has told us. We decide to go and check that ourselves one day.

On Monday we start with painting the outside woodwork for a second time and then leave for shopping at Karlovassi. Aris and Takis drive up to our house to continue the work on the pool. In Karlovassi we meet B. so we can already wish her Καλό χειμώνα (Good winter).

Back at the house F. has a beer with the pool workers. They tell him the next steps: first the wooden formwork must be ready, then the electricity and the lamps, and then another batch of concrete to fill up the walls.

Ha, that you might wish! Next day, Tuesday, is cloudy with a few drops of rain. No sign of the pool workers. We walk to Skouraiika, where it is very silent. No one to see, only one man who can tell us that the mail is no longer delivered in the kafeneion since it is closed. The owner had a bad health and has moved to his daughter in Athens for care. The mail is now delivered in Pefkos.

Wednesday and Thursday it also rains. We do some odd jobs in the house and take the terrace furniture inside. We take a lazy spell. When I call Takis for some messages he tells us that they are doing some construction work in the municipality of Marathokampos. As it turns out elections are coming up, next November, and Thanassis is running for mayor of Marathokampos. We fear that not much work will be done on the swimming pool before the elections.

On Friday we visit the Vodafone shop for payment of ours and R.'s last term before the winter. R.'s is no problem, we have the bill, but our bill has not yet arrived. The man assures us that it will be no problem to pay it next April. We wish him and the man at the vegetable store a Καλό χειμώνα. At the end of the afternoon we drive to Koumeika to fetch the last mail for R. at Maraki's. The chairs are occupied by all the

locals (= men), German J. also drops by and hands us some material to cover the sockets of the cable plugs for the tv.

The last days we encounter a strange phenomena. All the jobs are done! We seem unaccustomed to it. We have plenty of ideas for hobbies, but it seems a bit useless to start them now only for a few days.

A big swarm of small, dark grey birds of prey suddenly appears. The birds circle around in our valley for two days. Our field guide tells us that they are Eleonora's Falcons. Suddenly they have disappeared, to Madagascar for the winter, the guide tells us.

The last Sunday F. picks a bucket full of olives and spread them out on a piece of cloth to dry a little bit. It rains now and again. After we pack our suitcases with the little we want to take back (things to repair), we drive to the house of Thanassis and Roula next to the now abandoned taverna, to say goodbye. There we repeat our rehearsed story that we were sad (στενοχωρισμένοι) that the swimming pool was not ready and that we will be very happy (χαρούμενοι) when it is next year. Thanassis reassures us that it will be finished quite fast (γρήγορα), as will be the platform for the telescope. We tell them that we plan to come at Easter next year, by train, with stops at Budapest, Thessaloniki and Athens, like a sort of extra holiday (διακοπές).

We finish the remainders in the refrigerator and watch telly. Dutch programmes, that is. Greek programmes are not to our taste, being copies of Rai Uno with scarcely clothed young women next to elder men in gray suits.

Monday October 18th we close the house for another half year – with melancholy in our hearts.

Rounding the curve near the little canyon we suddenly perceive the rock partridges – they're back! They obviously survived the hunting season and reappear now things have quieted down. Καλό ταξίδι they seem to say – what a nice goodbye!

November 2010

R&D spend a weekend in the South Limburg hills at the end of the month. That Saturday we meet for a walk alongside the Geul at Ingendaal, G. and his dog S. have come too. Winter has already begun. Afterwards we hand them a print of Τα νέα των Σκουραϊκών (Skouraiika News) that we found on the internet. It appears that Thanassis has lost the elections. In a letter to the editor he announces – after some accusations at his opponents - that he will resign from all his public activities.

Hm, we think, at least now he has time enough for the swimming pool and the platform. Of which we have heard nothing so far.

January/February 2011

After the holiday season I send Takis an e-mail for an update on the swimming pool project. After a month of hearing nothing I call him. The work is going according to plan, he assures me, when we come in April we will be able to start filling the pool with water.

Our plan to travel to Thessaloniki by train is dismissed. When we visit the office of the Deutsche Bahn in Aachen the helpful lady at the desk informs us, after elaborate enquiries at headquarter's in Berlin, that no reservation can be made for the stretch Bucharest-Thessaloniki. We ourselves could not find it on the internet either by the way. We might wind up in Bucharest in the week before Easter with a chance of trains being fully booked because many Greeks will want to travel home for the holidays. The flight from Thessaloniki to Samos is only twice a week so we estimate the risk of missing it fairly evident. We decide to try it one other time when we have more time on our hands.

Back home at the telephone another nice lady of Aegean Airlines helps us change the flight Thessaloniki-Samos in to Düsseldorf-Athens-Samos with a stopover in Athens to have an elaborate tour of the new Acropolis Museum this time. For the return flight we already had booked the direct charter of Air Berlin from Samos to Düsseldorf, the first one of the year on May 2nd.

March 2011

We compare prices of Air Berlin and Dutch tour operator Sunweb for our holiday at the end of the summer. Sunweb is somewhat cheaper. When we consider F.'s free train tickets and my reduces train fares the choice is easy: a charter flight with Sunweb for 3 weeks saves us 150 euro parking fee at Düsseldorf. F&B will join us for two weeks.

We also persuade RS to join us for two weeks; after some hesitation her son books her a return flight Düsseldorf-Samos with Air Berlin. I strongly suspect that, although she has travelled a lot with groups, she's never had to organise something like that on herself before.

April 2011

After a long winter with very much snow finally the month has come in which we shall visit our beautiful house again. That is, after the Greek air controllers first terrified us with their announcement of strikes at smaller airports during the Easter break. Just to be sure I book two seats on the ferry from Piraeus to Samos.

Eventually the pressure from the Greek people gets too high because they too fear of not being able to reach their home for the celebrations. The strike is postponed till after Easter and then only from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. the next morning.

After visiting the new Acropolis Museum - runner up for the title "best museum of Europe" - we have a smooth landing on Samos. Temperature is 15 degrees Centigrade. Neighbour G. awaits us and drives us home via a new route through Spartarei. On the way he stops at the bakery in Pirgos for fresh bread. The baker shows us an Easter Man he made from bread dough. "Tomorrow I am going to do that too" I manage to tell him in Greek.

After arriving "home" the first thing we do is switch on the electric air heaters - it is cold inside!! The temperature rises in due time.

We leave for Ormos to meet with W. for an ouzo - I met him on the Dutch internet forum on Greece and Samos. First we visit the small supermarket for some elementary groceries and then we (continue to) chat with W. and his wife and their English neighbours.

Returning home we clear up the house for the remaining part. The tv does not work. In the evening we dine with our παρέα, again in Ormos since that is where the nearest opened restaurant is at this time of year.

The next days the weather remains cold. We shop at the cheap Lidl and clean the house. The electric blankets come very handy at night when we tuck in. We try to persuade German J. to drop by and help us again with the tv but that does not work out.

Work has been done on the swimming pool - that is true. The concrete form has been completely finished and the ground around it has been levelled. Also connections and tubing have been made. When we ask, we are told that there has been a problem with the delivery of the lamps, that's why nothing more has been done so far. Next week the painting will start, we are promised (no way - next week it rains on and off).

To our surprise a nice concrete path has been laid out to the terrace on the level below us. There a concrete platform of 4.5 x 4.5 m has been poured - we'd asked for a 3 x 3 m platform. We conclude that since the platform is so big we might as well build a wooden cabin as a second guest room on it besides from using it as an observatory for the telescope. The visiting cats (Vieze/Dirty, Zusje/Sister, black&white Kallista and a new striped one with a big white spot under the neck - alas no Skinny) use the concrete path like naturals and so F. baptises it "the catwalk".

Behind our property a stretch of land at the other side of the road is levelled into terraces. Our last information that it was going to be used to build another house proves to be outdated since Thanassis tells us that a photovoltaic electric park is going to be made - a green energy project so to say. Much quieter than new neighbours, we contemplate. As it shows the old high voltage mast on our land has been replaced by a new one next to the new energy park. When we have another good look we discover that our electric cables connection has also been slightly altered and that might have led to a distortion of the satellite receiver which is connected with it for stability - we have a photo of last year's situation to compare it. As a revenge the wasps have built a new nest in the meter box of the ρεύμα on the outside wall of our house. Thanassis promises to remove it but when he waits as long as usual they will have flown away by themselves I suppose.

Nearing Easter the weather somewhat changes for the better so we celebrate the traditional Easter lunch with Thanassis, his whole family and the παρέα in the sunshine on the parking lot in front of the taverna. The wind is still cold though. It is a hearty reunion. The men are expected at 10 a.m. already to put the goat on the spit (preceded by the ritual killing of it, I tease them). I fry Fried some eggs for breakfast since I assume they will also start on the ouzo at 10 a.m. At noon the ladies are expected. I hand out my Easter Men, which have turned out fairly well after some work on my part. We had some not-dried-out text markers at the house so I even decorated the eggs and wrote "Καλό Πάσχα" on them. I made 8, so I am even able to give G.'s neighbour Giorgos one when he drops by. When the goat and the deserts are finished Giorgos presents a bottle of home made wine which tastes awful like imitation sherry where something has gone wrong in the ripening process.

The cold wind has had its effect because the next day we both suffer from back pains as a result from cold back muscles we assume. But it diminishes over the next days and we are able to visit the Valley of the Nightingales near Manolates with the παρέα. The little bridge across the river has collapsed so we have some trouble finding the right path leading to it. When we find it the path is so overgrown that it looks like we're the first visitors that year. H. and F. claim that they hear the nightingale singing but according to me it is not so: it is a - far too short - rhythm it sings and nightingales sing in June, don't they?

For the walk back we have to cross the water, across a concrete bedding that has been made. Everybody unties his shoes, undoes his socks and rolls up the sleeves of his pants. Carefully we wade through the water because the floor is a bit slippery due to the algae. The feet are dried and socks and shoes put back on. An old Greek man which observed the whole process then shows us another way of crossing the river: a bit further

along he jumps from (dry) stone on to (dry) stone and crosses in some 2 seconds. We joke with him in Greek about our clumsiness. He tells us that we still have to cross the water another 2 times.

After a while we indeed reach another crossing. D. decides it is not too deep and walks on with her shoes still on. She miscalculated and wets her shoes and socks through and through. Behind us the old man suddenly reappears in a little pick-up truck. H. and I run to the car and he drives us across. He returns and drives the other ones across too. Then we all climb in the back and he drives us across the 3rd crossing as well; we end up quite near to where we parked our cars. We thank the man and imagine him telling stories at home about these crazy ξένους he met today. We have lunch at Agios Konstantinos in one of the very few restaurants that are open.

The days thereafter it rains from time to time so we do the odd jobs around the house. I take the "borrowed" gas bottle back myself when I go to see Roula, Thanassis' wife, for something else. Otherwise we'll have to wait for it forever, we guess.

We measure the space above the wardrobe in the sleeping room and decide two little Ikea closets just fit in. R. might bring them when he drives to Samos next June. For F&B we make a reservation for the rooms above the taverna for them to stay next August when RS also comes to visit us. I myself collect the borrowed gas bottle from last year from the taverna - tired from waiting - and we put it in the (locked) garden closet outside the house. In Karlovassi we manage to renew our internet subscription after one and a half our waiting for "connection with Athens". Back home I am able to set up a wifi network from the laptop so that we can internet on the iPhones and iPad through the house and on the terrace. The speed is absolutely NOT 3G but, "it's the Greece, hey" as R. always says. An attempt to find the firm near Vathi which should deliver do-it-yourself ready-made wooden cabins fails. Either it's broke or nothing was outside or it was just simply closed because of the @@@###!!!** weather.

When it is dry for some hours we manage, with infinite patience, to return the satellite receiver back into position. After reactivation of the smart cards we are able to watch the Royal Wedding in HD, expertly reviewed by the ladies of our παρέα.

One of our last days we are invited for a (real, live) wedding. The old feud between Thanassis and his brother Kostas seems to have come to an end. Therefore the wedding of Kostas' eldest son with a Bulgarian girl is celebrated at Thanassis' taverna. (The feud between Thanassis and his other brother Pantelis, who lives between G. and H., still seems to be very much alive though.)

The bride is much younger than Kostas' son, but it appears to be his second marriage. The pope is also present and secretly we are informed that the Greek orthodox church allows divorces. The mood is excellent and just after I remark that nowadays you don't see much of the old-fashioned platesmashing anymore in modern Greece, I am immediately proven wrong. It does still exist, we conclude as a couple of plates crash on the floor under loud cheering.

The Bulgarian girl though shows to be a young lady of substance since in the wee hours of the night she determinedly climbs one of the tables in her wedding gown to perform a traditional Bulgarian dance, still steady on her feet. I suddenly very much feel myself present in the Balkan area.

The little orchestra is assisted by a violinist/singer. He looks like a serious Athenian student but the talented young man knows how to get a party going! I suddenly know who I want to perform on our 25th wedding anniversary in two years.

A dinner at Mimi's in Balos, the best restaurant in the surroundings according to me, rounds up the spring holidays.

June 2011

Charis Alexiou performs in Brussels. What a passionate woman! That she is a good singer is, of course, no news for us. R. and D. and some relatives also attend the concert. R. tells us that he can take all our Ikea packages with him in the car when he drives to Samos this month. Good, that saves us some awkward times at the airport.

And again Takis calls and again they need money. As deposit for their solar project this time. But, but, the swimming pool will be really, really finished this summer.

When we return from a tour around Greek Sicily G. texts us from Samos that our swimming pool has been painted. He took our dongle with our Greek simcard along with him but it seems that texting still is faster than internet. At that time he'd also collected the packages for R. to transport to Samos.

They arrive on Samos in one piece, R. informs us later on. He also tells us that big Takis, Thanassis' son in law, has decided to emigrate to the USA with his wife and children. It appears that he also has American citizenship. Thanassis is very sad about it. I myself contemplate that it must not be easy to find a job in the USA. There's also crisis and unemployment over there.

August/September 2011

I work all summer long and finally as the end of August has arrived we find ourselves joining up with F & B at the busstop in Amby at nine o'clock in the evening. We travel by train through Schiphol this time since in high season the train is considerably cheaper than supervised parking of the car. Also F & B can take with them a suitcase full of things for our house since they themselves always travel lightly.

After some hanging around at Schiphol we board the plane early in the morning and enjoy the Samos sun at 9:30 am. We do some shopping at the mini market near the airport and not very long afterwards we arrive at the house. We start by emptying the studio/guest room from the garden furniture and finish by making the spare beds. In the afternoon it is still hot so the fans work at full speed.

One of the first matters to take care of is paying the car insurance at the car dealer. Via e-mail we had arranged that the Axiotis family would pay it in advance, very kind of them. Next is the fire insurance of the house; so far there haven't been any serious bush fires on the island (fingers crossed).

It did happen that one of the first nights we smelled a strong fire odor hanging in the air and we'd seen some smoke clouds drifting by behind the mountain. But as we learned it was a bush fire across the strait in the area of Turkish Kusadasi; the strong eastern wind had blown it to Samos.

Some nights we notice a pattern with broad vertical bands of blue and orange in the air at sunset. I wonder if this is some dispersing effect of the smoke particles still in the air. Later on I am told that it is indeed an effect of dispersion combined with the negative and positive interference of the light waves.

One day as I open the lid of the compost heap to empty the bucket with vegetable rests into it, I discover a gas bottle standing right in the middle. So that's where it was put we thought they never brought it back

The first week we follow a scheme of alternatively an excursion day and a work day. F. helps us to mount the little chests on top of the wardrobe chest so all the loose things can be put in, out of sight.

At night dinner is on the terrace where we admire the stars and the hooting of the owl. We also find a new type of gecko, a pinkish one, stuck on the wall just under the roof tiles.

After a week we move F & B to the apartment at Bella Vista and pick up RS at the airport. She's the first one to emerge from the arrivals hall. The car is big enough so we do some excursions that week with the five of us comfortably seated.

We do the tour of driving back to Pevkos via Spartharei - with spectacular views. When we arrive back home a snake quickly slides away from the sunny shelter between stone terrace and wall of the study, to a safe hiding under a Venetian door on the terrace. B. wants to take a picture and approaches it with her open sandals - I warn her to keep away. The frightened animal eventually flees, down into the valley. When we look it up it appears to be a - poisonous - large whip snake.

This year we'd decided not to immerse the terrace with scorpion poison. Last year we had the impression that it only made them groggy and that they lingered on the terrace when the sun rose, not knowing where to go. When we opened the door in the morning they would be inclined to run inside looking for a cool place.

Now the fall into the swimming pool at night so after breakfast we descend into it and help them to an afterlife. I alert F. not to throw them onto the "grass" surrounding the terrace afterwards - the hook at the end of the tail is still filled with poison after they're already dead and you don't want to step onto that!

On day I violently hit the brakes of the car when I spot a chameleon slowly crossing the road just under H's house. Everybody is startled as they're thrown forward but I'm forgiven as they learn the reason. We take a picture and put the animal safely away in the scrubland alongside the road. But, as we find out, the stupid animal returned to cross the road again and is found flat dead (literally!) the next day.

The whole of the *παρέα* is present so there's always a group organising a field trip or a get-together-meal in a restaurant. Unfortunately we are not able to repeat last year's outing to Fourni to indulge in spaghetti & lobster: the day-trip boat does not sail this year. Instead we make a trip to Drakei with C. and his family, an area that we have not explored before. We decide to come back next year in spring because the flowers will be certainly different up there in the north from around our house in the south-west.

D & L invite everybody over for a small party. They were secretly married last month. The experiment of their grass lawn has been a failure, we see. Their house is now connected to C&R's one and Y&N's one by a stone wall so that they now formally are one building. For regulations prescribe that it is not allowed to have three separate houses build on a plot of that (relatively small) size (*sic!*)

R. remembers that the wooden cabins that we were looking for last spring are being sold by Samoxyl. drop at Samoxyl's to ask for a price and almost fall down for our chair when they tell us - three times the price of what you pay in the NL! "Yes, but it already costs 2000 euro to transport it to the island" we are told. We decide the idea still needs a serious amount of thinking it over again.

One morning we notice R&D walking by with some relatives. D.'s sister and her husband are interested in the plot above the road, next to the solar panel project, that is still for sale. It is the last of the four plots that we inspected in 2008. We meet them afterwards, they seem nice people to have as neighbours.

As I expected no work is done on the swimming pool. Instead we swim in the sea off the beach at the taverna.

After two sunny weeks we drive F & B back to the airport. R & D now have new guests of which the suitcases have gone missing on arrival, so we promise to inquire for them since we are there. No, nothing yet, I am told after someone finally shows up at the little office of lost & found. But they spoke prematurely for when I return from the toilet I hear an announcement in Greek from which I distill the badly pronounced name of R & D's guests. And yes, oh coincidence, the suitcases just happened to arrive

After another week we drive RS back to the airport. When we walk into Pythagorion for a drink at our favorite coffee bar we almost stumble on the tourists. Hmm.... half september and still so many tourists good for the island, we think. It'll probably be due to the rainy summer in North Western Europe and the turmoil in Northern Africa. Sandy from the car rental company tells us that again he has a very good season, in fact he now has branches on Kos, Rhodes, Naxos, Karpathos, Chios and Lesvos and in Athens as well. I do hope things will go well next year too but when Northern Africa has calmed down and/or there is a really sunny summer in North Western Europe it might become quite a different story

Our little fig trees have recovered again after the dry summer; when we arrived there were hardly any leaves left, only some small green buds. But now the leaves are back on. Half of the ice flowers have survived too, N. got me them in the spring. We'll ask R. and her family to water them when we leave until we return in October.

After a quiet day for ourselves we end the summer with a dinner at Ormos with the *παρέα* in a taverna at the end of the boulevard. It is well known for its *Γαρίδες Σαγανάκι*, shrimps in tomato and feta sauce. That particular dish can be eaten in many restaurants, with a big variety in quality. Here however it is made of large scampis in a creamy sauce; Yammie!

October 2011

Originally we had booked a cultural trip around Northern Greece but since there were not enough participants it is cancelled. So we fly to our beloved Samos again, for two weeks. This time without guests so we can have a good rest.

The weather starts out sunny but it starts to rain after a few days. It is good for the land, and as it betters after a few days we see a green sprigs appearing in the valley. I do some photography of autumn flowering plants. R. has made quite a job of watering our fig trees: she dug a canal around them and made a protective circle around them with stones. Next year I will bring her some Dutch flower bulbs as a thank-you.

The small olive tree next to the bedroom has grown considerably in a few years, we notice as we compare it with photos from 2009. Behind it is spread out a leftover of small pebbles from the building of the house. When the tree has grown some more we can park our car on the pebbles in the shade of the tree during summer, we notice. So we abandon the plan of building a car roof. We might spread out some extra pebbles on the ground in front of the wall of the studio because when it rains there always remain pools of water in that particular area.

From our *παρέα*, G & D and H & J are present, as well as H's daughter K and her husband J. Those will fly back after our first day, that is, that's their plan, but since there is a strike going on they stay for another day. They redecorated the apartment in the upper part of H's house for longer stays in the future.

We visit W. another Sunday afternoon in the taverna in Ormos. He returns to the Netherlands for good, next year.

I accompany D. to the hairdresser's in Karlovassi. Maria is the fiancé of Nikos the barman of Bella Vista who had a serious car accident last year. He looks well again but now works as a handy man in a hotel in Votsalakia. When he wants to discuss politics with me Maria cuts him short with a sharp remark in Greek. "Don't discuss politics with the customers!" I think she says. He scurries away.

We learn that D's sister and her husband renounced from buying the plot behind us. Too bad. Now a couple from Rotterdam has had a look. Thanassis has showed them the interior in our house and it seems they were thrilled by the modern and light decoration.

The man from Athens will definitely not come to install the filter from the swimming pool and the pump. Thanassis' son in law *Ψυλότακης*, big Takis, will now do the job. This is told with - even according to Greek standards - elaborate apologies. Big Takis has returned from the USA since he could not find a job over there - just as I anticipated. We put the filter and the spare parts inside, in the living room, since the cardboard box on the terrace had started falling apart in the rain. I notice that the installation manual is in French. And, since I suspect that the Xatzinikolaous and their in-laws do not master that language and since I also suspect that they will be too proud to admit that - I translate it into English. But technical French is something

different from day-to-day French so I let G. check it after I print it - he is a French speaking Flemish by origin.

When we discuss the progress of the swimming pool with Thanassis and Takis over coffee and home baked apple pie (Μηλόπιτα) we mention the outrageous price for the wooden cabin at Samoxyl's. Thanassis frowns and promises he'll ask someone else. And so one of the last days of our stay we make a deal on the wooden cabin, a terrace around the swimming pool and a little wall behind the house. I secretly come to the conclusion that in order to build the terrace they will definitely first have to finish the installation of the filter and the pump

The riddle of the waste water of the swimming pool is solved in the meantime. The trick is to leave the water in the swimming pool during the winter. In spring the disinfectant hypochlorite ("bleach") will have degraded to normal salt-chloride and the water may be poured out over the land. Then the swimming pool is cleaned and again filled with water and (once in a while) hypochlorite as disinfectant. Let the sun warm it and voilà!

We are invited for coffee in the new apartment of Takis and Despina in Karlovassi. The decoration is very modern with a large flat screen tv playing in the background. F. discusses a road and travel insurance for our Greek car when we want to drive it to the Netherlands next year, to collect our new mattresses.

The last days of our stay the weather is lovely again so we do some sunbathing on the terrace. H. has started on the painting of the outside walls of his house; we drop by every now and then to encourage him. His son in law J. might drop by next winter to continue the painting (together with D?). We joke that when he does so he might take a picture of the progress around our swimming pool.

The last afternoon F. picks two kilos of olives to pickle. We take along some twigs of the mastic tree of the taverna for disinfectant when the olives are to be immersed in salt water to leach out. A copper nickle might also do the trick, I think, we always did that in the lab at the incubators to prevent moulding.

We dine out with the die-hards of the παρέα at Ormos at the last restaurant that is still open, as a year-closing. When we drive back an enormous eagle-owl flies in front of us along the dark country road.

December 2011

My plan to drive back to Greece next summer through Serbia to avoid the expensive ferry in high season seems to end prematurely as we learn that hostilities have flared up again between Serbia and Kosovo. So two ferry sailings then. I try to book it as a return ticket but that does not work out since we disembark in Bari on the way up and want to embark in Ancona on the way back. It's still too early in December too. I do find out that some days in the beginning of July and the end of August are low season since we want to travel in the "reverse" direction, most tourist doing Italy-Greece to begin with and Greece-Italy on their way back home at the end of the summer. We plan to do it the other way around. When we drive up with the empty car we also want to do some sight-seeing in Italy of places known in ancient Greece and Rome. And Venice ofcourse since we drive by very closely. Time enough! Back in the Netherlands we can follow the Olympic Games in London at ease. The EC Football will be in June so we will watch that on Samos. Greece has qualified so that will be big over there!

At the end of December the prices of the crossings with the ferries are published on their websites. I do some calculating and end up with an amount of 1250 euros simply for straight up to and straight down from Maastricht. That's a lot of money. To make things worse, F. discovers that we have to pay environmental tax for the car when using it as Dutch residents on the Dutch roads. We think of tricks to avoiding it by asking our Flemish friends to help us out but actually we start being fed up with it.

On the Greek chat forum I follow, one of the members has announced that he regularly travels to and from Greece with a mini van. When I do some inquiries I find out that he wants a modest amount of money for the transportation of two mattresses from the NL to Piraeus. We have some things to work out with insurance in case of theft but in fact we are almost decided to do it that way. We kind of like the idea of picking up the mattresses in the harbour of Piraeus and flying to and from NL in the summer for 470 euro for the two of us. Quite relaxed!

Takis calls and to my surprise he does not ask for the money for the works to be transferred earlier than agreed. No, the bill for the newly introduced real estate tax has arrived, plus the road tax bill. It has become too much for them to pay in advance for us. I assume they have recieved all the bills for the real estate tax for all the houses of the pareas, so it must be a huge sum all together. I reassure him that we'll pay and in due time I transfer the money. The amount is as I had calculated from lists which had been published on the Greek chat-forum. The rumour that the terrace is included in the calculation of the surface proves to be untrue. Compared to the real estate tax we have to pay in Maastricht it is a relatively small amount, but I suppose that is little comfort for the impoverished Greek.

Before the end of the year I book us a one way trip to Samos via Athens at the beginning of April next year.