

The Greek Odyssey, 2004

In which Eric relates the tale of a family that went to Greece in April 2004 for five weeks of adventure and to explore the roots of western civilization. The travelers were Eric Darwin and Frances Dubois and their children Michelle, 18; and Cosmos, 10. Eric's father, Allen, 78, was on the trip for the first two and half weeks.

Ottawa: Wednesday, April 28, 2004

Cosmos and Eric left home that Wednesday afternoon to go to Athens – by foot. We walked a few blocks from our downtown Ottawa home to the O-train station, dragging our carry-on suitcases on their little wheels along the busy streets. We took the train to near the airport, making the last bit of the trip by city bus. At the airport, we met my father and mother and my brother who had driven them to the airport. Allen was excited and raring to go; grandma was apprehensive and concerned about being separated from Allen. They had not been apart for decades. Brave faces went out to the departure gates; crying ones went to the parking garage and home.

Checking in was our first realization that the trip would be special. We had booked first class seats to Athens, using up airplane points because Air Canada and its points program were threatening to go into bankruptcy. No line ups for us, no siree! The Air Canada check in staff positively enthused over us, checking in our meager bags, and sending us off to the gate. Similarly, on board the connector flight to Toronto, cabin staff fussed over us. At Toronto, we boarded the Boeing 747; the first class seats were in the “upstairs” portion. There were 28 passengers and 3 staff. Allen sat one row ahead (a long long way ahead) amongst a bunch of heart surgeons returning to Europe from a Toronto conference. Not bad, I thought, if either of us gets a heart attack, we should have better care than in any hospital. The surgeons had beautiful hands, manicured, long fingered, smooth, and they exuded sophistication and wealth. They stocked up from the in-flight duty free bar and bought cartons of Marlborough cigarettes, and took every drink offered by the flight staff. Should the occasion arise, they would be in no condition to worry about the operating theatre.

All the books about travel in Europe, and articles about flying in general, all advise laying off the airplane booze in favour of lots of water. Why then do the flight attendants constantly circulate with so much booze? On the taxiway, there was champagne, just to kill those pre-flight jitters, and to sharpen your attention for the emergency warning speeches. As we climbed towards cruising altitude, there was shrimp and scallop appetizers, with Newfoundland iceberg martinis. The main course was chicken and veggies, and multiple courses of wine (one for the main meat, one for the salad, one to cleanse the palate, one for the road ...). Then there was cheese and fruit served from a delightful selection of many nice cheeses – with appropriate selection of port and wines. Then there was the crepe strawberries and chocolates, and chocolate fruit cups, and a selection of fine teas. Quickly followed by the after dinner drinkies, just in case the tea diluted anything.

The cabin staff seemed genuinely delighted that there were three generations of the guys on the one flight. Mr. Darwin (that's my father), me, and my son Cosmos. On vacation? Together – how nice! 'Til June ! Wow. And you're not just going to visit relatives, but on an adventure? Neat.

Dawn showed us the curve of the earth clearly visible. Eric and Allen had slept reasonably well in the reclining lazy-boy style chairs; Cosmos had played game-boy all night. At Frankfurt airport we slipped through customs and walked a hundred kilometers to another terminal building to await our Lufthansa flight to Athens. The terminal was sprawling, low ceilinged, and made only febrile attempts to separate smokers from everyone else. Many airport staff ride bicycles through the corridors. Our two and half hour flight to Athens offered us clear sunny skies and great views of the Italian coast and Aegean Sea. We arrived around 2pm, retrieved our luggage easily, and found our way to the city bus stop. Boarding the bus gave new meaning to the term "stampede seating" as 150 people, many with huge suitcases and taped together cardboard boxes, forced into the bus to get one of the 60 or so seats. All three of us got seats, which is a tribute to the famous Darwin sharp elbows, advance planning, and the ruthless ability to shove little old ladies out of the way. The bus ride that followed undid all that Air Canada and Lufthansa had tried to accomplish: it was hot, noisy, crowded, and stuck in a continuous stop and go traffic jam for the 90 minute trip to Syntagma Square, in the heart of Athens.

Construction reigned king in Athens: endless roadworks, sidewalk widenings, streetcar tracks, landscaping, all in a mad push to get things ready for the summer Olympics scheduled for August 2004. We didn't think they had much hope of getting things finished. It wasn't the first time that we would be proved wrong.

We three travelers, now feeling the effects of 20 hours of peripatation, took a longish stroll through the cobbled streets, our suitcases bumping noisily behind us, to the Hotel Attalos. For the princely sum of 150E a night, we had reserved a four person room. It was really a three person room with an extra cot squeezed in and a few more euros added to the bill. Still, the room was big enough for all of us, and had a curious two tier iron bathtub so one could sit rather upright in the tub. We had a large balcony overlooking the street, and by looking sideways, we could gaze directly on the Acropolis, a few blocks south of us. One floor up was the rooftop café, which was only offering early evening bar service in the offseason. We spent hours on this rooftop, eating ice cream, sipping beers or cokes, admiring the Parthenon atop the Acropolis, and gazing in wonder at the dense pre-automobile-era inner city neighbourhoods that makes up the Monistiraki and adjacent Plaka area.

After exploring the room and rooftop, we had a short nap, then went out to meet Michelle, who was arriving a few hours after our flight, having flown from Toronto via Boston. To our surprise, we found her right away, dragging her suitcase down the cobbled streets, the wheels madly clicking against the rounded pavers. Her bus from the airport had taken only 35 minutes; she described it as a pleasant city tour on a mostly empty bus.

For dinner, we headed out to the Plaka, the famous "old district" of the City, built on the steep streets that ascend and crisscross the slopes of the Acropolis. By and large these are

car-free streets, twisting, frequently steep. Transforming themselves into staircases. The narrow storefronts were crowded with merchandise in a flea-market style, impossibly steep stairways descended into basement stores. Mostly, they were all selling tourist bric-a-brac, some of which came home to Canada with us. Every once in while, we would suddenly come out into an open square, confronting a monumental ancient building (or facsimile thereof) or a big weedy hole that was supposed to be an excavated ruin.

Eventually we settled on a sidewalk restaurant at a busy corner. We selected it both for the décor (yellow stucco walls with art deco awning, and vines climbing the walls, densely packed café tables) and the tout who was soliciting traffic for the restaurant. The young man, with a strong Brit accent, waved his hands, accosted the passersby, cleverly “read” their reactions, and closed an amazing 7 of 11 approaches. He would promise anything (children: I know just what you like, I have your favorite food!; families: free desert for the kiddies!; girls: fun place! Very safe! We take care of you! No boys will bother you! (no mention of the attentive waiters and other patrons, half of whom were young males). His biggest coup in the 20 minutes we watched his show (and waited for our main course to arrive), was a group of 14 people; most amusing catch was an older Brit couple. The old man huffily refused to stop the first time they went by on one street, when they returned via the cross street 15 minutes later, obviously much more tired, and still unfed, our tout remembered them, and whipped her straight to a table to “rest her weary feet with a cuppa”, leaving grouchy obliged to follow on in. He was pacified with a “complimentary” beer.

The entertainment was memorable; the chicken kabob on rice, fries, Greek salads, bread and taziki, and desert couscous was forgettable, and the bill suitably cryptic at 70E.

We returned Allen and Cosmos to the hotel, whilst Michelle and Eric sought out an internet café (aghh! We had been a whole day away from the internet), which we found on a 6th floor walkup. The café was on a large open roof terrace with a glorious sky view and framed view of the Parthenon in the moonlight. It made a great “from” address on the emails. When we returned to the hotel, Allen was dead asleep; Cosmos was playing gameboy but was easily persuaded to go to sleep. After a last longing look at the Parthenon temple in the moonlight, we ended our first day in Greece.

Athens: Friday, April 30

Church bells in Greece are not like church bells in Western Europe or North America. The Greek Orthodox churches abound on every block; many with short bell towers boasting an array of numerous small bells, all of whom ring at once, with desperate urgency, clanging and tinkling and clinking and pushing their urgent sound into every nook and hotel room, then suddenly dying away to make room for the more regular city background noises to resume. Then, an hour later, the urgent cacophony of bells makes its strident voice heard again. We listened to several of these “melodies” until we got up at 9am, and went downstairs to our included breakfast. Now this was no cheap little dry baguette and weak hot choco, no siree, this was juices (well, tang), boiled eggs, ham, toast, fruits, yogurt, granola, cinnamon loaves, rich hot chocolate, tea, coffee, etc. We all loved the thick Greek yogurt and granola with extraordinarily flavorful honey poured over the helpings. It was amusing to watch the

other guests: a Goth-appareled school group from The Netherlands; German tourists sitting stiffly; British tourists, mouths turned down, suspiciously looking down their noses at the plates; Italians lounging and stretching. Once again, we had a lesson in why stereotypes persist.

We walked through the Monistiraki area towards the Acropolis. The shops were still closed, their “garage door” barriers pulled down over the windows, the streets strewn with the debris of the night before. As we began to ascend the hill towards the Acropolis, we met many of the famous dogs of Athens. Athenians “own” dogs, but this doesn’t extend to “taking care” of dogs, let alone leashing them, and there must be a terrible shortage of plastic bags because no one stoops, let alone scoops. On the pathways and staircases there were dogs everywhere, open sores buffeting the flies. No self respecting dog lies off the walk, or even off towards the edge: every dog knows it is its Athenian duty to lie right in the middle of the road or walk, on its side, legs outstretched, neck and nose extended out and up. Did I mention that the Athens public works dept. has not seen fit to build speed bumps on their roads?

We took a leisurely walk up the Acropolis, stopping frequently to admire the view, and to walk around the aforementioned dogs. We were careful not to overexert ourselves on the first days of the trip, and Allen wasn’t the only one unused to hiking all day. Just inside the Acropolis, we came across the typical Greek archeology project: lots of weed-encrusted scaffolding, air conditioned construction huts, and usually one worker working. Our worker was chiseling stone. Chink. About a minute later, chink. Like a slow motion clock. Very slow motion. Very, very slow motion. The restoration project of the Parthenon began in the early 1990’s, and was supposed to take 3 years. In 2001, the European Union gave lots of money to speed up the project so that the Parthenon could be freed of scaffolding before the Olympics. They may have forgotten to mention which Olympics; I think the construction “workers” envisioned some games in the late 21st century. Our version of the Parthenon was missing over half its pillars, but we thought the rusty scaffolding gave a sort of post-modern feel to the place. We thoroughly enjoyed the adjoining small museum; and walked along the south side viewing the ancient Greek and Roman amphitheaters cut into the hillside. The Roman one was well preserved / restored, an orchestral concert was being filmed there.

Our wanderings ended us up at Syntagma Square at noon. We were hungry, hungry for typical Greek fare, so we followed the Greek locals and joined the queue at an obviously popular local restaurant with many outside tables. It was the only affordable restaurant on the square. We negotiated the Greek menu with “English” subtitles, paid our euros, and had a great meal on the famous square. Then we left Macdonald’s, and walked a block to the front of the national palace/Parliament building. On the large piazza, the evzioni guards, who wear white dresses and pompom shoes, and pillbox hats with long tassels, strutted their stiff-legged stuff and slapped their white rifles. Some girls posed with the guards while they were stopped, evoking an angry reaction from an elderly gent. War has been omnipresent throughout Greek history, for some the military is a serious matter as is the symbolism of the guards. But for the tourists, it is simply bizarre to see soldiers wearing dresses and girly shoes.

There were vendors on the square selling corn in little bags for 1E. We recognized them as the same bags of corn we bought a few years earlier in Venice. The pigeons, even though they are not Venetian, recognize the bags, and converge on anyone who buys one. Eric and Cosmos fed the pigeons, letting them climb on our outstretched arms and perch on our shoulders. Allen swore he would not feed dirty pigeons, but corn thrown at him brought flocks of pigeons to land on his hat and arms, and he gave in, feeding them for a few minutes only.

Behind the Parliament is a public gardens and zoo. The wild dogs (on the “human” side of the fences) lay on the walkways and stared at the animals in the cages, who stared back their silent challenge and defense of their young, blissfully safe inside the cages. The gardens were on the “natural” side of the manicured vs wild continuum. We returned to the hotel via the Agora, the ancient Roman marketplace with its enormous reconstructed market building. We then relaxed with a rooftop beer back at the Hotel Attalos, wrote postcards, and were chased inside by cool air and showers to rest our feet in bed until 7.30.

For dinner we returned to the pedestrian streets of the Plaka, where we selected a quiet outdoor garden on the south edge of the built up area, looking uphill to the dark mass of the Acropolis. Almost immediately it began to rain, and we were forced indoors. The room was large, the Dutch school kids from our hotel were arrayed at a 40-foot long table where they imbibed enormous quantities of beer while their teacher/chaperones ate at a separate table laden with wine bottles and beer steins. We had pork souvlaki and a litre of white wine for 40E. This made us comment upon the entertainment charge we had apparently paid the previous night when watching the tout.

We had a delightful sleep, and were downstairs after a repeat buffet breakfast (this time zeroing in on the best stuff: the yogurt and granola and honey and boiled eggs) awaiting the arrival of our rental car. It was May 1, a national holiday, but not apparently for everyone: Cosmos and Michelle had acquired an amazing number of red bites during the night. We packed the battered little Hyundai Accent, and confidently headed down the street. An hour later, we passed the hotel again, going the other way, we had not managed to get anywhere. The streets were all one ways, the intersections crazy, the traffic suicidal, the tourists oblivious, and all the real street signs must have been taken down for repainting for the Olympics because the substitute signs sure made no sense.

We found ourselves heading southeast, so we decided that rather than going directly north to our destination Meteora, we would detour southeast via Cape Sounion and the temple of Posidon. On our way, we passed several ancient Greek settlements that were famous for their mines. Ancient mining was appallingly dangerous and mining camps were popular places to exile disgraced politicians and soldiers. Uncooperative household slaves also tended to end up at the mines. Today, there is little hint of the human oppression that made Mineral a household name.

Seventy-eight kilometers of narrow road later, we discovered that the temple was closed because of the Holiday, and there was no real way to go north from there – it was back towards Athens via the airport “freeway”. When our freeway joined the north-bound

freeway, within sight of the ... Acropolis, we encountered that extraordinary Greek reaction to heavy traffic. If there are too many cars on the road, and traffic slows down to a jam, then turn the 4-lane freeway into a 6-lane freeway by squeezing between the cars ahead of you, or on the shoulder side. Motorcyclists fly by the stopped cars at 90 km an hour, fitting their bikes into impossibly narrow spaces. Everyone turns their blinkers on and jerks from one lane to another, moving forward a few meters then looking desperately affronted as their ex-lane of traffic moves ahead of them – for a moment. The view from the cars wasn't so bad, as for the May 1st holiday most motorists had stuck bouquets of wild flowers (weeds?) or cut flowers in their windshield wipers, and few had funereal wreaths taped to the front windows. Gotta go pee? Then off to the side of the road with you! Look out, your driver is leaving ... It was on this stretch of road that we discovered our little Hyundai was not just beat up on the outside. The slower we went, the less responsive the engine was; lurching forward required flooring the gas pedal and then waiting, waiting, waiting.

After 90 minutes, we passed the lone construction worker who had closed 3 of the 4 lanes in preparation for invisible paving crews (on the national holiday? What's a Greek urn?). Traffic sped ahead, and our little car bravely whined and droned and actually got up some speed. Having accomplished that, we pulled off at the next highway refreshment stop. Once again we ate at the ever-popular Greek restaurant chain, and admired its Greek-themed menu, ordered No.5 with diet coke, and visited the washroom. Now, one great thing about most McDonald's is the presence of free bathrooms. I suspect many tourists think the golden arches spell "WC here". But this particular restaurant, despite having a huge table area, had washrooms sized for ... well, I've seen houses with bigger bathrooms. There was even a line up for the boys. Once I got to the inside line up, the outside line was pretty much gone, but the girl's one was even longer. Suddenly about 8 teen girls decided they had better prospects in our line, and they swarmed it. The hogged the mirror, and stared and made comments (in Greek of course, so I don't really know what they said) crowded shoulder to shoulder in the little washroom and butted up against the men standing at the two urinals and shifting their feet.

We stopped at the gas bar, filled up with 30E of gas, and discovered that the Greeks, for all they have invented, have not yet discovered self-serve gas. The pump instructions were all Greek to me anyway. I did not tip the gas jockey. Then zoom down to the freeway, our peppy little car bombing up the roadway without a care, along the pretty coast, inland over the plain to Kalamata, and then the kilometre-high peaks of Meteora rising sharply out of the flat farmlands, warmly lit by the setting sun.

We had directions to a street with several hotels, but hadn't counted on the May Day Parade, the chained mayor leading the black robed orthodox priest, the uniformed school choir, traditionally garbed women's guild, and several soccer teams in shiny nylon shirts and skimpy shorts. Forced to detour through the side streets, we eventually found accommodation at our third hotel, The Hotel Aeolic Star. I never figured out why the hotel was named after a feature of female anatomy.

Our room was a real find. We had a huge four person room in the expanded top floor – it was a semi-attic, with radiating exposed roof beams and big post in the middle of the room, it had

four beds, a wrap-around balcony about 60 feet long with views of the dramatic Meteora hills to the north and the town square and fountain to the south. The enormous bathroom had a fiberglass tub for 3 and heat lamps. The ceramic floors were in faux wood grain (just like in old Subway restaurants), with a large sheepskin rug (flokati) in the centre of the room. 100E a night. We loved it. Our car slept in a yard across the street, where it sheltered chickens at night.

Despite being a tourist centre, the town restaurant waiters were very timid about serving foreigners, and one was selected as the “loser” and was sent out to get our order. Chicken, mousaka, and wine for 35E, then ice cream from a street vendor while we strolled the main streets and looked at the shops and absorbed the Swiss mountain town feel of the place. Thus ended Saturday night, May Day in Greece. We had gone from ancient achievements (the Parthenon, Temple of Apollo) to modern ones (the freeway and golden arches) to rural Greece which contained elements unchanged for a thousand years. We slept as only contented people can.

Sunday: 2 May

Meteora is a collection of vertical spires of rock rising dramatically out of the flat plains; a number of the spires are topped with ancient monasteries (or ruins thereof). The highest is 2045 feet up above the plain – that is the equivalent of having an apartment on the 180th floor of a highrise. Almost as famous as the former residents is visitor James Bond who climbs up one of the spires in one of his 1970’s movies (the Russians came by helicopter). Monkish visitors were hauled up the sides of the cliffs in baskets or nets into the trapdoors in the floors of winch houses. We all wondered how many unpopular abbots or monks met accidents with frayed ropes breaking. Or if any skinny ones fell through the round hole of the toilet (bombs awa-a-a-y!).

Many of the rock columns are penetrated by caves near their bases; and we stopped at a roadside restaurant cleverly named “The Caves”. Eric and Frances had eaten there 20 years earlier, and taken a picture of the elderly man working the complicated spit arrangement. He looked, we thought, just like my father Allen. Now, 7300 days later, we returned with my father, and low and behold, you’d think they were lost brothers. The cave man’s grown up children were now running the restaurant, and couldn’t see what we thought was strange. But the little grandchildren, running out from the kitchen, stopped and stared in confusion: where had this second grandfather come from?

Leaving Meteora the next day, we sought a gas station. In North America, drivers complain that there must be collusion amongst big oil, since most stations have almost identical prices. On the road across the Kalamata plain we wished that was the case, because every station there had a different price – a hugely different price. Even the same brand of station on one side of a village had a 15cents/litre difference from the station at the other end. This was rather stressful to us, we kept going hoping to find the next station would be even cheaper than the previous, but then that one had a price 17c higher, and we wondered if we should go

back or continue on. Did prices get cheaper as we went south? Or left a village? Oh God, the gas tank reads empty. No, don't stop there, it was cheaper 40 kilometers back ...

Along the day's drive we passed a town with two giant storks' nests on twin church towers. We drove over endless mountain passes. When we pulled out to pass a truck on a steep hill the little Hyundai whined and whined and slowly fell back behind the lumbering diesel transport, but with a little cough it eventually ground ahead and we passed the creeping truck in about 4 minutes of travelling around hairpin turns in the wrong lane. We were then passed at supersonic speed by the Mercedes crowd. Mind you, they pass even on the downhill parts when we were just flying along. Now, our little gutless wonder did overtake and pass the goat herds walking along the highway, even when the goats were going the same direction as us.

Around two in the afternoon we emerged from the roads through the mountains into the town of Delphi. We got small but clean rooms at the elderly Hotel Sybilla for 24 and 30E. Delphi is a town we love. Perched halfway up on a 80 degree slope, it has fabulous views over the valleys to the port town of Itea and out the Gulf of Corinth. Delphi has two streets, the lower east-bound one is more level and has most of the shops, the upper west-bound one is a steep hill up, then down, to rejoin the other street at the far edge of town. In between, the streets are connected by numerous staircase alleys. Delphi used to be a major stop on the tourist route, but today the improved highways bring only day-trippers by car and bus from Athens, and the town is rather forlorn. The archeological site on the east edge of town is splendid, with well-preserved ruins of temples, paths, and a stadium. The ancient walls are covered in legible ancient Greek writing listing the visitors, winners at ancient games, and advertisements for tavernas (voted best taverna of 154 BC !).

While walking through the town we pass a group of British school kids about 12 years old on a school trip, extraordinarily loud, a number of the girls openly stare at Cosmos, and he earns one wolf whistle.

Our car, however, would not respond. Battery was dead. Get cables from the dinky BP gas station at the other end of town (no mechanic) and the hotellier brings her beat up red Datsun truck to give us a boost, but each time we disconnect the battery, our car dies. An entire posse of Greek men gathers around to criticize. They smoke. They laugh at us. They cell phone. They worry their beads. When our hotel lady gives up, they muscle forward, the guys will show her how to jump a car. Hey, why does it stop? It must be her laughable Datsun. Sissy car. Eric lets the hood drop closed on the Datsun – it almost pushes the engine to the pavement. Hood seems jammed shut. Expressions of worry. Pull up another car. Boost and die. Hmm. At hotel, call Swift car rental in Athens, they call ELPA, the roadside assistance people, who arrive from the next town in the European version of a tow truck. Smirking uniformed driver turns the dead car around in its parking space all by himself (Greek men are so-o-o stro-o-ong). Jumps battery. Smirk dies when car dies. Loads car on flat bed, Eric joins him for drive to Itea, 20 minutes away. Garagists laugh a ELPA driver, jump battery. Frown. Get new battery. Eric sits and watches Greek midday soap operas for two and half hours at the open air garage whilst the mechanics use the latest computerized brand name equipment to test the depressed Hyundai. Greek open air garages have more hi-tech equipment than I

recall seeing at our state run hospitals back in Canada. Greek afternoon soaps are amazingly sexy, the characters continually suffering from wardrobe malfunctions and needing to warm up the next bed. Even the soap commercials promised sheets so white that the next caller ... One door to door sales man never did get to ... well, anyway, eventually got a repaired alternator and drove the Hyundai back up to Delphi.

We had a great restaurant dinner (restaurant Lefas, I think). The place had a view to die for, and the food was fabulous. The owner/waiter must be the identical cousin of our friend Gaspar in Hamilton, Ont. Why do so many Greeks look like people we know? We eat deep dish mousaka; chicken with creamy mushroom sauce; and lots of cokes and wine. The owner made the wine himself, it is a smooth rose. We hear the story of how he buys the grapes and crushes them in the basement and bottles the stuff in the kitchen. We wait outside at the west end of town for Frances, who has flown from Canada a week after the rest of us. We are entertained by an eclipse of the moon whilst we sit on the stone walls and eat ice cream and await the bus from Athens and feed *glutimus maximus* to the ants. We ponder the ancient Greeks who 2000 years ago would have watched an eclipse from the same spot (whilst not eating ice cream), Frances gets off the bus at the east end of town, finds the hotel, and waits for us there. Who could guess that a one block town could have two bus stops?

Next morning we drive through Arahova, but do not stop to shop. Eric wanted to buy some more Greek rugs for the bedrooms at home, but the traffic is stressful. Halfway through the town Eric relaxes a bit because the hyper narrow twisty road through the medieval village has become a one way...until we meet a tour bus at the next corner.. . We drive on to the village of Osios Loukas, to see the famous monastery and church there. Twenty years ago, we had chanced upon the church just as a German choir group passed through. They asked a monk permission to sing under the giant dome of Christ Pantokrator. The monk refused permission for the women to sing; but the men's German song and chants were a time warp to times when religion was more real. In 2004, the rural monastery has been improved with a parking lot, admission booth, and decorative landscaping. The lack of monks and presence of sullen tourism employees lend it that distinct national park feel. Any remaining magic had been driven out. The nearby village completed the desecration by hosting us to the most rip-off lunch we had on the trip.

Anxious to reconnect to the real Greece, we drive back to Delphi along the older coastal road, with fabulous views and small villages and modern towns clustered around the bays and bauxite docks. We stop to watch numerous herds of goats along the steep roadsides. These herds often wander all over the pavement: we wait patiently; Greek drivers blare their horns and accelerate through the flocks. We visit a garden centre outside Itea and buy an azalea plant for the nice lady at the hotel, chastened by our day's experiences into having a better appreciation of the nice Greeks we have met. And besides, she still can't get her Datsun hood up. Gaspar the restaurant owner, however, remembers us from the night before and out comes the free homemade wine in country rooster jug. We find vegetables are available (although not on the menu) and dig in. Dinner was a great experience, with an incredible view over the coast thrown in for free.

Because it was early in the tourist season, there were no entertainments at the archeological site. Many years before, Eric had seen Oedipus Rex performed in ancient Greek in the ancient Greek theatre in the midst of the Delphi ruins.

Next morning the five of us are in the little Hyundai; we drive along the coast past Glaxidi and stop at a modern-looking national-chain gas station. The elderly attendant was not so modern looking. He was blind and smelly and looked like he was yet to recover from a long binge. He couldn't read the gas pumps, so Eric fills the car, escorts the blind man over the obligatory sprawled out abscessing dog in front of the door, and makes his own change from the till whilst the attendant sits at the fly-besotted table with the appetizing remains of several days' meals. Only on the way out do we notice he wasn't wearing any pants.

Rion is a bustling city on the Gulf, we tell the kids they are fortunate to be able to cross the gulf on the open-deck ferries as there is a fabulous cable-stayed high level bridge across the gulf nearing completion. The bridge has 4 piers in the gulf, where the water is so deep that artificial islands could not be built. This leaves the bridge vulnerable to attack; a frigate patrols back and forth under the bridge. The ferries are updated landing craft. We are directed to our tiny parking space, and we rush upstairs to the deck to enjoy the view as we cross over to the Peloponesus.

First came Patras.

It is a sprawling industrial city with a medieval centre. When leaving the ferry dock we somehow missed the exit to the highway and end up on a back city street, which goes under the freeway but has no ramp. Then suddenly we are in the ancient city, surrounded by rushing traffic, trying to stay headed south-west as we go up and down steep hills. The streets are narrow, with cars sprawled along both sides. Our Hyundai barely fits through, but Michael Schumacher makes the chicane and roars down the 90 degree hill to a suicide stop, then roars up the next hill to discover the road narrows and narrows and becomes a garage door but wait there's a gap beside the garbage bins and oh, god, is there a road there or is it staircase down? Oh, it's a road. Sharp left turn, no! right! keep going, watchout grandma, aiee, its too narrow for a motobike, but we make it. Did you know nice Mercedes cars have electric motors to turn their side mirrors flush with the car body so they don't get knocked off by overloaded Hyundais? The apartments end, now the road goes up a 80 degree slope, switching back and forth, oh, it is a two way road, why does the sign say Castello? Thank god we are not driving a manual, as we almost stall making a 270 degree switchback turn while still climbing the vertical mountain. Oh there's the castle, should we stop, oops no we are going down now, stop pushing the driver's seat forward kids, we're in the city again, stomach climb back in! Then flatness comes, and we discover we are on the National Road going the way we want to go (we think). But why is the National Road so small? Oh, there's the New National Road parallel over there. But when we make it there, we discover it is called the Old New National Road; the new New National Road is four lanes and a bit further inland. We get on it. We are going the right way. But its two o'clock, and we are hungry, and all the New Greek National Restaurants (a.k.a. McDonalds) are back in Patras, so we eat at a small roadside resto that sells genuine factory made sandwiches in cellopaks. The best before date is Greek to us.

In Olympia we stayed at the Hotel Poseidon, recommended in tour books everywhere. For 80E we have two rooms, each with private bathrooms. Although Poseidon must have been laughing, because the private baths are across the hall from the rooms rather than en suite. The hotel corridors echo and clang with slamming doors, and for a small town the streets are noisy all night. Directly across the street is a nightclub cum internet café. We log on; Michelle discovers she has passed first year university, straight A's. Mindful of being embarrassing parents, we curb our enthusiasm, only to be chided later for our lack of reaction. No point crying.

We eat at an attractive restaurant with extensive outdoor table area under awnings and umbrellas. It has a view down the gentle valley with the Olympic River (?) running in it. Across the creek, hidden amongst the lush trees, is ancient Olympia. Just upvalley from our restaurant is the narrow gauge rail line terminus. It is impossibly cute, the narrow tracks, tiny turntable, and engine sheds looking like railroad set models. Where's Thomas?

While ancient Delphi was precariously perched on a steep hillside, ancient Olympia sprawls over a gentle meadow of long grass. The ruins are suggestively restored here and there, the column sections gathered together, interpretive plaques are helpful. The museum was useful and well related to the adjacent site. It sold neat postcards that when angled one way show the ancient ruin and then with a slight twist show a "reconstruction".

We hit the cross-country road south to Kalamata, on the south coast of the Pelopeneus. There are more mountains than the map suggests. The modern town sprawls for miles. We eat at a seaside restaurant near the yacht marina, and wonder why there are so many palm branches everywhere, and why don't they sweep all the sand off the main streets? We get nice rooms on the fifth floor of a hotel right on the waterfront; only 88E for both rooms. We stroll the waterfront; walk the length of the breakwater; check out the seaside restaurants.

We phone Darlene and Kosta Scoularides, from Ottawa, who rent a villa 14 km down the coast. Kosta gives us simple directions, and promises to stand on the road to wave at us. We set out: 14 kilometers along the coast they tell us, be sure to bear right at the fork outside the posh hotel. We surprise ourselves by actually following the instructions; we surprise endless Greeks standing on the roadside by honking at them and staring to see if they are Kosta.

Once we pass the fork in the road at the deluxe hotel, the city fades out and we travel on a narrow but paved two-lane road that clings to the coast and passes through numerous villages. The villages get older, and the road more like the paved footpath it started out as. As we drive up an incline the road seems like it would go right through the front of a large stone house. Sitting in the front window, profile illuminated by a lamp, and old lady reads. Just centimetres short of the front wall the road throws itself 90 degrees to the right. Then sharp left. We look through the side windows at the back of the old lady reading. Then the road jerks left again, switch backs 180 degrees to the right, and climbs 10 metres, and we are looking down and through the back window to the old lady's other profile. She turns a page. Michelle complains she wasn't finished reading, and we resume watching the road.

A few more villages, a few more unmarked intersections (was that the road or a driveway??). Then we are coming down a slope, the road squeezing between the side walls of two houses so close it seems even our Hyundai could not fit through. The sloping road is covered in loose sand. A few metres in front of the houses is the seawall. Presumably the road turns ninety degrees left in front of the house. But the sand is like snow on the road, there is no traction, the little Hyundai, brakes on, slides down towards the water. How deep will it be? Just as we emerge from between the houses, Eric gives us gas and the car swings sideways (is it better to go off the edge of the dock frontwards or sideways?). As it gains traction on the front, the back end swings out and we all await the thump of the back wheel slipping off the dock. But hey, we are in Greece, and we are invincible, and we scurry along the waterfront and up another hill. It would be nice if the Greeks plowed the sand off the roads. About five car lengths later we slink past a city bus going the other way, taking our breaths with it. How could it fit between the houses? What happens to dumb tourists driving the other way?

Then we see Kosta, standing on the roadside, waving his arms at every car that goes by. His driveway is tame by comparison: Through the narrow gate then only 5 switchbacks on a 80 degree slope with oleanders and other shrubs brushing the sides of the car. We have arrived.

Kosta explains that just two days ago a huge storm or tornado had hit the coast with little warning. One minute driving in the sun, they were trapped in their car on that narrow road between the houses and the sea wall; the waves pushed their car against the walls and wrecked it, but the occupants escaped unharmed. This explained the Greek propensity to leave sand on the coastal road and all the broken palm branches littering the streets in Kalamata. We all counted our blessings, drank wine, nibbled, and watched a beautiful sunset over the bay. The villa functions like a North American's cottage, but was actually a three story building of apartments, with wide verandahs, lovely views, outdoor fireplace/oven, a private chapel on the grounds (quite common amongst the wealthy to have a private chapel for baptisms, marriages, etc), and goats clanking their bells just over the fence.

We walk about a kilometre along the coastal road to the last village. Along the way, we pass the roadside cemetery where all are buried in above ground sarcophagi of marble. All the cemetery inhabitants seemed to have lived to ripe old age, and died rather recently for such old tombs. Of course, tombs are re-used from generation to generation; and everyone dies old because the young all moved away. The tombs are dressed in marble, but lined in limestone. Limestone dissolves the human body, including the bones, to dust, in just 40 days. The road is a widened, paved footpath so it crowds too close to the ancient chapels, seaside cottages, and cemetery. The village consists of three restaurants on the beach, some ancient and dilapidated fishermen's cottages, and some vacation villas. And cats.

We drive home long after dark, skidding once on the sand covered roads, pass one bus, then go through Kalamata looking for the chicken restaurant Kosta recommends. We never find it; and instead have a great meal at a beachfront taverna at 11pm. We stagger across the road to our hotel to sleep to sound and smells of the sea.

The next morning we make the surprisingly long drive back through the mountains north towards Naphlio. The dowdy old town of twenty years ago has become the Cinderella of the party set. Everywhere are paved piazzas, restaurants and bars with hundreds of outdoor tables and chairs facing the seashore. The “in crowd” looked very at home amongst the expensive boutiques clogging the medieval narrow streets. This was not what we were looking for, so after lunch we drive up the coast heading towards Tolo town and/or Assini beach.

For 30E each, we get two cute modern wooden cottages, with kitchen and bath, just off the beach of Assini (alternate spelling: Assinine). The beach is mostly gravel with some sandy spots; we go for a swim but the sea is bitterly cold. Summer and warm water has come very late to Greece in 2004. The landward side of the beach “road” consists of modern cottage clusters and hotels alternating with Euro-styled “campgrounds”. These campgrounds have paved roads, mailboxes, electronically controlled gates, and rather permanently placed “tents” and trailers. The most regimented ones were German occupied. Evidently some families come for many months; other sites are “time shared” amongst friends or family or rented out. Every few hundred feet were delightful beachfront tavernas, splendidly deserted in the offseason, bound to be noisy and crowded in the peak season.

We stay at Assini beach for three nights. One day, we drive off to see ancient Mycenae (not as romantic and wonderful as Eric remembers it back in 1978: the power of the military dictatorship was failing then, and tourism was shaking off its hippie image. Iannis Xenakis, exiled Greek musician and mathematician, had written a stirring outdoor event to take place at the ruins of Mycenae, a retelling of the epic involving Jason and Homer and the Gods and having a thousand extras (sheep with flashlights on their necks driven up the dark hillsides). It was so extravagant that the Polytope was only put on twice: Eric saw the first night. The audience area was surrounded by six timpani groups, and the rhythmic pounding on the timpani made the sound swing round and round the audience like we were centred inside a pulsing centrifugal music machine). In 2004, the site could not live up to past memories. But the famous beehive tombs were still breathtaking, the lion’s gate dramatic, the ages-old storage chambers neat and ready to use.

Another day we drove to ancient Corinth, where Paul preached to the Corinthians (or was it he wrote to them?). The museum at Corinth answered the question: where are all the body parts missing from the other statues in other museums? Answer: in the cabinet at Corinth: arms, hands, fingers, toes, feet, penises, all those body parts missing from other statues are right there.

Then to the less ancient Corinth canal. We perch on the vibrating old bridge to look down into the sea canal chopped as if by Jason’s axe straight into the hump of the Pelopeneus. We watch a girl left at the rest stop run down the road after her leaving tour bus. We go to the south end of the canal, sit at a canal side taverna, and watch a freighter go through. Unbelievably, the bridge on the canal sinks down under the water to let the boat go over, then rises up again, shedding tonnes of water like a surfacing submarine.

We also visited Epidaurus, site of the famous ancient Greek hospitals (the symbol of medicine, the stick with an entwined snake, comes from here. Snakes shed their skins, and

are reborn in Spring; the doctors medicated their patients and awoke them from their dreams, healed) and of the famous outdoor theatre cut into the hillside. The seating area is sloped in keeping with the fibonacci mathematical sequence (a point missed by Dan Brown in his thriller *The DaVinci Code*, it is obviously a prequel to the *Holy Grail*).

We climbed the theatre steps, and watched, or rather listened to, the new European harmony. A French-speaking tour group of high school seniors or college juniors came prepared to read bits of Greek mythology or poetry from the stone in the centre of the stage, where a whisper can be heard to the very back row. Unfortunately, audience whispers from the very back row can be heard on the stage. As soon as the French starting performing, the German group of visitors starts talking loudly. Hisses and sssh'es only caused both groups to dig in their heels, and a most un-EU expression of family harmony manifested itself.

Two of the three evenings at Assine we drive to nearby Tolo for supper. Tolo is a resort town, a party town, a long string of hotels, bars, video parlors, and motobike rental shops. First we ate at a seaside restaurant on a wide wooden verandah that overhangs the sea. As it grows dusk, the ancient-looking chapel on the small island in the bay becomes floodlit. It is so romantic and cute it was funny; still it was thoughtful of the tourist board to give after-dusk diners something to look at once the sea is just a black hole. The second night, we ate at another restaurant, a tiny one, family run, half a flight down and right on the beach. Cheap and delicious.

Greek atmosphere in the 70's consisted of endless irritating Bouzouki music. In 2004, we only heard it once, and only for one track, when in Tolo. The musak was now more contemporary arrangements of traditional Greek flavours. Like tourists everywhere captivated by the magic of a strange but lovely place, wined and fed, and soothed by music, we longed to stay forever, or, failing that, buying the CD and taking home the music.

The next morning, we loaded up the car and drove to Ermione, where we parked the car and left the keys locked inside; the car rental guy would come by ferry from Athens to get the car and take it away. We were taking the ferry to Idra (or Hydra), a most enchanting island just off the coast, where we would finish the first part of our Greek adventure.

Tuesday, 11 May, 2004

The "Flyingcat 1" catamaran trip to Hydra is short, about 30 minutes, 6.4E each. The island is quite small; there is but one town on the steep hillside rising up from the double-breakwatered harbour. The outer breakwater shelters yachts; the inner one fishing boats. The main street & harbourside quay is lively and enjoyable. There are donkeys everywhere, carrying freight mostly, although some carry people; there are no motor vehicles on Hydra except for the garbage truck, one small dump truck, and the golf-cart-converted-to-ambulance. Almost all streets going back from the waterfront are stairs; many of the ones parallel to the harbour are also frequently decorated by stairs up and down.

We find a really pleasant hotel, the Greco, about 4 blocks back from the town front, where the valley to the inland of the mountainous island rises gently. Our hotel is a former sea

captain's house, set back amongst lush tropical gardens with tables and chairs set amongst the gravel and flowering Amaryllis. The strong stone front is enlivened with blue shutters and vines. Our rooms are on the second floor towards the back, overlooking the town soccer field. The rooms are very modern inside, with strong blue accessories. It cost us 450E for 2 rooms for 3 nights.

Each morning is welcomed with a complimentary al fresco buffet of yogurt, honey, granola, fresh cakes, cookies The hotel staff pops out every few minutes to top up your coffee or tea. I get the feeling Allen could stay there forever. Every so often a train of donkeys scurries by on the street, carrying bags of stone, stucco, cement, or McCain frozen french fries. The donkeys are led up the hill with the load; their masters often let them return to the harbour unescorted. From time to time, therefore, the idyllic peacefulness of the hotel garden is interrupted by a herd of donkeys charging through the garden, taking "shortcuts" to the harbour. When their path is blocked by tourists at a breakfast table, their eyes grow as big round as saucers, their nostrils flare, and they look like they might panic and climb over the tables. The donkeys remain calmer, thank heavens, invariably they swing to one side and crash through the flower bed, complaining to their friends that their way was blocked.

We ate our three suppers at sidewalk cafes. There are big cafes on the waterfront promenade, with big awnings over the tables, but they are somehow anonymous, and expensive to boot. For local, homemade cuisine we head to the side streets running back from the harbour. The restaurants have indoor dining rooms for only two or three tables for winter use. In the summer, they spill out all over the adjacent streets, lanes, and gardens. One restaurant we ate at was just the intersection of three streets, there were maybe six or eight tables and a few potted plants. The old waiter/owner brought out the food and wine and smiled at us and made us feel really welcome. It was so friendly we were joined by other diners eventually making a larger party. Another night we went up 10 steps to what appeared to be the filled in first floor of a partially demolished house – the foundations were there, a tree grew up in the centre, and the house next door provided the food. Another success. Our third evening was in a pleasant square, under the tree branches, with a dozen outdoor tables, and a fairly substantial ship-decorated restaurant off to the side. It was the most commercial, least fun, and we all thought least good.

We had four restful days in Hydra. We spend the time checking out every shop, stocking up on souvenirs and film. We processed all the films we had left, so that they could go back to Canada with my father. Eric and Frances bought a number of "hand knitted by the nuns up at the convent on the top of the mountain" pillow cases and a 4x6' rug. Cosmos and Allen discovered the "Sunset Café" on the west end of the harbour, and spent two afternoons there drinking and snacking and watching the parade of ferries and freighters and yachts and water taxis come and go in the harbour. Cosmos was thrilled to watch the sleek hydrofoils, sometimes known as flying dolphins, come in and out, rising up onto their stilt-like wings as they accelerate out of the harbour.

Once, a day cruise came in from Athens (3 islands in one day, lunch included). We couldn't help but sit on a wall and watch the 'tourists'; the day trippers seemed singularly unprepared for anything. The most amusing was an under-30 Brit, six foot 4, wearing ultra high spike

shoes, a pleated roman centurion style micro skirt, a bikini top with an exploding Union Jack on each cup, and of course, blond hair above the fluorescent red lipstick. Opposite the ferry dock was the ancient customs house, now converted to barracks for the merchant marine trainees. One merchant seaman was always keeping watch out the window when ferries came in. His sharp whistle into the darkened interior of the ancient building brought roughly 80 guys to hang out the windows of both floors. Rule Britannia. Cool Britannia.

The town had a sea captain's house turned into a museum; it was well worth the tour. Furnished with a heavy Turkish influence, it was sumptuous, relaxing, and opulent. The ceilings were carved wood, the few furnishings revealed how simply the rich lived three centuries ago. Just west of the town, accessed by walking a trail around the headland, was another little harbour with just a few fishing boats in it. This suburb was less touristy, much less prosperous. After exploring, we sat on a very windy hillside restaurant terrace and had lunch, listening to the conversations of long-term tourists who took accommodation in this village. While eating, a somewhat overloaded fishing boat came into the harbour, our interest was peaked by the cargo. Fruit, vegetables, and other "groceries" including the omnipresent McCain frozen french fries that would magically transform later onto the restaurant platter as "home made fries". There were heaps of boxes and fishing nets. In the centre was a sheep. And another one along the side of the boat, and yet another. This promised to be educational.

First a small boy tried to lead the sheep out of the boat onto the stone dock. He seemed to think that twitching the lead would cause the sheep to jump over the gap. The sheep had other ideas. Eventually the two men and boy managed to lift/dump the sheep onto the dock, and to be joined after much work, by the remaining two. The man then tried to lead the sheep up the three stairs from the dock to the street. The sheep pulled back with equal force; its back legs braced against the stone floor. Then suddenly it was overcome, pulled forward, front legs collapsing, nose down against the bottom step. So they pushed against the stuck up rump, until it too collapsed to hug the dock. The other two sheep were paraded forward as an example to the first one. Except they all joined the first one in refusing to leave the dock, like they had refused to get out of the boat, and no doubt had refused to get into the boat in the first place, or even to go down to the dock. One of the guys gave up and sauntered off up a side street. The others did what all Greeks do when faced with a problem: they sat and smoked. After a while, the man returns with a goat on a string. The goat is lead down the steps to the sheep, and then back up the steps. The sheep, anxious and bleating, follow it hesitantly. The sheep went on to their fate up the village street; the tourists went on their way back around the headland to the town, checking out the shop merchandise to see if anything had been missed on the first visits.

Other days have unique island excitement too. A medical helicopter landed on the soccer field, its jet engine whining over the city for a long time as the golf-cart-ambulance brings the evacuee to the site (yes, the patient's feet extend out the back of the golf cart, exposed to the air, the only thing missing was the mortician's toe tag).

Friday afternoon finds us sitting at the harbourside café, having a late lunch, waiting for the four thirty hydrofoil to Pireas. The "Flying Dolphin IV" hydrofoil ride (17.4E each) is a

pleasant adventure for all of us now that on-board smoking has been banned. For a long time, Frances and Eric stand at the back open verandah as the boat flies along at 60 kmh.

We stay in Pireas at the Hotel Phidias; we walk to the yacht harbour, lined with fashionable shops and restaurants. What to choose: McDonalds? Dominos? Burger King? Goodies? Dunkin Donut? We settle on Pizza Hut. The décor is all marble walls, subtle recessed lighting, 8” plank floors, black furniture. The décor and table accessories boast of fine dining; the standard pizza hut menu seems incongruous, but the food is delicious. Crowds of Greeks, young and old, fill the restaurants and their outdoor table areas. The old men sit at tables for hours, alternating traditional coffees with ice creams; the young trendies meet for affordable dining in the cosmopolitan style.

Saturday, 15 May, 2004

Allen is going home, back to Canada. His adventure is drawing to a close. Except of course, there is yet the trip alone to the airport, the afternoon flight to Frankfurt, then to Toronto, then to Ottawa. We arranged for Lufthansa and Air Canada to meet him at each arrival and take him to the next gate; this retired sailor is met by long-legged young females at each port of call. His trip home is uneventful, the food & travel first class, the reunion with grandma wonderful.

The other four are beginning stage two of the Greek adventure. Up early in the morning, taxi to the airport, breakfast at the typical (and only) Greek airport concession that was open (McDonopoulous). Followed by a forty-minute flight south to Crete, the intercom playing the theme song from Star Wars as we take off. The flight engenders a lot of conversation: no one can remember ever noticing flying on an airplane with large rusty spots on the wings. Is this something to be alarmed about? Or maybe we just haven't noticed before. What could we do about it anyway – get out? We check under the seats for Icarus Wings, but find only the standard life jackets.

Our next week in Crete is an “adventure tour”. We are going to be kayaking along the south coast for 7 days, from inn to inn. None of us has been in a kayak before. Indeed, it was only the week before we left for Greece that we went to a outfitters store to actually see and touch a kayak. The clerk was encouraging, claiming a trek was the best way to find out how to do it. Michelle was busy studying at school right up to the trip departure date, and we added her onto the trip only weeks before the departure, so she has no preparation for the adventure. On the flight over to Crete, she reads pages of an About Greece web guide written by a lady who had taken the trip the fall before. Once we arrive at the terminal, we meet the others on the same trip, and lo one is diTraci Regula, the lady who wrote the web article, back for another trip.

We meet the others: Adam Walsh is the expedition head, from NorthWest Passage in Chicago; his assistant is Mike Agostinelli the Chicago fireman, both bear a surfeit of good looks. diTraci seems to be half guest, half guide. Dana is a skinny hospital technician, accompanied by Jennifer, who has retired from the same profession, and is knowledgeable about the flora and fauna. Steve is the new age hippie practicing TM, and David Nolan is the

travel writer from New York. It looks a bit like a movie script about 11 diverse people thrown together ... for what? a bonding exercise? Survival?

We take a mini bus to the Palace of Knosis, which we really enjoy touring with our guide Effi. The palace “reconstruction” is obviously rather fanciful, but the red, brown, and black stained concrete work that replaces the missing wall pieces does help us imagine what *could* have been there two thousand years ago. Today, archeologists and historians curse the earlier generation of excavators and reconstructionists, as they destroyed much evidence, and the reconstructions are frowned upon as they are necessarily speculative. So more recently excavated sites tend to be very minimalist, and frankly less interesting to even the educated tourist. I rather liked the suggested reconstructions and charming stories the guides tell. Maybe we have been Disneyfied.

We had our first get-to-know-each-other luncheon at an upstairs open air restaurant, and quickly settled on what would become our routine for the whole trip: we ordered many appetizers and salads and put everything in the centre of the table to make a pick-and-choose buffet. Then off by minibus over the steep mountains of central Crete, enjoying the views into the valleys, and of the snow-covered mountains. We had not expected to find snow this far south in the middle of the Mediterranean, we are only 200km from Libya in Africa. We arrive at our two night stay in Matala.

Matala is a charming little town consisting of some rather cute tourist shops and trees on a narrow village street, surrounded by a dozen hotels and guest houses, and all backing onto a marvelous crescent beach and bay. The opposite site of the bay, a few hundred metres away, consists of a steep cliff angling sideways down into the sea. The face of the cliff on the bay and sandy beach is penetrated by dozens of large cave openings. These were tombs for earlier civilizations and the Romans. Then in the 1960’s the tiny, isolated village became a police-free haven for pot-smoking hippies who lived cheap on the beach and slept in the caves. Cat Stevens and Joni Mitchell went on to become famous.

We spent the dying hours of the afternoon visiting the caves, walking the beach, and wondering how we could ever kayak in the “peaceful calm warm waters” of the bay (so the research had assured us) when there was an angry six foot surf. In the courtyard behind the hotel we were introduced to spray skirts, PFD’s, and selected our favorite paddle. The guides sprang for some welcome drinks on the beachside patio of the Lion’s Bar, and then we traipsed out to Taverna Sunset, a small restaurant perched precariously at the far end of the rocky bayshore. It felt like some movie set, except the graffiti spray painted on the walls wasn’t witty.

Sunday, May 15th, 2004

Breakfast on the tree shaded patio outside the hotel. The breakfast buffet offers the usual tang; when we comment on it, Adam, the lead guide, gets the barkeeper to blend some real oranges into delicious orange juice, and we feel the trip will get off to a better start. Steve, the dedicated transcendental meditationist, tells us of how he went up into the caves at dawn, to “feel the vibes”. Part way through his hour long TM, some German guy walks into the

mouth of the cave to take a leak. Steve, in a ponderous low voice, orders “Not there!”. Confused, and unable to see anyone in the dark of the cave, the tourist goes a few feet over and makes preparations again, only to be told “Not there, either!”.

The bay is much calmer today, the first calm day in a week of unusually stormy weather. The guides have brought out the kayaks and lined them up, we gear up with our spray skirts and paddles and PFD’s and T-shirts. Team Darwin is all decked out in matching blue long sleeved rash shirts and orange gloves so we won’t sun burn on the water. We get instructions on how to sit in the boat, and climb into the kayaks in ankle deep water. The idea is for the guides to launch us out, we are to gather in a group 50 meters off shore to learn how to do a “wet escape” should we tip over (the legendary Eskimo roll, or 360 degree rollover and back up, is not part of our training). Eric demonstrates the wet escape technique about 4 metres after launch.

Eric is in a single kayak, Michelle in the Shadow single kayak, Frances shares the pook (a rather canoe-like canvas kayak that folds up, and is supposedly very stable) with diTraci, and Cosmos travels in the front hole/compartament of a long, two person kayak, our guide Adam being the paddler in the back compartment.

We paddle out the bay in a scraggly group, only two of the guests have kayaked before. We have our first experience in being the object of attention, entertainment, amusement ... everyone on the beach watches us, babies cry in fear, and some tanners take the movies that they hope to sell to TV news as the final footage of the ill-fated expedition should we never come back from our *three hour tour*.

Heading left out of the bay, we pass a steep headland, the swell is not much fun out here, the aggressive small waves bouncing back from the headland, buffeting our kayaks, making it hard to steer in the stiff cross wind. Didn’t the brochure say this trip was rated “novice”? It gets worse. We paddle into some small sea caves. Small here means claustrophobic. And smelly. Pigeons fly around in the semi-dark just above our heads. One hits the upper end of a kayak paddle and falls struggling into the water. Eric, who had not remembered to take sea sick pills, remembers why he had brought them. The swell of the sea lifts the kayaks several feet up, reducing the cave entrance to a low slit, and the ceiling swoops down onto the heads of the paddlers. The last group of paddlers into the cave observe a curious flotsam on the surface of the sea.

Just beyond the caves, we enter a open bay with a small beach, called Red Beach, after the iron-oxide enriched mud pockets that intersperse with the sand. We come in to land here; we must be quite a sight as 10 kayaks round the headland and approach the beach surf, the kayakers wide-eyed with incipient panic since they have never actually gotten out of a kayak before (Eric excepted). The tourists on the beach find us entertaining, and stand crowding the waterfront as they take our pictures and digital movies. At this point we realize that we have not warned our children that most beaches more than 10 meters from a hotel or taverna are textile optional. They were not prepared to see hundreds of clothes-free sunworshippers dangling whatever they could dangle everywhere. Several of our party provide more local entertainment by being plastered in reddish mud from the beach; walking back into the sea

does not wash it off, it has to be scrubbed off. Apparently the Romans valued red mud beaches; virtually every Mediterranean shore has at least one beach so named. There are no washrooms other than wading out into the sea, which some people do not find comfortable. Dana joins the nude sunbathers in our first hint at how fast a person can shed clothes. It takes two guides to tell her we are leaving.

We re-launch the kayaks and paddle back around the headland to Matala beach; we all struggle with the cross waves and rough waters of the headland. After a brief rest at Matala beach, our introduction to kayaking is supposed to continue with a paddle around the bay to the right, but everyone begs off, quite tired and somewhat discouraged from the first experience. Some of us hung around the beach; some returned to their rooms for a nap or to get steadier legs; Cosmos helped clean and tidy up the equipment (there is an amazing amount of stuff for a group of kayakers); Dana swims across the bay and climbs the cliff on the far side and starts cliff-diving about 7 meters down into the sea, trying to splash down just as a big roller goes by so as to not hit the bottom.

Late that afternoon we hike up the “mountain”, following the curvy goat paths, checking the flora and fauna, eventually reaching the top and admiring the sun set, looking down at the now deserted Matala bay on one side and the length of red beach on the other side of the mountain. We have a snack of crackers and cheese and Champagne to celebrate our first sea trials. We learn that we paddled only about 1.5 miles. Mike plays a flute; Steve offers a new age blessing to the four winds. Eric discovers Michelle went to red beach for the afternoon. Such unexpected bravery. We hike down in the gloaming dusk, and have dinner on the seaside patio of the Lion’s restaurant. We go to bed late.

On Monday morning, after breakfast on the patio, we pile into a mini-car and mini-minibus (multiple kayaks strapped to the roof). Our first stop comes quickly, at Festos, a hillside palace ruin. King Minos and the Cretan empire has about 7 palaces, this one overlooked fertile valleys and a busy trade route. The site is extraordinarily curious for one particular feature: the continual sound of people working. There are workers moving stones, wheelbarrows of cement, a cement mixer, men shoveling sand. I comment to George, our retired sea-captain/guide/mini-bus driver, about the unaccustomed level of noise and activity. He immediately agrees, then cocks his head to listen, and exclaims, “A-ha ! they are all Italian workers! No Greek would work that hard!”

We drive across Crete to nearly where we first landed at Iraklion, then continue west up the coast, past Suba Bay, a giant harbour with numerous American military bases housing submarines and ships that sprout enormous numbers of antennae. We hit a short stretch of divided four lane road and pick up speed. Suddenly we hear a popping noise and see tie down cords flapping along side the car, quickly followed by the extraordinary appearance of a silver kayak cruising down the next lane at our window height. As we exclaim that we have lost a kayak, it smoothly sails up a little, always staying upright for the convenience of its ghostly paddler, then moves left over the concrete barrier wall and across the opposing lanes of traffic, still more than a meter above the asphalt. Opposing traffic swerves and brakes, horns blare, and the kayak comes to gentle rest, still upright and pointing down the highway, in the far lane. A lorry stops in front of it and puts on its blue hazard light. In the meantime,

we have pulled to a stop on the shoulder. To everyone's protests, we begin to back up back down the freeway to where the kayak is in the far lane. Adam and Mike get out of the minibus, confirm that our tie down straps had snapped, and then run across the freeway, hop the concrete barrier, and cross two more lanes to pick up the kayak. They then bring it back to the middle, perching it on top of the concrete barrier whilst they hop over the wall, and carry it back to our shoulder of the road. We have no additional straps, so we abandon it in the tall roadside grass. Michelle is upset because it was her favorite kayak, the Shadow. Adam assures us it is not holed, just scraped.

We have lost about 45 minutes of time, and now pick up speed over dirt switchback roads to reach the entrance of the Samara Gorge. Our hike is to be a 11 km "stroll" downhill through the gorge to the coast. The descent is precipitous, the gorge walls steep and heavily forested, with numerous ancient springs along the creek flowing through the valley. Each spring is the origin of An Ancient Myth; diTraci tells us the story that goes with each as we hike the valley. The valley hike is not a pleasant as it first seems. Mostly, the valley floor consists of thousands, nay millions, of roundish rocks from pea size to Volkswagen size. Walking, even along the paths, consists of continually choosing footsteps amongst the stones. Frances requires the arm of Mike our guide to help hold her upright. Eric thinks that after the second kilometer surely the scenery or topography might change. Eric has been wrong before, and this time is no different.

Eric finds himself annoyed that so many tourists before him feel compelled to stack up the rocks in little snowmen piles or Inuksuit shapes. There are thousands of these little figures, everywhere. Apparently we are to be denied any sense of being in nature, everything must be man made.

DiTraci, our naturalist and mythologist, helps us to see Krikri, a sort of goat-like deer; we watch a family of four cavort near a rest-station in the valley. We see a few rare plants, quartz veins, and cross the now-river numerous times by stepping from round rock to round rock, and towards the end, by well-weathered loose board bridges cabled to the cliff sides. At its narrowest, the gorge is only about 2 meters wide at the bottom, and not much more wide several hundred meters up at the top. Despite our fast pace, it is rapidly getting dark – very dark. It is pitch dark when we exit the park gate at 8.45pm, manned, if that is the word, by two of the scariest, most-Hagrid like people I have ever seen. They take our exit tickets; they go in well after dark and carry out the stragglers.

But reaching the exit is not the same as reaching the coast. No indeed. It is still more than 2 kilometres to the coast. And the entire distance is an alluvial plain that has been rearranged by the recent heavy rain storms and floods. The bridges are washed out (fireman Mike to the Rescue, he carries each of us across the river), the lighting non-existent, the road and path exists only in short segments. There is no moon, just dark dark, and rushing water, and spooky sounds from the bushes. It takes a whole interminable hour to get to the coast and the hotel.

Michelle, Cosmos, and Dave the travel writer made the trip in 6 hours. Dana took just 4 hours; and promptly climbed the adjacent mountain to "see the view". The rest of us took 8

hours. Eight hours of endless round rocks; we spent almost all that time watching our feet. We “relax” at the lovely seaside taverna, gulp our food, take three ibuprofen each that the guides give us, and stagger to bed. Welcome to Agio Roumeli.

A note on chickens: having had chicken for dinner or lunch a few times, we commented on how Greek chickens seemed to have so many bones and sticks in them. Then we realized it was ... the lack of meat. These chickens grow up running around the yard, eating what they can, and are rather “skinny” when eaten. No Pamela Anderson chickies here.

Tuesday, 17 May, 2004

We wake up to bright sunshine, the surviving chickens cackling in the yards, roosters crowing and dogs barking. The town smells of fresh bread, fishing nets, and excitement. Our hotel room was simple, rustic, clean, and would have been much more enjoyable if we had been less tired, less pained.

This is our first big day of paddling. We head east down the coast towards Loutros. Our first stop is less than an hour away, at Agios Pavlos, a beachside church constructed in the cliff side in 1100 and dedicated to St Paul, who supposedly landed here in his perambulations. There is also a taverna, of course, and nothing else. We have a second breakfast or coffee. Then back into the kayaks and down the coast. We are getting rather proficient now at landing and relaunching the kayaks. On the steep shingle beaches, we tourists get into our kayaks on dry shore, the guides then push us out at a hundred kilometres an hour into the sea, our bows dipping low into the sea and then bobbing up, we struggle to gain control and not turn sideways (which will swamp us) and then smoothly cut our path out to sea.

Our second beach stop is Marmara Beach, at the base of a second gorge parallel to the Samara Gorge. I cannot believe that several members of the crew are seriously talking of skipping some kayaking to hike the second gorge. The gorge floor is not the only place to find round rocks.

Our third segment of journey takes us to Loutros. It is breathtakingly picturesque, the small town of white square buildings closely packed along the crescent of the bay, backed by steep hills. There are no streets – just a somewhat continuous walkway that goes from restaurant to restaurant all along the shore. There is no school, the children play on the streets in Batman and Spiderman costumes. Every building is a hotel, every front is a restaurant, every resident knows everyone else and all their secrets. There are no cars: the coastal ferry comes along several times a day and deposits cars or trucks on the paved loading beach, where people carry away the cargo.

Our mini van came by ferry, our luggage is in our rooms. Our hotel is the Daskalogiannis (“Dasko”), less than 50E a night, right on the waterfront, each room with a balcony with an immediate view of the bay. To our disgust, our all day of kayaking took us only 5.5 miles or so. We are pooped again tonight, still tired from the gorge walk and the first long paddle. But we are staying two nights in Loutros. The busy town gets some tourists by ferry, they get us by kayak, but mostly they get hikers, as a main European hiking trail goes along the coast

and cuts through the town. (The mostly German hikers hit the trails early in the morning, leaving the town quiet in the day). As evening falls we follow one of the hiking trails up to the point where there is an ancient Venetian fortress with extensive ruins and 5 metre high walls still standing. We have a snack, then hike back to town for a seafront dinner of endless courses of food and wine and company.

On Wednesday, our party splits up. Cosmos goes with David to hike up the steep goat-covered hills to see the Monastery at the top. Steve and Adam go hike the second gorge. Eric, Frances, Michelle go kayaking with Mike the guide. We travel further down the coast, stopping to visit some more pleasant sea caves, and have lunch at the less-attractive town of Svakia. It is very windy in the afternoon, and we are pooped by the time we get back to Loutros, having paddled 4 miles each way. Our group dinner on the waterfront is pleasant, as we are all getting to know each other well, and we are entertained by the goats running up and down the hill on the opposite side of the bay. Someone apparently would ring a bell, and then all the goats would stampede down the steep hills into a few corrals, mill about, then drift off again. Then the process would repeat. We could not tell if they got any reward for their pavlonian response to the bell; but it brought a smile to our faces every time.

On Thursday, we sadly leave Loutros and its postcard existence. Cosmos hikes the first 4 miles to Svakia, then travels in the van the rest of the day with George, his new story-telling hero. Frances rides the van and ferry for the first part of the day, then joins us in the kayaks. Michelle is in the Eclipse, a fast single seat kayak. Eric is in the Zeus, a larger single kayak. Our day is in four segments of 4, 7, 5, and 4.5 miles. After our first beach stop, Dana decides to get a lot of tanning in while kayaking. We arrive in downtown Frangocastelli, Dana gets dressed, and we tour the castle and walk to a cliff top restaurant to relax in the breezy sunshine.

Our last segment of the trip is a real challenge. The wind has picked up. That is to say, it has picked up waves. Whitecaps. The waves break continuously over the bow of the boats, submerging them in the wash, and waves go around our bodies snugly tied into the kayaks by our spray skirts. Spray skirts? More like surf deflectors. Picture a destroyer plowing through the stormy North Atlantic. The very last segment is actually scary, with the waves coming from two directions – the sea, and rebounds from the cliff-lined shores. But the challenge merely makes the sense of accomplishment all the more great as we round the final headland to see the broad sweep of beach at Imoudi. Our eponymous hotel is set well back amongst the trees and gardens. We celebrate our accomplishments by going inland to a town and shopping and eating at various tavernas, and wondering if we really want to rejoin such a civilization. After our pizzas, the waiters bring the adults shots of raki, an appalling over-proof alcohol. They bring two shots for the kids too, and we all start to protest, but the waiters insist they are apple juice, but encourage the kids to down them like shots. Amongst much teasing, they down the juice and we head home.

Friday, May 21, 2004.

This is to be a long day. We launch into moderate surf at the beach, leaving behind the sand-blasted sunbathers. We paddle 5 miles to Palm Beach and Turtle Bay. The beach here is a

spit of sand separating a slow creek that travels the length of the beach parallel to the sea before running down a gentle washboard into the bay. We park our kayaks on the spit, wade across the creek (its cold!) and visit the little taverna. Two old guys sit outside mending nets. For them, the sea is work and danger, a way to make a living. For us, we live and pay to play in the same sea, with all our fancy gear. We launch our kayaks in the river, and paddle up about one quarter mile under the south-pacific style palm trees, the shore is dense with turtles sunning, mudding, and swimming around. Back at the beach, we ride the little rapids down the river into the sea, and then paddle 5 more miles to three rocks, where we have lunch. Then a brief sprint 2 more miles to Ayos Pavlos, where there are dunes.

The final stretch is 8 miles, into Aya Galini. We are all hepped up now, brave and strong sea kayakers, ready to paddle a hundred miles, maybe more. Michelle and Eric are in a two person kayak, perhaps in response to Eric being pooped in the heavy surf the day before and being tired out. We make a good team, paddling very naturally together. The group stops frequently for rest breaks, and to admire the scenery. Cosmos has learned how to use the boat bailing pumps as water cannons; he is able to soak another kayaker from about 10 metres away. We visit a series of gorgeous caves, high ceilinged, some with skylights in them. For one cave we paddle in, turn 90 degrees near the back, and paddle out a different cave that empties into the sea around the headland from where we went in. We all go round and round the circuit, both ways. There is a third cave, partially undersea, that channels the sunlight down under the water, so that it glows a wondrous lustrous glow that is hypnotizing in effect. Why were the first caves of our trip so claustrophobic and dank; *these* are wonderful places to play in.

We paddle on, passing a place where the hard rock shore that makes up Crete spills down into the sea. Poseidon has broken off chunks of Crete here, dragging them back into the depths. We paddle into narrow clefts in the cliffs, riding the swells as they sweep us over the rocky shoals and out to the other side. Miss the swell and you could get stranded (or worse!) on the rocks until the next wave sweeps in. Just outside our final destination, we pass a cave in the cliff where apparently the Greek navy hid raiding ships during the occupation of Crete; the Germans never figured out where the ships sailed from. Michelle is now totally wiped out, and we limp into the harbour at Aya Galina, a bustling city clinging to the steep cliffs. We climb the precipitous streets, many of which are pedestrian-only stairs, to our cliff top hotel (the El Greco) with breathtaking views from our balcony out over the bay. It is clear from our eagle's nest how big the bay is, sweeping dozens of miles around. Far away, directly across the bay, are more cliffs, they are tomorrow's destination: Matala.

That night we have a farewell dinner at the rooftop terrace restaurant. Cosmos is getting quite down about leaving his new friends. The ever-present Greek "presents", shots of raki, are presented. Most of us decline to drink ours, Eric shares his with a plastic plant. Somehow all the spare shots head down the table to Dana, she stands and drinks each one. The waiters bring more shots. She downs 11? ounces of the rotgut in gulps over the next two minutes. We wait, holding our breaths, for her kidneys to drop out, or for her to faint. Instead, she walks off nonchalantly. Eric feels tipsy just from smelling the stuff.

Saturday, 6am

We are up in time to see the coast guard boats come back into harbour, having spent the night patrolling the narrow straits that separate us from Libya and the African continent. Presumably they were patrolling for drug or people smugglers. By 7.30 we are down at the waterfront, preparing the craft for a 7 mile dash straight across the bay to Matala. We are leaving early while it is calm; once we set out, there is no shore line to flee too, we are committed to a long paddle. Adam and Mike are slow getting to the beach, when they arrive they find most of the boats already launched by Eric and Dave, gear stowed, impatient paddlers at the ready. Eric and Michelle are paired again, having done so well together before. Adam has Cosmos in the front of his kayak. Our guides are being careful of our endurance and abilities – once in the bay, it would be nigh impossible for us to change boats. (Frances takes the road kayak around the bay with George).

Midway across the bay, riding nicely in the gentle swells, we raft our boats together to share some snacks. A giant sea turtle swims by, diving once he hears us spot him. We paddle on and on and on. The cliff beside Matala get larger, the caves are visible, as are the tourists on the beach. New tourists take videos of the expedition arriving at the beach, not knowing whether we had gone 3 hours or 3 weeks. We knew we had gone a lifetime, coming back different people than we had set out. Eric refuses Mike's hand when he beaches, climbing out by himself, pooped, Eric triumphant.

Watched by the diaper set and their tanning mommies, we unpack the boats. Cosmos complains that he never did an Eskimo roll. Adam sets up his kayak again, and out they go. Cosmos holds onto the sides of the boat, and Adam rolls it, pausing forever at the upside-down position, then rolling back to upright. Cosmos grins and cheers, and they do it again.

Mike pretends to take bets from the tourists that he can do a roll over and not get his hat wet. He does this by holding his hat in his upside hand as he rolls upside down, reaches up around his boat with his other hand, takes the hat, and rolls upright again, his head appearing right under the hat again. Wet head; dry hat. I never figured out just what he did with paddle while upside down in the water with both hands extended around his kayak up into the air to exchange the hat.

We shower at the hotel, rinse our clothes, dry them on the railings, the guides pack away the kayaks till the next trip. By one p.m. we are on the road to Iraklion.

So, trip over, what to think?

It seems like forever ago that the Eric decorated the surf in the first cave, that the ghost kayak flew parallel to the van, that we hiked that "scenic gorge". We learned that kayaks are really tough, withstanding freeway speeds, loaded launchings from the rocky beach, breaching on the exposed rocks near the cliffs. They withstand repeated water attacks by 10 year olds. They are not embarrassed by bare asses or any antics of the paddlers. That a "novice" rated kayak tour is still a strenuously athletic event, given the right seas and weather. That no matter how tired we got, no matter how often our sore arms fell off our

bodies, it is possible to still go out for dinner and yearn to kayak again early the next morning. That the 125 km that Michelle and Eric kayaked (we had kayaked 100% of the trip) is both forever and short. That a kayak trip in Crete is a wonderful experience, not to be missed. That we'd do it again, any time.

Iraklion, Crete

We overnighted at the Hotel Koronos for 45E per room per night, big breakfast included. It is located in the old part of the city, which suffers from the indignities inflicted on pre-automobile era streets when they are over-run with mopeds, motos, and cars. Still, the most ancient parts of the city had a number of nice buildings, and some streets returned to pedestrian domination. The streets were pleasantly busy with strollers, lovers, fans, shoppers, and people watchers. We had dinner at the four lions fountain square for 50E and were entertained by the celebrants after a televised soccer game which Ireland apparently won.

The next morning those uniquely Greek urgently ringing church bells awoke us before 7am. We rolled our suitcases through the ancient streets to the port, and caught the huge Cat IV to Mykinos; our four fares were 100E in total. We arrived at the new port of Athinios on Santorini Island at 11.30am. The new port is not directly below the town; it is several kilometers around the bay.

Instead of taking the bus or a taxi to town, we talked to several hotel drivers who park in a row with their mini vans. They show considerable courtesy to each other, allowing one to finish his spiel about the hotel and for the tourist to break off the conversation before they jump in with the attractions of their hotel. Unlike my previous visits to Greece, touts now carry large presentation folios with 9x12 colour pictures of their hotel (exterior and interior) and location maps, and have basic facts readily available for the discerning tourist. We are careful not to let the tout quote us a price first, since they will assume people are staying one night only, and multiply the one-night rate by however many nights you are staying. We preferred to jump right in by telling them we wanted two rooms for 3 nights close to the town but quiet.

We quickly found a nice property in the Hotel Antonios, near the main square on a pedestrian only street. The kids are downstairs, Eric and Frances have room upstairs; both with balcony or patio, A/C, fridge, cove moldings on the ceilings, nice shower in the bath, accessed through well decorated hallways.

Santorini is perched on the rim of a caldera. The formerly cone shaped volcanic island "blew its centre out" in ancient times (about 1525BC), and became a large lagoon (the ancient centre of the volcano) surrounded on three sides by the curving arms of the island. The sides of the island around the caldera are steep 1000' cliffs: the villages are perched on the knife-

edge top of the cliffs. In 197BC and 1707AD other smaller islands of black chunky rock grew up in the centre of the caldera. These islands are still active volcanoes, the last major eruption being in the 1920's. The town scenery is breathtakingly picturesque, a fantasy from an opera set designer. The ancient streets in the old town are twisty and sloped; narrow, only two to three metres wide; colonnaded on both sides by whitewashed shops and residences.

The ancient port is 580 sloping steps down from the centre of town (885 ft). Donkeys walk up and down continuously, ferrying passengers from luxury yachts, cruise boats, and local ferries. The fare was cheap, and Eric will forever regret not riding a donkey up the slimy slippery brown steps. There is also a funicular for the those who need to rest their ass or believe the donkeys are exploited. Throughout the town there are many restaurants with fabulous views over the caldera or the opposite way over the gently sloping agricultural land towards the opposite shoreline. There are many expensive restaurants and shops; but there are also reasonably priced shops and restaurants for those who seek them out. Our Greek Chinese restaurant, however, was nothing to write home about.

It is fully possible to spend several days, or the major part thereof, just wandering the streets of the town, marveling at the views of the caldera, the sky, the town, the people. The characteristic architecture of the newer buildings is barrel-vaulted concrete construction. The vaults are punched with star shaped or round skylights; the barrel ends festooned with balconies. Since much of Santorini was rebuilt in a traditional style after earthquakes in 1956, the resultant townscape is harmonious. After those earthquakes, entire villages picked up and emigrated to America and elsewhere. The contrast between the pleasing compact town of Santorini and the rural countryside is somewhat spoiled by the planning authorities permitting unrestricted large lot development all over the island. In a few more years, it will look just like a giant suburb, all quaintness and cuteness lost (much like Mykinos, as we will discover in a few more days). Of course, our view as tourists may not be the same as the locals who have to live their lives there year round.

On Monday we rent a small Citroen car (35E/day, automatic) from Travel Fate and explore the many poorly marked roads as we head south. We reach the gravel beach near Akrotiri and have late lunch on a beach side café. The food is good, the service relaxed, the pace is slow. All along the shoreline boathouses and cottages are dug out of the gravel cliffs along the shore; like ancient dwellings they have only a front wall that is man made. Frances and Cosmos enjoy some chess games at the restaurant table whilst Michelle and Eric explore down the coast to Red Beach and a black sand beach. One table at our café is by itself, umbrella bravely waving in the breeze, on a small concrete island that guest have to jump to from the dock. Unfortunately, every 10 minutes or so a wave washes over the whole island, soaking the feet of the unwary.

We drive west along the gentle coast and explore the almost-deserted inland town of Pyrgos which is perched atop a steep volcanic peak. While incredibly cute to tourists, these ancient towns lack practical amenities, like driveable streets. Their underpopulation permits rich urbanites to convert several small houses into larger cottages and gardens. These towns perch in a limbo, neither vibrant and living urban spaces, nor decaying ghost towns. The Venice syndrome. There was an elderly man near the busy pedestrian intersection, he was well

dressed in greek cap and pullover, and had two finely blanketed donkeys with him, he charged tourists a small fee to sit on the donkey and have their picture taken. It seemed a fine post-career retirement plan for the donkeys, the old man, and tourists.

At the far end of the Island we come to another major town, Oia, sometimes spelled Io, also perched atop the knife edge of the volcanic cliffs. Oia does not look into the caldera, it looks westward to the setting sun. Sunset is a major social event; everyone pours out of houses or watches from their hard-won patio café tables as the sun settles quickly into the west.

During our walks along the narrow pedestrian lanes that overlook the caldera and the sea, Frances gets adopted by a dog. He is not particularly friendly, and seems to view us a sheep or a game, he runs along the walls that separate the walk from the cliff, sheparding us along. When we switch direction, he does too. Other dogs run out to see the fun, he protects his flock with great mock ferocity. He then tries to kiss Frances, an effort that is not reciprocated. Eventually we outrun him, and looking back, see him escorting an elderly woman along the wall, to her consternation. Dogs were not the only ones having odd amusements on Santorini; we are about to go 'on location'.

The lanes are Hollywood-cute with pots of flowers perched on the streetside walls. They don't get knocked over the cliff into the sea because someone comes along and picks them all up and takes them away. Why? It seems Oia is Hollywood, Greek style. There is on-location filming underway for the Greek portion of the movie *Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants*. The Italian film crew doesn't know who it is staring. Then Michelle spots the star, it is Alexis Bledell, one of the TV sitcom *Gilmore Girls*. The Italian crew is impressed that the tourists recognize the American star, and look more serious and pompous. We had never heard of the movie and were puzzled by the title; only on returning to North America do we learn that *Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants* is *The Number One Best-Selling Book* amongst teenyboppers.

We watch them film a scene in front of the church, using a donkey (playing itself), motobike, local children portraying local urchins, and local elderly Greeks pressed into roles as bench-sitting decorations around the square. The chestnut vendor is most definitely an actor. The Orthodox priest outside the church spends lots of time waving away the blue-smoking motobike; up-braiding the donkey keeper because the donkey didn't keep what it should have and now who will pick up that mess outside his church, did they have no respect? No, you can't plug in your camera to his outlet. Take off your hat when you approach the front door of God's church! He has incredible energy for such an old man; clearly defending his church's forecourt is important to him. He looks ancient, but then most Orthodox priests look old to us because of their costume and long flowing beard. To our dismay, the camera crew and helpers openly jeer and tease him. A few younger local Greeks join in the dissing.

We drift off to the other side of the town, and rest in a square, enjoying the gloaming. Suddenly the priest appears striding urgently out of the narrow side streets; two elderly ladies wander out from an outdoor café to greet him and receive his blessing. He grabs one, swings her way over backwards, and gives her a long mouthy kiss whilst the other woman stands rooted in shock. Then he hugs *her*, rubbing his hand down her leg. He then strides off,

pulling off his priest's cap and beard, revealing a youngish man, who then hops over the door into a Volkswagen convertible illegally parked on the square beside the film trucks, and roars off into the dark, blowing kisses to the young girls around the square. How to glamorize the orthodox church ...

On Tuesday, we take a late morning ferry out to the islands in the caldera. The two-masted sailing boat cruises cost 15E; they sail around the caldera a bit, then visit the volcanic islands in the centre of the caldera. These islands, created from lava, are intensely hostile places made up of heaps of unnaturally black rock. They look like mine tailings. The wind in the caldera comes up strong and cold, most everyone on the boat is underdressed. That doesn't stop two dozen or so from diving overboard at one of the bays, where they swim into a small mud-brown bay that is an outlet of hot sulfur water from an active volcano vent. The resultant blend of cold sea water and volcano hot sulfur water is a pleasant 72 degrees.

We later land at a dock and hike up the barren hillside paths to the top of the volcano, which is actually hundreds of feet lower down than the rim of the caldera, upon which poses Santorini town and Oia. There are several active vents on the route; at one, Eric and Cosmos climb down a dry caldera and stick our heads right into the steaming vent. It stinks of sulfur, and is hot like a 400-degree oven. We grab some souvenir rocks, pretty colours, as freshly made as this planet gets. They are hot, we toss them from hand to hand till they cool. We also get some black pumice rocks, which are rocks that float. An egg-sized rock weighs as much as a button.

Dinner that night is at an Italian restaurant, great food and value for 53E, including a half litre of red wine. It is nice not to have a greek salad, just for a change. We buy ferry tickets to our next island for 50E; the ferry leaves at 7.15am.

On to Paros

It is easy in retrospect to say we were always going to Paros, but in fact we had several island options once we left Santorini on the Blue Star Naxos, a large, traditional ship-shaped ferry. We took the escalators up past tuxedo-clad greeters to the very modern indoor decks, with airplane type seats, large restaurants, bank and internet centres, and spacious outdoor decks. Eric then abdicated his role as group leader, and told the others to read the books, decide if we were staying in town or in the country, taking the bus or renting a car. By time we got to Paros, the itinerary was roughed out.

We walked the harborside streets of Paroikia (also the capital) for twenty minutes to find an available automatic car (another Hyundai) for three days at 30E a day. We started off around the island, taking the "long way" around the coast, delighted with the rich prosperous countryside of wheat and other farm crops, scattered villages sprouting hotels and country villas (we are now within striking distance by ferry for weekend and holiday visits from prosperous Athenians).

We had identified several possible beach towns to stay at, but when we got to our destination, we decided we liked the previous set of villages better and backtracked to Pisso Livadi,

eventually leaving the car at the edge of town and walking down the beach to a group of tavernas and small hotels, the village called Logaras. We had a delightful beachside lunch, then walked on for about 2 kilometers. The beach was very windy, unpleasantly so, and the island is famous for its wind sailing championships. Nonetheless, we felt the wind would die down, and we settled on a utterly charming two story beach front hotel called the Akteon. We rented a two room apartment, with kitchen, bath, two sleeping rooms, giant outdoor decks, looking right up the beach in both directions, for 50E a night. The courtyard hotel had many arches, marble stairs, and was tastefully painted blue and yellow and white.

We discovered we were some of the very few guests, the holiday season being abnormally late starting due to the late spring. We walked up the beach around a headland and came to an enormous beach club at Pounta, with bars, decks, pool, sunning terraces, head shops, boutiques, beach, and very few customers. They waived admission, pleased to have someone to sit under the beach umbrellas and drink their beer. So we sunned away the afternoon, trying to lie low in the sand to avoid the sandblasting zephyr.

In the evening we wandered into town for a harbourside dinner on a sheltered patio, and then battened down the hatches and went to sleep listening to the gale force winds rattle the shutters and push the surf. The next day we hung around the hotel sunning all the white spots. At the taverna up the beach, there was a string hung along the front of the seating area, along the beach, from which they suspended a dozen or so octopuses (octopi?) each day to dry before they do whatever they do with them in order to sell them to unsuspecting diners.

Now it is a much remarked upon feature of tropical travel by northerners that inhibitions fall away. I recall thirty (!) years ago at University there was a Soc. Prof. with a cushy research project: she went to the Caribbean islands every spring to observe the behaviour of single female travelers and the local males who befriended them. Euphemisms abounded. Since then, much has been written in the academic and popular literature about the shedding of inhibitions when people go to Mardi Gras, carnival, South Padre or Cancun on March break. Such it was for our little family, ensconced on the roof deck overlooking the beach, ensuring the sun saw every nook and cranny to tan it, whilst human eyes observed nothing.

Friday, May 28

We decided to go for a drive around the island, wandering through the back lanes and small villages along the coast, and then up into the mountains to Lefkes, a medieval town, painted stone patterns on the car-free streets, small homes converting into vacation villas, the town coming back from near ghost-town status due to the beautiful mountain scenery.

The hills were covered with terraces, generations of ancient Greek farmers had worn themselves out stacking rocks, carrying dirt, creating flat terraces for crops. Now, in one generation, they were abandoned, crumbling away rapidly, the children living in wealth beyond the farmers' dreams, but doing it by driving a taxi, running a B&B, or working in a hotel. The farms were nothing but cute views, worthy of sentimental sniff or two on moonlit nights; adults interrupting game boy or TV to point out to impatient small children the

disappearing terrace across the valley where grandfather, great great grandfather, and generations back to Homer, had worked the hillsides.

Near Lefkes was a large abandoned quarry, some of it surface pits, some deeper shafts angling down into the mountains. From this quarry came the most famous marble in the world, translucent to 2.5cm of depth, for unrivaled luster and beauty. The marble is found only on Paros, and makes the many steps, patios, and tables around the island. But no mere sculpture: from the Venus di Milo (Milo being the next island over, they used Paros marble to make their Venus) to Napoleon's Tomb, Paros marble was used for the best projects. The Marathi quarries are worn out now, but visitors can pick up the jagged tea-coloured rocks everywhere around the quarry, and breaking them open, reveal the brilliant white insides. Alas, no one was yet making local marble crafts from the stone; instead shops had the usual manufactured brick a brack imported from Athens.

We spent the afternoon at the beach club again, it is mentioned in our tour book as the best beach club, the trendiest club in Greece. We sunned, ate chips, admired both of the bikini clad girls and the three macho boys who were now arriving from Athens for the start of the season. As we left, the tunes were thumping, the empty bar stools hopping, the waiters looking worried.

One of the tavernas down the beach had live music that evening (unadvertised but apparently every Friday night) and we stopped by after supper to listen to two Greek guys play traditional Greek music whilst the children run around the tables and back and forth to the beach. They played a guitar and a (mandolin?) and were thoroughly enjoyable. Their sets were followed by a female and male, playing violin and (mandolin?) but they were much too loud and screechy, going for the speed-it-up make-it-louder school of entertainment. The waiter looked just like Mephistopheles.

Saturday is back to town to return the car and buy a birthday present for the 3 year old child of the hotel owners, Eric comes back by island bus. Then its off to the Pounta beach club, really hopping now with several hundred patrons, tits and chips, a DJ, totally skimpy fashion show. It is more credible now to believe that this might just be a trendy spot.

Sunday, June 30

We sleep in, have boiled eggs for breakfast on our delightful patio overlooking the sea, Frances and Cosmos play chess, and then at 1pm we take a taxi (15E) back to the port where we buy mini pizzas and cokes and get on the boat, the smallest ship-type ferry yet, the Alpha liner "Aqua Jewel". We have a pleasant deck passage to Mykinos new port (about a mile out in nowhere from the traditional old port downtown, where some ferries still dock). We had decided not to stay in Mykinos town itself, as it is very much a crowded, night-club & party town, when we are checkered-tablecloth café-type people. *(The most famous club opens at 2am, dancing til 10am, then it closes...these must be the dopey people we see wandering out onto the beach at 11am to sleep away the day, having lunch at 4pm, then heading to town after dark)*

We talk to a few of the ladies at the port, parked with their mini vans and pictures of their hotels. Our new hotel is set well back from the ocean, about 6 blocks, way up a gentle valley hill, with a view over the lush (read: swampy) valley to the beachfront and bay of Piatì Gialis, on the opposite side of the island from Mykinos Town. The rooms are Ok, with nice big terraces, and a 5 minute walk to beach. We have two doubles, for 50E total.

We have dinner at a friendly beach front hotel, at their front verandah restaurant Notas. The excellent pasta and half litre of wine leave us tipsy, and only 60E poorer for having eaten at oceanside by candlelight. The lovely dinner is followed by disaster: the hotel has visitors – 3” cockroaches, and no one sleeps a wink.

In the morning, we move out, down to the beach front hotel where we had dinner the night before. We stay at the Mykinos Palace, getting two ground floor rooms, both beachfront, each with a huge bathroom, just 20 feet from the pool and beach, for 60E per double per night. The “on season” quoted rate is much higher – 90E – but we know the season is slow starting and the hotel needs guests, and we praise the excellent dinner we had the night before at the hotel, and presto, a much better rate. We are also pleased because staying at a cheaper hotel would necessitate us to buy breakfast along the waterfront, and now it is included. Very first class. The included sumptuous breakfast buffet, which we dig into on the Nota verandah (well, we *hadn't* stayed there the night before, but *now* we are guests, so we helped ourselves ...), has yogurt, cheese, honey, cereal, toast, eggs prepared 5 ways....we stretch it out right to lunch time.

We lay around the pool, decorated with dolphin mosaics, discovering it has bitterly cold semi-salt water compared to the ocean’s warmer but totally-salt water. Later we discover the bathroom showers are also semi-salt water, apparently all purified water is semi-desalinated, only drinking water is “fresh” or, as the Greeks prefer to call it, “sweet”. Our sunning has become excessive, and ominous flaking patches begin to appear. By the end of the day, Frances and Eric are like snakes shedding their old skin.

Having missed a night’s sleep, and been oversunned and then overfed, the dinner wine knocks us out and we sleep like logs.

Tuesday

Our new life begins on Mykinos with a huge breakfast-lunch, the yogurt and honey and granola now supplemented by apricots, fresh fruit cocktail, and rolls. Eric and Frances walk west around the headlands, visiting the next coves, some pleasantly secluded but backed up by expensive hotels, later climbing over the steep rocky slopes below private villas on the hillsides. Every once in while the path reveals a pretty little beach or flat sunning rocks, always occupied by textile-liberated visitors. The bigger beaches in front of the hotels are similarly undecked out, but with waiters to bring you your water or beer whilst guests work on their tans.

Eric then walks east around the bay, past the first beach, decked out with club-like bars and bamboo wind screens and oodles of flesh. I think the Germans are trying to emulate the Somalis, they crave such dark skin.

The next beach down the coast is Paradise Beach, famous from the 70's as the hippie beach where *mary jane* was universal and clothes absent. It still manages to convey a bit of that atmosphere, but the beach is backed up by enormous 500-table night club/discos with plunge pools, party floors, and an outdoor food court (for sanitary reasons, a wrap or bathing suit must be worn while buying food). Paradise has no village, it is reached by a city bus route direct from the port. So famous, the beach attracts many novice travelers, looking more for moving real estate than sun tans, reveling in post cards to college friends at home about their naughty beach visit. The other part of the beach was made up of the old leather/tough hide set of all genders, and ages and sizes, but so tanned they look like burnt toast, burnt hot dogs, and very old saddle leather.

The next bay over is Super Paradise, the gay beach. Same scenery.

Back towards Platis Gialis, one of the beach front hotels along the coast has many regular hotel rooms, and an enormous collection of outdoor steel frames on concrete pads. After a few minutes Eric realizes that these are the famous beach "tents" – canvas covered steel-framed tents with two army cots in them, washrooms across the courtyard at the hotel. Each tent is about 6' from the next tent, which must make for interesting acoustics. There were 24 of them in one row along the edge of the hotel property. Elsewhere I saw three-sided wooden tents with open fronts (like a shipping or cargo container with one long side missing) with just mosquito net fronts facing the path and the ocean. In bed, on stage.

Now my comments above, on the excessively tanned individuals we saw on the beaches, should not be construed to mean that everyone was craving that old leather look. Indeed, there were many very pleasantly browned individuals, doing their best to eliminate embarrassing white lines on their bodies. One such tanner lay on a chaise next to me at the pool, she was French, with a most regal bearing and manner, Ms Snobby Upper-class personified. Next to her, lay an American girl, about 19 I would guess, with all the preppy good looks and sleek body and blond hair and confidence the marks the offspring of the affluent. She wore a straw cowboy hat, which certainly made her stick out conspicuously as an American. She asked to "borrow" the sun screen from the French woman, who very reluctantly "lent" her the expensive-looking tube. The American girl persisted in talking to the woman, who clearly conveyed an patronizing air of impatience. Finally the American girl said, "I'm from California ya know. I just *loved* France. But I didn't vote for Schwarzenegger you know, not all Americans are like that." Pause. "And everybody just *hates* Bush, no one thinks *he* can get elected." This, I thought, is interesting, how much groveling can she do? But Ms. Snobby turned back to her magazine, and Ms Cowgirl sunned for two or three minutes, then ran off into the sea with some boys, and they played catch with her bikini top. Later, I discovered the beach shop sold the straw cowboy hats; they were also popular with certain types of Germans.

Around four that day we hopped the local bus into Mykinos town. The streets are crowded and narrow, busy and noisy, it appears many tourists rent homes or rooms in these crowded streets. But maybe they spend the day at Paradise Beach or somewhere else. We shop at some of the tiny shops, Michelle gets some fancy Turkish slippers, Frances gets a necklace and earrings. Of the old town, the famous windmills are dilapidated and disappointing; we see the current Pedro the Pelican at the beach; the Little Venice waterfront is attractive and trendy; the many restaurants too pushy for trade. We ate at an outdoor café, it cost way too much.

We stuck our heads in various churches; every second house on some streets seems to be a church or chapel. We develop some film at a shop; the owner's boy is playing at the computer. Eric recognizes the tune and blurts out "Age of Empires". The boy looks up, excited to share what he likes, it quickly becomes apparent the parents have no understanding of what their son is doing. I engage them in a 10 minute parent conversation, in which I enthuse about the merits of that particular game for what it teaches about economics, society, politics, to the delight of the boy, amusement of my son, and bewilderment of the parents.

We take the city bus back to Piati Gialis; there is an extended family of dutch or german tourists on the bus, their blond-haired little girls perfect clones of each other; grandchildren, parents, grandparents, all stamped from the same mold. At 10pm we have a quick swim in the dark in our hotel pool, illuminated by the full moon. Funnily enough, Eric chills from the swim, and it takes him until 4 in the morning before he warms up again.

The next morning (Wednesday) we pig out at the extended buffet again. Like yesterday, a whole group of school-age teens arrives walking along the beach, each with a Mac laptop, and settle in around the restaurant verandah and poolside chairs. Eric chats some of them up (the blond ones). Turns out they are from Nova Scotia and Ontario. They are with EMI International School, doing 80 days in Europe to earn 3-4 high school credits. The 27 kids have gone from Paris to Heidelberg to Tuscany, Athens, and now Mykinos, studying geography, history, culture, art, and religion. Doing some rough math, Eric guesses it must cost their parents about \$18,000 each; the blond girl snorts and says "w-a-a-a-y more". This must account for the insouciant way they wander around the hotel grounds, blond manes waving, easy smiles, progeny of the upper classes, distressingly vague about what to do now that school was over. University? Oh, I haven't applied anywhere yet. Yawn. For now, I'm just cuddling up with my friend and laptop on the Euro tour. The teachers hold a lunch conference on the deck, lesson planning by the look of it, facilitated by pitchers of wine and greek salads. Students slouch on chaise lounges or deck chairs, wearing the school uniform of flowered bathing trunks or bikinis. Maybe I made a wrong career choice somewhere.

Some departing Germans earlier in the week had given Cosmos their soccer ball rather than pack it home. Now, Cosmos passes it on to some British kids, who are in Greece enjoying their sun while their mother laments that she has to hide the fact that they are out of school during term since, she says, in Britain she can be fined or investigated for abuse for taking her kids out of school. What a contrast to our Ontario system, which has almost always reacted to our taking our children out of school (sometimes for just a week, this time for 35 days) with something akin to enthusiasm: go learn in the outside world! Go for it!

At one thirty we take the hotel shuttle bus to Mykinos port and board the “Blue Star Ithaki”. We stake out airplane type chairs inside in the lounge and plastic patio chairs and table outside on the back deck. The sea is dead calm. We follow other ferries to Tinos, a beautiful town of obvious neatness and affluence. Second stop is Syro, with dry-docks, steep hillsides of adobe-like houses climbing up towards the mountain top monasteries. Hordes of Greeks get off and on the ferry. Then on towards Piraeas. The seas become more crowded, ships, ferries, freighters, converging towards the port.

On board, we have lunch at Goodies, the McDonald clone. We have excellent quality burger and salads. This causes us to reflect once again on the perils of cultural imperialism – by those who lament the spread of fast-food dining to other countries. Do these critics ever really consider what they are saying, the consequences of having no fast dining, or standardized menus, no cheap restaurants for moms to take the kids to, for boyfriends and girlfriends to meet at? It strikes me as hypocritical as environmentalists who campaign to save the forests by printing leaflets; or social do-gooders who lament low wages and social inequality but make sure they patronize the cheapest places around.

We have made reservations at the Hotel Phidias, where we stayed after our first leg through Greece and before flying to Crete. This time we walk to the hotel from the port, following the pedestrian streets over the hills of Piraeas, dragging our little wheeled suitcases over the streets and curbs. Cosmos’s pull-out handle on his suitcase breaks. We reflect on how far our cheap little drag along bags have gone since 1999 – to Washington, to Galveston and SanAntonio, to Halifax, through Europe for 46 days, to Miami, to Cancun, to Toronto, New York City, Boston, Detroit, Las Vegas, Colorado Springs and Santa Fe, Palm Springs/SanDiego/LosAngeles, Vancouver, and a dozen different short hop business trips in between. What a lucky life we lead.

We head out for a stroll and dinner. The pedestrian streets in the area are wall to wall shops, the streets lively with young people. The cross streets are vehicular, narrower, residential above commercial ground floors. We walk though a new Carrefour grocery/department store, built right on the waterfront of Zeas yacht harbour. Eventually we join the crowds of Greeks eating on the patios in front of the local and international restaurants that clutter the harbour-end of the pedestrian streets and wrap around the bay along the sea wall. Dinner is at Pizza Hut, its incongruous upscale surroundings, crowds of partying Guppies (Greek urban professionals) interspersed with elderly Greek men lingering with colleagues over coffee and memories.

Thursday, June 3rd

Michelle is on a separate flight from Eric, Frances, and Cosmos, because we booked her separately just before we came. She is up and gone at 4am to the airport; she has a half day layover in Boston, where she hopes to hit some galleries before connecting to Toronto and then Ottawa. The rest of us wander the shopping streets to develop the last of the film, and get a new video game for Cosmos’s Gameboy. Then in mid afternoon, we too depart Athens for Frankfurt, then Toronto, then Ottawa, arriving home 38 days after we left.

Notes

Michelle carried her camera in a Pelican case – a sturdy, waterproof plastic lunch-box type thing lined with sponge to keep cameras or other valuables safe. She discovered that no-one at all ever inspected the Pelican case – inspection personnel at airports respond to the sight of the case by handling it gingerly and with great respect for the supposedly-valuable and delicate objects inside, and never opening it.

Cosmos's picture was featured in the NY Times newspaper in Sept 19, 2004. Marilyn Rudick, taking a kayaking trip in Crete just after us wrote up a lengthy article that was published in the Times and syndicated elsewhere. Dave, the travel writer who was on our trip, supplied some photos for the article, one of which was a large spread of Cosmos hiking along the Cretan coast.

At travel time, April 2004, one euro was worth \$1.60 Canadian

We used a handy euro-dollar translation card printed from the web, www.oanda.com

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Hotel Aeolic Star, Meteora/Kalambaka, fax 2432 022444

Hotel Sibylla, Delphi, fax 83221

Hotel Greco, Idra; grecogold@hotmail.com

Hotel Phidias, Pireas, www.filoxenia.com

Hotel Daskalogiannis, Loutro, Crete www.loutro.com

Hotel Ammoudi, Rethymno, Crete , fax 0832 31755

Hotel El Greco, Agia Galini, Crete fax 91491

Hotel Kronos, Heraklion, Crete www.kronoshotel.gr

Hotel Antonia, Fira, Santorini, www.hotelantonia.gr

Akteon Hotel, Paros, www.greek-tourism.gr/akteon-paros

Hotel Mykonos Palace, www.mykonospalace.com

Sisterhood of the Travelling Pants, the movie, release date June 2005.

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Photos by Michelle and Cosmos Darwin.