

Taking for Granted Our Local Treasures – Athens, Greece



I'm not sure what sparked the idea for this article. It may have been when a friend of mine mentioned that he was going to Yosemite National Park, and I realized I've still never been there. I have lived in northern California all of my life and, on at least three occasions, driven my motorcycle right past one of the park's entrances, but never went in. That started me thinking that, during our upcoming trip to Greece, I would conduct an impromptu survey.

I wanted to ask local Athenians who have lived in the shadow of the Acropolis their entire lives, how many times they have visited this world famous monument. (Actually, I had Helen ask, because my Greek is still pretty weak.) I made a prediction before we left and it turned out to be pretty accurate.

We started with Helen's cousin and his wife, who live in Piraeus, just south of Athens. Her cousin Ilias had visited the Parthenon once while in school on a field-trip. His wife, Julia, had never been there.

At our hotel, with a fantastic view of the Acropolis and Parthenon from the rooftop bar, I asked the bartender how many times she had visited the Parthenon. She told me she had been several times, but she was from Poland and had only lived in Greece for the last five years. Each time members of her family would come to visit, she would take them on the walk up to the Parthenon. She did, however, tell me that on more than a couple of occasions, actual Greeks, visiting Athens from one of the islands, had asked her what that "building" on the hill was. Wow.

During a stroll around the Plaka, I wanted to get in a few more queries. There were two police officers on the corner. They didn't really look too busy so, I thought, what the heck? Besides, Helen would have

to do the talking. They were younger men, maybe in their late twenties, and quite friendly. Helen went ahead and asked each of them how many times they had been up to the Acropolis. The first replied that he had been there many times because it was on part of his patrol. The second officer said he had only been there "maybe five times," to which the first officer replied "What? Only five times?" Then the first officer confirmed what I had a hard time believing before. He said that, on more than one occasion, a Greek citizen has asked him, pointing to the Parthenon, "what's that big castle on the hill?" Honestly, I really would have thought that pretty much everyone on the planet has, on at least one occasion, seen a picture of the Parthenon. Apparently, I'm wrong.

A little further down the street, we met a pair of police female officers, about the same age as the first two officers. They were also willing to participate in my completely unscientific survey. The first officer said she had only been up to the Parthenon once on a school field trip. The second said she had been there many times as, like the first male officer, the Acropolis was sometimes on her patrol.

That was the extent of my survey. I know it wasn't very scientific and the sampling was fairly small, but it confirmed the prediction I mentioned earlier. So what does Athenians not visiting the Parthenon have to do with me never having been to Yosemite? Everything. It's exactly the same thing. This leads me to think that people do this all over the world, which is sad. It's sad because life is too short and people don't get out and take advantage of what's in their own backyard. And it's not because people don't care about the monuments or parks around them. I think it's more a case of thinking that "we'll do it later. It will always be there. We'll go next week." But next week comes, then next year, and before you know it, ten years have gone by and you still haven't done it.

I live quite close to San Francisco, a beautiful, world-class city. The last time I went was last year when some friends from Belgium came to visit. Before that, it had been years. I actually live *in* the Tahoe National Forest, but do I go to Lake Tahoe? No. Not since last year, again with the Belgians. So, I'm just as guilty of this and this experience has made me see that I need to stop. Everyone does. We need to get out and learn about our local history and culture. Explore what is near. Now, even more, with the economy in the shape it has been lately, trips to local treasures are the way to go.

It seems to me that, instead of spending your entire life trying to make a living, you should just take some time to actually live.