

women and nuns scurrying about, dusting pews and icons, preparing for the Sunday service. I lit some candles and just stood there and drank it all in.

We were disappointed to find that the church museum was closed. We had read that it contained a cross that had been made with wood from the original crucifix...something we both would love to have seen. That, too, would have to wait until our next trip.

As we walked back toward the car, we passed a place called the Garden of the Virgin Mary. It was unkempt and looked like it hadn't been maintained in some time, but we decided to climb the many stairs to the top, anyway, and take a look. From that vantage point, we were treated to an awesome view of the village below, with its red-roofed, white homes scattered across the mountainside, its lovely cobblestone streets lined with little shops, and the many colorful balconies, full of vibrant flowers. It looked like a postcard and beckoned us to take more pictures.



After coming back down from this place, we decided we'd better start looking for Giannoula. Did she and her daughter still live here? Did she even exist? I knew if I didn't at least try to find her, my Aunt Soula would be very disappointed, so off we went on our quest. We drove up the mountain, following the directions that the taverna lady had given us, and eventually came to the "upper village." As we got out of our parked car, I approached a little black-clad yiayia who was walking by, carrying a full plastic bag in each hand, and asked her if she knew where I could find the family bearing Giannoula's last name. Instead of telling me, she turned around and said, "Follow me," and proceeded to walk back the other way. Since this involved more uphill walking, I said, "Oh, please, you don't have to take us there. You can just give me directions," but she insisted on leading the way! We walked a couple of "blocks" up another cobblestone street, where she stopped and pointed to a pickup truck that was parked at the end of that street. She said that the family I was looking for lived in the house across from the truck. She stood there waiting until Carolyn and I reached the right doorway, then waved good-bye and walked back down the hill.

There was no answer at that house, but a lady came out of another home two doors away and asked if she could help. I told her the story, she thought for a minute, then asked me to wait. She went back into her home and when she came back out, she had another, older lady with her, and claimed, "We've found her! We know who you're looking for!" I couldn't believe my ears! They told me that Giannoula lived down in the "lower village" along with her daughter and niece. They also explained that she was very poor and ill, that her daughter was also ill, and that her niece was a little crazy. But they did tell me that she lived next to the Police Station in town. We thanked them many times over and proceeded back down the mountain.

I once again parked near the taverna where we had first inquired about her, and went back to talk to the lady again. We noticed that, this time, the local priest had joined the others for their Saturday afternoon “sit,” smoking a cigarette and drinking coffee. When I told her what I had found out, her eyes got big and she said, “Oh, for heaven’s sake, I know who she is! She’s my neighbor! I don’t know why I didn’t remember her when you first asked! What a pity that I don’t know my own neighbors better than that!” She then repeated the fact that this woman was in pretty bad shape and that I was doing a wonderful thing by taking her money and gifts. I asked for directions, and they said it would be too difficult for us to find it on our own, so they asked one of the young boys there to lead us to it on his motor scooter. We were very glad about this, because there were many side streets and curves that would have gotten us lost for sure, had we been on our own! Finally, he motioned for us to park and he went to ask one of the merchants where Giannoula’s house was. He then walked us right to her door and asked if we thought we’d be able to find our way back down and we said we could. I tried giving him some euros for his trouble, but he would not accept them.

I couldn’t believe I was actually standing at this “legendary” woman’s front door. It was a small little hovel of a house, attached to the house next to it, as most village homes are. I knocked on the door a couple of times, and someone from an upstairs window yelled something down that I didn’t understand. I shouted back that I was from America and was Soula’s niece. A woman with short black hair and piercing black eyes finally came to the door and opened it a crack. This was the niece, we later found out. I explained who I was and, without a word, she closed the door and I heard her yelling for her aunt and cousin to come down, that there was someone here from America to see them.

A few moments later, the door opened again, this time by a different woman, and she was smiling. When I repeated my story, she welcomed us both into the house and yelled up for her mother to come down. She asked us to sit on the little couch inside the doorway and immediately proceeded to make us some Greek coffee, which she served on a tray, along with a couple of glasses of cold water. Knowing that Carolyn was not a big coffee drinker, especially the incredibly strong “Greek mud” type, I looked at her and whispered, “Don’t even think about not drinking it!” and she assured me she would. It was pretty obvious that these folks didn’t have much, and we certainly didn’t want to offend them by not accepting what they served us! It turned out to be a very delicious little cup of coffee and the water was quite refreshing!

Soon, Giannoula slowly made her way down the stairs to the lower level, where we sat waiting. I got up and enveloped her in my arms, giving her a big hug, although not too tightly, as she was a very small, frail-looking woman. We sat and talked to her and her daughter (we never did see her niece again), and she kept apologizing for not having more



to serve us. I assured her that I was ecstatic just to have found her and be able to visit with her for a while. I placed the money into her hand, just as my aunt had instructed me to do, and she cried. We sat and chatted for about a half hour, and Carolyn took a picture of the three of us. I told them that I would be taking them back to America through my camera, and they both chuckled at that. What a very uplifting experience that was!

After winding our way back down to the town center, we decided to stop at the same little taverna for lunch before heading back down to our next mission. I kept thanking the people there for all their help, but they insisted that it was I who should be thanked, for doing such a kind deed for this destitute family. I felt very humbled by that and again decided that these Greeks must be the warmest people in the world!

Our next mission, also by directive from my Aunt Soula, was to go to the town of Thermi, find the Church of St. Raphael, and get her some holy water and holy oil. She also asked me to bring her back an icon of this famous Saint, who is know for his many miracles. Thermi is on the other side of Mytilene, up the eastern coast of the island a little ways, so we decided to stop back at the hotel and see if Don wanted to join us on this second leg of our journey. He opted out once again, so we left the cherries with him and were back on the road toward Thermi.

After getting thoroughly lost and ending up on the narrowest street we'd ever seen, somewhere in the hills of Mytilene, we again were led out of the maze and down to the right road by another kind Greek man on a motorcycle. That little interlude actually scared us...the road was very steep and very narrow and a mail truck had to move up a little way in order to make room for us to get by. It was just about at this point that Carolyn said, "I don't like this one bit." We laughed about that later, but at the time, we were quite freaked out!!

After Mr. Motorcycle Man got us back down to where we should be, he told us to just stay on that road until it took us to Thermi. This was yet another beautiful drive, as it followed the crystal blue Aegean most of the way, and we passed through several little fishing villages. We kept a close look at the map and the street signs, to make sure we didn't get lost again, and finally reached our destination. We pulled into the parking lot and noticed a little souvenir stand right outside the entry to the church's courtyard, but decided to wait until we'd gone in and completed our mission first. We were glad we did, because there was a sign right outside the entryway that stated that the souvenir shop was in no way connected to the church and that they could not assure that their merchandise was authentic.



Once inside the courtyard, I inquired as to whether it was permitted to take pictures, and was told that I could, but to be sure I didn't take any of the nuns...that was not allowed! The church was glorious...very big, very white, with beautiful domes and arches everywhere. There was a crowd gathering, and we were told they were preparing for a baby's christening, so I quickly took some pictures before too many people



arrived and obstructed my views. We then went around to the side of the church, where I had noticed another doorway and another nun standing inside. My aunt had given me 6 little plastic bottles...3 for holy oil and 3 for holy water. She had also instructed me to take a bottle of commercial olive oil and give it to one of the nuns there, which is customary...they apparently get it blessed and thus keep replenishing their supply. This ritual was all very new and foreign to me, but the nun I spoke to knew exactly what I was talking about, took the olive oil from me and instructed me where to find the holy water and oil. I put some euros in the donation box and lit a few more candles (also per my aunt's instructions...she's kind of bossy!), then we proceeded to another little doorway toward the back of the church, with stairs leading down to where we would be filling our bottles. This was a small room, so it was easy to figure out what to do. There was a little alcove at one end, containing a sort of water fountain. This was obviously the holy water, and Carolyn took three of the bottles over to it. At the other end of the room, there was a brass urn with a spigot for dispensing the holy oil, which I did. Mission accomplished!

When we came back out, we walked over to the window where they apparently sold the authentic religious articles...books, icons, calendars, pamphlets, little statues, and crosses. I didn't see anyone behind the window, then noticed a little sign that said they closed at 7:00. It had just turned 7:00!! Oh, no!! I stopped a passing priest and asked if he could please possibly reopen the store so I could make my purchases. He said "of course," and told me it would be just a few minutes while he retrieved the nun that worked there.

As I was waiting for her by the window, two women approached me and started what ended up being quite a lengthy conversation, in Greek. They told me they were visiting from Germany, but that they were originally from the island and came back to visit every year. They said they knew I wasn't a local (what was it about me?), but thought I was from Australia when they'd heard me talk. I've never heard that one before! They said something about "when they were my age" and I told them that today was, in fact, my 58<sup>th</sup> birthday. Their shock and compliments once again made my head swell, and they commented that I was one of those Greek women that just don't age. I responded, in Greek, "Well, maybe not on the outside, but try telling my hip that," which made them both laugh out loud.

The nun finally returned to the store and the Greek-German women proceeded to tell me which books I should purchase for my aunt. The total came to under 28.00 euro, but I was down to my last 50.00 euro bill, which I handed to the nun, who in turn told

me she didn't have any change and wondered if I had anything smaller. When I told her to just go ahead and keep the change and donate it to the church, she gave me many blessings and added a calendar of Holy Days and a little pamphlet, which contained all of St. Raphael's miracles to date, to the rest of my purchases. I knew my aunt would really like all of these items, and I gave her many thanks.

As the sun was sinking closer to the horizon, Carolyn and I made our way back down to the Mytilana, very tired, but also feeling very satisfied that we'd accomplished so much! We'd made tentative plans to meet my cousin's daughter and her family for dinner that night, but I called her and begged off, explaining that we would be leaving the island the next day and had to pack and get ready for our departure. As I heard myself tell her that, I was overcome with a great feeling of sadness! Could this trip of a lifetime actually be almost over? I didn't want to leave, and the others echoed my feelings. I actually don't remember what we did for dinner that night...I think we just ate leftovers from a previous meal. I know we didn't go out anywhere, as we were all quite tired...and depressed about leaving Paradise!

### Sunday, May 21

Doomsday is here. We went down to breakfast, as usual, but unlike the other days, we were all pretty mopey. Since our plane for Athens didn't leave until after 4:00, and Stratis wouldn't be picking us up until 1:30 or 2:00, we decided that if we all finished packing by noon, we'd spend one last time on "our beach." Darren, of course, finished his packing quite quickly, but mine took a couple of hours longer than that, especially since my heart just wasn't in it. I loved this resort, this town, this island and this country. I loved the people and the food and the traditions and everything else about it. By noon, everything but my bathing suit was packed, so down to the beach we went. There were several waves today, unlike most of the other days, when the sea was as smooth as a sheet of aquamarine-colored glass. We lay on the beach chairs, soaking up the rays of the warm Aegean sun one last time, trying to get just a little browner. As I looked out to the sea, I made a silent promise to it that I would return next year, and the year after that, and every year after that. How could I not?



Our last day on the island. Left, looking toward the outside seating area of the Mytilana from the pier; Right, looking out at the Aegean, toward the opposite shore of the Gulf of Gera, again from the pier.

After about an hour, we reluctantly went back up to our rooms and changed into our traveling clothes, took one last look around the room and balcony, to make sure we hadn't forgotten anything, then started carrying our bags down to where the car was parked. Maria helped us and we just kept hugging and telling each other how much we would miss them, and they us. I stood there, in the parking area, and sounded like a spoiled child as I whined, "I don't WANT to go!!" But soon, here came Stratis, to pick up our excess baggage and lead us back to the airport. Maria's brother had also pulled up, to take her home after her shift was over, and she introduced me to him and made me promise that, next year when we returned, we would go to her house for a home-cooked meal with them and their mother. I promised we would. My heart and stomach sank, and I felt my eyes leak, as we all said our final good-byes and drove away toward the Mytilene Airport.

On the flight back to Athens, I sat next to an older lady (who I discovered was only two years older than me), and she and I chatted the whole way, while Darren dozed in the seat next to me. The poor woman complained most of the time about her overbearing, boorish husband, and how unhappy she was. She asked me if my husband was a good man, and I told her he was the best! After all, he was slowly making all my dreams come true...but this had been the biggest dream of all.

Nick II was waiting for us at the Athens Airport and took us to the hotel where we would be staying that night. The Emmantina was a pretty nice place, and this time we didn't have to take our own luggage up to our rooms! The view from our rooms was also quite nice. (Right)



We showered, changed and went down to the elegant dining room for dinner. Don was very happy to see a good old-fashioned cheeseburger on the menu and ordered that, along with what he thought was going to be a regular shrimp cocktail. When he ordered the cheeseburger, and the waiter repeated it, we all about fell off our chairs, because he sounded EXACTLY like John Belushi when he used to do the old Greek restaurant skit in the original SNL shows..."Cheezburga, Cheezburga, Cheezburga...cheeps, no fries!" We politely contained our laughter until after he'd walked away, but that was definitely the highlight of the evening! But then, when the waiter returned with Don's "shrimp cocktail," it was time for round two of the laughter. They were, by far, the largest shrimp we'd ever seen...like miniature lobsters...and they still had their heads and, worse, their eyes!! Needless to say, it remained untouched! But he savored every bite of that mighty "cheezburga!"

## Monday, May 22

Nick II took us back to the Athens Airport for our long flight back to New York and the good old US of A. We thanked him, bid him a fond farewell, and before we knew it, we were on a big Air France jet again, heading toward Paris, where we knew we would have to scramble again to catch our connecting flight. This time, however, Darren had called ahead and arranged for a wheelchair to take him to the gate. We thought the rest of us would be escorted along with him but, once again, we were wrong. No worries, though.



Nick II and Helen at Athens Airport

The flight had been delayed and we actually ended up sitting on the runway for over an hour until they took care of a minor mechanical problem and also counted and recounted the passengers many times over until they were sure everyone was on the plane. We wondered why they didn't do that on our flight from Paris to Athens, when THAT plane just took off without us! Oh, well!

When we finally reached JFK, after what seemed like an eternity, we wondered what in the world we were thinking, booking a 5 ½ hour tour of New York City for the next day! We were so tired we could hardly see straight, and we just didn't think any of us would feel like doing that in the morning. As soon as we got to the JFK Radisson, the boys headed up to the bar, as usual, and Carolyn and I said goodnight, took our showers and went straight to bed.

## Tuesday, May 23

In the morning, all of us having woken up fairly refreshed, we went down for breakfast, which we thought was included with our room. Wake up, tourists from Citrus Height, CA!! You're not in Greece anymore!! After paying the \$16.00 per person bill, we brought down our bags, had them put into a holding room, checked out and waited for our cab that would take us to Times Square, where we would meet our tour bus. The thought of this didn't seem nearly as insane this morning as it had last night when we'd gotten off the plane! After all, none of us had ever been to New York City, it was another beautiful day, and none of us were quite ready to end our vacation yet.

Our cab driver was a friendly guy who told us a lot about the city as he drove toward Manhattan during the morning rush hour! That in itself was an experience! One thing New York drivers and Athens drivers have in common...they love honking their horns!! We drove through Queens, then onto the Long Island Expressway and over the East River into Manhattan. These were places we had all heard of, of course, but it was quite something else to actually be there...and this was just the cab ride!

What should have taken a half hour to go the 17½ miles took nearly an hour, but he got us there within 5 minutes of the tour bus leaving!

We boarded the tour bus, along with the other 20 or so tourists, and all found seats with great viewing windows. Our tour guide introduced himself as “Robert,” although I can’t remember the driver’s name. Robert was a short, dark, bald little guy with a mustache and carrying a purple umbrella. The purpose of this, he told us, was that if we got separated at any point, he would hold it up so we could see where he was. We were happy to hear that we would be getting off the bus from time to time...5 ½ hours sitting on a bus seat just didn’t appeal to us! There was a cooler full of various drinks up front, and he quickly added that none of them were alcoholic. We soon found out that Robert was a Tour Guide Supreme!! He had the most fantastic personality, along with a wonderful sense of humor, and his knowledge of the city was phenomenal. After all, he explained, he was born and raised there and he absolutely loved his city!

We immediately started clicking away at buildings and sites we were familiar with only through the media: the Empire State Building, the Brooklyn Bridge, Wall Street.



There were three things on this tour that made me cry. The first was when we drove by the Dakota Hotel and saw the doorway at which John Lennon had been shot and killed by Mark D. Chapman on December 8, 1980. Seeing that doorway brought back the horrible memories of that day, which will always be



vivid in my mind. He then took us to the area in Central Park that's been named "Strawberry Fields" in his honor, and we were able to walk over to the "Imagine" memorial...a beautiful mosaic circle on the ground, which is shaded by a stand of American Elms, and is always covered with flowers and sometimes candles. The vision of this memorial is what started my tears flowing. I miss you, John!



The second was when we were on the Staten Island Ferry and Robert told us the history of Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty. As we passed these historic sites, and listened to his words, I imagined first my father, coming over in the late 1930's, and then my mother, in 1947, both having gone through the long,

arduous process on Ellis Island, but knowing it was worth it once they'd seen Miss Liberty, standing in New York Harbor, ready to welcome them to this glorious new country. What hopes and dreams must they both have had? What had they left behind in their own countries, knowing that they well may never see those countries again? My tears flowed. I miss you, Mom and Dad!



Lady Liberty



Ellis Island



Where the Twin Towers used to stand

The third time was, of course, when we stood before the site of the Twin Towers, and especially when we were escorted into St. Paul's Chapel, directly across from this timeless memorial, where



St. Paul's Chapel

George Washington went to worship after his inauguration in 1789. St. Paul's miraculously withstood the collapse of the towers, shielded from the shower of falling debris by the 500-year-old limbs of a massive sycamore that used to stand in front of it. Except for a layer of ash and soot, the building survived unscathed. For eight months, St. Paul's Chapel, an Episcopal church, became a physical and spiritual refuge for exhausted recovery workers during the non-stop effort to clear Ground Zero. An exhibition inside the church, called *Unwavering Spirit*, is devoted to artistic reflections of 9/11. It features artwork and photographs from amateur artists, Sunday schools, youth groups, prayer memorials, and other outlets. It is impossible to visit this interactive exhibit and not be deeply moved. I was very grateful that the chapel supplies a box of tissues at the end of each pew!

Robert told me that, although he conducts this same tour practically on a daily basis, and he has his spiel down, he never knows what he'll say when he's at this site, and it's still very difficult for him...every single time.

We were so grateful that we had decided to book this tour, and even more grateful that we ended up with Robert as our tour guide. At one point, a man that wasn't even with our tour group, but had overheard Robert talking, approached him to tell him that he's heard many tour guides in New York City, but none better than him!



Robert, Tour Guide Supreme

When our tour was over, we decided to go to the part of Manhattan known as Hell's Kitchen, in Chelsea, for lunch...it seemed an appropriate way to end our vacation before heading back to JFK and on to our humble abodes. We ended up going to a little place called Chelsea Grill...it had American food and a full bar, so it was a sure bet! Although it's considered one of New York City's "cheapie" restaurants, the bill came to over \$100 for the four of us...for cheeseburgers and drinks! Yes, Totolopolous, we're not in Greece anymore!!!

Our final adventure was trying to get a cab to take us back to our hotel to pick up our luggage, so that we could get to JFK in time for our flight home. In Greece, you merely had to stand near the curb, and three cabs would stop for you. Not so much in NYC!! Several of them would pull up to us, but as soon as we would tell them we needed to go near JFK Int'l, and since it was almost 5:00, they would tell us it was too close to their shift change and that was too far for them to go! HUH???? Finally, Darren got one to stop and offered him an extra \$100 to take us where we needed to go. Phillip Lee, the cab driver, said, "Ok, but I've got to stop and take a leak first." No problem, Phil...just get us there on time, please! New York City is a great place to visit, but these four California suburbanites just really wouldn't want to live there!

After an uneventful flight home on Jet Blue (I slept all the way!), and a much longer than necessary shuttle ride home (we were the last of three stops), we found ourselves pulling back into Tanbark Court. In the last 48 hours, we'd been in Mytilene, Athens, Paris, New York City, and now home. It all seemed very surreal, and I found myself wondering if it had all been a really wonderful dream. Our friend Karen, who had been taking care of our house and dogs while we were gone, greeted us in the middle of the court, and helped us carry our luggage in before taking her dog, Charlotte, and going home. I hugged Carolyn goodbye, and we went in to hug our dogs, Buster and Bailey, hello. This had truly been the trip of a lifetime, and one that we will never forget!

## Epilogue

We've since decided that we can't wait a whole year before returning to this incredible island, so we're heading back in September and hope to buy some property while we're there. That way, the dream never has to end. We hope you'll all come to visit in the years ahead!