



My Big Fat AFMC Greek Bike Trip

You see, my friends and family are all American, but Greek at heart. They are a big, loud, obnoxious motorcycle club called the American Flyers. Yeah, like that's not too obvious to anyone within fifty feet of us. When we pull into a nice quiet Pelopponesian village in the heat of the day just before their Greek Independence Day parade, we stop at the local bar and do the equivalent of "splash the pot" if this were a poker game. We ask for Cafe Americano, we make faces in the Cappuccino foam, we ask for extra ice for our Coca Cola Lights and then we commit the worst garish sin imaginable to the locals watching all this in horror...we leave a 15% tip for the waitress.

We are the Dirty Dozen of the Pelopponesus. Twelve Americanos (Dilly, Hansen, Larsen, Marin, O'Connell and Shriver/Sardini) on seven rented BMW's (3 1200 GS and 4 700 GS) and one trailing Citroen, supported by one Texan, two Turks and a large chase van. In most cultures this is called a circus caravan. You know, the ones where the dogs bark and the wagons roll out of town into the night, with local wallets lighter and local daughters a bit rounder.

We all came into Athens from parts unknown. Roger and Edwina flew in from Petra, Wadi Rum and Temple Mount (Mideast Peace is now technically an impossibility). Mark, Jeanne, Steve and Maggie hoofed in from Phoenix. Barb bopped in from Bean-town. Frank and Anne chased in late from a Chicago corporate board coup-in-the-making. And Kim and Rich defied all advice from the State Department and the Turkish Consulate and came via Istanbul.

Arrivals began on Wednesday with Steve and Maggie having spent a day scoping out the best Athens had to offer. Now we had all read so much about the financial trials and tribulations of Greece as the poor whipping boy of the EU these



Steve and Maggie had found their favorite Greek restaurant already on the next block over, past two other nice-looking similar restaurants, but without the Trip Advisor stars had by the Ayopa Select. It was mid-afternoon, but they were busily washing the windows with Windex. But we had a nice lunch anyway, served by an over-friendly wait staff. More on that later. Dinner was a prelude to the next day by having us dine at a restaurant with up-close night views of the Acropolis.

Thursday was all about a trip up the hill to the Acropolis. Let's be honest, this is a must-do and now we understand why. Based on the crowds heading up, the Greek government is supporting the balance of payments on entry fees alone. And then, without railings on the steep and irregular stone steps up and down, we suspect the Greek EU fees are paid out of EMT/ambulance/emergency room/orthopedic surgery revenues generated by the many likely tourist slip/fall incidents. I'm told they also spray Windex on sprains and any open wounds.

Our triathlete guide, Betty, who bragged about walking 20,000 paces daily, ran up and down the hill with us and then back up and down with Chris, who arrived later. She suggested we walk the 26 Miles back to the Hilton, saying she does it five times a day. Remind me to find a new guide next time I'm in Athens.

That evening Steve said Trip Advisor had declared the Hilton roof-top restaurant as a "Fake Restaurant". The only place, according to Steve, to eat was the Ayopa Select again. He swore that his cousin's quarter-share ownership had almost nothing to do with it.

Time Travel to Nafplio

Nafplio used to be a very important port city for Greece in ancient times, in the times of Venetian dominance, during the Byzantine era and under the Ottoman



Breuer and Eero Saarinen, all rolled into one cliff-side hotel. The rooms had great views of the harbor with its castle in the center, all of which distracts you from the 50-year-old furnishings and analog technology. The mini-bars are stocked with regular Coca Cola, Baby Ruth Bars, Fritos and small travel-size Windex.

Once again, we dined in a fine Greek restaurant with Chris grooving on the grilled octopus and Rich looking for something non-seafood, non-lamb without tomatoes or olives. Rich doesn't understand why that seems funny to the others. Turns out the Greek meatballs have a tasty blend of beef and lamb that's spiced to appeal to everyone...even Rich.

Do You Know the Way to Monemvasio

I must stop for a moment to point out that the weather has been perfect for this Greek Passion Play. Mid-60's architecture is one thing, but mid-60's temperature with sunny skies is the way to see Greece from horseback. We headed around and along the coast road surrounding the Bay of Argolikos and headed south towards Leonidio where we disturbed the locals' peace and harmony for our coffee break stop. We had left Nafplio early to avoid the Greek Independence Day parades only to find ourselves caught in the same thing except in Leonidio, with its hordes of uniformed school children off for the day to march, floats made of Feta cheese and Windex and lots of blue and white flags all in tribute to their Hellenic heritage.

This became the first defining moment of the day since the group was delayed, confused and eventually split by the proceedings and the attempts to circumvent them. Heading south towards Monemvasio was harder than it seemed on the map. We headed up the mountain in the middle of this Peloponnesus peninsula and found teeny roads with switchbacks taking us up to the sky-top



from the mainland. There is a medieval walled town on the southern end, much like Eze in southern France...only Greek. We stayed at a stone hotel called Lazareto near the short bridge to the commercial center on the mainland.

Since Rich had lost the group in Leonidio and headed into the interior mountains alone, he was first to arrive at the rock and after reconnoitering the area set up camp at a port cafe near the causeway to the island such that no one could pass unnoticed. Sure enough, as the group rode by, Rich flagged them down with the suggestion to stop and lunch there rather than brave the barren island just yet. This unplanned stop was not entirely popular for some reason, but a nice port pit stop was had by all. Chris in particular developed a rapport with the wait staff that eventually led to a nice ham and cheese sandwich.

While Roger scaled the cliff to the top of the rock in his flip flops, Edwina and the rest of the gang rested up for a big night in the medieval village. After passing through a defensive maze portal, the group found itself once again on irregular, slippery stone steps heading up past quaint shops to a lovely restaurant with a covered, but open-air vista over the distant Aegean towards Crete. It was strange for a fish restaurant to have no fish-of-the-day, but once again, everyone found something to like on the menu. After being regaled by Chris's Hollywood casting couch stories, post-prandial shopping was the order of the evening.

Which Comes First, the Oil or the Olives of Kalamata?

The day dawned cool yet sunny on the Gibraltar-like Monemvasio rock. Breakfast was a bit of a Greek clusterfuck, especially for the two poor non-AFMC couples at the hotel. Off we went back into the belly of the Peloponnesus and then along the Bay of Lakonikos looking out onto the Ionian Sea. The water color was a stunning Caribbean blue accentuated by alternating peaceful beaches and craggy



Off in the distance sat a beached freighter, its rusted hulk resting at a 20 degree list to starboard. It was reachable from the beach so we went up for a closer look. This is the Dimitrios, stranded on the beach in 1981 after being caught smuggling cigarettes from Turkey. It somehow seems older and more romantic than that when you see it on the lovely sandy beach.

We stopped for our morning coffee break shortly thereafter in the small port city of Gytherio. From there it was time to boogie across the Mani Peninsula to the cliffside of Areoploli, where a statue of the leader of Greek Independence, Petros_Mavromichalis, seemed of little or no interest to any of us despite Kaz's best efforts to make us stop for a photo opp. This minor clusterfuck was ignored in deference to the spectacular views of the bay called Messiniakos Kolpos.

At one spot in the hilly terrain, we saw a re-enactment of our own quest for unity as a group when a drove of goats was being herded across the road. We stopped to allow passage and the goats went about their business. As we headed off again, one stray and frantic goat had inadvertently been left behind and was desperate to rejoin the drove. He was racing forward towards us seemingly oblivious to our presence, running past us in the mad and desperate need for reunification. I'm not sure who of us this reminded me of, but on any given day it could be any of us. The desperation in its eyes said it all....one for all, all for one, I will not leave my wingmen!!!

We then headed north up to the hilltop town of Kampos, where Kaz had arranged for an olive pressing demonstration along with a tasting with local bread and cheese at the owner's home. The star attraction was the YaYa and her three goats, who turned out to be very shy. The Kalamata olives are the best in the world, but the Italians have overwhelmed the global marketing to the point of buying the local Extra Virgin output and labeling it their own.



AFMC Olympics

Our ride to Olympia yielded even more beautiful seaside scenery and another stop for coffee at the lovely port town of Karalis. It allowed us a break from the sun under some trees, only to have birds poop on Kim and Rich for good luck. This all happened while our bikes lined up on the quay when a local policeman came by with flashing lights looking like a ticket or two was in store. It turned out to be a Coast Guard cop on a coffee mission who waved that we were OK and should carry on drinking, laughing and scratching. You gotta love Greece.

Next stop was the town of Archea Olympia, where we had gyros before heading to the site of the first Olympic Games. This was a vast excavated field of ruins in a lovely pastoral valley. There the outlines and columns (Doric, Ionian, and Corinthian) stood showing where the temples of Zeus and Hera had stood to honor the Greek Gods of strength, honor and beauty. The men ran naked and the women in clothes ran away. The field of battle at the stadium, with its grand entrance arch and tunnel almost made us want to run a race around the track just to honor the memory of all the athletes before us. Almost, but not quite. Roger might have tried, but he was too busy sulking over the Manafort arrest news from America.

We found the local Amalia Hotel, which we once again had mostly to ourselves. Ihan and the van had arrived there early to unload the luggage for us and while Ihan enjoyed a mint julep in the Bar, Ann straggled in late with her stone serpent trophy strapped to her and Chris' bike and finally Steve limped in with his fat lip compliments of Ann. Everyone was very calm about the glories of Olympus. We dined at the Amalia on lamb, chicken and veg without a care in the world. Roger was seen crying in the corner when he realized some Greek guy called Papadopolous had implicated the White House in his plea bargain.



any curves we might encounter. Kaz found routes around towns and villages to get us to the famous earthquake-resistant and designer-centric Bridge off the Peloponnese at Rio. Our very own bridge-builder, Roger asked to stop, so we pulled over on the Antirrio side past the toll, only to get chased away by the tollbooth guards who thought we might be Republican terrorists or something. So off we boogied on a new EU-financed toll road with hardly any other traffic. It was a fine road that cut through the mountains and indeed got us to the port of Igoumenitsa by the appointed ferry time.

Funny thing though, the ferry terminal was less than the beehive of activity one might expect. In fact, the local constabulary advised us that the ferry workers had gone on 48 hour strike that morning, leaving us high and dry with no way to Corfu. At this point we all turned to Skip, who said he was mighty glad he had taken a local partner, so we turned to Kaz, who was already working the phones. Ihan was off to the side plotting his next attack on Ann's peace of mind. Everyone began shouting and making suggestions. Those who didn't choose to overreact were chided for not engaging in the solution. There was talk of chartering a plane, going into Albania for a look-see, taking over a local beach resort, etc. Then Steve, ever so quietly (due mostly to his healing fat lip from the prior day), said, "why don't we leave the bikes here and rent a private boat?" He quickly shrank back into the background for fear of another beating as Ann glowered at him.

Then Kaz gathered the group, now wandering the abandoned ferry depot in search of food, drink and WC, and said his super-touristic fixer team in Athens had secured us a private boat a mere 15 minutes away. We gathered ourselves with dispatch and jumped across to Plataria where the GSS Minnow sat awaiting our arrival. We crowded onboard and found seats like refugees fleeing the war-torn mainland in hopes of a better life in Corfu. The crossing was brisk, but relatively



as we had been forced to do. We harbored narry a thought about our rented bikes back in lonely Plataria.

We struck out for a long hike through cobblestone hell to find our restaurant. Finally Kaz found the lovely spot that had been pre-arranged. We only lost two along the way (Ann and Frank), who we suspect of having an affair given that they kept whispering about a treehouse and disclosure and who would end up on top. Nevertheless, the rest of us enjoyed dinner at the Fine restaurant with Barbara, Chris and especially Steve seeming to be in fine spirits.

Monastic Life

After an extra-long breakfast, we boarded a luxury Mercedes Benz bus (MB is apparently big on Corfu) and drove to the lovely Monastery of Paleokastritsa, which means old (paleo) place of castrated monks (kastritsa). It was perched above a magnificent rocky coast facing Italy and the Adriatic. I'm not sure why a Monastery needs a cannon, but they had one facing out to sea. They also had more icons than you could shake a stick at. Strangely enough, you could buy icons in one of two competing stores in the Monastery, both of which accepted several forms of crypto-currency including Bitcoin, Ethereum, Litecoin, Ripple, and Dash.

We then trundled back onto the bus and headed to the Theotoky Estate Winery where we learned about winemaking and bottling on Corfu. It was a pleasant spot with lots of samplings for lunch and the required visit to the gift store so Edwina could piss off Roger by buying olive oil for the masses back in New Jersey. This all got us back to the hotel in time for an afternoon of shopping and/or relaxing. Mark, ever the industrious lad, chose this respite to seek out a Corfu cobbler to fix Jeanne's broken boot, wrecked on the rock-strewn hills of the Peloponnesus.



The Hills Are Alive

Nevertheless, we indulged in a hearty hotel breakfast before getting back in the MB van for the ride back to the southern end of the island. We finally found the GSS Minnow at a different dock (strike-busting is clearly a clandestine activity), and this time we were even more crowded since the captain was taking another group of passengers across during this big revenue-opportunity moment. Four of us sat on the bow, but luckily the sea was calm and the weather pleasant for the crossing.

Off we skedaddled towards the mountains, taking the new EU toll road with its myriad of shiny new tunnels. We all wished we were members of the EU so we could get such great infrastructure in our states. The roads and landscape were very reminiscent of a ride through the great back roads of Tulare County, California. When we finally got off and on to local roads we stopped at a cafe for a pit stop and despite having pretty gyro pictures, it was more or less foodless. So we went to a rustic spot that Ihan knew and had a great Greek/Bavarian lunch in front of a roaring fire. This was welcomed warmth as the weather had turned decidedly cooler though still sunny. The sausage and burgers were hearty and a nice change from more normal Greek fare.

The main event in Kalabaka is a small but dynamically craggy set of mountains on which are precariously perched about 20 monasteries. We are scheduled to tour one tomorrow, but today we rode up and among the hills on some nice twisty roads and stopped a few times for incredible photo opportunities. It was hard to distinguish these cliff-hanging temples from the shrines of Tibet or Bhutan. They were, perhaps, the most unexpected and beautiful sight of the trip so far. We found a local restaurant in town (the tourist restaurants already closed for the season) and dined with the hoy palloy of Kalabaka.



three busloads of Korean tourists. It was about 150 steps down and 150 steps up to get to the monastery. That times two meant 600 steps to navigate to witness the monastic life. 80% of the group made the trek and saw the ancient prayer rooms and kitchen. The rest of us stayed back and jockeyed bikes as the arriving daily truck and bus deliveries demanded.

The ride south towards Delphi was pretty nondescript and boring until we got to the Central Greek mountains between Lamia and Delphi. We got onto more local roads that went up into the mountains where the sweeping curves interspersed with tight switchbacks were very reminiscent of riding the Alpine Loop in Colorado. We stopped about twenty miles out from Delphi for a break and lunch only to find once again that the season had ended and the only thing on offer was chips and cookies. We made a lunch of the snacks on the theory that both solid breakfast and dinner would make up for it.

We pulled into Delphi, which is located halfway up Mount Parnassus, looking out over the Gulf of Corinth. This was the location of the famous Delphic Oracle as well as the Muses (good for those of us with artistic tendencies). It was also a sacred spot for Dionysius, God of the Grape, so I'm sure the wine will flow freely tonight. We are bedded once again at the Amalia Hotel, which we now all believe are owned by a shrewd chiropractor in Athens, given the rock hardness of the beds at all the Amalias.

The Oracle Speaketh

After a last and plentiful Amalia breakfast buffet, we drove to the Ruins of the temples at Delphi. This is a spectacular mountainside setting that surely impressed the Greeks into making Mount Parnassus their sacred spot. From the images and description of the site from almost three millennia ago, there was



The site itself is tiered up the side of the mountain with lower level ancient shopping arcade, a treasury, a sanctuary honoring Apollo where the Oracle would respond to tricky ancient questions with even trickier replies. On the highest levels were a stadium and theater. This was all placed here thanks to Zeus' divining eagles that crossed at this spot and determined it to be the center of the earth. Phew, that's a lot of pressure on any one spot, but this one lived up to the challenge.

From Delphi we rode back to Athens in the most direct and speedy path available. Unfortunately, the Greek Gods of bad weather (Theoi, Meteoroi) were obviously displeased that Rich only went up as high as the Treasury and did not duly honor Apollo by pressing onward. It rained pretty much all the way back, but did not prevent us all from getting back to the barn at the Athens Hilton.

We all enjoyed this MotoDiscovery/Kazoom adventure through Greece so much that we have decided to reconvene the group (and any other AFMCers that are so inclined) for a Sicilian Tour same time next year.