

NOTES FROM GREECE

KEVIN ALLEN

Editor's note: Kevin Allen, erstwhile reporter and commentator for Clue! Magazine, has taken a temporary position teaching in Greece. He has promised to keep in contact with us, and to keep us posted on his adventures in Europe. Following is his first missive.

Dear Clue!

I'm sitting right now in the Greek countryside: it is late afternoon and the vines have been woven into a seasonal shelter to protect me from the incredibly overbearing sun. The ocean, that wonderful travel agent here, is intense. The air is filled with the scents of July flowers. It is a wonderfully lazy day — even the insects are lazy. This is life in the slow lane, and so it should be; I am on my vacation.

This is the three-week summer break for both students and teachers alike, and I am relaxing with a vengeance.

My life in Greece up until now has presented a sharp contrast to this peaceful countryside. To date, I have lived through stress, depression, anxiety and feelings of inferiority. These emotions are pleasantly summed up by psychologists as culture shock.

Greece as a country and as a people are incredibly different from Canada and Canadians. The differences are everywhere, and what initially was charming and exotic quickly became isolating and disturbing. This according to *The Canadian Guide to Working and Living Overseas*, is beginning of the "cultural adjustment process." When it is through, one finds oneself at a new equilibrium and in my opinion, irrevocably changed.

The city I live in, when I am not in the countryside, is Thessaloniki. It is the second largest city in Greece, boasting a population of one million people; and with a city of this size comes an equally developed night life. This city, for the most part, sleeps during the day (no wonder; it can get very hot — past 40° C!) and this preference for night has become institutionalized. Most stores and services close their doors at two in the afternoon, and only those stores that are ambitious reopen in

the evenings.

The Greeks are truly a night-loving people. The street I live on, a fairly busy one, is literally never empty of people. In fact, there is a 24-hour fast food establishment in the main floor of my building. Its purpose? To satisfy that early, early morning hamburger or souvlakia craving.

I live on the third floor of a relatively — large flat. My balcony runs along the south and east walls of the flat, and allows for great people-watching on the busy street below. Everyone in Thessaloniki lives like I do, there are no houses as Canadians know them. As a

pales when compared to the patriotism of the Greeks. They are fiercely — proud of their country, which is symbolized largely by their common language. They are outraged by any insult to it, international or otherwise.

Macedonia is a northern province in Greece, of which Thessaloniki is the capital city. In Canadian terms, a parallel could be drawn between Macedonia and Western Canada. Just as "the West" feels itself set apart from Ontario and Eastern Canada, so too does Macedonia feel toward Athens and Southern Greece.

Macedonia also explains his last comment, "the Turks." Macedonia was occupied by Turkey for over 400 years, the occupation ending in 1912. It seems they were not particularly benevolent occupiers either; Greek grandparents still find it painful to speak about the horrible atrocities that were visited on them. Thus, the Turks are enemies still, in a hate that is transported across generations.

It is not for me to judge the validity of this hatred, but it does give me insight into some of the problems which have plagued south-eastern Europe.

This country spends vast sums of money on their military each year. Indeed, it counts for a large part of the government's budget. Every Greek man, at the age of 18, is conscripted into the army for a period of

two years. This public policy seems ugly and brutish to me, coming from a country with only token military forces. A fellow Thessalonikian pointed out that this was an unavoidable reality, as Greece is surrounded by demonstrably hostile neighbours.

Another self-perceived problem I saw in the Greek Army was its gender inequality. Women are not conscripted and were only recently allowed the volunteer for military service. I know of other countries, such as Israel, which conscript both sexes, and this



Anonymous building. Most buildings in Thessaloniki are more or less exactly the same. Stores and services on the main floor with apartments or offices on the other floors. I don't think such a thing as "zoning" occurs here!

result, the urban landscape is filled with seemingly identical buildings, each sprouting a complicated array of TV antennae and power cables.

The Greek people are passionate lazy and — proud of both these qualities. One evening I asked a Greek man to give me three words describing himself as a Greek. His answer was, "Patriotism, Macedonia, and the Turks!" All of these words came from a strong sense of cultural identity.

The perception of Americans as patriotic

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seems fairer. This time I was set straight by another English teacher. She said, "that Greece [in her opinion] is about 30 years behind Western Culture in its liberation." Thus men who go into the army lose but two years from their careers. Any woman who chooses to have children (very socially desirable choice here in Greece) loses a minimum of ten years from her career. This, she concluded, "is even more inequitable", and she is right.

The extent to which Greek society is liberal also affects attitudes towards homosexuality. Greece, in history and in myth, is known for its famous homosexuals. From Achilles to Sappho, homosexuality as Greek legend is less ambiguous and vague than many worried intellectuals would have us believe. But what about the perceptions of modern Greeks? Unfortunately, modern Greeks are no more tolerant than modern Canadians, and maybe less so. The Greek Orthodox Church has a firm grip on the country's beliefs, and I imagine this causes a large part of the fear and mistrust surrounding homosexuality.

It is ironic that the Greeks feel this way because, as a culture, they are much more open to intimacy and human contact than many others. It is not considered "evil" for same-sex individuals to touch each other.

The first time I really noticed this was about a month ago on a beach. Two 16-year-old boys were talking with their heads together, one with his arm over the other: I was like a deer transfixed in a headlight. I could not stop staring. My thoughts wandered from disbelief to amazement. I have since learned those two probably were not young lovers (although

they could have been), but rather good friends.

This same-sex intimacy is even more common with Greek females. When I am teaching a class and my students have their heads buried in a story, it is not uncommon to see a girl absentmindedly reach out to grab a tuft of her girlfriend's hair and then to see the same girl start stroking and twirling it, as if it was her own.

Personally, I have not spent time looking for homosexual friends. I am still very much

impaired.

There is one place, however, whose laws are universal and where language is transcended. It is called the disco.

A Greek disco in summer is a noisy, crowded, open-air affair. It is filled with equal parts of thundering music, dazzling lights and sexual tension. These places are almost always located at the edge of the city, if not in the country, and are sensationally extravagant, a sort of techno-Disneyland. Indeed, I went to one in the country this last weekend.

It was enormous, complete with a large kidney-shaped pool to be jumped or pushed into. The nights are a perfect temperature with light breezes quietly whispering through the pulses of music. If you get cold, you just have to move deeper into the frenzied core of the dance floor. It is there, I am sure, that many relationships form and fade, body heat being very volatile as you know.

The Greek way of living has some very nice aspects. The people are warm and genuine. The pace is not stressful, but leisurely. Although this was

frustrating at first, I am gradually adjusting to the way these people work. I even nap in the afternoons myself.

Greece is not the mythical land of sun, sea, sex and ouzo (a traditional Greek spirit) which exists in the minds of North Americans, yet it is dramatically different and at times seriously beautiful. Change is good for the soul.

Keep well, — Kevin.



Greek beach near a town call Sarti on a peninsula call Chalcidiki. Many topless & nude bathers as well!

occupied with serving some of my more basic needs, like survival. It seems like I have had to learn how to manage myself in society all over again. Buying groceries, going to the post office and riding the bus all take on a different slant when you cannot speak the local language. Although I am learning Greek, I still often feel intimidated by many locals. It is like, with their language, they are privy to an important secret that I really should know but don't. I am

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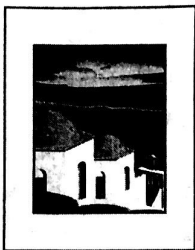
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Notes From Greece

by Kevin Allen

"I am not sure that foreigners... should cultivate likes or dislikes about the people they are invited to meet."

— Oscar Wilde.



I was sitting in Taboo, a gay bar in Thessaloniki, drinking a vodka-and-coke with my friends. Madonna was playing in the background — it could have been a gay bar anywhere. Hadn't I just seen all these barflies in Calgary six months ago? The lesbians were at one end of the bar, the gay men at the other, the drag queens were everywhere at the same time.

The only difference was sound. People were speaking. They were speaking Greek, but then, who really communicates verbally in a bar anyway?

At the time, gay life in Thessaloniki seemed very similar to gay life in Calgary. But beyond this adopted western glow of the bar scene, I have learned that gay life is profoundly different.

I have read that there was a time in Greece when sexuality was less defined. The Greeks, being a very sexual people, slept with whomever they wanted and still got married and had children. But now, with westernization, homosexuality is seen as taboo (pun intended). However, there is a hypocrisy within this taboo because being gay and sleeping with a same-sex partner are often seen as two different things. The difference, it seems, is one of identification. If one is a homosexual, and not out or not identifying as a homosexual, then Greek public opinion rewards this person with less, if any, stigma. I know there is hypocrisy in Canadian public opinion when it comes to the issue of sexual orientation, yet I think the Greeks have taken it to a new level.

So the difficulty for gay Greeks seems to be more about identifying as gay rather than having gay relationships. An anecdote I have heard which describes this (which should probably be taken with a kilogram of salt) is that a gay man can sleep with anyone and everyone he

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wants, until he is 30. After 30, his family will expect him to marry and have children. It is like a 12-year party before he has to yoke himself to the plough of social responsibility. Correction: it is a 13-year party, because the legal age of homosexual consent in Greece is 17.

In the 1994 *Kraxilimo Greek Gay Guide*, it says that "overtly" gay men working in the public and private sectors may find themselves isolated and

discriminated against. However, the interesting phenomenon of homosexuality being excused in prominent cultural figures exists as well, as with Andy Warhol.

The book also says that the great majority of Greek men have had a homosexual experience at least once in their lives. If this is true, then one would think there would be a greater social acceptance of male homosexuality here, as opposed to North America -- where Kinsey's figure of male-male sexual experience was 37 per cent. In my opinion, the reasons for lesser social acceptance here stem from the cultural differences between Greece and Canada.

One of the striking differences between the two countries is the power of the family, and the extended family, over the individual. In Greece, family ties are stronger: family members sacrifice much for each other, and are expected to sacrifice in return. Greeks are gossipers, therefore there is an incredibly strong pressure for the family unit to avoid gossip or scandals and to be successful. Consequently, homosexuality affects not only the individual, but "shames" his or her family.

The other reason can be found in the rigidity of Greek gender roles. Quite simply, men are macho and women have 'big hair'. Androgyny is undeniably unpopular and effeminacy in men is scorned.

The Greek definition of who is a homosexual, as a result, is ironic and maybe a little bit funny. For example, for

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every two men who are engaged in anal sex, the only one considered gay is the passive man. The active man is not gay at all: he is just "getting his rocks off." This duplicity in definition is also illustrated by the fact that transvestite prostitutes in places do a brisk business. Indeed, the demand can be so great for their alternative love that they compete with their female counterparts for the largest market share.

Westernization of Greek gay life has brought mixed blessings. There are large gay communities in the two main cities, Athens and Thessaloniki, as well as gay tourism in the islands. These gatherings of homosexuals inevitably led to organization.

The first political organization came into the scene in 1977. It was called A.K.O.E. (The Liberation Movement of Greek Homosexuals.) They successfully published a magazine called *Amphi*. Currently, the main gay periodical is called *To Kraximo*, which means "The Crawling" -- I believe in reference to gay

ancient Greece.

Recently gay organizations have become better-coordinated and more productive. The OPO, the group in Thessaloniki, has its own radio program on the alternative radio station (sounds familiar, doesn't it?), and publishes a 'fanzine' called *O Pothos*, which means "The Desire." This group also founded a Greek Act Up chapter in 1993, in order to create an umbrella organization for all gay groups in the country.

These new developments in the Greek gay community have not been welcomed by all. I am told that many members of the community prefer it not to be organized, in an effort to maintain elitism (cliques being the international bane of homosexuals everywhere).

A more negative development as a result of western influence is gay bashing. Violence towards homosexuals is increasing dramatically in Greece, where previously it was rare and discrete. It is possible that there is

a backlash to groups such as the disturbingly visible and audible OPO operating. But then, maybe gay-bashing was just never reported before.

Lesbians seem to me to be harder to find than gay men in Thessaloniki, but I am sure they are out there. I would imagine that there are fewer out lesbians than gay men in Greece for no other reason than Greek women do not have as much control over their sexuality as do Canadian women.

Greece is still very androcentric, and I have been told that only in the last ten years have women really been allowed to come out of their houses for reasons other than shopping. Indeed, there are still many places where women "choose" not to go out. The Greek *kafeneion* (coffee house for men) is a perfect example of this. It is no wonder I do not meet many; they are still gathering at home with the rest of the womenfolk.

So that's it, that's the scoop, the digs and the angle.

Keep Well — Kevin.



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Editor's note: Kevin Allen, a reporter for Clue! Magazine, has taken a temporary leave of absence to pursue a teaching position in Greece. He is keeping in touch, however, with his series of letters.



Adventures in Santorini

Dear Clue!:

It is hard to imagine being in one place with limited movement for more than a day, where travelling to the bathroom is a time-consuming and acrobatic ordeal. I recently, in my less-than-infinite wisdom, travelled "deck class" on a ferry boat

from Thessaloniki to the island of Santorini.

I shared this journey with hundreds of other would-be economy travellers during the August full moon. Canadian travel had not prepared me for the challenge of moving through labyrinths of human limbs and bodies. But I was lucky — I spotted an empty space free of human appendages and luggage, and I literally dove for it.

Climbing over four people and hurdling the guard rail, I found a nice little piece of floor on the starboard edge of the ferry. Two other intrepid travellers followed my lead and occupied the starboard edge's edge. It was, after all, only a forty foot drop to the water. I unravelled my sleeping bag but was too excited about travelling to be really sleepy.

I don't drink much water, to the extreme pleasure of those same four people whose thighs were my runway to the bathroom. It was on these bladder-inspired journeys that I learned how many people can fit on a boat. There were people sleeping on stairs, wedged between railings, and some who could, or would, only stand. My turf was a luxury in comparison.

The rest of the journey was uneventful, spent sleeping and reading, except when the boat beached itself in Mykonos. None of the passengers were quite sure how this happened; perhaps we were an extra-heavy group of people.

Mykonos is legendary for its wind (among other things), and the

next ten hours saw many people struggling for their lives against projectile pop cans and cigarette butt blizzards.

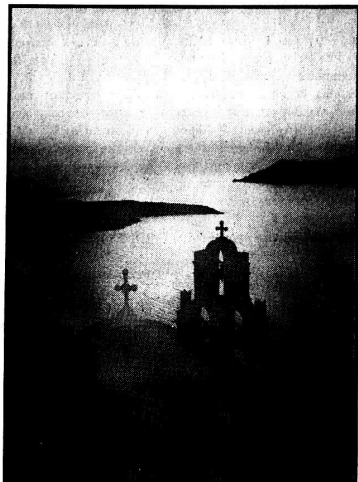
Finally, we reached Santorini, our destination. It only took a leisurely thirty-three hours to get there. Indeed, I finished reading my book.

Santorini, or Thira as it is called by the locals, is an island that was once a volcanic crater. Its other half fell into the sea around 1500 B.C. and is widely believed to have been Atlantis, that famous lost civilization. The volcano is still active and a new island has appeared in the last 400 years from the submerged crater's centre. That, very briefly, is the tourist rundown.

When I arrived at three a.m. with my one thousand friends, Santorini was ominous to look at. All I could see was a vertical wall, incredibly high, that blocked out the stars. Along the wall, at various heights, tiny bus headlights could be seen inching back and forth. Their destination was to get over the top of the wall to where all the main towns of the island are. The thought of rock climbing in a bus in the dark did not thrill me after my long trip, so the sleeping bag was again unfurled — this vampire was waiting for daylight!

Daylight came and with it the wonderful island was unveiled. The bus ride to the top, along the wall, provided an intense view of blue sea and black rock.

Finding a place to stay was a problem. I am sure the tourists



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outnumbered the locals by a ratio of ten to one, so accommodations which were not prearranged were a challenge. My anxiety was lessened by the realization that I now had the ability to sleep anywhere!

I found a youth hostel run by a funny little man. I asked if he had any beds and he replied, "The hostel itself is full, but try the roof." On the roof were forty-five bunk beds, almost all of them occupied. Luckily, I found a bottom bunk recently vacated, and seized it for myself. I later learned that fate had been with me at that moment, because the top bunks were a morning torture test.

Most of the hostellers, like myself, stayed out very late. Because we were on the roof, the morning sun for the people on the top bunks was much too warm to sleep under. I was shaded pleasantly from both light and heat and even had a gentle breeze. The person above me, though, was hissing like the undead. I am sure if I had had just a little holy water I could have finished him off.

One day, with friends made at the hostel, I went on a boat tour to the volcano and to some of Santorini's smaller accessory islands. Apart from the drama of walking through hills of jet-black volcanic shale, we also got to swim in ocean hot springs.

It seems that an underwater vent heats the ocean water in this one particular bay. The boat couldn't dock very close, so those who wanted to bathe had to jump off the boat and swim in. It was all very surrealistic. Imagine forty people, all swimming breaststroke in synchronicity to a rocky cove. I felt like an aquatic mammal on a pilgrimage to a thermal mecca.

Lunch was always something like an informal UN meeting. My fellow hostellers were from every continent except Antarctica (at least I don't think there were any Antarticans!). It was a surprise to discover that everyone spoke English: it is the international language. It continues to amaze me that something so painfully easy for me has so much value in other parts of the world.

The rest of the trip included churches, beaches, discos and archaeological excavations, each one more wonderful than the last. However, the ultimate image I have of Santorini is the sunset from the main town of Thira. Sitting on the town wall, legs dangling over the cliff, I saw colours in the sunset with a richness never before seen. It was so grand that you had to rotate your head back and forth to catch its entire splendour. It was a visual orgasm.

On my last day, after a weary but pleasing morning of sightseeing, I went back to the hostel for my "do as the Greeks do" afternoon nap. Before completely losing consciousness, I overheard a collection of European travellers comparing different groups' distaste for Americans, indifference for British and Australian people, and love for Canadians.

They couldn't have been more flattering either. They went on and on, as if they were being paid to compliment us, calling us earthy and laid back, humble and intelligent and topped with a good sense of humour. I wanted to jump up and down, click my heels and wave the maple leaf. Instead, I smiled knowingly and went to sleep.

I look back at Canada now, with a view from the other side of the world, and I see a very different country. Our problems with constitutional reform, government corruption, language supremacy and aboriginal and human rights seem less substantial. Indeed, the rest of the world is equally distanced. They do not know Canada the country at all, they only know Canada the people, and they say that they like us very much! I, in my less-than-infinite wisdom, think that these impressions Canadians give the world of Canada and of ourselves reflects something wonderful about us. We should wonder at this wonder, for it is greater than any of our collective problems.

Keep well — Kevin.



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