

Cradled by Triton (Part II): The Greek Isles

- Dr. Jharna Chatterjee

Now about the islands! Oh, the extra-ordinary beauty! Oh, the sorrow of not being a Byron, who had a special place for Greece in his heart! I wish I could adequately describe how I felt when we saw the first island – a sparkling jewel on the rich, velvet of the Aegean sea! It was the pretty pearl of an island, Mykonos. Tradition dictates that all buildings there be painted in white, and they gleam. All the streets (narrow lanes, steps and walkways) form an intricate maze-like plan as a deliberate defense strategy against pirates. Houses can be seen at every possible spot and level. The entire island was like a spring garden in bloom, with open terraces offering restaurants and cafes. Small tourist shops line both sides of the stone-paved lanes. A large number of churches (we were told there were 365 for each day of the year) in interesting architectural styles, old-fashioned wind-mills and rows of buildings rising straight out of the sea as in Venice, were treats for our eyes. Add to that Peter the Pelican, and you have an enchanting sight.

We went to Crete next, but I would like to describe Santorini first. In fact, I will not describe the islands in the order we saw them for various reasons – but would like to continue to write about this remarkable experience in a few more articles to come.

Santorini is an island that seems to emerge straight out of the ocean, surrounded by a number of other volcanic islands. I had read somewhere that the legendary "Los Atlantis" was believed by some to be buried deep in the ocean in the vicinity of Santorini. As we approached the bay, an announcement was made for us to go to the deck and witness the spectacle. It was so very windy that I clung to my husband's arm in desperation. A sudden gust carried away a hair band I was wearing and later we learned that it even managed to topple a lady on to the floor of the deck.

We got to the island by a small boat (same in Mykonos and later, in Patmos) and then went up to the town perched on top of the hill by cable car. The other option would have been riding donkeys, a popular mode of transportation in some of these islands. It was interesting to walk through the winding streets, to look at the shop and listen to Greek music being played near the open-air street cafes. The music, we noticed, sounded very similar to Indian (Hindi) music, if you did not pay attention to the words and listened only to the melodies.



Above: Cable cars in Santorini. Below: Peter the Pelican, famous inhabitant of Mykonos. The two photos on the next page are also of Santorini.



Crete, one of the largest Greek islands we saw was quite different in character from Mykonos and Santorini, with less of ups and downs on the terrain. As our tourist bus approached Heraklion, the ancient walled port city in Crete, it looked quite ordinary at first. We got off the bus at the ruins of the famous legendary Minoan palace, where "Theseus slew the Minotaur". The palace at Knossos (or Cnossus) was an impressive specimen of an advanced ancient civilization that flourished around 2,000 B.C. There were baths with bathtubs remarkably similar to stylish modern bathtubs, drains, decorated pillars and colorful frescoed walls, huge jars that possibly contained olive oil once.

From the central courtyard of the palace, a beautiful staircase goes down to the queen's apartment that overlooks the valley; the roof of the stairwell allows sunlight to pour in. Across from the staircase we went to the throne room, where the simple, gypsum throne remains. There was a sacred site in the room, where king Minos might have been desperately worshipping the gods, as his palace was captured and burned. Archeologists found an overturned oil jar here, as well as religious utensils. Carved in one of the courtyards was a bull's head; the bull seemed to be a prominent figure in Knossos.



Crete: Above, a fresco in the royal palace – showing dolphins swimming among a school of fish. Below: huge earthen or stone jars and other vessels found in the palace.

Our last stop – the last Greek island we had seen was Patmos. It is believed that St. John received the revelations in a cave in Patmos, and these revelations formed the last book of the New Testament. We had to take a taxi to go to the Byzantine monastery – practically the only thing there to see. It was quiet and peaceful, as it should be, and I heard a dove's melancholy notes while we were on the terrace taking some pictures. A young Australian female lawyer of Greek descent joined us for the land-tour and it was funny to watch her argue with the taxi driver in Greek and efficiently negotiate the fare, to the surprise of the embarrassed taxi driver. The poor guy had assumed that we were totally ignorant tourists in the beginning. Friendship has unexpected benefits sometimes! I should mention that from the first day of our cruise, an American lady who was traveling alone got "adopted" by the three of us – my husband, daughter and I – and from then on, the *four of us* always had our meals and traveled everywhere together. At the end of our trip, we parted from her in tears and kept in touch for many years after we returned to our respective hometowns.



Inside the monastery, the wooden decorations were elaborate, shiny and colorful with gold varnish. There were many tropical plants including a gardenia in the courtyard, so I almost felt envious of the residents of this small island! After Patmos, it was the voyage back to Piraeus, through narrow channels where at some points it seemed as if we could "touch" a Greek island with one hand and Asia Minor with the other.

In my next article(s) I would like to write about the other islands (Rhodes and Ephesus) that we had seen before Patmos and after Mykonos, Crete and Santorini.

(Photos by the author)