



# No place like Homer

Kate Armstrong embarks on a Greek adventure where the locals never let fact ruin a good myth.

*On the Greek island of Ithaca the locals joke that many things run on GMT (Greek Maybe Time). The school bus, which doubles as public transport in high season, arrives and departs as it pleases and shops and cafes operate on the whim of their owners.*

The same can't be said for a group of elderly men who gather every morning without fail at the local kafeneio (coffee house). Here, while sipping on short blacks and clicking and twirling their worry beads, they chat and argue over games of cards. This tradition seems as ancient as the Greek myths themselves and these old blokes, as I discover each morning over my own strong coffee brew, can spin a damn good yarn. After all, Ithaca is the kind of place where myths are made.

It is the home of the legendary Greek king and Homeric hero, Odysseus (or Ulysses). If you're not so hot on Greek mythology before you get here, you'll be an expert by the time you leave. According to Homer's Iliad Odysseus left home for 10 years, fought in several epic wars and then spent another 10 years trying to sail home from Troy to his loyal wife Penelope (as described in the Odyssey). Along the way, he fended off sirens, monsters and tempestuous seas. He made it home.

Sailing is still a popular way to explore Ithaca; keen yachties charter vessels and retrace parts of Odysseus' voyage. My friend and I, however, arrive by regular ferry. The vista

before us is stunning. Ithaca looks like two large islands joined by a narrow isthmus - a spine defined by sheer cliffs and steep mountain passages. The peninsulas are high, dry and rocky, with pockets of green pine forests and olive groves.

The southern peninsula features Vathy, the island's tiny capital, where pretty Venetian style mansions line the elongated waterfront. Only 30 minutes' drive away, on the northern peninsula, are the beautiful fishing hamlets of Kioni and Frikes with their bougavnillea, wildflowers and small, pebbly coves.

The island's hidden beaches and crystal clear, turquoise waters attract all kinds of tourists, including Madonna and comedian Rowan Atkinson.

Ithaca's permanent population of about 3700 swells considerably in summer when tourists and expatriates arrive. After an earthquake in 1953,

many Ithacans left their childhood, villages for South Africa, the United States, Canada and Australia.

Many who left for Australia are now returning in their retirement or for lengthy holidays to reconnect with the island of their youth. As a result, the island's myths and mysteries live on.

Over a rovani, Ithaca's traditional rice and honey sweet, Alexandros, a 71 year old returnee, explains the Odysseus-Ithaca controversy. Homeric enthusiasts, such as the Friends of Odysseus, a group of passionate locals, have little doubt that Ithaca is the island in Homer's Odyssey. Sceptics, on the other hand, claim the island's scant archaeological remains don't exactly match Homer's text with the island location. The debate and conspiracy theories rage, the island holds annual academic conferences and Ithacans whisper about "future announcements" and "proof". Strong evidence exists in the key exhibit of

Vathy's archaeological museum - small ancient coins stamped with the image of Odysseus (identified by his pointy hat).

Ithaca's island characters are integral to any traveller's tale. There's Nikos, the owner of the kafeneio in the sleepy village of Anogi, who tries to sell us his well-gingered postcards before handing over the keys to the neighbouring 12th century church, Agia Panagia. The church's interior is covered in extraordinary Byzantine frescos.

Then there's Fotini, an Australian - Greek who despite her crippling arthritis volunteers at the tiny museum in the village of Stavros. She bellows out information about her ancient hero, irrelevant to most of the exhibits.

Within a couple of days we tick off the important Odyssean sites. There's the Fountain of Arethusa, a small, rocky waterhole on the southern peninsula where Odysseus' swine-

