



Nikos Paleokostas in hospital for tests

The inmate Nikos Paleokostas, older brother of the notorious fugitive Vassilis Paleokostas that escaped from Korydallos prison a few months ago and is still at large, was admitted to Patras University Hospital for medical tests after he complained of chest pains on Tuesday morning.

He is currently serving his sentence at Agios Stefanos prison.

The prisoner was transferred to the hospital under heavy guard, while a strong police force has been deployed around the hospital while police await the results of tests and the doctors' diagnosis.

If doctors find that he must be admitted, police intend to enforce strict security for the duration of his stay.

Nikos Paleokostas is serving lengthy jail sentences for a series of bank robberies and abductions for ransom, while he is also held responsible for a number of jail breaks - his own and also the first of two spectacular, Hollywood-style escapes by his brother Vassilis from Korydallos prison in Athens, using a rented helicopter.

Greeks seek refuge in coffee shops amid slump

ATHENS (AFP) — Determined to keep their cheer in the gloom of the economic downturn, Greeks are holding on to the nation's unofficial shrink couch — the coffee shop — for a few hours of escape from their bills. At a time when hundreds of small businesses around the country teeter in a market plagued by falling consumer demand and a loan drought, cafeterias are doing a brisk trade with millions refusing to forego their daily coffee fix.

“Crisis or not, Greeks will have their coffee,” said Phaedon Vaimakis, 29, a junior financial analyst enjoying his cup on a warm Athens spring afternoon.

Though not a coffee producer, the country swears by the bean — Greeks go through an estimated 5.8 billion cups a year whether on a date, a business appointment or just to get out of bed in the morning.

And with the economic crisis making landfall with an early slump in tourist bookings that are vital to the Greek economy, the sight of bustling cafes where patrons queue for seats starkly contrasts with boarded up businesses next door.

“At a time of crisis, people seek goods and services that add value to their crammed daily routine,” said Eleni Drosou, marketing and business development manager for prominent coffee chain Flocafe.

“To Greeks, coffee is a daily outing and a chance to enjoy themselves with friends,” she told AFP in an email.

“Coffee will be the last thing to die in Greece,” declared a cafe manager in the Athens district of Kolonaki,



home to the capital's priciest boutiques and cafeterias charging around five euros (6.60 dollars) a cup.

The high charges do little to dent demand. Even at prices up to nine euros — the equivalent of a main course — seating at the most exclusive spots in the centre and coastal suburbs can be hard to find particularly in the midday-to-afternoon coffee rush hour.

“It's the cheapest form of entertainment,” said Thanassis, a 40-year-old computer technician who describes himself as an avid coffee drinker.

“Every week I look forward to Saturday and Sunday when I can relax at a cafeteria with a coffee and newspaper,” he noted.

Instead of paying around eight euros for a movie or over 30 euros for a meal, many Greeks spend the same amount of time chatting over a coffee — to the silent outrage of operators who would prefer swifter client rotation.

“The other day I had two ladies here for seven hours over two coffees,” fumed Natassa Vettou, a cafeteria owner in the busy Ermou St shopping district.

But while cafe business remains brisk, other sectors are not as fortunate.

The Athens chamber of commerce and industry (EVEA) this month said 38,000 companies are “a step away” from bankruptcy while around 200,000 are considering staff cuts.

A 28-billion-euro (37-billion-dollar) state package to encourage bank loans has failed to jumpstart the market, minimal growth is expected next year and the jobless rate in January hit 9.4 percent, the highest since March 2007. Greece's resilient parallel economy, estimated by the World Bank at around 28 percent of its gross domestic product (GDP), is helping cushion the blow according to analysts.

Around 35 percent of Greeks are non-salaried and many hold down a second job kept clear of the taxman, notes Michalis Massourakis, senior manager for economic research at Greece's second largest lender Alpha Bank.

Other analysts point to the high rate of home ownership in Greece as a further mitigating factor that helps families stay afloat.

But in the absence of heavy industry, Greece's response to the crisis will likely be decided abroad — by foreign visitor proceeds that generate some 18 percent of Greece's gross domestic product.

A leading association of Greek tourism operators this month said the early booking season indicated a 20-percent drop in arrivals compared to last year.

But last week, the national statistics service (Esye) said Greek museums had 18.7 percent fewer visitors in 2008 compared to 2007 while the country's famous archaeological sites saw a 14.4-percent fall in attendance.

Unless the trend is checked, the association of Greek tourism enterprises (SETE) estimates the downturn could cost Greece's tourism industry at least five billion euros (6.6 billion dollars) in lost income and thousands of jobs.

Greek cuisine 'not for rich people, but it is rich for taste'

No matter how closely you follow the recipe it's impossible to reproduce the taste of Mediterranean cuisine — colorful vegetables bursting with flavor, richly-scented herbs and fish fresh from the sea — in America.

“(In Greece) I can take a tomato and take a bite out of it and have sugar all around my mouth; that's how sweet it is,” said Maria Howard-Linn, a Great Falls woman who came over from Athens more than 40 years ago. “It's because of the climate; it's because of the region.”

Greek food is extremely simple, she said. The herbs are the secret — when they're used, where they're used and how many are used. “It's very simple, very stew-y,” Howard-Linn said. “And we cook with everything. You never waste anything — the intestines, the head, the feet — you name it.”

However, a dish prepared in the northern part of Greece will vary in ingredients and, therefore, taste from the same dish prepared in the south or on one of the 180-some inhabited islands. The regions have been influenced by their neighboring cultures that also fell under the long-lasting rule of the Ottoman Empire, from which Greece finally gained independence from in the late 1820s. Mediterranean food lends itself to a healthy diet because most recipes use an abundance of fresh fruits and vegetables, and olive oil as the main source of fat. Greek people eat plenty of fish, moderate amounts of dairy, and not too much poultry or meat, though lamb is a traditional menu item.

The staple items found in most Greek kitchens are lemons and olive oil, which are used in almost all dishes, and bread. If these three things aren't in the kitchen there is no food, Howard-Linn said.