

# Dream weaver

*Ian Robert Smith is all at sea on a ferry from Thessaloniki to Rhodes*

STANDING on the dock at Thessaloniki on a balmy June evening, I watch the makings of a classic ferry journey unfurl. In the air is that wonderful Greek harbour smell, a fusion of brine, dust and exhaust fumes, congealed by heat. Men shout, seemingly for the heck of it. Horns blare and whistles shrill as, guided by fellows who look as if their idea of a good time would be wrestling the Cyclops, vehicles bounce over the metal ramp into the gaping maw of the Blue Star FB Diagoras.

Arriving in northern Greece, bound for the islands, I have a choice: travel seven hours overland to Athens or hop on the Diagoras, which departs Thessaloniki weekly throughout summer for the island of Rhodes in the southern Dodecanese.

It is, as they say, a no-brainer.

En route to Rhodes, the Diagoras negotiates the north Aegean and Dodecanese islands, traditional stepping stones between Europe and Asia, which cling like limpets to the Turkish mainland. These are some of Greece's most far-flung outposts, where lonely coasts, pine and olive-covered hills, stark mountains and colourful harbours, plus ample historic relics, make ideal island-hopping material.

Boarding the vessel, I encounter some curious innovations in the world of Greek ferry travel: smiling staff, clean-smelling air, a spacious foyer with telephones that work, an ATM, a machine that dispenses neck massages and, behind a desk that would put Captain Kirk's bridge on the Starship Enterprise to shame, a helpful receptionist.

Blue Star, clearly, is a professional outfit. Even the toilets are clean.

Its vessels have shops, free internet, DVDs and luxurious cabins. Blue Star publishes a quarterly magazine packed with articles on culture and travel, film reviews, recipes and, rather quirkily, remedies for ailments such as constipation.

Despite lunch, and possibly because of all the excitement, I am ravenous. In the ala carte restaurant, with its plush carpet and big portholes, chatty waiters fuss about me like in a barber shop of old.

One man manoeuvres my chair, another brandishes a menu and yet a third, grey-headed and urbane, polishes a wine glass. Their ministrations enhance an excellent dinner of grilled sea bass in lemon and caper sauce with potato and vegetables, accompanied by a crisp Mylopotamos muscat, made just across the water by the monks of Athos.

Later, on deck, in the fading light of a long June evening I take my bearings. Northward rises Halkidiki, the triple-pronged peninsula beloved of Greek holidaymakers and the wine-making monks. Westward, flush against a sky the colour of molten copper, the vast silhouetted cone of Mt Olympus pierces a raft of cloud lit from beneath, as in Renaissance paintings. The air, meanwhile, is a caress and the sea, untroubled by wind, is san ladi, like oil, as the Greeks say, a black swath gently unrolling.

With the engines throbbing and tourists milling around me, I feel extraordinarily content. What travel author Paul Theroux wrote of trains applies equally to ferries: anything is possible. In the 25 hours it takes to reach Rhodes you could fall in love, go on a bender, get a suntan, read (should you so wish) War and Peace.

The egalitarian nature of ferries, their lack of boundaries, means fellow travellers are open and strangers become acquaintances easily.

People such as Dimitrios, for instance, a huge, sunburned former Foreign Legionnaire with a shaved head atop shoulders the width of Zimbabwe's Victoria Falls, piercing blue eyes and a growling voice coarsened by half a lifetime of Gauloises.

"The Foreign Legion isn't dangerous," he says, lighting up and gazing into the inky darkness beyond the ship's penumbra. "People are dangerous."

Dimitrios is on the move. Tired of soldiering, he is, he says, looking for an island, "but an island without pinetrees".

He hates pine trees. "Nothing grows beneath them, they burn like Roman candles, they are unromantic," he complains. "When I see a pine tree, I run."

It is an odd, but not unreasonable, fixation so I wish Dimitrios luck and stretch out on a bench in my sleeping bag and, using my boots wrapped in a towel for a pillow, doze off gazing up at shimmering constellations from which, sporadically, rogue stars detach themselves in fiery parabolas that sear across the sky.

Woken at dawn by a crew member with a fire hose who, presumably, mistakes me for the deck, I detect the pungent aroma of incense. The fragrance issues from Lesbos's phrygana-covered hills and wafts on a meltemi wind that



makes a kite of my sleeping bag and billisters the sea, indigo beneath a colourless sky, with whitecaps. Somewhat dazed, I haul myself upright to see caiques rolling like corks in our wake while the deck shudders as the ferry turns and, lowering its ramp, reverses towards a sleepy dock.

Equally surreal is the scene in the lounge, which resembles a disaster area with people sprawled insensibly across sofas, wrapped around table legs or huddled, snoring, in corners. Tuned to a football match, the televisions broadcast the hysterical ramblings of an overwrought commentator to a barman who, eyes bleary, bow tie askew, makes me a passable Greek coffee.

Back upstairs an egg-yolk sunrise fires the sea, illuminating coasts and headlands. Light spills across the deck where sleep-tousled tourists sit amid their belongings like disconsolate gypsies. Greek men stalk up and down, industriously smoking, while across the sea early yachts gallop with billowing sails. Ahead looms Chios, a pale apparition. I watch the island grow larger and more distinct until, by 9am, we are cruising beneath barren limestone mountains daubed with villages, pine trees and, teetering on crags, white chapels with

eggshell blue domes.

Known for its mastic trees -- cultivated since medieval times for their aromatic resin, used in the production of paint, cosmetics and sweets -- its medieval villages and wealthy ship-owning dynasties, Chios's glittering flanks jut from the sea a mere determined swim away from the Turkish coast. In the intervening strait we watch Greek naval helicopters buzz a Turkish warship that turns and, its scarlet flag flying, retreats in a sweeping arc.

About midday, as we are approaching high, green, mysterious Samos, Dimitrios appears with bread, olives, sardines, a bottle of ouzo and two glasses.

He tells me about the excellent Samian wines made, he says, from Muscat of Alexandria grapes grown on steep mountain terraces and dried in the sun to a scintillating intensity. "But the island has pine trees?" I venture.

"Sadly, yes, thousands of them. It is a great tragedy."

Later, seeking coffee, we descend to the lounge where a trio of young musicians, toting traditional laouto, violi and drum, stages an impromptu jam. Songs of love, loss and exile electrify the passengers, who form a circle that, stumbling over furniture, haphazardly expands as it goes around and around the room. I watch in awe as, led by a sprightly silver-haired satyr who leaps, pirouettes, kicks his heels and waves his handkerchief like a flag, students, fishermen, housewives, children, a quartet of army recruits and several grannies in black, faces aflame, giddily revolve. "Friend," observes Dimitrios, grinning, "this is crazy."

Elated by the music and the sheer high spirits, I leave him down there and return topside. The meltemi thumps and salt threads the air. Scattered across a swirling sea as dark and seductive as wine, the tawny islands of the Dodecanese, cosseted in mist, hover ethereally. Some boast white towns and romantic names. Others are mere outcrops, covered in prickly furze and inhabited solely by birds and goats. We stop at Kalymnos, where lonely monasteries cling to a steep-sided coast and, astride a wide cobalt bay, a town of faded blue and pink and ochre houses climb bone-white mountainsides. At Kos the light fades in increments as purple shadows creep across the land.

Finally, about 9pm, with the sun lost behind Symi, we approach Rhodes where the old town lifts a medieval vision of towers, ramparts and minarets against an incandescent sky.

Tired, salty, happy, yet sorry it's over, I listen as the ship's whistle chortles once, twice, three times.

*Dr Panayiotis Diamantis wrote a letter to the Editor of The Weekend Australia with some very interesting information about the medieval tower they included in the article.*

Susan Kurosawa Editor, Travel and Indulgence The Weekend Australian  
GPO Box 4245 Sydney NSW 2001 - E: travel@theaustralian.com.au

Dear Editor,

**RE: "Dream weaver" The Weekend Australian 31 October 2009, page 9**  
I thoroughly enjoyed reading this latest offering from your esteemed publication on travel in Hellas. In particular since it begins in the "Bride of the North", the Macedonian capital city of Thessalonike.

The article featured a photograph of a medieval tower, with the caption "Steeped in history: Mt Athos on Thessaloniki". The building was erected in the 1100s and once belonged to one of the monasteries on the Athos Peninsula (Vatopedion), east of Thessalonike. In 1924, it became home to an Australian couple, Gallipoli veteran Sydney Loch, and his Queensland-born wife, Joice NanKivell. They lived in this majestic stone monument until their deaths (he in 1952 and she in 1981 respectively).

Today, the upper floors of the tower, which were the Lochs living quarters, are an Australian-heritage museum, featuring their private possessions and photographs illustrating their decades of sacrifices to the people of the town which surrounds the tower, Ouranoupolis (City of Heaven).

The Lochs ventured to this isolated settlement in 1924 to assist a group of survivors of the Hellenic Genocide (1914-1924) who had made their way there after World War One. With donations of cash and kind from Australia, the Lochs helped the survivors build a new community of fishermen and rug-weavers. One of the rugs now graces the Loch Australian Museum in the tower, while another is a prized possession of the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney.

Just another piece of the diverse Australian Diaspora story.

Yours sincerely,

Dr Panayiotis Diamadis - Director, Beyond ANZAC Cove Project  
Australian Institute for Holocaust and Genocide Studies