

The good oil

With a little ouzo and lots of olives, Nicola Walker basks in the warm hospitality of Lesvos.

Stand anywhere on the east coast of the Greek island of Lesvos and Turkey looms across the Aegean. The Lesviots did not stand a chance when Sultan Mohamed II sent over the mighty Ottoman army in 1462. Many islanders were enslaved or exiled to Constantinople. The Turks stayed until 1912, ruthlessly suppressing Greek nationalism for many of those long years, although an edict of 1839 finally allowed the Lesviots legal parity with the colonists and religious freedom.

Memories of the occupation passed down through the generations still cause older Lesviots to wince. Turkey is always stiffly referred to as Asia Minor. This becomes a running gag a la Basil Fawlty (Don't mention ...) for our little tour group, permissible because we are in the company of a local. Effie's parents are from the village of Agia Paraskevi and set sail for Australia when Lesvos fell on hard times in the 1950s. Effie has returned to "her island" many times. I have wanted to accompany her for nigh on 20 years and now here we are: two couples, each with a young daughter.

We joyfully convene in the busy capital of Mytilini for breakfast. The Walker team flew in from Croatia last night and immediately got lost in the hire car. It is bliss to hand over responsibility to Effie, whose Greek is impeccable and who orders stacks of bougatsa, whorls of filo stuffed with various fillings. Five-year-old Iris, who ate only cornflakes and ice-cream in Croatia, hoes into the cinnamon-custard bougatsa and we relax into the happy hum of the cafe over our frappes.

I am even more delighted to be on Greek turf again when the ashtray is knocked off the table and Effie contritely takes the pieces inside. "Bah," (or some Greek equivalent) says the man behind the counter, laughing loudly, "that ashtray was so ugly it deserved to be broken." Oh, it's a generalisation, I know, but such affability makes the Greeks marvellous hosts.

As indeed are the owners of the Hotel Clara in the small re-

sort town of Petra on the north coast, about a 90-minute drive in our hire car. They usher us into two perfect rooms, one with a twin-bed antechamber for the girls and both with sea-facing balconies big enough for four adults to sit on late into the night drinking ouzo. There are decent buffet suppers and breakfasts on a terrace with gorgeous views, though queuing for food alongside the British clientele makes us feel like extras in a Carry On film.

Behind Petra's narrow main road, which follows the curve of a crowded beach, are pretty, cobbled laneways and numerous cafes. The exquisite little basilica of Agios Nikolaos has 16th-century wall paintings of saints and at the top of 114 stairs, carved into the volcanic petra (aka mighty large rock) that gives the town its name, is the airy Panagia Glykofilousa (Our Lady of the Sweet Kiss).

Easily bypassed is Vareltsidaina, tucked away in a side street. It is one of the last



surviving Ottoman mansions on the island. Built in the late 18th century, the four spacious upper-storey rooms are divided only by intricate wooden screens. Kilims cloak the floors and benches and the walls are painted with naive scenes of maritime towns and courting couples.

The architecture of Lesvos is completely unlike the iconic whitewashed buildings of Greek tourist brochures. Mytilini's ornate mansions date to the mid-19th century when the Ottomans softened their rule and the island prospered. Even the smallest villages are distinguished by honey-coloured double-storey stone houses with balconies and painted shutters. The various castle fortresses of Lesvos, whether Byzantine or Genoese (the island was given as a dowry to a nobleman from Genoa in 1354), were repaired by Ottoman governors, who erected a few of their own, through punitive local taxes.

They still bear Turkish inscriptions, though the cheerful Greek flag now flutters in the wind.

Seven-year-old Alexia jumps on to the stage inside the castle of Molivos and, wholly unself-consciously belts out Smoke on the Water. From the battlements, Asia Minor's corrugated skyline seems alarmingly close.

Beneath us, the tiled roofs of the town tumble down the sheer hillside to the glittering sea. Molivos is Lesvos at its most blatantly pretty and we stay on for an early supper in one of the seaside tavernas. The rest of us admire the sunset while Effie orders a feast of delicately fried red mullet, calamari and octopus. The Walker team prefers retsina but the other side, being almost local, opts for the island's favoured tippie: ouzo. We stagger out, very pleased with ourselves and the euro 74 (\$112) bill.

Later, with the girls asleep, we lounge on the hotel balcony and debate the possibilities for the



Ouzo and oil ... the harbour at Molivos. Photo: David Tipling/Lonely Planet

the priest. Her aunt is spending the day making manestra and the children taste the tiny worms of dough. On a frappe break in the cafe-lined main street, we covertly watch the old men taking in the morning air and, stirred by the timelessness of the scene, feel anxious for the continuing life of these villages.

In spite of its prosaic title, the Museum of Industrial Olive Oil Production in Agia Paraskevi is a joy. We have the place to ourselves and stay for several hours with the help of interactive computer exhibits. Effie recalls picking olives in her grandfather's grove as a young girl, before nets were introduced in the 1970s. Being unable to squat, she was scolded for bruising the olives with her knees. There are 11 million olive trees on Lesvos, spread over 450,000 hectares, and they were transplanted from Asia Minor after the Great Frost of 1850. Local producers ganged together in 1910 to build the press we are standing in, thereby destroying the stranglehold of private enterprise.



trip. Lesvos is the third-biggest Greek island after Crete and Euboea and there is plenty to do. The poet, Sappho, was famously born here in the 7th century BC but regretfully we decide to leave her home town of Eresos to the crowds of her female devotees.

First on the list is a visit to Effie's "village". Walking alongside her in Agia Paraskevi is a bit like a trot with royalty. Everyone greets us, including

They funnelled some of the profits back into the community, hence the astonishing neo-classical school in the village.

The good oil underpinned the Ottoman period, as it does now the island's economy, though to a lesser extent. By 1912 when the Turks departed, there were 113 machine olive presses on Lesvos, six pomace (must) extraction plants and 14 soap works.

We snaffle hundreds of the mind-boggling number of olives

by way of Greek salads in our daily visits to different no-frills waterside tavernas. In the quiet village of Sigri, on the far west coast, a pair of septuagenarians cooks us dinner in a taverna that surely won't be the same for much longer.

Sigri houses the Natural History Museum of the Lesvos Petrified Forest, which I'm afraid we eschew in favour of the beach, having already walked around the forest in the national park en route. Swamped by lava 20 million years ago, the sequoia trees were preserved, roots, fruits, seeds, leaves and all, making it an autochthonous-petrified forest, which means there are a lot of phallic ochre stumps dotted about a dramatic barren mountainside. Effie says that before the trees were protected, expatriates and tourists alike chipped away at them, carrying the nuggets home. An umbrella is useful here, for there isn't a scrap of shade.

The Walker team runs out of time to visit the ouzo factory in Plomari and the monastery of Madamados but we make a mad dash for Mytilini on our last day.

I want to see the folk paintings of Theophilos, Lesvos's revered artist whose scenes of daily life on the island show intriguing Ottoman influences. Naturally, he was scorned in his own lifetime and died penniless in 1934. We arrive at the museum with barely 30 minutes to spare before our flight and find it is closed on Mondays. Luckily, I have two postcards by Theophilos, one showing Our Lady of the Sweet Kiss in Petra surrounded by olive trees and vegetable plots; the other of mustachioed fishermen wearing Turkish trousers cut off at the knees and what appear to be safari hats.

We reluctantly resume responsibility for ourselves and board our Aegean Airways flight to Athens to discover we are sitting in separate seats. An energetic young steward moves heaven and earth to ensure Iris is sitting next to her mama. Now that's hospitality, and even without Effie.

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