



## A Link Between: Adventure, Philanthropy, Youth, History, Belief and Hellenic Culture

The following is a story of how a team from Greece and the Diaspora helped reopen a 720 year old church, built using columns from a temple erected 1900 years earlier (2600 years ago) on the Greek island of Kythera.

By John Fardoulis

When questioning residents around the nearby village of Mitata in Kythera during July this year, no one really knew when liturgy was last held in Agios Kosmas, a small Byzantine church which sits on a mountain side, where the ancient capital of Kythera once stood.

John Prineas, a Kytherian-Australian who attended the family's horafia on the local hillside in the 1940's - said that there was no talk of any service in Agios Kosmas in living recollection at that time.

Hence we came up with the assumption that liturgy hadn't been conducted in Agios Kosmas for around 100-150 years.

A team of local residents, university students from Athens and volunteers from the Diaspora (particularly Australia) worked on the island for 18 days in July this year, as part of a team that supported archaeologists from the Greek Ministry of Culture in excavations that rediscovered parts of the ancient, Laconian-controlled capital of Kythera.

An adjunct to this project was creating a walking path through inhospitable scrub, previously blocking access to Agios Kosmas, reopening the small but magical church to the public. It's not uncommon for Byzantine churches to be constructed where older Pagan temples and sanctuaries once stood, usually because they occupied strategic locations, and to overshadow a previously rival religion.

The project helped prove a lot of things to the community, especially how when unbridled (perhaps slightly crazy) enthusiasm is combined with a good cause, almost anything's possible. So the quest to bring life back to Agios Kosmas began. Local Kytherian farmers Jimmy Galakatos and Kostas Moulos rose to the challenge, as the front men who fought their way up the 'agrio' mountain, armed with chainsaws that tamed

the previously dominant agathia and suffocating bushes.

Archaeology students from Athens and Greek-Australian youth followed in their wake, throwing branches out to the sides of the path, clearing a walking trail that later saw hundreds of people ranging from 8-year-old children to 85-year old grandparents venture up the mountain in the weeks that followed. None of this was for money, everyone volunteered their time and sweat. And it was worth it!

A visit to Agios Kosmas is doubly historic - being able to see inside a 720 year-old church exuding a special ambience, cool, dimly lit, with decaying hagiography on the walls from the 1300's. The church also stands where the island's ancient capital functioned nearly two thousand years earlier, using ancient 600 BC Doric columns to hold up the roof.

Contemporary Australia is only a little more than 200 years old, we don't have 720 year-old churches here, and as relatively new migrants, most Greek-Aus-

tralian don't have ties that go back more than seventy years in this new land. But in Greece, a wide range of civilizations have either ruled or visited over the last 5000 years, with many Greek-Australians now inheriting plots of land engulfing priceless remnants of the past.

### Not Just Discovering, but Creating History

During the three week stay in July, our team got to know Kythera's Metropolitan, Bishop Seraphim and local priest Father Yiorgios on a practical basis - due to hospitality offered by the Kytherian Archdiocese, in allowing 25 full-time volunteers to stay in a beautiful 170-year-old monastery, Agia Moni. This built rapport, which led to collaboration on a cultural and religious level, working together to stage the first church service in Agios Kosmas for 100-150 years.

The historic reopening of Agios Kosmas took place on July 29th, 2010 when Bishop Seraphim and regular church goers were joined by a new generation of 'neolaia', in a beautiful church service on the Paleokastro mountaintop. Life and energy was injected.

There's an important lesson to learn here. Attending church is one thing, but working together on volunteer projects helps build a deeper rapport, and can unify volunteers from around the world, which was the case for our team in July this year.

Going beyond discovering new elements of history... was the opportunity to actually create it - staging the first service at Agios Kosmas in well over 100 years. As you can see from photos, it was truly a magical experience. Culture in action. The service was a moving experience and if you closed your eyes, your mind could have drifted back a thousand years.

### Actions Speak Louder Than Words

When farewelling Bishop Seraphim the day before returning to Australia, he



suggested that we open up two more currently inaccessible churches next year, bringing life back to other historic places of worship. A great way to combine a Greek-island holiday with a dash of adventure, physical activity and in creating life-long memories. The concept is worth discussing across all Greek-Australian brotherhoods and committees here in Australia, imagine if teams could be formed to open access to old churches that are currently cut off in other parts of Greece.

Similarly, we found that volunteering on an archaeological dig helped spark people's imagination and formed a greater connection with their Hellenic heritage, in a very special way. Searching for objects from the past had a universal appeal - to both intellectuals and those with shorter attention spans, especially youth who get bored with old history books.

That's a point to remember. How else can you learn about ancient Greek history, without reading books? Well on-the-job, actually searching for new evidence, which ironically could lead to new chapters of history being written. The Greek archaeologists that we helped were great, patiently explaining the excavation process and teaching us about the significance of ancient artefacts found.

You see a lot of young fans showing

