

## **Chapter 1: The land of logic, democracy and philosophy**

Hello Everyone,

Please forgive the group e-mail but it is the most effective way to communicate with everyone.

I arrived in Athens safely with no delays and all my baggage, which evidently wasn't the case for most of the other students here. My roommate, Andrew, has been without a change of clothes for 6 days now!

After recovering from some of the worst jet lag many of us had ever experienced, our group went out to dinner at one of the local sluvacki restaurants. I do not remember the name of the dish I had that night but it was a great first taste of Greece.

Trying to fall asleep when your body still thinks it's 3:00 pm wasn't easy but I eventually fell asleep with the help of some nighttime medicine.

The next day we all formally met everyone else and took a walking tour of our neighborhood. The post office, market and bakery are within a block of our apartment building, however the hill that one is required to walk up and down makes the journey a tough one. As we continued our walking tour of Pangrati, the area in which I live, we came to the original Olympic stadium. The gates were closed and locked; otherwise I would have put on my track spikes and took a lap or two. The stadium was pretty impressive but it was heavily reconstructed so I took its antiquity with a grain of salt.

Our group has already become very close. We come from a diverse background of interests and fields of study but we all seem to have that adventurous spirit that makes almost every day exciting and interesting. Another roommate of mine, Derek, is a photojournalist and has offered to share his photos with me, so I'm sure I'll have some fantastic images to share by the end of this experience. The two philosophy majors, Birti and Arnold, make for very interesting dinner conversation... Birti and I have had a very interesting discussion about the role of philosophical debate within the theory of human evolution. The rest of the group is very interesting and kind as well and I look forward to hearing of their pasts and experiences as our trip progresses.

This past Saturday our entire group walked to Monastiraki (an area of Athens) to go shopping at a popular marketplace where I bought a really nice jacket for 50 euros after bartering with the shopkeeper. As we walked through the market people who were trying to sell bootlegged DVDs and video games constantly approached us. Someone in our group made the comment that they thought these were the same guys who bombarded them in New York... "They look the same and everything!" she said. I bought a kilo of clementines for 1 euro and a bundle of bananas for .50 euro and we left. The clementines were fantastic, exceptionally sweet and juicy.

Monstiraki has the best sluvacki in Athens. Not only was it the best "Gyro" (as we call them in the states) but it was cheap... less than 2 Euro and two of theses things make you want to sit around, sleep and digest all day.

After going to the market, we walked back to our apartments through the national gardens and the "Diag" equivalent in Athens. It's amazing how people

are packed into this city that was originally designed for 70,000. Over 4 million live here now. Cars are parked everywhere: on the sides of the roads, in the roads, on the sidewalks... everywhere. There is no where to park so people just get creative... even more creative than in Ann Arbor, but here no one gets towed.

Since sidewalk space is often taken up by parked cars and motorcycles, pedestrians are often forced to walk in the streets. Of course this alone makes walking in Athens fairly dangerous, however if you factor in the INSANE drivers with which you are sharing the street, it makes you extremely aware of what is going on around you; you're always ready to jump to avoid impeding death.

Yesterday, a few of us (after recovering from the previous night's festivities) took a walk to the Acropolis; it was worth every dodged car and annoying gypsy encountered on the way. I'm sure many of us have seen pictures of the Parthenon in history books or travel brochures but seeing it in person makes you realize how inadequate a photograph can be. I'm sorry I can only give you a description and send you pictures of what I experienced that day. It was incredible... yes, yes, it was big and old and all that but seeing it in context of everything else around it and situated on top of a hill over looking the entire city, mountains and sea... it makes you want to cry... well... not me of course because I'm manly and tough and don't do that sort of thing.

We left the Acropolis after a few hours and got on board the metro to Piraeus, which is the harbor district of Athens. The rail system was brand new so all the facilities were very nice, fast and clean which is more than you can say for the rest of the city.

Piraeus was great, unfortunately we were all so cold at this point that we could not stay long, only long enough for a picture, which turned out great thanks to Derek's photojournalistic skills. I am sure we will be back there soon as we have many field trips coming up that require us to take a ferry to one of the neighboring islands.

Classes started today and my Greek language skills are progressing, however I fear it will be a while before I am able to mingle with the locals. Oh, and evidently there was a 6.9 magnitude earthquake in and around Athens yesterday while we were visiting the Acropolis but we didn't feel a thing. Protected by the gods perhaps?

So yes, the trip is going well, I am doing well and everything is great. If you'd like to see pictures from my trip so far you can visit this site:

[http://gallery.michiganfiji.com/main.php?g2\\_view=core.ShowItem&g2\\_itemId=1093&g2\\_navId=x0808fe9f](http://gallery.michiganfiji.com/main.php?g2_view=core.ShowItem&g2_itemId=1093&g2_navId=x0808fe9f)

It is getting late here and I have work to complete for class tomorrow so take a look at the pictures and be well. So, as they say in Athens; Calliniktas (goodnight).

## **Chapter 2: Jason in Athens**

Hello All,

Since my last correspondence I feel as though I've been here for months. Our group has grown very close in this short amount of time and this had made our trips in and around Athens even more exciting.

We had our first out-of-classroom instruction at the Theater of Dionysos, which is located at the foot of the Acropolis. It was bitter cold and the constant barking of nearby stray dogs made paying attention to Professor Wheeler's lecture exceedingly difficult. Even with the elements working against us, we still managed to enjoy ourselves. Oh, and we met Steve, a stray dog, who followed us home and now resides on Dikearchou St. outside our apartment building.

I remember learning about the Theater of Dionysos in my ancient Greek art class last semester: I looked at a picture of the location, wrote down some key facts on a flash card and then pounded the information into my brain for the upcoming exam. However, having sat in the same seats, looking at the same mountain background, having the same sunlight reflect off the Aegean Sea onto my face for some temporary warmth as those that lived hundreds of years ago gave me a somewhat different perspective of the knowledge I so quickly shoved to the back of my head. There is definitely something to be said for looking at a picture in a textbook, then looking up from the book and seeing the image in reality.

Later that week a few of us took a trip to the Cycladic Art Museum in Athens, which is only a twenty-minute walk from our University. Nothing much to report from this experience except, again, I saw many of the

things I learned about in my ancient Greek art class, but in person. We also went to the Benaki Museum in Athens but this was more of the same; do not misunderstand me, these places were very nice and informative but I much prefer to be "on location".

The week finished with a bang as we took our first out-of-Athens day trip with Professor Wheeler. We arrived at the archaeological site of Ramnous, outside of Marathon, before the sun had fully risen above the mountains. As we were walking from our tour bus to the site itself I wasn't quite sure what to expect. I started thinking of all the pictures I had seen in my text book and the captions below the images describing the dimensions of the site, the order of the columns, etc., but at the same time I was remembering that pictures and descriptions were inadequate when I wrote to all of you about the Acropolis. What would I see, how would I feel, I did not know, but even if I had there is nothing that could have prepared me for the view that lay ahead. Blue and White. The visual cortex of my brain was overwhelmed by the abundance and vibrancy of just these two colors. The sky and clouds seemed to be an extension of the sea if not for the protruding land mass that separated them in the distance. This fantastic backdrop was complimented by the presence of the Temple of Nemesis to whose ancient patrons I felt connected through the appreciation of such an incredible view. I stood back from the group as Professor Wheeler stood at the edge of the site and lectured to the group and this is when it finally hit me. THIS is Greece, THESE are the experiences with which I want to fill my life and MAN it's friggin' cold, lets wrap this up and get back in the bus.

In the same day we visited a few other archaeological sites that were of mild interest to the group. However, there was one site that was particularly

interesting: the Theater of Dionysos at Ikarion. This ancient theater was probably the site of the first tragedy, the birthplace of modern drama. However, I feel that the intensity of the women who showed us around the site distracted from the experience as a whole; who wants to know about flower arrangements when visiting the location of the origin of tragedy? We pressed on.

We stopped at Oropos, a coastal town, to eat. I had some beef souvlaki and a Heineken for lunch and bought a bottle of Muskray DeRhodes wine for five euro. By the way, I would not recommend drinking this wine unless you also enjoy drinking rotten grape flavored syrup.

We stopped at some other site on the way home, but the guard was quick to push us out as it was 2:30 and time for Siesta.

On Saturday, seven of our group hiked the Hymettus Mountains; a two or three mile walk from our apartments. We went up the mountain with the intention to visit the Kaisariani Monastery, however we quickly got lost after we decided we should no longer follow the signs and or road and trudge through the woods relying only on our vague sense of direction and strong thirst for adventure.

We hiked to the top of a peak that we saw from the base of the mountain. Once we got up there, we found the ruins of an old outpost that overlooked Attica and the trail up, which we traveled. The view was nothing short of amazing but you all are probably getting tired of hearing me say this. Nevertheless it was breathtaking. We got some great group pictures... you know, the type of pictures you would see in a youth travel catalogue or something like that. Derek, my roommate, brought his super-expensive and

comically over sized camera so some of the pictures are actually professional quality. Danny, you need one of these cameras!

We ventured further up into the mountains almost to the radio antennas perched atop the mountain that can only be seen on a clear day from the city elevation. We were way up there but never far enough way that we could not see the Acropolis or the old Olympic Stadium. We eventually came to another ruins site at which we took some more memorable pictures. At this point I think we were just walking around looking for something of which to take pictures because we were dreading the long walk home. And it was a long walk home. After walking up hills, through the woods, and over rocks all day our legs became Jello. We had to stop and rest a couple times on the way down the mountain. But even with the wobbling legs we all agreed the trip was worth it. Oh yeah, and we encountered a pack of wild dogs, but they were nice and didn't kill us... only chased us for a little while.

The food and drink in Athens continues to satisfy me. We recently found an area of Athens, close to our apartments, that has all these restaurants whose serving areas have been extended onto the sidewalk into these glass huts. In one of such glass huts we met our first local Greek friend, Lia. She's been very kind and friendly, which is more than I can say for Greek women as a whole, and has showed us a lot of the "non-touristy" destinations in and around Athens. In fact, she is taking our group out tonight to "do something traditional Greek" as she puts it. I'm scared.

Last night the Athens Centre hosted an event for all the students, teachers and administration in the villa of our school. Of course, we expected the worst

because honestly, have you ever been to a student and staff mixer that wasn't just completely awkward and uncomfortable? Once we arrived, however, we found that this was not to be the case. We had a blast! Greek people are so incredible friendly and eager to share their life stories; I spent an hour talking to a woman whose family moved to Kosovo from California and even learned a little Albanian. I also talked to a very prominent Athenian mathematician who told me my tie and shirt combination was "intriguing", a gentlemen who was propelled out of his house when a bomb was dropped on it during World War II and even a Greek Violinist who was interested in the concept of Fraternities and Sororities in the U.S. The Athens Centre staff eventually had to kick us out as it was nearing second hour past the scheduled end of the event. By the end of the night our group, twenty or so Americans, ended up at the only Old American Western themed bar in Athens singing "Friends in Low places" with a bunch of guys and girls who only knew enough English to sing along with us. Let me just say, the Greeks know how to have fun.

That is all I have to report for now. It's going to be close to 60F today so I'm anxious to get off the computer and into the sun. I hope all is well with all of you and be sure to check out my updated pictures.

### **Chapter 3: Feta Cheese**

Dear Friends and Family,

Once I've left Greece, I'll never eat Feta again. I do now know how I have gotten this far in my life without this fantastic food. I remember having feta cheese once before, back in the states, and I hated it. Why? Because I do not know what I ate in the U.S. but if this feta in Greece is real feta then what I ate in the U.S. was not.

Anyway... now on to the good stuff.

A few of us were eager to venture further out of Athens than we had done previously, so we asked our program coordinator, a long time Athenian, what would be a suitable option for such an adventurous group. She told us of an island, very close to the Mainland, called Αίγινα (Egina). So, we went down to the seaport at Πειραιάς (Piraeus) and booked a ride on the Flying Dolphin IX. The boat itself was pretty amazing to me but this was probably just due to the fact that prior to this trip I'd never been on a hydrofoil boat. Evidently, there are these large skis attached to the under-belly of the fuselage that, when the boat reaches a certain speed, causes the entire thing to rise out of the water and ride on these hydrofoils. It makes for an incredibly smooth ride and allows the ferry to be able to travel at greater speeds due to less resistance.

It was a beautiful day for a boat trip and I took full advantage of the warm and sunny weather. I wore a t-shirt all day long and only at the end of the day, when the sun set, did I feel the need to put on a coat. The first thing we did on the island was take some pictures of these three little kids who were fishing for crabs right off of the sea wall. They offered to sell us

their day's catch for a nominal fee but we declined in hopes of finding some seafood that was already cooked. We wandered around the city for a while looking for a bus station or some sort of information booth so that we could buy tickets to the Temple of Aphaia, which is one of the best preserved ancient sanctuaries in all of Greece. We eventually located a small kiosk that sold bus tickets to the site but the bus did not leave until 4:00 and the site closed at 5:00. We decided to get the bus tickets and just go to the site for a half hour.

I think our bus driver graduated from the Mario Andretti NASCAR driver's school or something. I have never seen someone so fluidly avoid sheep, small children and rock faces with a 40-foot long bus at 50 mph before in my life. Needless to say, we were all glad to arrive at the site and get off that bus. Little did we know that we would be back on that bus no less than 10 minutes after we got off it as the last bus down the mountain left shortly after we arrived. And there was only one bus driver for this route. We debated walking down the mountain but decided to risk our lives, again, to save the precious hours of daylight we had left. We left the site without even seeing the temple and made it down the mountain in one piece. The day may have been a complete loss if not for the incredible food we had at a small seaside cafe. I think I had swordfish and potatoes but since the owner spoke only Greek and the menu was not in English I cannot be sure. Her understanding of my Greek was limited to one word: fresh, and boy was it ever. If any of you ever go to Egina, I recommend the swordfish from the little restaurant in the 2nd alley past the bakery by the seaport. Trust me.

On Thursday evening I was planning on getting up early the next morning and going to the train station with 7 others from our group to travel north for the

weekend. But as I was getting ready for bed, an intriguing opportunity presented itself. One of my friends, Lia, was going to a Vanessa Mae concert on Friday evening at the Olympic complex in Athens. This was not the first time I had heard the name Vanessa Mae but I really didn't know anything about her music except that it was progressive and an interesting combination of classical and other types of music. So, I arranged to switch the departure time of my ticket and went to the concert the next night. We took the metro to the Olympic complex and I was immediately taken in by the incredible architecture and open space (something you do not see a lot of in Athens). We walked through what looked like the dissected rib cage of a 1000 foot long, 50 foot high snake when we came to an open area with an arrangement of geometric ponds and ground-lit walk ways. We followed the crowd passed this enormous metal wave simulator that was arranged perpendicular to the ground. I do not know quite how to describe this one structure's magnificence but if you are interested to know exactly what I am talking about you can visit the Olympic website for a moving picture of what this thing does. Like a herd of cows (equivalently sheep in Greece) we made our way through the complex to the concert.

The event was horribly organized, even for the laid-back Greeks. No body knew which entrance to go in or where to sit. We found out later that this was due to an electronic ticket mishap that happened earlier that night. We eventually went in some back door entrance and sat in someone else's seats. And they were great seats; a little bit off the right side of the stage and only a few rows up. When Vanessa Mae came out I could clearly make out the details of electric violin. The music was really... interesting, and I do not mean this in a negative way. Like I said before, it mixed classical and rock and roll but it had

a certain mysterious aspect about it that was not quite like anything I have heard before. The Greeks were really into it. Everyone was standing and dancing and clapping with the music, even me. I surprised myself and the unsuspecting Greeks around me. I gave them a dose of the 'ol "white man over-bite" dance courtesy of Mr. Warren Baumann and they loved it... or so I think.

As I write this letter I am on the train to Θεσσαλονίκη (Thessaloniki), a supposedly beautiful laid back city 5 hours north of Athens. I am traveling with my new friend Lia, who is from a small town outside of Thessaloniki called Νάουσα (Naousa) and she has promised to show us a good time while we're visiting her home town. The rest of our group left for Thessaloniki on Friday morning but I decided to come with Lia on Saturday so that I could attend the Vanessa Mae concert at the Olympic Stadium in Athens on Friday night. Our train left at 10am, which meant we had to get up at 8:30 in the morning so I was pretty tired when we first boarded the train. My seat offers all the comfort of an uneven, bulbous boulder, so my attempts at sleeping have been, for the most part, unsuccessful. However, my continuous waking has not been such a bad thing because as I open my eyes, the first thing I see is a magnificent Ansel Adams-esque landscape. You can't image how beautiful the Greek mountains are when you're traveling through them; I'm tempted to take a picture through the window to show you all what I'm talking about but I fear that action would invoke a flurry of awkward blank stares. The mountains are covered in snow all the way to the point of which they meet the hazy, sun-lit clouds. I like to imagine that the peaks of these mountains don't exist and they tower up towards the sky forever but my 21 year-old logic does not allow me to take that idea too far. Childhood imagination, where are you now?

Every once in a while our train stops at a town to pick up and drop off passengers. Lia and I had to negotiate with a friendly young woman who had gotten on at one of the intermediate stops for her seat that we had commandeered. Like many of the Greeks I've met so far, this woman was very understanding, easy going and kind and she traded her tickets with Lia so that we could continue to sit near each other. I have found this easy going quality in the people here to be very refreshing. I have often been late for appointments with my teachers, or doctors or our lawyer and they have no problem with this. They just use the time to step outside and smoke a cigarette or start a conversation about the latest Green versus Red soccer game. It is a far cry from the "I need it now" and "You're 5 minutes late, where the hell were you" lifestyle with which I have grown up. What a nice change of pace.

My seat faces away from the front of the train while other seats are facing towards the front. A few rows in front of me there is a man who has been very interesting to watch as I drift in and out of dreamland. He is an old man with short white hair arranged in typical grandpa fashion. He has no teeth, which becomes all too apparent when we occasionally catch each other's glance and he smiles a universal "hello". The wrinkles on his face show years of vibrant living and his dark, sunken eyes reflect his age. His gaze is fixed on the landscape and I can see the reflection of the passing rock face in his glassy eyes. He reminds me of a man in a photo I saw in the introduction to James Agee's, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*; maybe it is because it just looks like he belongs in a black and white picture. I do not know why I find this person's face so interesting, even mesmerizing, but for some odd reason I find the shape, wear and expressions of his face to be as

strangely beautiful as the Mona Lisa. I do not know where he is from or how he got to this point in his life but I think I'd like to end up like this old man when I am nearing the end of mine. I would like to spark interest in those around me, to have an aura about me that inspires on-lookers, to be on a train enjoying the journey and not being particularly interested in the destination, to look at the passing landscape with the same eyes and wonder as I had so many years ago, to catch the glance of a young man sitting across from me and smile at him with a universal "hello" that secretly implies "I hope your life was and is as wonderful as mine". Someday, I want to be this man.

I leave you now as my laptop battery is about to die and our train is nearing its destination. I cannot say that the destination of the train will be my own but I will be sure to check in again soon to let you all know how my journey is progressing. So, as the Greeks say, Γεια σας (Ya sas) my friends, health to you.

## **Chapter 4: Where does the white go?**

Where does the white go?

It is amazing what topics of conversation arise when you stick 18 intelligent college students in a 3-bedroom apartment with 4 bottles of wine and 18 different "correct" answers to 1 question at 1 o'clock in the morning. Where does the white go when snow melts? This was the question that Arnold, one of the two philosophers in our group, posed on Monday evening. The combination of Arnold's philosophical approach to answering questions and his lack of physics knowledge made answering his question more difficult. One person tried to explain that energy exists on different frequencies and that light was just the part of energy that humans can see with their eyes. To this Arnold asked, "Ok, well can you show me some light?" A valid question of course, to which Arnold got an even greater variety of answers. Eventually, the conversation got to a point where half the people in the room did not think that white really exists while the other half were convinced that it did. The scientific part of me wanted to chime in and give my two cents about the existence of something we all perceive everyday but as I began formulating my remarks in my head another stream of thought took its place. It was much, much more interesting to just listen to what 4 bottles of wine does to 18 intelligent college students in a 3-bedroom apartment at 1 o'clock in the morning.

When I last left you all, I was on a train destined for Θεσσαλονίκη (Thessaloniki) in the northern part of Greece. The rest of the train ride was uneventful, which is something I cannot say for the remainder of our trip. We arrived in Thessaloniki at around 4:30 or 5 and went to our hotel soon after that. After having not slept on the train all I wanted to do was crash on

the bed for five minutes, just five minutes, but I was in Thessaloniki, out of Athens! I should not nap or lay around; I should go out exploring the city! And so we did.

We met up with the rest of our group, who had arrived the previous day, and walked along the boardwalk to the White Tower, a fantastic early first millennium structure right on the water, and then to a restaurant that the guide book insisted had the best food and drink in the entire city. We ordered a wide variety of appetizers including, but not limited to, Greek salad and fried feta. I think we also had some sort of fried fish dish that must have been pretty fresh since it still had a number of scales on it. I stayed away from that one. The main dishes were fantastic; like "weak at the knees with every bite" fantastic. The fish, squid, pork, feta, tomatoes, pasta, bread and zesty seasonings made me feel as if I had been using my sense of taste for the first time! Up to that point I would have been hard-pressed to identify food that I had enjoyed more than what we ate that night. The fish I had on Αίγινα (Egina) would have been the closest competitor. Mmm-mmm good.

After dinner we went back down to the boardwalk to check out the nightlife. Nothing really special happened here so I won't bore you all with the details but we did have a good time talking to a few people from New Zealand.

I involuntarily woke up early the next morning and had some of the best μπογάτσα (Bougotsa) I have had since my arrival in Greece. Bougotsa is essentially a pizza-slice shaped, crispy baked bread with powdered sugar on top and some sort of cream in the middle. There is, or so my local Greek informants tell me, a constant opposition between the bakers of Athens and the bakers of Thessaloniki as to what

actually constitutes bougotsa. The Athenian bakers insist that it is exactly what I have described above and any variation of this pastry would not be considered bougotsa while Thessalinikian bakers maintain that bougotsa can take many forms and should not be limited to crispy bread with cream and powdered sugar on top. Well, whatever the true nature of bougotsa may be, I have found that the ongoing contention between the bakers of the two cities has been benefiting my appetite directly. I have had bougotsa with mozzarella cheese, I have had bougotsa with ham, I have had bougotsa with peanut butter and the list goes on and on. I say let the two cities duke it out forever and let there be no set definition of bougotsa; my stomach is certainly enjoying the hullabaloo.

Lia and I met up with her mother and brother, who were in Thessaloniki for the day, for lunch at a popular local restaurant the name of which I do not recall. Lia's mom is an intriguing person. Late in her life she decided that she wanted to go back to school and pursue her academic interests in a variety of fields. Now, a number of years after she started on this endeavor, she has masters' degrees and Ph.Ds. in four different subjects including Latin, English and Theology. We had in depth conversations about the state of religion in Greece, the contention between Athenians and Turks, and the state of Macedonia (or the lack there of) and so on and so forth. Despite the occasional pause to ask someone else at the table for a translation of a Greek word, the group of us talked non-stop for nearly four hours. Both Lia and her mom commented on how refreshing it was to have an intelligent conversation with an American that didn't involve a bloated self image or a subliminal superiority complex... at which point I swelled with pride, ripped off my jacket to reveal my American Flag t-shirt, sang the national anthem and drove away

in my 2007 Chevy Gigantatruck.

Our day concluded with a jaunt to the highest point in the city to watch the sunset over the Aegean. Perhaps Alex Murray, a fellow Fiji, said it best when he saw a picture of this scene and said it looked as though it had come straight from a movie. The intense golden light reflecting off the water seemed to make the entire city glow with a dim orange hue and at this point I was torn. Should I sit here and thoroughly enjoy these few moments as the sun retreats beyond the horizon or should I be snapping pictures so that I may enjoy this moment sometime in the future? It was a silly question really, especially considering the recurrent theme in my letters: pictures just cannot do these things justice. So I sat on the edge of old city wall, my camera turned off, my hands in my pockets, in silence and in peace and watched as the horizon defeated the sun.

Our train back left Thessaloniki at nearly midnight and at first I was dreading the five hour ride back to Athens but then I remembered something that would make the comfort of this train ride different than the previous: SLEEPER CABINS! Oh, what a wonderful innovation these sleeper cabins. I mean what a fantastic idea! People are tired on trains and the seats are usually uncomfortable so why not offer passengers a place to lie down while they are traveling. The combination of the late hour, the gentle swaying of the car, soft light passing by the windows and everyone shutting up would make for quite a pleasant trip and restful sleep right? Theoretically, yes but I was not so lucky. For what seemed like hours two women, who spoke in the most obnoxious high pitch of Greek I have ever heard, argued about who should get the bottom bunk and who should have to turn off the light and who had a thicker blanket and who should move the ladder and who

should be the first one out of the cabin when the train stopped. As they argued I became so annoyed that I started to become aware of other potentially annoying sounds in the train. Well, potentially turned into absolutely, so even when the two women had apparently (and temporarily as it turned out) settled their differences I still could not sleep due to the clacking of a loose buckle in the next cabin or the humming of the air passing through a crack in the window. By the time I had figured out a way to use my shoe in combination with a towel as an earplug there was no more time for sleep. We arrived in Athens at 6:00 am and after all that whining between the two women, guess who was the first one out of the Cabin? Me. Lesson learned: When traveling on a train over night two things are essential: duct tape and willingness to use it.

Fortunately for me, on my next trip everyone spoke English so I when I told them they were being loud and obnoxious they gave me the appropriate evil looks instead of the blank stares I got on the last train. Our first weekend adventure that involved structured learning was to the Argolis valley in the Peloponnese. Stevie D. and Stevie Wee (or Professor Stephen Diamond and Professor Stephen Wheeler as they are known to grown-ups) were the ones that accompanied us to this area of Greece and they proved to be much more pleasant than I imagined, but I'll get to that in a minute. Our trip was to entail visits to the archaeological sites of Mycenae, Tiryns and Lerna with a side adventure to the Palamidi castle in Nauplio.

Our first stop was to the ancient "city" of Mycenae. I put city in quotation marks because we are currently writing a paper that challenges this position, but for the sake of clarity I have decided to use the term here. The site itself is located on a small hill next to

the mountain range that surrounds the Argolis Valley. As we walked up the road to the site we stopped along the way to see some of the Tholos tombs that had been excavated right by the side of the road. I thought that it was pretty incredible that we only had to step two feet (literally) off the road to see a three or four thousand year old structure. As you walked into one of these things along a long, narrow path with tall clay and dirt walls it looked as though you had found the entrance to Hades. Luckily for us this was not the entrance to the underworld but there was a few thousand years worth of humans remains caked into the clay floor, so that was interesting to think about.

I could always see Mycenae in the distance and we walked toward the site, so it was not as if it just appeared around the corner and I was awe-struck but rather I was continually awe-struck as we drew closer. The site was impressive yes, but I just could not believe that ancient people were able to build such a magnificent structure on such a mountainous terrain. The cyclopean (also known as 'really big') walls had been partially swallowed by the hillside over the centuries but the super structure was, for the most part, still intact. We entered the site and saw some stuff of archaeological importance but all we really wanted to do was run to the top and see what the Argolis Valley looked like from this altitude. When Stevie D. finally stopped talking about the Lion's Gate and Grave Circle 'A', the Argolis Valley, in its entire splendor, was revealed to us. As I stood on the edge of one of the cyclopean walls and looked around me all I could see was the sun shooting across the open valley hitting the mountains and sea in the distance. The valley itself seemed greedy with the light it was given and did not want to let any of it escape. The result was the entire Argolis Valley basking in the sunlight. "Could the views get better

than this," I thought to myself. I could not imagine how such a sight could be surpassed but our visit to Nauplio and the Palamidi Castle would soon lay that question to rest.

The archaeological sites of Tiryns and Lerna were not that interesting but the Nauplio, on the other hand was extraordinary. The city has two districts: the contemporary district and the historic district. Our hotel was in the contemporary district so my initial impression of Nauplio was that it looked a lot like Athens but once I walked toward the harbor it became evident that this place was far, far from anything Athenian. Fresh seafood restaurants line the street as you walk between the sea and the main strip. The town seems lively as many people are walking in groups laughing or sitting at on the cafes sharing a bottle of wine or drinking espresso. The sun setting over the Aegean was the perfect backdrop for such a cute town.

Stevie D. took us to a restaurant that supposedly had the best fish soup of anywhere in Greece. We had to put our order in a day ahead of time and pay before we even got to taste our meal but it was worth it. My time in Greece has actually made me quite fond of seafood. I do not know why I did not appreciate it back in the states but now, if it is as good as in Greece, I will be ordering it all the time back home. The restaurant atmosphere was calm and inviting. Our table was positioned adjacent to the musical accompaniment for the night, which made for a pleasant meal.

Our trip to the Palamidi castle the next day was, by far, the best part of the trip. The castle itself really has nothing to do with what we are studying but since it was so prominent in Nauplio (if you look towards the sky at night you are bound to see the

castle lit up above the town) it would have been silly to not visit it. The story behind this castle is actually pretty funny. When the castle was initially constructed it was renowned through Greece as the most impenetrable fortress ever built with its 30 ft walls and cliffs surrounding its borders. However, the first time it was attacked it was over taken because the hired soldiers guarding it said, "to hell with this, we haven't been paid in months, you defend your own castle". The Phoenicians controlled Nauplio for a few centuries until the Greeks decided they wanted the city back. So, two men, who are now immortalized in the town square as statues, scaled the steepest cliff to gain entrance to the fortress and snuck around to the front gate and opened it for the waiting Greek Army. So, as Stevie D. said "The most impenetrable castle in all of Greece is batting zero for two".

The positioning of the castle on the tallest mountain in Nauplio makes for some fantastic views. I was amazed that walls like this could be built into such a steep cliff. I mean, often you would look over a wall and there would be nothing on the other side except a straight shot to the sea or the rocky shore below! But the castle had more to offer than just some breathtaking sites. There were what seemed like hundreds of little passageways, corridors or rooms that took you to all different parts of the castle and I think we found and explored almost all of them. One of the little corridors took us out of the normal touristy area so we were able to see how time and the earth had taken over the castle.

When we were done with the castle the clouds were starting to clear up so Liz and I decided to go to the nearest beach and go for a dip. We were not the only ones in our group that wanted to go swimming but we were the only ones that were willing to go sans

bathing suit. We walked on a trail that was positioned above the shoreline looking for a place to swim until we found a narrow little walking path that lead us down a rocky cliff face to a tranquil cove. There were a few gigantic rocks, which looked like they had been put there explicitly for sunbathers, on which we laid our clothes and then jumped off. The water was really, really cold, almost to the point that I had trouble breathing, but having swam in Lake Michigan all my life I was prepared for this. Right when we jumped in, the sun came out in full force and I could feel its heat on my face and shoulders. I remember looking out across the Aegean to the other side of the inlet and seeing the mountains covered in snow and just being amazed that I could be feeling and seeing such extremes at the same time. The water was as smooth as glass, which I am sure made it easy for those walking on the path high above us to not have to leave anything to their imaginations. We could not have cared less; we were swimming in freezing water that did not feel cold, with sun shining our face in a beautiful cove in what was probably the most gorgeous area of Greece, 5000 miles away from real school and real life. It was peaceful. I wish we could have stayed in longer but we had a schedule to keep and Stevie D. always stuck to the schedule. We got out, air-dried on the giant rocks, got some hot coffee and met up with the rest of the group near the harbor.

I guess if I picked one thing to tell you all that I learned from these past few weeks, is that sometimes it's better to just turn off your camera, keep your mouth shut, your eyes open and just enjoy life at that moment. I feel that sometimes I forget to just take things in because I'm too busy trying to get a picture with this or a picture of that and even though I have a ton of pictures from this past trip, I was really able to take the time to appreciate where I was in my life. I

am in Greece and I am happy. No photo can fully capture that.

So my friends I encourage you to put down your cameras, pause your iPods and take off your glasses. Open your ears and eyes. Take a minute to listen to a ridiculous conversation about "where the white goes" because when you do, you will feel as content as me and that is the best wish I could ever offer you.

## **Chapter 5: Spring Break and Deep Pelopenese**

Dear Friends and Family,

Please forgive me for the time it has taken me to write this letter. It has been almost three weeks since I have last written and I have so much to tell you all. I admit, I have been putting off writing this letter but it was only because I was intimidated by the daunting task of describing everything that I saw and experienced... there has just been so much! So I guess I'll just take it a step at a time and start from the end of my last letter.

Our class took a field trip to the deep Peloponnese mostly to visit ancient athletic complexes but we took some time to visit some other things that did not really have much to do with ancient Greek athletics. One of such sites was this temple of which I cannot remember the name. No matter, it is not as if anyone reading this would have any idea what I was talking about anyway. We had to walk from the bottom of this massive hill to reach it, an effort that took about 35 minutes to complete, but the hike through the olive trees and mosquito nests was completely worth it. I forgot to pack my camera for this trip so I cannot refer you guys to any particular photo but just imagine this: A winding trail up and through a long chain of connected hills. To each side of the two-track there is an abundance of olive trees and a variety of multicolored flowering weeds. The sky is a vibrant pastel blue and is spattered with cotton clouds. As you come to peak of the tallest hill of the chain there is a giant mound of dirt covered with these multicolored weeds. There is something peculiar about this mound of earth... it is out of place and there are giant marble blocks poking through various points of the surface. As you walk about the opposite side of this mound it becomes apparent what this mound

may have been: a temple. Ok, so it is a temple, we've seen many, MANY of these ruins throughout Greece, what makes this one any different? Well, it is not the temple that makes this point in our trip stand out to me, it is what you see when you turn away from the temple. You see Sparta, a small city, located in the city of a vast valley with river running from end to end. Mountains, a few of which are snow capped, mark the borders of the valley. And the sky, now unobstructed by olive trees, is glowing. Rays of yellow brilliance are coming through the clouds at a 45-degree angle and are illuminating particular points of the landscape. The air is not foggy, yet somehow you are still able to make out individual rays of light. Just stand there for a second and think about what your eyes are showing you. Can you believe it? Does it not look like a scene straight from a fairytale? It does! Yes, it does! All those images of sunlit landscapes laced with unicorns and rainbows you thought were just imaginary start to seem a little bit more plausible. After about an hour of processing the information your eyes have been giving you, you start walking down the same winding trail from which you came and are happy knowing that there is a fine line between the imaginary and the extraordinary.

We went to our nearby hotel in Sparta where we went to a few local archaeological sites of interest, including one that we had to jump a fence and study illegally. Surprised? You shouldn't be... we archaeologists and anthropologists live life on the edge.

That evening I went out to dinner with my Professor Stephen Wheeler. It was supposed to be some sort of meeting to assess where I stood academically and socially with the rest of the group but Stephen and I decided we really did not need to talk about that since the answer was already apparent to both of us,

so we took the opportunity to just talk. It was great to be able to talk to a professor on an equal level and leave academics out of the mix for a little while. We talked about everything from his bad choices in high school to his hopes for this two kids Marcos and Clara. I talked to some of the other students that met with Stephen and they all seemed to have a much more formal relationship with him than I do. I do not think that I am playing teacher's pet or anything but for some reason we just get along really well and have interesting, engaging conversations. I look forward to the next two months in Greece under Professor Wheeler's instruction and to many more intelligent conversations.

The next day we went to Mistras, a castle complex positioned high above the city on the side of one of the mountains that encases the valley in which the city rests. This site had nothing to do with period of Greek history we were studying but it was such a monumentally impressive structure we decided it was worth a visit. We walked up, and up, and up what seemed like ten thousand poorly preserved rock stairs until we came to the peak of the castle. The castle was smaller than the one we saw in Nauplio, but where it lacked in size it compensated with a view unlike any other I have seen. Again, I saw the valley of which I spoke earlier but this time, when I turned around, there was a gorge with a river running down it. The combination of this deep gorge and the snow-capped mountains in the background made for quite the scene. We hung out here for an hour or so and then headed down to the bus to make our way towards Kalamata.

Since we had to wake up early that morning many of our group took the opportunity presented by a three-hour bus ride to catch up on some much needed sleep. Once we started driving through the

mountains, however, I was glad that I was still awake. We drove under huge overhangs and over the rushing river we had seen from Mistras, then through a slightly wooded area that had a delicate dusting of snow and down a ravine that had walls taller than most buildings! For just sitting on a bus for three hours I had a great time, my eyes wide open for every second of the ride.

We met another professor of ours in Kalamata for a quick lunch at a university that she founded and then we went to a few more archaeological sites before we ended up in St. Andreas. We arrived in this small town at about 9:00 pm just after the sun had set over the mountains. The bus dropped us off in the town center, which consisted of an entrance to a hotel, a rock balcony, a taverna, a kiosk and a huge tree... a huge tree that has water pouring out of it. At first I was confused to see a steadily flowing stream of water coming out of a hole in a tree but when I took a closer look I saw that it was actually a pipe coming out of this tree. Evidently, a hundred of so years ago there used to be a well where this tree now stands. The tree grew very close to the well and eventually grew completely over it! Now, all that is left of this well is a pipe sticking out of a tree.

We stayed the night in this little town and filled the two hotels that the town had to offer to capacity with twenty people. We went to the local taverna for dinner that night and the owner was so happy to have us he gave our group four bottles of the local wine to take home with us. I wonder who has those bottles. If you are ever in the Deep Peloponnese and want to stay in the cutest, most authentic and charming mountain village you can imagine I recommend St. Andreas. You will not be disappointed.

The trip did not end with our stay in St. Andreas but the rest of the stuff we did probably would not interest anyone except me so I will spare you all the details. When we got back to Athens everyone else was glad to sit down and rest after a long trip away from home but I had to pack my bags again as I was flying to Barcelona the next day to start my spring break. My break was not supposed to start until the following week but wanted to go early so I worked out an alternate academic schedule with my professors so that I could miss that week of class.

On Saturday morning I took the metro to the airport and a ticket for not having the correct metro pass. In order to take the metro to the airport I was supposed to have bought the 6.00 euro pass but since I only have the 0.60 euro pass I was fined 4.00 euro and asked to purchase a 6.00 euro ticket from the police officer. Considering that a taxi to the airport from Pangrati would have cost close to 50.00 euro, getting fined was fine with me.

I got to the airport with plenty of time to spare and boarded the plane with no problems. First, I flew from Athens to Milan, and then from Milan to Barcelona. On the plane from Milan to Barcelona I met a man named Efrain. His seat was not assigned next to me but he wanted to sit in the front of the plane so he asked me if the seat next to me was taken and I told him he was welcome to it. We got to talking, and it turned out he was a graduate from the U of M Business School who has been working in and around Europe since he graduated in the mid 90's. We talked about all the usual stuff like U of M football, the view of Americans as seen from Europeans and what places would be nice to visit in Barcelona but then here is the kicker... Efrain said he was going to be on business trips for the next two weeks and that no one was going to be staying in his

apartment so he offered it to me while I was visiting the city! He was incredibly nice and even dropped me off at the hotel took me out to dinner and gave me a S.I.M. card for my cell phone to make cheap calls while I was in Spain! I accepted his invitations and had a great first night in Barcelona.

The highlights of my trip included a visit to Parc Guell, eating in the gothic quarter, shopping near Laz Ramblas, visiting the Joan Miro museum and the Olympic Complex. I also just spent a lot of time walking around the city and discovering Barcelona on my own. I made lunch for myself almost every day (fresh baguette bread, parmesan cheese and apple slices) and went out to eat at a different restaurant every night. I was introduced to a drink called Caipinihn, or something close to that, that I really enjoyed. It was a typical carnival drink filled to the top with ice, a lot of limes, sugar on the bottom and Cachaça, which is an alcohol made from sugar cane. I tried a couple different variations of that drink including one that was half filled with mint leaves, but the original was the best.

Saying goodbye was, of course, very sad but I had a great time in Barcelona and I feel revitalized from my time away from school.

I hopped on a plane and flew to Milan, then to Pisa in Italy to meet up with Chris Fredrickson, my long time friend from high school. My bag somehow got lost on the way to Pisa so when I arrived in Florence, Chris was surprised how lightly I packed. Luckily the airline brought my clothes to the place we were staying the next day.

We got extremely lucky with the accommodations we booked in Florence. We stayed in an apartment that was shared between two other groups, six people in

all including ourselves. It was newly renovated, clean, and spacious and even had an iPod dock for travelers to charge their iPods. The owner of the apartment made us breakfast every morning we stayed there which usually included some sort of breakfast fruity cake with toast and coffee. Before we even arrived the cupboards were stocked with food and drinks and the bathroom had new toothbrushes, shampoo, body wash, razors... basically everything we needed plus free internet; all of this for 21 euros per person per night. We hardly spent any time there but it was nice to have a nice, clean and comfortable place to come back to every night.

The first day we were in Florence, Chris and I rented mopeds so we could explore the city without the limitations of a bus or metro. We spent close to 5 hours roaming the city and the nearby countryside before our hands finally were so numb we could not feel the handlebars. We went back to our apartment and went out to dinner at Za Za's later that night per Sara's (my sister) recommendation.

The next day Chris and I decided we wanted to ditch our original plans of spending half our time in Florence and half our time in Rome and booked two tickets for Pisa and Venice. Pisa was a small city with one asset... the Leaning Tower of Pisa. We walked around that city for quite a long time looking for something else of interest but the Leaning Tower and surrounding cathedrals were the only things we could find of remote interest. We took a bunch of touristy pictures, including the one of us holding up the tower, and then got back on the train destined for Venice... which was 5 hours in the direction that we had just come from.

Riding the train in Italy is actually really nice. At first I thought it was going to be similar to the trains in

Greece with the rock hard seats and minimal personal space but these trains were surprisingly comfortable. It may have had something to do with the fact that for the majority of the train ride Chris and I were the only ones in our railcar. Two watched movies and a few listened CDs later we arrived in Venice.

I had heard from a number of people that have backpacked through Europe that Venice would be a great place to visit except for its retched stench so it was a relief to get off the train and not smell anything but the sea. The train station opened up to a section of the Grand Canal and a large bridge traversing it so you got a quick dose of Venice as soon as you exited the building. We walked for about fifteen minutes through dark allies, over bridges and along canals until we came to Saint Margaritas Square, close to which our apartment was located. It was late so we turned in for the night in order to get up early the next day and make the most of our six or seven hours in Venice.

We walked around Venice all the next day and saw a lot of churches, canals and bridges but the most impressive place we went to was Saint Marco's Square. In a city of condensed and crowded buildings and narrow walkways it was a surprise to see such a vast and open space. Thousands of people and pigeons occupied the square simultaneously and there was still an over abundance of space in which we could move. The pillars that lined the border of the square were probably the most impressive part of the square for me. There were at least a hundred of them on each side of the square and each one of them was massive. I could not, and still cannot, believe that the whole complex hasn't sunk by now under the immense weight of this area. Chris and I went into the cathedral that was at the end of the square

opposite the entrance. There was no fee to enter, but once you were inside you had to pay to have access to different areas... basically everything that was worth seeing cost an arm and a leg to look at while you were being herded like sheep through small corridors. We skipped out on the treasure of Saint Marco (a sculpture of three golden horses) and continued to explore the city.

Venice is my favorite city in Italy to date. Most of the buildings are not more than two or three stories high and all the people are really nice. Despite being a high traffic tourist destination, we managed to only see a few other Americans while we were there. This was a nice change from Florence or Pisa and what we would find in Rome. The food and gelato were excellent and the entertainment was cheap... we visited seven or eight churches each with its own distinguishing and interesting features all for free. Despite the unorganized road system we were able to get along just fine without a map and just used a few landmarks to get our bearings. The combination of the food, the people, the ease of navigation and economical efficiency is what makes Venice my favorite place in Italy so far.

Later in the afternoon we caught a direct high-speed train to Rome. We were not too lucky this time as to get an entire car all to ourselves but the ride was still moderately comfortable and there were few stops so the trip seemed to go by pretty quickly.

We arrived in Rome on Thursday evening thinking that we were going to meet up with my friend, Melissa, from Athens, to spend the next few days together. Unfortunately, Melissa and I had a miscommunication and she was in Florence while we were in Rome. So she decided to catch a train back to Rome to visit with us while we were in the city even

though she had already been in Rome for three days only a couple days prior. But it all worked out fine for us since Melissa wanted to come back to Rome anyway and Chris and I wanted someone to show us around. We ended up finding another pretty nice apartment to stay in that was really close to the Termini (the main transportation hub in Rome). When Melissa got in that evening she took us for a night walk through the city that included a walk to the "monument to victory" and the Coliseum. Neither of these places were open, of course, but it was cool to see them all light up.

The most bizarre happening of our entire trip happened the next day at the metro station. Chris and I decided we wanted to go to Vatican City in the morning and walk around the rest of the city after that so we went to the metro station to get our tickets and board a train. While we were standing in line waiting to purchase our tickets we heard someone from behind us say "Jaaaasssonnn?" We turned around and it was Courtney Doody, our good friend from Suttons Bay High School. Chris and I looked at each other in complete disbelief. We could not believe that we ran into one of our friends from high school on the other side of the planet. What are the odds? Well, random things happen all the time and it is just a matter of time until one of the random happenings means something to you. So, in that respect, maybe it was not random at all, just the everyday normal. Whichever the case, it was great to see Courtney and hang out with her at the Vatican all day.

So, now the four of us (Chris, Courtney, Gretchen and I) went to Vatican City and inside the Vatican itself. When we first arrived, the line to get in the door was at least four hundred meters long so we were not sure if we would be able to make it into the museum

before the closing time. The line moved along fairly quickly and we were in the museum in about twenty-five minutes after we had gotten in line. We decided that since the museum was going to close soon we should make our way to the Sistine Chapel before anything else. We saw a lot of pretty amazing things on our way there including the map room. This long wide hallway was painted from top to bottom of old world maps and biblical scenes. The artwork was so incredibly elaborate and detailed that I could have spent an entire day just in this room! But even if I wanted to stay there all day long it would have been nearly impossible to escape the shoulder-to-shoulder river of people headed towards the Sistine Chapel.

Once we finally reached the entrance to the Sistine Chapel I could not wait to see what was inside, as I felt like I had already seen so many amazing things. We entered the large dome structure and we instantly instructed to keep quiet and to put away our cameras. "Odd" I thought, since they let us use our cameras before as long as we did not use a flash. Whatever, it was the Sistine chapel, I would have clucked like a chicken if that is what was required to get in.

Honestly, I was not that impressed with the Sistine Chapel... it was really beautiful and obviously very skillfully done but it just did impress me as much as the other rooms we had already walked through. The map room, through which we had just passed, seemed like it was much more detailed, elaborate and beautiful. Nevertheless, it was interesting to be able to see Michelangelo's work in person, even if it did cause a major kink in my neck. I managed to sneak a couple shots from inside the chapel so you all can check it out and let me know what you think.

After the Vatican Museum, we went around the corner to Saint Peter's Square where there was a line about four hundred meters long waiting to see the dead and preserved Pope. I really wanted to go into the church that housed the deceased Pope but the line was just way too long. Instead, we just spent time walking around the square (which is actually a circle) taking pictures and looking at the architecture. As I mentioned before when I was describing Saint Marco's Square in Venice it was refreshing to have a large open space in the middle of a really crowded and congested city.

We left Saint Peter's Square and made our way back towards the center of Rome to meet up with Melissa at the Pantheon (not to be confused with the Parthenon in Athens) after we visited the Coliseum. The Coliseum, by the way, may be the biggest tourist trap in Rome. It was twelve euro to enter and it looked pretty much the same on the inside as it did on the outside. Since the Coliseum has been constantly renovated over the centuries, the concrete and pebble walls and roofs make the Coliseum closely resemble a worn-down warehouse. After seeing so many impressive solid stone ruins in Greece, the Coliseum just did not seem that impressive.

We arrived at the Pantheon, met up with Melissa and got out the guidebook. We went around town looking at all the interesting things that Rome had to offer that did not charge admission. This included the Pantheon, the Fontana di Trevi and the Spanish Steps. The Pantheon was a pretty incredible architectural accomplishment but was too crowded to really enjoy, the Trevi Fountain was spectacular but also really crowded and the Spanish Steps were undergoing major renovations so we were not really able to get the full effect of those either. It was still fun just

walking around the city and seeing what was not in the guidebook.

One of such widely unknown wonders of Rome is a little (by Roman standards at least... it was actually really big) church that has an interesting ceiling painting. According to the information we read while walking around inside, the church did not have enough money to complete a large dome structure for which they had planned so they just built a regular flat ceiling. After construction of the church was completed, an artist, whose name is escaping me right now, came in and painted a ceiling painting that, when looked at from below, EXACTLY emulates a dome. What I mean is that when you look up towards the ceiling it looks like you are looking up into a dome with light shining through a skylight. I swear I had to look at this painting for ten minutes before my eyes were able to adjust to see that it was just a flat surface. Chris spent twice as long looking at it and still could not see how it was only a flat ceiling.

After our day of walking around the city we headed back to our rented apartment, got cleaned up and met Courtney and her friends for dinner at a nearby restaurant. I had lasagna.

So that is it! That has been what was going on in my life for the past three weeks! I am now back in Athens and awaiting the return of my friends to hear all their spring break stories. If their experiences were half as interesting and jam-packed as mine I am sure we will be up all night sharing our stories.

I hope all is well with all of you and hopefully I will hear back from some of you to let me know what is going on in your lives!

## **Chapter 6: The islands of Greece**

## *Santorini*

Our big trip that we all had been planning since the beginning of the year was to the island of Santorini. The island is known worldwide as one of the most fun places to visit in Greece. The island has lots of black sand beaches, a great nightlife and ethnic foods from all over the world designed to cater to the variety of people that travel to the island. The first group of us arrived on Santorini at roughly 7:30 in the morning after not having slept at all the night before. Do not get me wrong, I would have loved to sleep the night before our trip but we had to leave our apartment at 3:00am in order to get to the airport in time for our flight so I guess I just did not see the point of sleeping for a few hours and then getting up. Luckily, I was awake enough to drag myself off the plane and into the bus that was waiting for us at the airport to take us to our hotel on the island. I was looking forward to checking into the hotel and sleeping until the rest of the group got there at about noon but when we arrived at the hotel we found out we could not check in until 11am. What the hell were we supposed to do for four hours? None of the shops were open yet, not even the bakers! I was extremely annoyed but what could I do about it? Nothing. So, we walked about town for four hours looking at random things and watching the sunrise. The sunrise over the Aegean was actually really beautiful now that I look at the pictures from that morning but I was too tired and annoyed while I was taking the pictures to appreciate the beauty that was on the other end of the viewfinder.

The other group arrived on schedule and we all got on the next bus to Perissa beach. I guess I should mention that before the trip all the guys had decided that we wanted white linen pants and shirts to wear

while we were vacationing on the islands. To complete the outfits we bought over sized goofy-looking sunglasses and put cigars in our front shirt pocket. I actually like the white linen pants and shirt but at this point we were wearing them as more of a silly costume to outline the fact that we were stupid American tourists. We got so many looks on our way to the beach that day, and then on the bus we heard a number of Greeks say "Milokas" and "Aspro" which mean assholes and white respectively. Greeks use the word "Milokas" as more a playful term like Americans would use "man" in the phrase "Hey Man" but its literal translation is asshole so we were not quite sure what they were saying about us. It did not matter to us, we were having a great time creating personalities we thought fit the clothing and created cantors to match. When we finally got to Perissa beach, we took pictures of all the guys standing on a pile of rocks on the beach, the setting of which closely resembles a Hugo Boss or Tommy Hilfiger advertisement. The photo is now famous at the Athens Centre and among the students in the program.

Our second day in Santorini was a little more eventful than the first. A few of us decided to take a boat tour of the nearby volcanic island and hot springs. We took a cable car to the otherwise only stair accessible seaport and set out on a giant fake pirate ship. Does it get anymore touristy than that? Our first stop was to the volcanic island only about two of three kilometers from Santorini. The boat dropped us off at the makeshift port (the island was uninhabited of course) and we hiked to the top to see the sulfur jets and red moss that covered the landscape. The black and brown rock looked like they were on fire with all this red growth all over the place. It was easy to imagine what the landscape would have looked like if the volcano were still active. The next stop was to the

"hot" springs and I put hot in quotation marks because the area they call the hot springs was anything but hot; maybe the "slightly not cold" springs would have been a better name choice. Nevertheless, it was fun to jump off the boat and swim with a bunch of people I did not know and get covered in sulfuric mud. It was also nice to get back on the ship and lay on the deck where the sun had warmed the wood and hence warmed me.

Once we got back to the seaport we had two options to get back up to the top of the hill that we had previously taken the cable car to get down. We could take the cable car again or we could ride DONKEYS to the top. I chose the donkey. Oh my god was this ever fun! I paid the guy and he brought a donkey and told me to jump on. Having ridden horses before I thought I knew what to expect so I hopped on and started looking for the reins. The more and more I looked the more and more I realized that there were no reins and I was at the mercy of this animal. As soon as I got on the donkey it took off up the stairs. I did not have to tell it when to go or to stop or to turn or which direction to travel... it already knew. I could not believe it, I did nothing expect take pictures of my other friends on their donkeys all the way to the top. At one point Derek's donkey looked like it was planning to jump over the edge into the sea but really it just trying to eat some of the grass that had grown on the other side of the wall. Of all the things I bought on Santorini, of all the experience I had, riding donkeys from the seaport was the best use of my three euros on this trip.

The next thing we did that day was more of the same but at a different beach: Kamari. We spent the rest of the day at the beach eating fresh bread, fruit and vegetables we bought that morning and seeing who could through a rock the furthest into the sea. I love moments in which you realize you do not have

anything to do so you might as well do something as frivolous as throwing rocks into the sea. Moments like these were pretty much the theme of our entire trip to Santorini.

On our third and final day in Santorini, a few of us decided we wanted to rent a car in order to see more of the island than just the scenery that was along the bus routes. We traveled to the top of a mountain to see the ruins of an ancient city, we traveled along the coastline and stopped at some random beaches along the way and eventually ended up in a town called Oia that was known for its fantastic view of the sunset. In true Aegean island fashion the sunset was beautiful and a great final memory of Santorini.

### *Crete*

I really don't have much to say about Crete except that it fell short of expectations. Our trip to the southern most island in Greece (and hence the southern most point in Europe) was supposed to be our big exciting end of the year class trip but it ended up just being another field trip that we could have done without. I mean it was fun to travel on a really nice ferry boat from the mainland to Crete overnight with all my friends and to see some of the archaeological sites I had read about but for some reason the Athens Centre set us up with a tour guide, which is something they hadn't done before, and he was absolutely awful. He told us a bunch of information that simply wasn't true and then skipped over things he did not know about even though it was important from an academic standpoint. After we left the site of Knossos we asked Vassia (our Athens Centre Representative) if the tour guide was really necessary. He was dropped off at the next bus stop and our trip got a little better from there.

The highlights from Crete include a beach visit to a place called Zakros and an overnight stay in the southern most city in Europe called Ierapetra. I liked Zakros because it was far, FAR out of the way and took us almost two hours of driving through the mountains to get there. It was really quiet and sunny and that is all I needed. Ierapetra was nice because we stayed at a hotel that was directly on the beach, so all we had to go was walk out the front door and we had immediate accessibility to the Aegean. Other than that... Crete just was not that great of an experience for me.

### *Zakynthos*

Our trip to Zakynthos started in the traditional "traveling within Greece fashion" by us being unable to get a taxi. We purposefully put aside way more time than we should have actually needed for this process and it still was not enough. It was not even a problem of spotting a taxi, they were all over the place, but a problem of getting them to take you to where you needed to go. Its not like it is in the states where the cabbies are happy to have your service, no, the cabbies here get to decide if they want to take you to your destination. We must have spent 30 minutes hailing cabs and asking them if they would take us to the Kiffisuo bus station and none would accept our request. Finally, we ended up walking to Syndagma Square and finding a cab there that would take us to the bus station. After leaving our apartments with an hour and ten minutes to get to the bus station that was a little over 4 km away, we got there five minutes before our bus left...

The five-hour bus ride along the coast and through the Peloponnese was uneventful until we arrived in Kyllini to catch our ferry. For some reason our bus driver got really pissed off at all the passengers when

it was time to unload our luggage from the bus. His mood was evident by the throwing (yes, actually throwing) other passengers bags, boxes and possession out from under the bus storage compartment. We just stepped back until he was about to throw one of our bags at which point we quickly grabbed it from his hands in order to save the laptops and iPods we had packed. We talked on the hour-long ferry to the island of Zakynthos about why he must have been so pissed off and we couldn't come up with a good reason

We arrived on Zakynthos at about 9:30 pm on Thursday evening at the town port where we were supposed to pick up our rental mini-bus and the man who was going to take us to our villa. As soon as we got off the boat there was a lady waiting with a sign in her hand that said "Jason Stewart". I had to laugh at this point at this... I don't know why, I've just never had someone waiting for me with a sign with my name on it before. It was just a good way to start our Easter vacation.

We went with the representative to our Fiat Scudo Mini-bus, signed some papers and met with the guy who was taking us to our Villa in the town of Keri. The person we were expecting to meet to take us to our Villa was an older Greek woman named Marzia so we were a little surprised to be met by her big Italian brother, but he was very nice and gave us all big hugs when we met him. So, with that we got in our mini-bus and followed our Italian man into the Zakynthos countryside to the villa that we'd be staying in for the next 4 or 5 days.

We drove for about 15 or 20 minutes to reach Keri Lake the area in which our villa was situated. As we drove down this little dirt road away from the coastal road we kept seeing all these really nice stone houses

and joked amongst each other that we were staying in one of those places. Then our Italian leader turned into the driveway of one of them. We wouldn't believe it. We had seen pictures on the website of what the villa was going to look like and all the amenities it offered but the limited frame of the camera's lens really didn't do this place justice. The entire house is cobblestone-esque with the exception of the mud brick and marble porch and the wooden porch roof and window shutters. The green shutters are in staunch contrast to the white, light red and orange stones of which the villa is constructed but it suits it quite nicely. At this point we were all still in awe that we were staying at such a nice place for only 90 euro per night (split between 7 people is about 13 euro which is cheaper than most hostels) and then we walked in the front door. Our awe continued as we saw that the inside was just as amazing as the exterior. The stone and wood construction continued on the inside. The entire villa was really great and it had everything we needed but probably the coolest feature was the internal balcony that overlooked the living room and fireplace area or the upstairs bedroom that had lofted and curtained bed positioned next to an internal window that looked down into the living room. That night I fell asleep in front of a blazing fire and listening to an Italian dance channel that was on the TV... the combination of which I never thought I'd fall asleep by while in Greece. The castle, as we came to call it, was fantastic.

The next day we got up about 8 am (if you had woken me up at 8 I would have killed you, so I don't think it was 8...ha) or so and left the house by 9 to find a beach called Porta Roma on the south side of the island. We never found Porta Roma and ended up at beach called St. Nicholas instead. The beach was so named due to its proximity to the St. Nicholas church that was only about 200m away from the beach. It

was here that I felt my first earthquake... we knew that Zakynthos was seismically active so this didn't come as a complete surprise but having actually never before consciously felt an earthquake, the experience was a little unnerving. We weren't near any cliffs and the earthquake was only about 3 seconds long so we really weren't in any danger.

We left the beach at around 3:30 pm and decided to drive to the northern part of the island to see about getting a boat tour of the island's famous blue caves and shipwreck cove. We found two places, one of which was named "This is Better" and happened to be a complete rip off in respect to the next place we found. At the very northern tip of the island there was a guy whose family owned the northern most restaurant on the island. Evidently, during tourist season, this guy just sits at the family restaurant and waits for lost tourists to wonder to the far off northern tip of the island where he waits to take them on the island's famous "blue caves" tour... what a life! Being lost and in search of a person to give us a tour of the blue caves, we booked a reservation with this man for around 11 or 12 the next morning. While we were at the northern end of the island we made a couple quick stops to some windmills and lighthouses we saw on our way back to Keri. Once we actually got to Keri, however, we decided to explore the southern part of the island as well and the result of this was the discovery of the Zakynthos Nature Reserve and the spawning grounds of the famous Carretta Carretta (yes, I meant to type that twice) sea turtles. It wasn't the breeding season for the turtles so we were able to walk freely on the beach and enjoy the last hours of sunlight for that day.

The next day we got up fairly early again in order to get to the north end of the island in time to take our boat tour of the blue caves and still have enough time

afterwards to hang out at the beach for a while. We estimated the drive was going to be about an hour or maybe an hour and 15 minutes since it was only about 40 km from our villa, but it took us more than two hours. The reason for this was due to the mountainous topography of Zakynthos and the fact that this is are almost no straight stretches of road that last for over 100m. By the end of this trip we were all sad to say goodbye to this great island but glad to say goodbye to the twisting roads. Anyway, we eventually reached the port from which our boat tour was departing, got onboard and started our tour. Perhaps now would be a good time for me to try to explain what exactly the "blue caves" are and why they are so special. The coast of Zakynthos has tons of caves, many of which small boats can motor right into to give the sea-goers a better view. The sand at the bottom of these caves is a combination of normal sand and sand that is bright white and the light that enters these caves reflects off the shiny interior rock face and the sand at such a frequency that the water appears to be glowing a florescent blue. If you decide to go swimming in one of these caves, as I did, your entire body glows with this blue hue. This phenomenon is not restricted to only one cave on the island or to a set of specific circumstances so there are hundreds of places on the coast where you can witness this effect taking place but we decided we wanted to take the boat tour because that seemed like a fun way to experience the caves. Our driver was really nice and let us stop pretty much do wherever we wanted to do, go swimming or to take pictures or whatever, so the boat trip lasted for about an hour or so and consisted of two or three stops to swim, lots of cave visits and a couple stops to jump off cliffs into the sea. Yes, the water was pretty frigid but I didn't let that stop me from swimming in one of the most beautiful places I have ever seen. We really wanted to visit another one of Zakynthos' famous attractions,

the Smuggler's Cove, but unfortunately the seas were too rough on that side of the island so we weren't able to go that day. Nevertheless, it was definitely worth the 7 euro and even though it's a very touristy thing to do on Zakynthos, I highly recommend a boat tour of the blue caves.

After our boat tour ended it was still relatively early in the day so we drove another two hours to the very southern tip of the island to lay under the remaining sunlight at the Zakynthos Nature Reserve. We arrived at about 3:30 and lay in the sun until about 7:00 when it finally fell behind a far off island. The only note worthy thing that happened at this beach was this odd photo shoot between this older couple which consisted of some racy rock and shallow water poses. This was not the kind of person you wanted to see posing seductively on a beach so a few of us decided it was time to take a walk. When we came back we saw this same women who had just been floundering in the shallow painting on a canvas setup on the beach... wasn't to sure what to make of that but whatever, this is Greece, "different" stuff like this happens all the time! Did I mention that this was a nude beach?

Most, if not all, of Greece's Greek population is part of the Greek Orthodox religion so every year when Easter comes around the entire country celebrates it in a big way. This is particularly true on the islands as most Grecians leave the mainland and vacation on the islands for the week leading up to the celebration of the resurrection of Jesus Christ on Sunday, April 23rd (one week later that Easter in the US). We were able to take part in this celebration on Saturday night when we went into the town of Zakynthos and stood in a crowd of nearly 10,000 listening to a high religious figure sing hymns in Greek and then later parade through the streets led by a military band and

accompanied by fireworks. The entire town was engulfed by this celebration and even though I'm not a Greek Orthodox it was quite a rewarding experience. This was the night that all seven of us were invited to Yoirgos and Maria's (who were the sister and brother in law of the Marzia whose villa at which we were staying) home in Keri to have Easter brunch with their family. Supposedly this sort of hospitality is common in Greece but even so, we were all extremely happy to have been invited to their family's house when we were only the people renting their villa.

So the next morning we went to Yoirgos and Maria's house in Keri. We followed the family who was staying next-door to us as they were long time friends of Marzia's family and had also been invited to their house for Easter brunch. We weren't really sure what to expect when we arrived as none of us were particularly religious but we kept an open mind... then we saw an entire lamb on spit with only its testicles still attached to the main part of the body. Even equipped with an "open mind" nothing can really prepare you to turn a corner and see a fully skinned animal that had likely been killed just that morning rotating on a spit over an open flame with only its testicles still attached. Genna, who is a vegetarian, actually took it quite well and only turned yellow for a few minutes, which surprised us all. After standing around outside Yoirgos and Maria's house trying to avoid looking directly at the slaughtered lamb for a couple minutes, Maria, who we had not yet met, poked her head out the window to greet us and invite us in for Greek coffee. Maria and Yoirgos had known each other since they were young children living in Keri and the house in which they now live is directly across from the house Maria used to visit her grandmother when she was a child. Maria told us all sort of stories about her life on the island of

Zakynthos as we drank the Greek coffee she had made for us. She said that she has never left Greece and rarely finds it necessary to leave Zakynthos. "Everything we need is right here", she told us, and from what we had seen of the island so far she was absolutely right. She also introduced us to her daughter Dionysia who was named after her grandmother and the patron saint of the island. Maria said that every family on Zakynthos, with very few exceptions, has someone in their family named after the patron saint of the island whose name was Dionysios. This explained why I had seen so many boats and restaurants named after a derivative of Dionysis as well. Maria went on to explain that her husband, Yoirgos, was a builder and was responsible for building the villa in which we were staying and the new home of our neighbors who fell in love with Zakynthos and are building a vacation home on the top of a hill that has a panoramic view of the entire island and surrounding seas. I was completely jealous. However, Yoirgos said he knew of a similar plot of land that I could buy and he would build a house on it for me... but he didn't just leave the fantasy at that as if it weren't enough. He told me exactly the type of house that would best suite that location, structurally and aesthetically, how much it would cost, who my neighbors would be, the closest baker and even the time by which he could finish it. It sounded like he had already thought deeply about this idea and I felt honored that he would let me live in his dream. When I explained to him that I wouldn't have enough money or be back to Zakynthos for a very long time (and I will return to Zakynthos) he said "It's no problem, I will always be here and I can build your house anytime". A big stupid smile came on my face as the thought that someday I could live on that hill, overlooking a beautiful island surrounded by an even more astounding sea and have friends like Yoirgos and Maria come into my

mind. What a simple and pleasant life I would have in the little town of Keri on Zakynthos. Ha, I'm smiling even as I write this. Wow, wouldn't that be great?

We finished our coffees and lemon cookies, thanked Maria and Yoigos for their hospitality and left in search of a driving route to the Smuggler's Cove. I wanted to stay at Maria and Yoigos' house all day and help them eat that roasting lamb but this was our last full day on Zakynthos and we had lots more that we wanted to see. One of the beautiful thing about being on an island is that no matter which direction you go, you eventually hit water... so even though we had no (and I really mean none at all) idea where we were going we always ended up somewhere that was potentially in the right direction as long as we followed the coast line. Since there is no "coastal road" on the west side of Zakynthos we took every road that lead to the sea that we could find in hopes that it would lead us to Smuggler's Cove. Some of these stops were really extraordinary, such as the one with the porous rocks that were filled by crashing waves and then warmed by the sun daily, while others were beyond words. I know that's a cliché but if you check out my pictures from this trip you will see that I am not joking. One of our stops, which was just a completely random stop on the side of the road to pee, revealed a shear rock-face that dropped hundreds of feet straight down to the sea. No railings, no warning signs, no footpath, just us creeping up the edge on our hands and knees and dropping rocks off the edge to count the seconds until it hit the water. Eight seconds. This wasn't on any map or in any guidebook; it was just the result of 7 people looking for something out of the ordinary. The combination of blues, greens, pale oranges and bright white were the likes of which I have never seen before. It was nearly impossible to take a bad picture

there as the landscape provided all the artistry the shot needed.

These random breathtaking stops seemed to never end. Somehow we always ended up at a place that was more beautiful and secluded than the last. The more north we traveled, the water seemed to become more vibrantly colored, the cliffs seemed to get more ominous and the landscape less populated. Finally, five hours after we left the company of Maria and Yoirgos in Keri, our random stops took us to the place for which we had been searching: Smuggler's Cove! This beach, that we discovered really was only accessible by boat and not just something locals tell you to benefit their tour boat economy, is at the end of a cove that is surrounded on three sides by cliffs easily twice as tall as the cliffs we looked down upon before. On the beach lies the reason for this location's name. A giant ship that washed up on the shore approximately thirty years ago and the rusted skeleton of the vessel are all that remain. The ship was carrying an illegal shipment of cigarettes and alcohol from Greece to Italy when it encountered the legendary turbulent waters on the west side of the island. The ship was likely seeking shelter from a storm in this cove but instead became a permanent ornament of the beach and a warning to other sailors seeking shelter from a storm. Smuggler's cove is Zakynthos' most popular attraction and from my visit it was easy to see why. The rest of the island is gorgeous, yes, but this area is the pinnacle of that beauty.

Tired from an entire day of driving and swimming I decided that I wanted to stay in that night and relax by the fire back at our Villa but Liz, Genna, Kate and Kristi decided that they wanted to attend the traveling circus that was visiting Zakynthos. Long story short, I dropped them off at 9:00pm, the circus

ended at 11:00 and I picked them up at 2:00am after they had drinks and conversation with the ringmaster, some clowns and a trapeze person. Evidently, the ringmaster took a liking to them during the show and had one of the clowns proposition them for their company following the show. I mean, how can you not laugh at that situation... "Well, we were on this Greek island watching the traveling Italian circus and one of the clowns asked us if we wanted to go for drinks with him, the ringmaster and his lion-taming friends after the show". Haha, I'm sure the girls will have a good time telling that one to their friends once they're back in the U.S.

Our last day in Zakynthos was a sad one. We really didn't want to leave the island and had a roundtable discussion on our way to the beach about if it was somehow possible to swing just one more day in this paradise we knew as Zakynthos. Unless we wanted to completely fail this semester it wasn't possible, so we just made the best of it and went to a beach we had seen while driving but at which we hadn't yet stopped. The beach looked beautiful from the road, and it was beautiful, but what our view from the road couldn't tell us was that it reeked of sulfur. The smell was awful but we had driven an hour or more to reach this place so we just stayed there and eventually got used to it. The beach resembled a miniaturized version of the Smuggler's Cove we had visited the day before and thus part of its appeal to us, but when we actually got to the beach we found that it had much more to offer than just a pleasant resemblance: First, the water was a different sort of fluorescent bluish-green color than we had seen before which was mostly likely the result of the high sulfur concentration in the water (evident by the chemical change of the ring I was wearing); second, we were the only people at the beach so we were free to do whatever we wanted and have it be as quiet or

loud as we pleased; and third, there were a series of caves that we swam into and discovered that they actually went really far back into the surrounding rock-face. The caves were a lot of fun but you would only take the smell of rotten eggs for so long before you got sick. "So long" was equivalent to about five minutes for me so I was not able to explore as much as I would have liked too but it was still fun. Four hours later it was time to go but it was a good last impression of a truly amazing island experience.

I guess this will be my last letter home since the Athens Centre study abroad program is nearing its end. I should be home sometime in the near future so I hope to see you all this summer but if not, then during the next school year. Greece has been an incredible experience and I hope you all have enjoyed my letters and pictures... I enjoyed providing them. Goodbye!