



No Greek tragedy

Anabel Dean reports from the front where – in spite of the Greek financial crisis – it's all quiet on the Aegean.

LOCAL banks closed all over Greece as we sped towards the tiny island of Hydra.

We were staring into the waves slapping at our bright green hydrofoil while Greece was staring into the abyss of another default on its colossal debts and possible rejection from the Euro.

Greece was suffering a bad case of European flu but our arrival at Hydra, in late afternoon sunshine, revealed business pretty much as usual. Vital life support was warmly administered all along the crescent-shaped harbour at the

tavernas where laughter rose in plumes like cigarette smoke.

A distant bell rang out on the day of the referendum (to decide if Greece should agree to debt rescue terms being demanded by creditors in order to release bail-out funds).

Hydriots trickled into the polling station to mark ballots with a cross. Visitors in floppy hats strolled past with important decision-making of their own: "Shall we have a coffee shot at Pirate Bar or pistachio ice-cream at Cool Mule?" Will there be space after lunch (at shady Taverna Xeri Elia-Douskos) to fit a slab of irresistibly sharp lemon tart from the baker near the port?

A pivotal moment in Greek history was marked by the long summer drone of

cicadas and the clattering of donkey hooves on cobblestones. There was no civil unrest, no rioting in the streets, nothing but civility and friendship. Life in Greece continued on its higgledy-piggledy course, its (slightly fewer) tourists welcomed with dignity and grace, as they have always been.

Hydra is an adorable Aegean gem within easy reach of Athens. It boasts of being the birthplace of five Greek prime ministers and, perhaps more famously, working its charms on celebrated actors, writers and musicians like Sophia Loren, Melina Mercouri, Charmian Clift and Leonard Cohen. It is not, however, an island that relishes only beauty and lassitude.

There's the steep 588m summit of Mount Eros (past the Monastery of Prophet Elias) best tackled on foot (or mule) before

breakfast when heat is already building to an impossible intensity.

When it's time to recuperate, there are endless choices about which padded cafe lounge offers the best views of the harbour, a theatrical amphitheatre of activity with boats dancing in skilful navigational harmony in and out of the marina.

Ferry-loads of day-trippers offload here (most of them Greek) yet somehow they seem to melt away down the maze of alleyways or into smart shops along the quay.

Footpaths recently mapped by the Municipality of Hydra encourage further exploration of the town, its mansions (built in the 18th and 19th centuries when Hydriot seafaring prowess bought great wealth), its mountains and its many monasteries.

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HAMISH McDONALD



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Main Image: Hydra Port. Bottom, left to right: Cafes along the harbourside; A passerby on the pathway to Mount Eros; Houses along alleyways.

ATHENS: A NEW TAKE ON THE ANCIENT WORLD

ATHENS can be hard work. It's not easily navigable, it's noisy and not a place to fall in love with at first glance, but don't be too quick to boat off to the Greek isles.

Pilgrimage to the Acropolis is one of life's absolute necessities. And there is nothing to compare with the exquisitely harmonious proportions of ancient sculptures – mainstays underpinning the entire edifice of Western artistic culture – at the National Archaeological Museum and the Acropolis Museum.

The small but perfectly formed New Hotel in the Syntagma district (next to the Plaka and just minutes from Constitution Square) is another good reason to stay.

It's a contemporary masterwork of 1950s modernity, a design hotel owned by one of the world's most powerful collectors of modern art, Dakis Joannou. His personal art collection complements some unusually

quirky features throughout the arty party pad that finely balances creativity with comfort and service.

There's a new take on bespoke furniture that feels close to genius here. Recycled bits of wooden furniture from the old Olympic Palace Hotel (which stood on the same site) have been cobbled together into columns and walls. Modern twists in a deconstructed past encourage a sense of humour throughout the hotel: the old Olympic Palace sign reworked as a coffee table, fabrics and tools whimsically transformed into 'the ladder chair', 'the tomato chair', 'the newspaper chair', a chair for every corner.

Past and present are mixed and matched in whisper-quiet bedrooms (ours with a wall of glassy evil eyes to guard against ill omen) with a solid brass washbasin shaped like fragmented rocks in the bathroom. Even the

little night-time chocolate arrives in a perfectly fragmented golden box.

It's all part of a philosophy that pushes art and design into the everyday where it can be seen, touched, slept with and lived in.

At the Art Lounge on the 7th floor, you can enjoy one of 2000 art books from Joannou's private collection, or just admire the 360° views of the Acropolis, the ruins of the Plaka, Lycabettus Hill, Syntagma Square and the Parliament.

No amount of artistic brilliance from Brazilian designers, the Campana Brothers, will sell a place if personal attention is out of sorts. What makes the New Hotel so utterly engaging, apart from all that edgy art, is the staff. They are as valuable as a Roy Lichtenstein painting with their local knowledge about where to go, how to get there, and how much to pay the taxi driver.

Main Image: The Acropolis. Insert: New Hotel, Athens.



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New Hotel is not to be missed no matter how loud the sirens are calling from across the sea.

For more information: www.yeshotels.gr
Anabel Dean was a guest of New Hotel, Athens.



◀ PAGE 26 Silvery steps of shoe-polish brilliance lead just about everywhere on this endearing isle. You can go by foot or, as we did, by braying beast to several beautifully preserved monasteries. At Agia Eupraxia, the nuns (only two in number now) offer tea and cake and one of the best views of a shimmering sea far below.

There are many choices about which pathway to follow homewards. Our house, its cooled interiors flanked by a courtyard of riotous bougainvillea, was a pink beacon on the hill next to an ancient domed church.

The town views from here were endlessly captivating but, for my money, it's hard to improve upon the Spilia swimming hole tucked at harbour entrance. There has to be an analogy for a country heading into uncharted waters and a cliff top where children literally leap into the air, limbs cartwheeling towards the sun, then fall like Icarus into the azure depths of the Saronic Gulf.

'Jump Rock' (so named by our Australian contingent) is a meeting place for multinational all-sorts who languidly drape towels and bodies over boulders, whiling away hours till they succumb to a long tinkly drink at the Spilia Café & Cocktail Bar, then dinner at the Sunset Restaurant next door.

Economic woes under these influences feel as far away as the sun setting behind the peaked mountains of the Peloponnese just across a narrow strip of water. Unless, of course, you are a local.

For those living on Hydra, routine tasks are completed as usual, under the dismissive gaze of cats on steps, cats in shadows, cats on rooftops. Donkeys tramp past with heads bowed and backs weighted down with bulbous rope bags stuffed full of rocks or water bottles



Children jump and dive into the sea at Spilia.

HAMISH McDONALD

More Information

Hydra is roughly two hours by ferry from the Athenian port of Piraeus.

Hydra's Footpaths:

www.facebook.com/footpathHydra

Miranda Hotel: www.mirandahotel.gr

Hellenic Seaways:

www.hellenicseaways.gr

Harriet's Hydra Horses:

www.harriethydrahorses.com

or washing powder. There are no cars on Hydra (only rubbish trucks). Time stands still in a bright light, blue liquid netherworld.

"The perfect thing about Hydra is this timeless quality," says Phoebe Paraskevas, an elegant Athenian who has known the Cyprus-scented breezes of Hydra since she was five days old. Her grandfather, a refugee from what is now Turkey, bought a captain's mansion in the 1960s and called it Miranda Hotel (after his beloved daughter). The hotel with high painted ceilings and 14 boutique rooms has been a focus of Hydriot culture, cuisine and conversation ever since.

"You have a sense of sharing moments in a place like this," Phoebe explains. Her mother, Miranda, not only cultivated minds and artists, she can still be found in the kitchen or tending jasmine in the garden. Life feels easy but it has not always been.

"Crisis is not a new thing," Phoebe reflects, considering current concerns. "We all knew there would be crisis since before we were born. Life is a crisis itself. It's how people accept this situation, how they confront it and how they manage to survive it. Greece is a beautiful country but everyday life is difficult and there is always a struggle for survival.

"Greece is a passage from Europe to the east but we are obliged to make bridges in order to survive. It has always been that in a way."

A visit to the proud Museum of Hydra confirms some of these geopolitical complications. The heroic Hydriot 'fire-brands' played a major part in the War of Independence as Greek revolutionaries against the Ottoman Empire between 1821 and 1832.

"Hydra had the biggest merchant fleet in Greece when it joined the revolution," says John Sahinis, president of the Athenian Hydriots and a descendent of one of the revolutionary leaders.

"Going to war without Hydra's fleet [of 186 ships] would have been like going without a superpower."

The museum walls are lined with tales of courageous Hydriot ingenuity in loading ships with inflammable materials to scupper the enemy. Island history goes much further back of course, scanty remains of classical antiquities displayed in glass cases along with ancient ornamental ship carvings, navigational maps and heirlooms of two world wars.

From here, it's a short walk around the point to the DESTE Slaughterhouse Project Space, an interesting exhibition space for contemporary artists. Or, in the other direction, along the coast to a tiny, picturesque harbour called Kamini (the site of Greece's first naval academy in 1745). It's another lovely swimming spot. And there are other beaches worth exploration by water-taxi as days lengthen.

It's easy to see how a few days can stretch into decades here.

Hydra might just be the place that everyone is looking for: as warm in heart as its sunshine; a place where beauty remains undiminished despite the woes of the world.

The writer stayed on Hydra with the assistance of John Sahinis (President of the Athenian Hydriots).



Ryan Corr, left, and Craig Scott give triumphant performances.

Living love in the shadows



MARGARET POMERANZ

Film critic and host of *Margaret Pomeranz Presents* and *Screen* on Foxtel

FIRST there was the personalised account of a love affair by Timothy Conigrave, then an enormously successful stage adaptation by Tommy Murphy, and finally the film of *Holding the Man*, with Neil Armfield directing Murphy's screen adaptation of the play. What is it that so resonates today about this story of a gay romance that began in the schoolyard and transcended social ostracism and parental disapproval, even the deadly hand that AIDS was to play in both men's lives?

Timothy Conigrave (Corr) is not a jock, he's artistic, he's in the school play, in a minor part in *Romeo and Juliet*, but the one he fancies is football star John Caleo (Stott). His pursuit of John is hesitant but determined and they do become lovers, quite explicitly in the film. All this is to be kept hidden from their parents, Tim's father (Pearce) and mother (Fox), but particularly from John's quite strict Catholic father (LaPaglia).

All this takes place in the early 1970s when gay relationships were far outside middle-class experiences, from where both these boys come.

As the years go by, Tim pursues his acting in Sydney (a delightful cameo by the director's frequent collaborator Geoffrey Rush features here), there are frictions about jealousy, there is activism for gay rights, then the shadow of AIDS enters the film.

For me some of the most moving elements of the film come from the parents. There is a beautiful moment when Tim's

father dances with him at his daughter's wedding. I wept because it was such an act of love and acceptance. John's father has a harder time accepting his son's sexual preference but LaPaglia's performance is so understated that we feel for this man.

Corr is one of the most arresting young actors working today in Australia and he is simply wonderful as Tim. Stott has worked mainly in television but his leap to the big screen is a triumph.

Armfield has established an impressive reputation both in Australia and internationally as a director of theatre and opera. Here he is in complete control of the story he is telling. It is a most moving, sad and sublime film.



Corr, left, is one of Australia's most arresting young actors.

MOVIE *Holding the Man* (MA15+)

DIRECTOR Neil Armfield

WITH Ryan Corr, Craig Stott, Anthony LaPaglia, Guy Pearce, Kerry Fox

VERDICT ★