

# DISCOVERING GREECE

by Barbara Renaud González



Athena by Leonidas Drosis in front of the Academy of Athens

## Leaving the U.S. at the time of Corona

Why am I always surprised at the signs?

Of course I was the second-to-the-last American to enter Greece when they were shutting down the country on March 18th. The other American was a wealthy white woman from Hawaii who heard me say I was a writer, and they let her in, too.

A long long flight. Houston. Boston. London. Athens. March 17<sup>th</sup>, 80 degrees in San Antonio,

Freezing in Boston, freezing in London, rainy-cold in Athens. Me with my poncho and a backpack, bluejeans and a summer blouse. A manuscript and laptop in my backpack, and bare essentials. Why didn't I prepare? A couple hundred dollars, that's it. They didn't feed me on the plane or give me a blanket or pillow like I expected, the Corona-risk. So I had 3 seats to myself, sleeping anyway. No cellphone either, cause I washed it through the laundromat before I left.

Lucky for me that Pablo Martinez gave me a Starbucks gift card before I left. A good breakfast in London, first meal in 24 hours. Gracias, Pablito.

The Greek Immigration Officer heard my story, my reservation made in November (thank you, Annette!), that I needed to see the museums... blahblahblah. "OK, Self-Isolate for two weeks." I took the metro from the airport into my rented flat in Athens, an hour-long trip, basically by myself on the train at 9 pm. Everything was closed—the restaurants, the retail stores, the cinemas, and of course, the Acropolis. No traffic, eerie. Lucky for me, I like my cooking, and the grocery stores, bakeries, pharmacies, and the fish market remained open, just around the block that I discovered the next morning. And it began—nobody on the streets in the afternoons walking except me and the cats everyone feeds.

The nights were in the 30s, the days in the 50s, no central heating, so I froze for a month. Central heating/air is a luxury in Europe, and I wasn't gonna ask that the radiators be turned on.

I don't mind freezing if I can walk to buy fresh food and bread.

## WHAT BROUGHT ME TO GREECE

After my critical brain surgery in December of 2012, and no health insurance in the time before Obamacare, I experienced a spiritual rebirth.

My humongous brain tumor was a blessing. I was forced to face myself. Made lists of all the people I was grateful for and all those who betrayed me. Long lists. I also made a list of all the people I'd betrayed—short list. *Myself*. Realized I had to become who I'd dreamed of being.

No fucking around, no pretending anymore. Because we are not in control of our lives, we're not! Hope you see this with the Corona pandemic and the George Floyd protests. Our lives are not to be ordinary in any way—forget the TV soaps, hunger instead for your own story, cry for the artists, the beaten-up women and the animalitos, protest

the police, not toilet paper.

After the brain surgery that saved my life, I realized why it happened. I didn't want to be afraid of my passionate, conscious, and falling-down life anymore. Why compare myself to anyone but me? My destiny—the rebellions, the firings, the moves, the unscripted dance of life—means one thing. *I'm supposed to write*. That's it. Everything has happened because this is what I'm supposed to do. Life isn't rational, so quit trying to make it so. Life is mystical. Find the clarity in the middle of the ground-shifting. Think—Gloria Anzaldua.



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## ATHENS AND THE CORONA LOCKDOWN

I've always dreamed of being here, even when I was working the cotton fields in the Texas Panhandle, running from the rattlesnakes. I don't understand all of it, except that Greece is a country with a foundational history of democracy, goddesses, yogurt, seafood, and islands, in that order to me. Also, different varieties of feta cheese and baklava. In the ancient world, theatre and politics nurtured each other. Can you imagine a city that built temples to the goddess of wisdom, and a public theatre on the slope of a hill where the greatest writers participated in competitive theatrical productions (Dionysian Theatre)? *The spoken word was valued, a living thing*. And for a time, the playwrights presented their tragedies, comedies, and satire for the whole city. The themes were about suffering, relationships, injustice. The politicians sat front and center, learning from the artists, and the writers studied the politician's real-life dramas.

Example: The most famous playwrights: Euripides, Sophocles, Aeschylus, Aristophanes, (fifth century before Christ) wrote about real people making bad decisions...and the effects of those actions. How we lived in a flawed world. The dialogue with the dead. Think of *Oedipus*, *Antigone*, *Iphigenia*. Tragedy is about confronting suffering, catharsis, and healing. I think we need theatre more than ever.

Every time I visit an archaeological site—the Acropolis, the Hill of Muses, the Temple of Zeus, the Ancient Agora, and others, I inevitably cry. What's all this about? I've seen the pyramids in Mexico: Teotihuacan. Palenque. Monte Alban, the pyramid in the clouds of Oaxaca. And Tikal, deep in the Guatemalan jungle, where the monkeys show you around. At those sites, I felt elevated, inspired, enlarged by my heritage. Here I'm standing beside a goddess sculpted in marble, revered by her city. A goddess of wisdom. A democracy that flourished, doomed to die. Now the ancient temples and sculptures, present throughout the city, you can see the Acropolis from different angles in the city—are witnesses to our modern tragedies.



The Bakery Barbara passes by every morning.



# DISCOVERING MYSELF

And what have we learned?

Which takes me to my memories of despair. I remember the Plaza de Grimaldi, in Chile, where thousands were brutally tortured under Pinochet. The town of Dolores Hidalgo, where Mexican independence began with a grito. The concentration camp, Majdanek, in Lublin, Poland, where hundreds of thousands died and you can still smell the gas. Then there is the Monument to the "Discoveries" in Lisbon, Portugal, where the conquistadores sailed on their way to the New World.

Maybe I need to be this far away so that I can see the personal and collective tragedies of my world better, ¿Quién sabe?

## GREECE AND THE PEOPLE DURING THE PANDEMIC

It seems to me that people took the pandemic seriously. A two-month shutdown of the city. It's June 10<sup>th</sup> as I write this, and there are still lines to enter the supermarkets and most people use masks to enter. The retail stores opened in late May, and we are expected to use plenty of hand sterilizer which is provided at all the store entrances. The restaurants opened for outdoor dining only last week. Face masks are required on public transportation. The police flit around on motorcycles ensuring that people don't gather in crowds.



Stations for recycling in Athens are everywhere.

I see the concern in their faces, and yet they persevere, hoping for a better day. They are in this together. Even the dogs were in lockdown, wailing away their frustrations.

Almost everyone speaks English, and I've heard little complaining. They can't believe I'm here, and constantly ask me what is the problem with the U.S.? And, when are they coming... And, maybe it's better they don't come because of the pandemic over there... *What can I say?*

I hate to admit it, but the Lockdown has been very good for me. I don't mind being alone, I can get books and magazines through the San Antonio's library "Libby" app, Kindle, or if I'm desperate enough, I can order books online. If I get restless, I just start walking



The Parthenon is a major part of the Acropolis located on the hills above the city of Athens.

toward the Acropolis, which is about a mile and half from where I live—I've visited all the major archaeological sites now. Besides, the neighborhoods are—European, like in Mexico, so there are outdoor cafes, children on bikes and skates, the grandparents sitting on benches, dogs on leashes, sleeping cats everywhere (people here feed and care for the felines, even at the temples), and so it's like Fiesta! every day without the borracheras and guns. I'm not lonely. Here, I'm surrounded by a social life every day if I want it, cause people walk throughout the neighborhood, and there is music, shopping, coupling, and children biking like maniacs all the time. You can also get a drink outdoors and walk home afterwards, so no worries about getting a DWI.

I don't have the money to go out beyond the museums and buying some Greek earrings, so the Lockdown has given me time to think, read, write, and make plans to visit the Oracle of Delphi, the Temple to Poseidon on a hill overlooking the Aegean Sea, lighting candles at the Greek Orthodox churches for my beloved friend, Mariana Ornelas. If I get a Visa extension, I will go to her island of Lesbos, over eight hours away by ferry, and visit the poet Sappho's birthplace.



One of many Greek Orthodox Churches where Barbara lights candles for Mariana Ornelas, a friend.

It's not up to me. At any rate, I don't plan on returning to the U.S. till late October for medical checkups and of course, to vote.

But I've decided. I will move here or to Portugal permanently by next Spring. My dream, and my destiny. The goddesses will surely take care of me. I have promised to write more and greater stories about Texas.

The first COVID-19 case was diagnosed in Greece on February 26<sup>th</sup>. Contact tracing was initiated on the first and all subsequent confirmed cases, with all contacts being tested and isolated.

On February 27<sup>th</sup>, the annual carnival in Patra (an event which draws big crowds from all over the country), was cancelled. On March 10<sup>th</sup>, with officially 89 cases and 0 deaths, all schools and universities across the country were closed.

On March 12<sup>th</sup>, movie theaters, gyms and courtrooms were closed. On March 13<sup>th</sup>, with 190 confirmed cases and 1 death, malls, cafés, restaurants, bars, beauty parlors, museums and archaeological sites were closed. On March

14<sup>th</sup>, organized beaches and ski resorts were also closed.

On March 18<sup>th</sup>, with 418 confirmed cases and 5 deaths, all stores were closed.

On March 23<sup>rd</sup>, with 695 confirmed cases and 17 deaths, a nation-wide restriction of movement is enforced, whereby citizens can leave their house only for specific reasons and with a special permit.

As of March 30<sup>th</sup>, Greece had 1212 confirmed cases and 46 deaths.

Source: Nation Public Health Organization, 2020

By June 1<sup>st</sup>, there were two new cases reported. The country's museums, including the Acropolis Museum, are scheduled to open on June 15<sup>th</sup>. The restaurants open for full dining on July 1<sup>st</sup>.