

Pieces of a Puzzle

PLACE

The Pink Palace (1995–1996)

Incident on Market Street (1994–1995)

Images of India (1995–1996)

Youth Hostel Plakias (2005–2006)

Reality is much more complex than we can perceive with our five senses. The sights, sounds, and smells we experience are only a small sample of the vibrancy in a place. As a result, our interpretations of a situation are like incomplete pictures. This issue hinders our mental heuristics as well—the inferences and assumptions we make are not infallible.

The authors featured in this collection express a similar sentiment. In their essays, they focus on a single setting. Through the stories they share and the descriptions they paint, the authors present a contrast between initial interpretations and actual experiences. They discuss details and nuances that either contradict earlier assumptions or reveal new insights. The final result is a new perspective, one that is more gray and less clearly black or white, and that better expresses the realities of the place.

The Pink Palace

SUZANNE S. BAKER

WRITER'S COMMENT: The time that I spent at the Pink Palace was four long summers ago, and this essay has been brewing in my head ever since. The people I met and the resort itself are far too interesting not to immortalize, and I'm thankful that I wrote about it before the entire experience declined into a faded memory. The funny thing is, I remember the summer as a good time, but when I sat down at my computer, disgust and cynicism seemed to predominate. Admittedly, I focused on the negative aspects to make a point, but the entire account is true. I simply couldn't fit all the details into the piece. The Pink Palace is even more bizarre and surrealistic than I let on in this essay. The things I left out are unprintable, almost unthinkable.

Jayne Walker helped me tremendously in realizing the potential of this essay.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: My first major assignment in English 101 (Advanced Composition) challenges the students to write a first-person report that brings to life a social "world" unfamiliar to their readers. This "world" can be as close to home as their workplace or the neighborhood where they grew up or as exotic as Suzanne Baker's "The Pink Palace." Challenged to "show," not simply to "tell," Suzanne combined powerful descriptions of a sordid reality with a mature reflective style that transforms this very raw material of experience into art.

With this piece, Suzanne has also shown that she possesses, in abundance, the talent to fulfill her dream of becoming a travel writer.

—Jayne Walker, English Department

It is the lawlessness of Greece that attracts both travelers and outcasts. They arrive on ferry boats with the eagerness of immigrants, drunk with notions of escape and pleasure. This hedonistic lure of the Greek islands is far removed from the academic splendor of mainland Europe. In myth, Greece is a land ruled by the selfish whimsy of the gods, and this climate of self-indulgence blows across the Ionian island of Corfu like a frolicking wind.

Teetering, as it does, on the far edge of western civilization, Corfu presents itself as a haven or a refuge, depending on one's orientation as traveler or derelict. Here, travelers can live out their adolescent fantasies, and outcasts can be gods. The playground of these gods, the Mount Olympus of debauchery, spills down the steep east coast of Corfu like a glob of Pepto Bismol—the Pink Palace.

I came to the Pink Palace in late May, one of a steady trickle of off-season travelers who had arrived just in time to enjoy the last of the cool nights before the torrent of peak-season vacationers, drawn by the summer heat, filled the island to capacity. The last leg of a nine-month solo expedition through Europe, the Pink Palace was my last indulgence in freedom before I flew home to start college. On paper, the resort looked like Paradise—the very brochure seemed saturated with ambrosia. Pictures of gleeful scuba divers, vast cliffs that fell into the Ionian Sea, and sunny rooms lured me from the mainland. But the brochure's utopian promise—"Ideally situated on the sands of Agios Gordios beach, the Palace assures a stay that you'll never forget"—turned out to be, at best, a euphemistic appraisal of the jarring reality that awaited me.

The Pink Palace was a glaring twentieth-century smear on an otherwise primitive landscape. At night, the profusion of light and music that came from the resort was as obnoxious and out of place as the sickly pink stucco structure that scarred the green hillside. Self-indulgence came in liquid form at the Pink Palace, with names like Ouzo, Blowjob, B-52s, Kamikazes, and Alabama Slammers. Having dutifully saturated themselves with the culture of the mainland, my fellow guests now allowed themselves the corporeal pleasure of drunken oblivion. By day, aerobicized girls whizzed through the streets on rented candy-pink mopeds, their bikini strings flapping behind them. I could have been in Fort Lauderdale, except for the fact that the Palace was surrounded by a network of narrow dirt roads, trudging donkeys, and dim, chaotic general stores run by swarthy merchants.

The young foreigners who lived and worked within those pink walls were the real tourist attraction. They had a preternatural glow that eclipsed even the knobby rock formations of Agios Gordios beach. This incandescence manifested itself in a curious lack of the deference that usually defines patron-/employee relationships. In fact, the staff seemed peeved that they had to stop drinking long enough to feed us or clean our rooms. They attended to our needs with the lassitude of gods who have been grudgingly assigned to day-care duty at Mount Olympus.

Tan and blasé, the staff sauntered through sunbathing guests like top-billed stars weaving through insignificant movie extras on a Hollywood set. We forgave this offense. As that infectious languor particular to Greece dripped from the sun into our pores and settled in our veins, awe replaced insult, and we began to regard the staff as human incarnations of this honeyed lethargy. It didn't matter that our omelettes were either burned or running off the plate—after all, why should such deities of leisure know how to cook eggs?

Whether claiming a watery omelette from a cursing, scornful kitchen worker or ordering a screwdriver from the haughty bartender in the disco, I approached staff members with giddy trepidation. The first time I bought cigarettes from Lucinda Barfoot-Saunt, the strolling cigarette vendor, was no exception. “Wouldja like regular assholes or Lights?” she asked me, bastardizing the brand name Assos with characteristic staff crudeness. As Lucinda handed me a pack of Assos Lights, her eyes returned again and again to my nose ring. I could sense her unshakeable disdain faltering as she coolly asked me where I had gotten my nose pierced. As I answered her questions, her attitude toward me warmed perceptibly. A candid curiosity replaced her previous condescension. In fact, Lucinda looked more like Benny Hill than Mighty Aphrodite, her complexion closer to ruddy oatmeal than classic alabaster. And when she told me in choppy Cockney, “You can call me Barfie, everyone does,” the pedestal that I had placed her on fell to rubble at her feet.

Comforted by her abrupt fall from grace and encouraged by her friendliness, I asked Barfie how she had come to the Pink Palace. It turned out she was merely seventeen—a runaway from Gloucester, England, whose father had kicked her out of the house when she was arrested “for stealing a bloody ‘airdryer, right?” With typical teenage bravado, Barfie informed me that she “couldn't be bothered with school,” so she drifted the European runaway circuit down to southern France, where she made

a decent living washing windshields at stoplights in Nice. But when she heard that the Pink Palace “was the place to laze in the sun and get shitty,” Barfie hopped on the first available ferry bound for the Ionian Islands.

Hardly a past befitting a god, Barfie’s sordid history provided the initial hairline crack in my illusions of the mythic self-confidence of the staff. This fissure split ever wider when Barfie introduced me to Ross and Dave, the resident moped mechanics. My curiosity piqued, I asked these two the same question I had posed to Barfie. Ross’s voice drawled smooth as a nighttime disc jockey, but he sucked down cigarettes with nervous ferocity, lighting a string of fresh smokes from butts that became little more than frayed, fibrous lumps rolling between his anxious fingers. Ross told me that not even in Corfu did he feel safe from the threat of his father, who had vowed to kill him upon his release from a British prison in August. Dave, one of the few Swedes on staff, was reserved and far less confiding than Barfie and Ross. He kept his Nordic distance as he shyly told me that he used to live with his girlfriend in Stockholm. One night in April, he went around the corner to buy smokes and “somehow” ended up a third of the way to the equator, at the Pink Palace. Dave was friendly enough, but he seemed so skittish that I felt it wrong to ask him to elaborate on this tantalizingly incomplete story.

Once the disdainful facades of Barfie, Ross, and Dave had been punctured, I began to suspect an ugly truth behind the godly mystique of the entire staff. Rather than being repelled by this disillusionment, the decidedly human angst of my new acquaintances both intrigued and strangely comforted me. I felt more allied with their jaded cynicism than with the insipid frivolity of the guests. In fact, a desperate anxiety gripped me at the thought of leaving that never-never land at the end of the week. Ahead of me lay plane flights and customs, cities and parents, and looming behind it all, college. So, at the urging of Barfie and Ross, I decided to hole up at the Pink Palace for the summer and asked to be put on staff.

My request for a job couldn’t have come at a better time. With the frenzied tourist season threatening, the owner, George, began recruiting guests at the rate of two or three a day. So I cleared out of my sparkling beachside room, strapped on my backpack, and began to climb the steep hill from the beach to the staff quarters. Wheezing and coughing, I arrived at my new home as “Welcome to the Jungle” was pounding out of a second-story bathroom window. Axl Rose’s shrieking falsetto was the

last sound I heard before I began a spiraling descent from paradise to the netherworld.

The bubble-gum pink stucco of the resort, so airy and frivolous in the pristine guest areas, was a garish backdrop to the tenement house atmosphere of the staff quarters. Two leaky pipes trailed rusty streaks down the pink walls. Sculptural heaps of beer, wine, and soda bottles, overflowing ashtrays and lopsided chaise longues littered the patio. Makeshift clotheslines strung densely with bikini tops, panties, T-shirts, and boxer shorts made gaudy festoons between crusty windows. And the staff crammed into tiny rooms like the most impoverished of immigrants. My dingy room barely held two bunkbeds, a twin bed, two wardrobes, and a representative cast of misfits—my roommates.

The bunk above me belonged to Debi. The night watchmen would regularly lay her out in a drunken stupor. Although the same age as I was, Debi seemed much older than her nineteen years, probably because of her crotchety disposition and tenacious drinking habits. Debi worked in check-ins, serving shots of pink-tinted ouzo to groups of raucous backpackers that began arriving at 6:30 a.m. By 8:30 breakfast, she had invariably sampled more ouzo than she had poured. Each night Debi faded out under the influence of numerous Freight Trains—a toxic shot of Jack Daniels and Jim Beam.

Murphy and Hayden, the maintenance men, shared the other bunk. Murphy was a Scotsman with childlike eyes and a diabolical smile. He typically wore jean shorts cut just below the butt and a black cut-off T-shirt featuring a cow's head and the pronouncement "Cool as Fuck." Retsina, a Greek wine aged in pine barrels, was Murphy's drink of choice, since it was rumored to be hallucinogenic in large quantities. "I miss me drugs, love," he used to tell me between burps after he had guzzled an entire bottle. Having just finished a three-year prison sentence, Murphy looked forward to each night in the disco with giddy anticipation. To watch his ritualistic grooming for this event was amusement in itself. Standing before our bathroom mirror, Murphy would grease his thinning hair into a limp ponytail, step back, and pivot—back and forth, right foot forward, now left—winking and pointing at every turn. "Lookin' hot tonight, yes sirrah," he would announce to his reflection in his syrupy brogue. "Goin' to get lucky tonight, yes, sirrah." Finally, a last wink in the mirror, one tossed to me like a quarter's tip to a shoeshine boy, and he was out the door with a jaunty sidestep.

His bunkmate, Hayden, had slipped out of the hands of the British police and fled to the Pink Palace to avoid a charge of robbery and assault. Psychotically attractive, Hayden was perpetually “on the wagon,” meaning that he wasn’t allowed to drink. George meted out this punishment when he discovered someone who was too drunk on the job (too drunk usually meant unable to stand up). In an atmosphere where drinking served as a solace, an escape, and a social crutch, being put on the wagon equaled solitary confinement, especially to an admitted alcoholic like Hayden. As a result of his “dry” status, Hayden was always edgily energetic—he had a habit of raking nicotine-stained fingers through a startled shock of hair that looked as if it had been deep-fried in peroxide. Bare-chested and chain-smoking, he swung through the resort with manic energy, skidding to an occasional stop in order to introduce him self to shapely female guests.

Dino occupied the twin bed. His uncanny resemblance to Fabio, as well as his high-profile job as bartender, garnered him high status on the staff celebrity scale. Each day, Dino spent his two-hour lunch break tanning and chatting with “select ladies.” Apparently nonchalant, such shmoozing was actually a well-planned means to an end—Dino’s lunchtime flirtations were designed to ensure that he would get laid at the end of each long night.

Dino’s sexual designs invariably worked, and Hayden and Murphy fared just as well. Neither alcohol nor moral qualms could dampen the libido of my male roommates. It was an off- night when Dino, Murphy, and Hayden didn’t reap the sexual harvest that their celebrity status afforded them, and I woke countless nights to the squeaking and bumping of three mattresses, each producing its own coital rhythm.

Needless to say, by mid-June, the godly veneer of the staff that had dazzled me in May had been exposed as hollow bravado. My co-workers were cowering refugees rather than Olympian figures. Vindictive and afraid, they had descended on the Pink Palace from Liverpool, Toronto, Stockholm, Melbourne, Los Angeles, and Atlanta, as if drawn to a point of convergence by a sinister common thread—the thread that runs through every derelict who has a chance to become a god. Variousy insulted by their homelands, these outlaws found the exotic third-world naiveté of Corfu the ideal place to rise from their own ashes. It’s not a far escape, from the fringe of society to the edge of civilization.

Along with the horrific realization that I had badly miscast myself as a Pink Palace staff member came the discovery that the nauseating pink stucco served as a candy-coating of a workplace that was more dictatorship than resort. It wasn't long after I made that damning leap from guest to staff member that I realized we were in the clutches of a madman. A poster of George that hung behind the bar in the disco had seemed harmless when I noticed it as a guest. It showed George, triumphant (and maniacal to the discerning eye), pointing at his audience in a facsimile of Uncle Sam. Underneath it read, "Dr. George wants you . . . to enjoy a sensational stay at the Pink Palace." This cheesy allusion to freedom and democracy transformed into a cruel and grotesque irony once I realized that George spent more energy instilling fear in the staff than he did catering to the guests. He ruled as the fiercest of dictators.

Like Hitler and Franco before him, George ruled by creating a climate of fear. Like so much propaganda, an irrational but stringent set of rules was relayed by his henchman, the manager Rick. The first rule was, as George so delicately phrased it, "No staff fucking staff." Designed to steer us clear from any romantic dramas that might distract us from our duties, this rule instead spurred the passions of amorous staff members, exciting them with notions of forbidden lust.

George's erratic temper gave us good cause for fear. Reports on George's moods ran like a furtive current through all staff interactions. There were three factors that determined his mood: how drunk he was, how well the guests were behaving, and how well-fucked he had been by his wife Wendy. We all prayed for Wendy's horniness.

Of the three, the drunkenness scale was the hardest to gauge. George a little drunk was friendly and affectionate, and we were quick to ask for afternoons off or a cash advance before he downed a few more Jack Daniels shots. We all planned to get drunk ourselves when George, anesthetized and harmless, reached the "fairly liquored" stage. But George blind drunk incited a terror that I'd never known. He flew into violent rages, throwing busboys down stairs if they had a rip in their staff shirts. Veteran staff told me that George had once blown a guest's kneecap off for starting a brawl in the disco. So much for "the customer's always right" theory.

One morning I woke at dawn with a start, as one wakes to an earthquake. Fragments of frantic whispers bounced off the walls of my dim room. "Get up . . . don't be . . . George is . . . go out the back . . .

late . . . really drunk . . . go to your own bed!” Dino and Murphy, bleary-eyed and throbbing with hangovers, scrambled around the room, looking for clothes that had been discarded not too many hours before in fits of drunken passion. Still flattened by those notorious Freight Trains, Debi lay comatose in bed. Hayden, who had uncharacteristically slept with a staff member the night before rather than with a groupie, rushed in from an adjoining room through the bathroom and was aimlessly smoothing a musty sheet across his mattress when Rick burst through the door. “No staff fucking in here, right?” Receiving only baleful looks in reply, he nodded absently and charged through the bathroom to continue his reign of terror in the next room. George, belligerently drunk, swayed at the top of the stairs outside, berating anyone who was foolish enough to go out the front door and aiming crooked blows at any male staff who were unfortunately still drunk and late to work. The hubbub had flushed groupies out of every doorway and some windows—trailing bedsheets and last night’s dresses, they scurried down the hill in a hysterical clump.

Mercifully, my job in the laundry offered a refuge from such bedlam. Under the direction of George’s mother, I washed, hung, and folded all the sheets. Because I was “Mama’s Little Helper” George left me alone, as long as I did a good job and Mama spoke well of me, which she did. This protection was essential to my peace of mind because I lived in fear of his hunkering frame. Even when his shadow did darken the laundry, I found that he conceded to the authority of his mother and was shyly congenial to me.

“Mama” ran the laundry and was, as Murphy characterized her, “one loony bitch.” I forgave her this—she was a peasant woman, transplanted into an obscene display of capitalism. Gravity had been unkind to Mama: her whole body—chin, shoulders, breasts and hips—sagged towards the ground and even her legs bowed as if to meet the earth. Attired in a calico dress, apron, and slippers, with a handkerchief knotted under her whiskey chin, Mama patrolled the laundry with a shuffling gait.

The laundry was the uppermost portion of the Pink Palace grounds, 300 feet above sea level, behind the building where the group check-ins took place five or six times a day. The Greek and Armenian maids plodded a half-mile up the hill from the beachfront rooms—the bags of laundry that they balanced on their heads were approximate in shape and size to their squat frames. What scared me were the smaller bags that often dangled from their hands. These meant that some inebriated

guest had lost control of his or her body functions and that the sheet was disgustingly and sufficiently soiled as to deserve its own bag. “How many of those assholes shit themselves last night?” the night watchman Pete asked me daily. I was used to this kind of greeting. Since I was the most solitary staff member, both in duties and in temperament, few on the staff had any idea what to talk to me about, and soiled sheets provided a lively topic to ease this social awkwardness. Embarrassing as it was to be known as “the shit-soaker,” I considered myself lucky to be soaking sheets for ten hours every day under Mama’s supervision rather than slaving for twelve to fourteen hours a day under George’s manic eye, like the rest.

The patio where I hung and folded the sheets surveyed the entire cove of Agios Gordios beach, from pine-clad hills above me down to the knobby sandstone towers that punctuated the beach far below. As I draped the airy pink sheets, Mama shambled through the billowing maze, muttering. When she found that I had done something wrong, such as not lining up the corners of the folded sheets precisely, the muttering would crescendo into a shrill rasp of “Suzannah! Putana! Ella!” which, loosely translated, means, “Suzanne, you whore, come here.” Mama had a soft spot for me, putana or not. She would squint up at me with her benevolent blue eyes, touch my nose ring lightly with her bony finger, and croon, “Putana,” in her raspy voice, then erupt into cackling laughter. Sometimes she would offer me some chicken noodle soup, which usually had ants in it, or bread, or maybe some thick, sugary coffee. These nutritional windfalls were a welcome supplement to my steady diet of ouzo, retsina, and cigarettes.

My last day at the Pink Palace, I asked Mama if I could take a picture of her. She shrieked incredulously and shuffled into her kitchen, muttering frantically. I imagined that I had somehow offended her, but she returned to the patio five minutes later, smiling like a toothless debutante. She had taken off her apron and wound a fresh handkerchief around her head, ready to pose for me. Sitting at a table piled with folded sheets, Mama assumed a dignified stance, staring unsmilingly at the camera as I snapped two shots. “There’s a goddess,” I thought as I took the pictures.

I came to the Pink Palace a traveler and left in early September feeling like an outlaw. Of course, if I had truly been an outlaw, I would have stayed with the Pink Palace staff, joining them in their nomadic freedom instead of returning home to start college. The staff was splitting

up, beginning their seasonal migration. Ross and Barfie implored me to come with them to Israel, where they intended to find work on a kibbutz. Other staff members planned to meet in Switzerland, to look for jobs in ski resorts. I still dreaded college, but I knew that I was too young to commit myself to a nomadic life.

The frenzy of the tourist season had subsided and the ferry back to Italy was sparsely populated by off-season travelers—a more somber bunch than the hormone-heady summer vacationers. Although I had earned almost 1000 dollars that summer, \$700 had gone to my bar tab. The previous night, in his office above the disco, George had counted out fifteen twenty-dollar bills—American currency—and told me with a smile that his mama liked me very much. As I sat on the deck of the ferry, I went over my earnings in my head: \$300, a pack-a-day smoking habit, a groaning liver, a malnourished body, a frazzled psyche, and countless phone numbers and addresses of people who never planned to stop running—a roster of misfits. I had not found the Greece of myths—the ambrosia had rotted my liver, the gods and goddesses were drunks, and Zeus himself was a sadistic psychopath with delusions of grandeur.

Incident On Market Street

NATHAN HITZEMAN

WRITER'S COMMENT: Writing about a personal experience can be frightening. "Who will care what has happened in my uneventful life?" the pessimist in us might ask. Perhaps it's the emotional scars from Show and Tell in the third grade, when we brought in our toothpick-studded avocado pits that failed to sprout in a glass of water, while the popular kid flaunted a moon rock given to him by his astronaut dad. We hate to come across as dull, yet we need to tell our stories to help ourselves and others make sense of our world. The experience I wrote about for English 103A kept me up a few nights pondering why people often fail to act, even when their consciences scream that they should.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Writing a reflective paper early in the quarter can be a way for students to realize that their own experience is, in fact, a valuable source of meaning and interest. Concurrently, we study the work of writers who render ideas and events with great vividness, and we talk about ways to achieve immediacy in our own writing. Nathan Hitzeman's "Incident on Market Street" pulls these strains together with exceptional success; the experience he recounts is remarkable in itself, and he reports it with great skill. Of course, I can't claim that he actually learned how to do this in my class. Nathan is a talented writer, and all his essays in 103A were splendid; I merely provided their "occasions." I am pleased that one of his pieces now has a wider audience.

—Sondra Reid, English Department

When I was a sophomore in high school, I went to San Francisco a lot to skateboard. That year I had fallen in love with that little piece of wood with four wheels that let you zoom and swerve and jump over obstacles. I usually went skateboarding with three other guys—Kurt, my best friend; Kurt's brother Happy, who would do anything short of paying us to hang out with older guys; and Steve, a short guy with a buzz cut who always had us laughing. We lived fifteen miles away from the city, but we went skateboarding there whenever we could. Kurt had just turned sixteen, and if we could find a parking space big enough for his mom's station wagon, we were set for the day, for once we parked, our skateboards would maneuver us neatly through the crisscrossed streets and sidewalks. Faces flashed out briefly as we glided through the masses. People moved like ants in procession, punctuated by a flow of cars at the intersections. Drivers always frowned at us because we weaved around them, showing off our cat-like balance, our ability to keep a smooth momentum over the offset blocks of cement. We would skateboard through all parts of the city—Chinatown, North Beach, and even the dilapidated Tenderloin (an area my mom always told me to avoid). We always ended up at the Embarcadero, where the other skateboarders hung out and compared tricks, like how to ride your board down a handrail. Happy almost jeopardized his future ability to have kids trying that one.

San Francisco was a world of its own, far different from the mundane suburb where I lived. In the city, every block brought a new surprise—a Korean selling carved dragons, a kite-flier flying a giant experimental kite at Pier 39, or a hobo at Fisherman's Wharf salvaging a few tunes off of a beat-up six-string guitar. The nationalities changed from block to block too. Almost in minutes, you went from Japantown with its sushi to Chinatown, where you could buy fireworks and Chinese yo-yos, or to the Mission District, where Latinos showed off their '64 Impalas with their hydraulics and loud bass speakers.

We also observed the disparity of wealth in the city. San Francisco is small in area for its population, and I was always surprised at how close the ghettos are to the rich areas. (The houses are all gummed together and you wonder if someone could run across rooftops from one end of town to the other, or live up there—perhaps a character like Calvino's "Baron in the Trees," but with rooftops). For instance, the run-down Fillmore District lies right down the street from the tall, lush Victorian houses of

Pacific Heights. Union Square, where upper-middle-class women with styled hair and long legs shop, lies just a couple of streets away from Geary, where women with even longer legs and longer, frizzier hair wait on the corners for customers. I thought San Francisco had to be the most fascinating place on Earth.

However, one day, something happened that changed my appreciation for the city. The day was sunny and a wind seemed to whip off of the bay like foam from a tall glass of root beer. We had just been kicked out of the subways for trying to sneak through the fare gates, so we rode aimlessly down Market Street on our skateboards, looking for something to do. We moaned when Steve said he was hungry. Steve never had money, and this meant that we would have to buy something for him out of our pocket change. Pooling our pittances into a larger pittance, we bought a couple of cheeseburgers at Burger King and went outside to eat them. The sun felt nice, and I soon forgot about the money I had lent Steve. These kinds of days were meant for friends to share, and I was looking forward to a long day of skateboarding. I felt happy to be alive. I even gave a homeless guy my leftover change, thinking I had done my good deed for the day.

We had not been sitting down for long when the peace of that afternoon was broken by a commotion that arose nearby. The city is naturally loud, always filled with the humdrum of lots of people talking at once. Once in a while you hear a few flourishes from a sax drift lazily down the street or someone shouting for a cab, but it is all usually just a mesh of noise—a sort of monotone one can get lost in like the sound of ocean breakers. Two voices were dominating this part of Market Street just now, however, and people were starting to gather around to listen to the argument. The noise was coming from a drunk man who kept yelling “Fag!” in front of a lady. At first I was puzzled, but then I saw that the lady had a mustache and bulging, hairy legs not well concealed by his pink nylons.

I had not seen too many transvestites before and none that were as colorfully dressed as this man. He was wearing black high heels, pink hose, a bright red jumper with handprints painted on the rear, and a halter top under a leather jacket. The two features that gave him away were his facial hair, which you could not see from the side because of his black wig, and his incredible build.

“I ain’t no fag, you drunk,” he said, aware of the people gathering around and appearing a little self-conscious.

“You’re a fruitcake! Don’t tell me ya ain’t no fag. Get the hell back to Castro Street with all the other fags. Or better yet, why don’t all of you fags go to an island somewhere where you can hump and not make the rest of us sick!” These words were coming from a man with gray hair who was holding a beer and trying to keep his balance, but with little success. I was shocked by his appearance even more than I was by that of the transvestite. He looked like someone’s grandpa who had given a few too many pints of blood. His face was emaciated, his cheeks were caved in, and his remaining teeth jutted out yellow and dismal. His body swayed like a blade of grass in the slight breeze. I looked at his torn pants and mustard-colored shirt and wondered how long it had been since the skin under the dirt and grease had seen the light of day. I thought of Pig Pen in the *Peanuts* cartoons who walked around in his own cloud of dust. But there was nothing comical about this guy. His eyes bulged out from his drawn-back skin. They were bloodshot and violent, the eyes of someone looking at an inner hell and cursing the devil that brought them there. The rest of him just looked pitiful, like a corpse already starting to rot.

“I ain’t no fag, you drunk,” the other guy said, looking even more agitated and stepping still closer to the bum. “Just because I dress this way doesn’t mean I’m gay! Don’t you know that, you stupid wino?” He pushed the drunk just a bit, and the drunk did not even brace himself. All the drugs and drinking had reduced him to taut skin over bones, and when the guy pushed him, the drunk fell on the ground like a puppet whose strings had broken. I could not believe how insubstantial he was, how easily he had fallen. He was utterly helpless against the cross-dressed man, whose dress and purse in no way hindered the strength of his muscled arms. When the drunk fell on his rear, a slight gasp escaped from the people around the scene. I looked around, amazed at how many people were watching now. A businesswoman was standing across from me, an attaché case in her hand. She looked revolted. A Chinese woman selling flowers was watching too, and as she watched, someone on a bike flew behind her and snatched a bouquet. Some sailors across the street were snickering and whispering to each other. My friend Kurt was mesmerized, watching these two strange people go at it. Happy looked scared, as though he wanted to go home. Listening to the name-calling and hateful remarks erupt from these two, I knew it had to be stopped.

The drunk guy was no match for the transvestite, but he would not shut up for his own good.

Where was a policeman when you needed one? They always appeared when we tried to skateboard in a private parking garage or when we defiled handrails with our sliding tricks. And why were all these people so passive? Could not someone come forward and say “Knock it off, you two”? I could feel danger surfacing by the look of the guy in the dress. His hands were knotted, and he stood still as if trying to hold himself back from launching an all-out assault. Luckily, though, what little sense the bum still had seemed to kick in after the push. He stood up slowly, somehow having protected his beer rather than his body. He actually was quiet for a moment, but his eyes were beaming out hate and his few crooked teeth were clenched in a grimace. He had the helpless and defiant look of a downed wildebeest waiting in agony as the lions stand ready to devour him alive.

“That’s right, you’d better shut up, you alcoholic son-sa-bitch,” said the transvestite, now appearing to loosen his fists and turning around to walk away. I let out a short sigh. It was going to be okay, I thought. The tension was diffusing. The sailors across the street were walking away now, figuring the show was over. The transvestite walked to the curb. Ten yards away, then fifteen yards, and soon to be out of sight, I hoped, so we could get on with our day.

Then, before that gentle hum of conversation could replace the silence, before voices could drown away the awkwardness of the temporary rift in time that had just occurred, the drunk muttered, “You’re still a fag, though.” It wasn’t loud, but in that moment of silence before everyone had reentered their independent worlds, that last insult was clearly heard by the transvestite. He stopped and turned around. Before I knew what had happened, the man in the dress was right in front of the bum again. He did not say anything; he just walked right up to the drunk and pushed him. The drunk did not try to crouch or get away. He just stood there with the still and insubstantial stance of a cardboard cutout, his eyes glazed and looking right through space into some other dimension.

Then he flew backwards, his legs buckling under him like twigs, and I heard the crash of his beer bottle on the sidewalk, followed by the crack of his skull as it hit the hard, slick concrete. I have never heard anything make a thud like that since.

Nor have I since seen a person killed.

No one stayed around for very long. The cops arrived and later an ambulance, but the show was over and onlookers went back to their respective lives. A few people made the sign of the cross. One woman looked as though she was about to cry, but she turned away before I could see the tears.

I've heard stories about people being stabbed, where the victim screams and no one comes to help even though there are people everywhere who know exactly what is taking place.

These stories always make me wonder about human nature and the present state of our society. It seems that the more people come together in one place, the less responsible any one of them feels for anyone else. Everyone wants their own rights and an indisputable space in which to eke out some bit of life for themselves, but space is scarce in San Francisco. Bums fight to sleep in their entryways, their life-sustaining niches out of the cold gusts that blow 7-11 Slurpee cups and paper bags along the street. Houses are all crammed together, with iron gates barring their doorways. This is my bit of space, everything seems to protest. Perhaps we feel the need to shout out like the drunk man because of a need to assert our space, our meaning, our fear.

I also have come to see San Francisco's celebrated diversity in a different way. While appearing to be a rich cultural stew to the visitor, it may be a bitter broth to the people who live there, with everyone sure that it is some other group that is making the taste unpleasant for the rest of them.

"It's the damn homeless. Why don't they get a job?"

"It's those gang-banging teenage thugs. Don't their parents know how to keep them in line?"

"It's all those foreigners coming over to exploit our wealth. Why can't they even speak English if they want to be Americans?"

We stand around watching what can be fixed, scared to make a difference and relieved to see that the people fighting in the circle on Market Street are not us. At least, not today.

Images of India

ANUSHREE SHIRALI

WRITER'S COMMENT: The idea for "Images of India" came after a frantic brainstorming session a few days before my assignment for English 101 was due. For some reason, I was having trouble writing a good paper that fit Ms. Walker's specifications for a reporting format. I was reluctant to write about my trip to India because I did not want it to sound like the typical travel article. However, after Ms. Walker's advice on writing several drafts to avoid the travel article bug, I began "Images of India."

Surprisingly, this paper was not difficult to write once I got started. My trip to India provided me with sights, sounds, and memories which will always remain with me. I wanted to share these experiences with others, to offer them a glimpse of my changing homeland, different from my beloved childhood days but bustling with anticipation of the future.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: Anushree Shirali's first-person report, written for my English 101 (Advanced Composition) class, shows a creative approach to the assignment of introducing readers to an unfamiliar social "world." Concerned with avoiding the clichés of conventional travel writing, she uses a trip to the Taj Mahal as a vehicle for exploring continuities and ruptures between India's past glories and its present realities. She creates a dual perspective on this trip, showing us the reactions of her American travel companion, the "foreign tourist," as well as her own observations and reflections on her native culture. Her command of resonant details is powerful, and her evocation of the spirit of contemporary India will haunt readers' imaginations.

— Jayne Walker, English Department

In the dawn of a June morning, I wait outside the Vasant Kunj residential buildings in New Delhi for a tour bus to the Taj Mahal. It is not yet six but India is never quiet. Nearly a billion people live in this country and need all twenty-four hours to live their hopes, fears, and dreams. The cows from the neighboring dairy farm are moaning wildly in anticipation of being violated to produce milk. Men sit on verandas and read newspapers while women calm whistling tea kettles and fussy babies. On the street a traffic policeman waits to direct the morning commute, fiddling to center his beret and smoking a cigarette from the corner of his wrinkled mouth.

I am waiting for the Regal Taj when another bus, advertising itself as the “premier deluxe air-conditioned Taj Express,” arrives, its seats apparently filled completely with people. I climb up the creaking steps as the driver stretches his hand for a ten-rupee note for the pleasure of this upgraded ride. There is a reason why the bus is “air-conditioned”; two of the windows are broken. A makeshift cellophane sheet stuck with duct tape over the open space keeps coming undone and rattles angrily against the ledge.

This is not a bus for the country club crowd. Men show deep creases of labor and worry on their foreheads and women balance four or five children, on their laps and pressed against their bosoms. But they are Indian, and they have a birthright and an obligation to respect their history. This is the country where spontaneous monuments sprout up in honor of Shivaji, the Hindu warrior who lost his friends, family, and then his life in resisting the conquering Moguls. This is the country where people invoke the name of Gandhi at political rallies, “Long Live Mahatma,” as if his placid face lingers as a ghost on the stage. The Mahabharat, mostly mythical but historically based, was adapted for television a few years ago and remains the highest rated series of all time. So, as overworked and overburdened as the masses may be, the Taj Mahal beckons to reveal the glory of India’s past to them.

The back of the bus has an empty seat, next to a foreign tourist, which I claim as my own. He is young, wears a USC shirt with a faded Trojan, and with the exception of an emerging goatee, is smooth-shaven. With a hiker’s backpack and lived-in brown boots, he seems well prepared for the journey. Gripping the virgin pages of his Indian travel guide in one hand, he extends the other to introduce himself. As I sit down, the bus moves ahead and leaves behind puffs of black smoke to rise up and

greet the awakening sky. He is an anthropology graduate student, on an independent field project to immerse himself in a new culture. The trip to the Taj Mahal is to be his introduction to the Indian way of life.

Within three hours of leaving Delhi, we arrive in Haryana, the agricultural state. The bus stops at Raja's *dukhan*, a small corner market and lunch counter, for drinks and refreshments. I buy bottled Evian while the American finally decides to grip the curves of a Coke bottle; they are out of Pepsi, his favorite brand. Across the street from the market, we see the anonymous farms, stripped bare from the spring harvest. The tractors are now at work turning over the topsoil for a new planting of seeds. The American jokes that these tractors, painted red with H-O-N-D-A in yellow letters, are faster than his Celica at home. After a while we climb aboard the bus, leaving behind the screams from the kitchen for orders of omelets and french fries, as well as *samosas*, *idlis*, and *dosas*.

The ride to Uttar Pradesh, of which Agra is the crown city, usually takes an hour or two after leaving Haryana. Our journey takes longer, however, because we make one stop for lunch and another one at a handloom house. The driver tries to make the latter stop seem natural and impromptu, but it is pre-arranged, as his candor with the manager indicates. The salesmen crowd around the American with jewelry, fabrics, and carpets, wooing him with discounts and congeniality. "*Sabeb, hum* credit card accept *karte hai*," they say to him in their broken attempt at English. But the lure of plastic does not convince him. He has heard that child labor is responsible for producing some of these handicrafts; he cannot encourage such exploitation. We return to the bus with postcards and stationery, no consolation to the salesmen who acknowledge our departure with disappointed stares.

A sudden stop at Agra awakens me and most of the sleeping passengers on the bus. The American turns sheepishly to me with a smile and says, "I could not sleep because I am too excited. I have heard that the Taj Mahal is one of the most peaceful spots on Earth." We make our way through Agra slowly. It is nearly four in the afternoon and the daily traffic jam of school buses, commercial trucks, and commuters has begun. The "Taj Express" no longer lives up to its name as it crawls along the street, slowed by children on tricycles and street vendors with big baskets of red, yellow, and green vegetables on their heads. After a few minutes at a snail's pace, the bus comes to a complete halt. The American extends his neck out of the window to gauge the extent of the traffic

backup and starts laughing. Apparently, a herd of cows is blocking the road a few yards away. As we wait impatiently in the bus, vehicles honk their horns to urge the cattle on, but they refuse to budge. Finally, their owner comes to lead them back home and the traffic starts moving again. The American breathes a sigh of relief and says, "The traffic here is even worse than in L.A." We continue the bus ride for another ten minutes before the sign appears: "Taj Mahal—2 km ahead."

The bus stops next to a dozen other tour buses and the American eagerly jumps out and loads film into his camera. From the parking lot, the Taj Mahal is not immediately visible to us. We are walking up a small hill when we see a towering brick wall with wooden doors, perhaps a quarter of a mile ahead. Looking at the top of the wall, we first catch a glimpse of the Taj, its dome extending slightly above the wall into the sky. This wall joins with other walls to create a border around the monument. The enclosure gives the impression of a guarded fort. We continue to walk towards the wooden doors.

We are a few yards from the entrance when a commotion distracts us. Crowds gather as a policeman attempts to arrest a panhandler who has kept his straw cot and his belongings against the brick wall. The man is kicking and screaming, not wanting to leave what seems to be his only home. But the policeman succeeds, the crowds disperse, and we make our way through the doors. Just before we enter, another policeman stops us, takes our purses and bags to a holding area, and checks our pockets. "Why are you checking my pockets?" the American asks. "You could be carrying a gun or a bomb," he replies, adding, "You never know how the terrorists will next plan an attack." His eyes, cloudy brown and sunken deep into his face, are old and experienced; he means his words. He allows us to proceed.

Upon entering the main doors, we make our way through a maze of gardens and walkways until we reach a smaller wall with wooden doors. The doorway perfectly frames the Taj Mahal, which stands a half-mile straight across in the distance. As we walk through the gardens that lead to the stairs of the Taj, the American remarks, "It's beautiful but not as big as I imagined and a little darker than the pictures in my travel guide." In the horizon, refinery towers choke out curling black smoke. He is trying to take pictures when children accidentally splash water on him from the garden fountains. "Too many people in the way," he says, "so I can't get a good shot." We sit down on the marble benches between

two sculpted dwarf pine trees. An elderly gentleman, with wire-rimmed glasses like Gandhi's and a Nehru jacket, is sitting next to us studying the monument. His son, in faded denim and a polo shirt, keeps urging him to be in a photograph with him, with the Taj as a background. But he sits still and stares at it, imprinting every image into his memory so that one day his words can show his grandkids the Taj Mahal. And everywhere, the older generation sits and stares wistfully while its sons and daughters pose their children for pictures. Then we hear our driver shout that it is time for the Taj Express to leave. The American says, "Is it that time already?"

The ride home is quiet and mellow. "Did the trip," I ask, "meet your expectations?" "Not exactly," the American replies. I know what he means. It is not the India of his imagination or my childhood memories. We expect India to be exotic and mysterious, with snake charmers, warriors, and precious jewels. In reality, it shares problems familiar to the Western world, like traffic, pollution, and terrorism. Indian culture has readily adapted to western food, technology, and clothing. The cows, once sacred and celebrated, share space with automobiles. Even the Taj Mahal is no longer the focus of myths, fables, and romances; it is now reduced to a celluloid image in some family's vacation photo album. The past is there, but the future demands its own attention. As the bus slows near my stop, I turn to the American and wish him luck on his field project. The Taj Express speeds away, the black puffs of smoke no longer visible in the midnight shadows.

Youth Hostel Plakias

LYDIA WERNER

WRITER'S COMMENT: Inspired by my parents' transcontinental love story and an Australian cousin who does freelance travel writing from France, I decided to take Journalism (UWP 104C) with the hopes of capturing my own passion for travel on paper. As I sat down to write "Youth Hostel Plakias," I quickly realized that journalism was not as simple as recounting my travel tales. Ms. Jayne Walker taught me that the use of language is powerful enough to cross borders in those who have never so much as left home. She showed me that through the delicate and artistic manipulation of written language, it is possible to evoke and shape the visions of others. I am greatly appreciative to have created "Youth Hostel Plakias" as a culmination of my vision, a treasured travel experience, and the literary guidance of Ms. Walker.

INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: I remember how enthusiastically Lydia Werner shared her discovery of Travelgirl magazine, in response to an early assignment in my UWP 104C (Journalism) class. Finding a travel magazine aimed at intelligent, adventurous young women whetted her ambition to write a piece of her own. When I read Lydia's first draft of "Youth Hostel Plakias," the opening took my breath away. Her description of the road to Plakias, on the southern coast of Crete, is terrifyingly exact. These and countless other details take the reader there, with her—to explore the coast and the town (not "idyllic" but "better, it's untouched") and to relish the company of other young adventurers gathered at the hostel. The description of places and scenes is deepened and enriched by the autobiographical dimension of the piece. It was her parents' stories of their backpacking adventures in the 1970s that impelled her to seek out this remote hostel, far from the beaten tourist path. From them, Lydia has inherited a vivid sense of place.

— Jayne Walker, University Writing Program

I jolted awake. The man across the aisle was fidgeting incessantly. I thought something was wrong. I peered over and stiffened: he wasn't fidgeting, he was praying. He crossed himself continuously, and to my bewilderment, I noticed several others on the bus doing the same. We swerved along, the driver honking and shouting with each hairpin turn. Perhaps guardrails once offered some protection from the precipitous drops. Perhaps not. We plummeted into chalky gorges and bounced over summits. Whitewashed cubes equipped with the standard cross dotted the bottoms of the snaking crevices, inciting even further head bowing. Nothing could have prepared the weary traveler for the Greek road system, not even two days of trains and two overnight ferries (sleeping outside on the wet decks, of course). I was terrified to (literally) be veering so far from the well-beaten path. I readjusted my grip and cursed myself for ever having entertained this whimsical notion. But this was my last attempt to revive the travel fantasies of my childhood. A year abroad and nineteen path-beaten countries later, I feared further disappointment even more than public transportation. I desperately needed to regain the travel spirit I had lost somewhere along the way. Terraced hills speckled with olive trees and the sapphire Mediterranean came into view, and my heart rate lowered as we emerged from the gorge and descended into Plakias.

Crete is Greece's southernmost island, upon whose southern fringe lies the nearly undiscovered Plakias. The hostel web page boasts "the most southerly hostel in Europe!" Graced by the gods, I found the ancient art of backpack travel fully excavated in Crete. The island bustles with a freshly exotic air while still gracefully preserved as a timeless camaraderie. Tucked between two gorges, at the bottom of a rugged mountain range, Plakias exists as a communal treasure openly shared with those who actually get there.

The first chapter in my personal book of travels was written by my parents. One fateful night in 1972, they met in a Welsh youth hostel. My Aussie mum rang the ship bell on the wall, mistaking it for the call bell on the counter. When the whole place awoke, she saw my Californian dad smiling behind the tangle of a 1970s beard. While parts of the story were omitted for the children's sake (e.g., the fact that my mum was already engaged!), the point is that after extensive traveling, they ended up on Sitia, also on the island of Crete. They rented a flat together and attempted a Cretan cultural immersion. They passed endless days

plummeting to the bottomless sea from sun-scorched rocks and luring unsuspecting octopi with sticks. They shared the nights with the locals, feasting on roasted goat and fresh fish and, of course, drinking lots of ouzo. Hitchhiking, sleeping in apple orchards, skiing the Alps, handing over passports in Yugoslavia, and crossing into Soviet East Germany were my bedtime stories.

It was no surprise when I set off to study abroad for a year in Madrid. I used the city as my base (and excuse) for backpacking excursions. During my final and longest solo trip, I concluded that the life of youth hostelling and backpacking was not what I had envisioned. My romantic visions were dashed by the harsh reality of spring break mini-resorts masquerading as traditional youth hostels. They were packed with high school graduates, seemingly pushed to Europe by their parents. They tossed back shots of the local drinks (Pilsner Urquell in Prague, sangria in Granada, just about anything in Munich, and absinthe everywhere, all at upped rates and reduced concentrations), while grocery-listing their visits and complaining about the local culture—without straying from the hostel’s own bar and club downstairs, of course. When they did leave the hostel, it was with one of the exorbitantly-priced tour groups that cut deals with the proprietors. “Culture” was tailored, packaged, and delivered to the doorstep, for a price. Gone were my childhood notions of toughing it out, using my Swiss Army knife, and swapping stories with fellow travelers. I was thoroughly disenchanted.

The bus skidded to a stop alongside a strip of beach. I strapped on my bag and sweated around, clutching the directions I had downloaded the previous night on the ferry. “Get off at Plakias sea front and walk with the sea on your right for about 100m, turn left and go past the pharmacy.” Check. “At the end of this road, turn left and follow the yellow triangular signs. You will be home in less than 10 minutes.” Check. A girl I met in Prague had gushed that a friend once stayed at “some amazing hostel” in “some amazing place” on Crete. Well, there is only one hostel in Plakias, so this had to be it. In fact, there’s really only one of everything in Plakias, if that. This could only mean that the olive grove lying hazily ahead, decorated with peach bungalows, was it. Home.

“Hello, love,” the manager, Chris, rasped past the cigarette see-sawed in his teeth. “The kids ’ull all be ’round later. Go a’ead an put yur stuff down.”

The layout of the hostel grounds promoted a sense of community. The reception area was more of a kitchen and shared room, open onto the

large patio and grassy area. Five bungalows gathered around the communal area, connected by stepping stones and overhead trellises dangling their teasing vines and purple flowers. Every stucco unit had a front and back patio, great for lazy nights chatting and white gecko watching. Luke's bed happened to be on my front porch, where he conveniently hand-rolled his cigarettes while Alex cooked eggplant over a Bunsen burner. The doors opposite one another pulled a breeze even through the impossible heat. The terra-cotta floors cooled calloused and sandy feet. My back patio looked out into the olive grove, where a waist-high retaining wall separated us from the wandering horses. They crunched past eerily in the middle of the night, even after the time Luke insisted that he ride one and woke with a dislocated arm.

I immediately changed into my swimsuit and skirt, not knowing they would be my uniform for the entirety of my stay. I wandered back through the downtown, which consists mainly of a single street along the water. The promenade is home to the quaint, family-owned restaurants and shops. Several bisecting streets head up towards brilliantly white homes contrasting sharply against their dusty olive groves. My frivolous attempt to decipher the signs using only the characters I could recall lettered along Frat Row in college proved to be completely unsuccessful. I couldn't resist chuckling; it was all Greek to me. I was surprised that the town wasn't idyllic. Dead weeds jutted and clumped, fences fell down, walls cracked, and gray-haired widows clad in black sat menacingly on doorsteps. It isn't idyllic, it's better: it's untouched.

It was quiet down on the beach, and I was ecstatic to finally relax. The main Plakias beach is partially protected by the mountainous caves jutting out one side and a half-moon bay forming the other. Mopeds droned along the main street, past the rows of green chaise lounges. My mind raced, with my trip coming to an end and so little time to island hop the Greek hotspots like Mikonos and Santorini. I fell asleep, unaware of the dangers of the near Equator sun. I found out. My first few nights were sick and hallucinogenic. I spent the days chafing and peeling. That is, until the day Luke challenged the fellow hostellers to a skin peeling contest. Sheets the size of paper money were pulled from my back, and Luke, never one to back down from a challenge, ate one.

When I scuffled in late that first afternoon, the reception area and patio were abuzz with movement. I nervously sat near a group, as I always did the first night in a hostel, hoping that someone would invite me

over. Only this time, something was different: there was really only one big group—not lots of personal clusters. I could hear them giggling, and finally someone asked, “Hello. So where are you from?” It was an ice-breaking game they played. They had already pinned me as Dutch, Czech, Australian, or American. Only one day later, I would be playing the game, as if I had been there forever, too. When I introduced myself as a Tasmanian-Californian, Luke grinned and proudly held out his hand, “So we have a fellow Tassie girl!” His over-sunned face, blond locks, and big blue eyes could have made him my brother—something we both called our mums to rule out, to the amusement of the group. Tasmania is a small place; it certainly wouldn’t have been unheard of . . .

The daily stories spilled over the table like the honey mixing into Alex’s white Greek yogurt. Some had gone to nearby beaches, others on the river walk, and most just lounged around the hostel. Apparently Plakias is the perfect place to do absolutely nothing at all. It’s also apparently the place that nobody ever leaves. My travel guides and calendars lay as untouched as my plans to leave that very first afternoon on the beach. It was really the only place which seemed to actually slow travelers down, to force them just to be. Luke, having been traveling for over two years, had been to ninety-one countries. Anyone who has been chased by cane-wielding curfew enforcers in Nepal, trekked through the snow in Slovenia, and watched a Tibetan Sky Burial has to be interesting. His stories were the best. Alex, my other quick friend, was as Greek as Greek can be. If his extreme olive skin and jet black hair didn’t give it away, his last name did: Tsoukas. Born to Greek immigrants in Canada, he was in his third year of medical school. Alex, like many of the other backpackers, had already been in Plakias for nearly three months, and, also like the others, it was not his first summer staying at Youth Hostel Plakias, nor would it be his last.

Youth Hostel Plakias epitomizes the idea of classic backpack travel primarily because the guests all share a similar passion for appreciating the natural and cultural diversity that can’t be explained in guidebooks. It takes a unique type of person to actually venture down there, especially as it’s not the resort ideal of the more touristy Greek isles. Since Plakias is not a place easily stumbled upon, each guest, including myself, comes in search of something unattainable elsewhere. Being so disconnected from the world and far from the stressors of life, even travel life, my own thoughts calmed and my mood lifted immediately. It was like that first

day of break after a tough quarter. You take a breath and realize that while you have been buckled down, all the rest of the world, in all her beauty, has continued to exist around you. It is truly eye-opening.

The hostel perpetuates the classic image of a backpacking haven by taking great pride in its “no rules” policy. Had any other hostel boasted the same, it would have been a free-for-all down at the bar. In Plakias, the “anything goes” idea only furthered the communal concept. The newbies looked to the other kids to gauge appropriate behavior, and the place runs on mutual respect, exactly as I would have imagined a hostel to run in the ‘70s. Breakfast was cooked and served for about \$1 every morning by those residents earning their \$8 per night keep. Outdoor mattresses were available for a discounted extended rate, like Luke’s patio hideaway. We shared the fridges, eating space, bathrooms, and just about everything we had, including our stories and even my Swiss Army knife (the same one my dad had used while backpacking).

The local community embraces the hostel as much as the hostel-goers respect the community. They are warm and welcoming, but not in a fake souvenir-pushing way. There are no tours to go on, no entrance fees, no expeditions, and certainly no pub-crawls. The only impromptu tour occurred one night while I was walking the main street with Luke: we were invited inside every restaurant to have a shot of Raki, the ouzo of Plakias, with each owner. One morning, Alex and I went shopping in a beautiful natural jewelry store, and to my surprised delight, the soft-spoken woman withdrew a curtain revealing a huge container of Raki. It was “Yammas” (cheers) at eleven o’clock a.m. Another night, the Serbian and Macedonian waiters linked around us in a circle, teaching us to dance the traditional Cretan pentozalis.

Each day was a self-led (or fellow hosteler-led) curiosity adventure, usually followed by a day of recovery. Skipping breakfast at the hostel, Alex and I usually started off the day by wandering downtown for either ice cream or souvlakia (a gyro with yogurt tzatziki sauce). We would meet up with the gang (whoever happened to be around that day) to weigh our fresh fruit and head off towards the mountains or the beaches. The concept of time ceased to exist. One afternoon, we hiked to Pig’s Bay, a perfectly enclosed hidden (nude) beach shrouded by rock cliffs. Luke and I scaled one of the jutting rocks and sat high above the water. We were there for hours, watching as the waves crashed against the other side and, amusingly, the nudies attempted the climb. Our history lesson that

afternoon was the discovery of cave dwellings used by the Germans in World War Two. Biology was the hour we stood pressed against a fence, watching a farmer feed his herd of sheep. “This is better than television,” murmured Chris, the gothic-kilted American. Of course, a day couldn’t have been better topped off than by the Plakias lending library. The 2,000 volume collection was quite possibly the most variably kept library in the world, coincidentally opening during what might be a “happy hour” and cheerfully serving wine to its patrons (unless you brought your own, of course).

I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t even end up going anywhere else in Greece (except, begrudgingly, to Athens to catch my flight). I had found what I had set out to find an entire year earlier, what every traveler sets out to find. It’s what compels us to keep going while we’re out on the road and refills our daydreams back in the confines of daily life. For me, it was the embodiment of a childhood of fantasies, the love story of my parents, and a reaffirmation of my personal travel spirit. I learned to trust that my own instincts will carry me to where I most want to go. Every backpacker is different, but we all yearn for those places in the world where we feel most alive. It’s Budapest for some and Antwerp for others, but Plakias is mine.

I trekked back down to the bus stop, the same as I had arrived. This time I was accompanied by half the hostel, even though Luke proclaimed it was only because he’d heard that the Swedish Women’s Volleyball team would be arriving on the incoming bus. I waved through tears as we lurched and groaned back into the gorge and up the summit. The Plakias beach twinkled back, further off, behind me. We were first stalled by a man crossing with his burro and then teetered precariously over a cliff while attempting a fifteen-point U-turn on the two-lane road. I peered to the bottom for the whitewashed shrines, crossed myself, and held on.