

Youth Hostel Plakias

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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.

—*Lydia Werner*

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 1970's 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.

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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 seen-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 swim suit 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 grey-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 hostelers 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 91 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 guide books. It takes a unique type of person to actually venture down there, especially as it's not the resorty-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 cur-

tain revealing a huge container of Raki. It was “Yammas” (cheers) at eleven o’clock AM. 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 sadziki 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 15-point U-turn on the two-lane road. I peered to the bottom for the whitewashed shrines, crossed myself, and held on.