



My First Time Abroad: Sea, Sun, Sand...

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I was young and naïve.

I was from a small town in the north of England and I'd never been further than the Isle of Wight. I sat in the travel agency and stared at the brochures. Eventually, I made up my mind. Eight days in Corfu, Greece; the land of Homer, his Iliad and Odyssey; of Scylla and Charybdis and the one-eyed giant Polyphemus.

Eight days of sun, sea, sand and ... salty kisses, perhaps? What could possibly go wrong?

My flight was at 3 pm so I turned up at the airport half an hour earlier, secure in the belief that I was in plenty of time. I would have been even earlier but I stopped off for a beer. To calm the nerves.

I looked around for the plane with 'CORFU' written on the front but couldn't see it so I asked a nice lady from Olympic Airways. She screamed at me that everyone was waiting and 10 seconds later I was being rushed through customs and immigration and raced down a long corridor. I couldn't understand the fuss. We still had 15 minutes.

We literally ran across the tarmac to a flight of steps leading to the plane. They were just closing the doors. Up we went, the nice lady called me several unpleasant names. I was still carrying my suitcase. They took it off me, put it up front near where the pilot was sitting, strapped me into my seat and 10 minutes later we were floating high above the clouds.

This is it, I thought. This is the life. No more staid, boring England for me.

I had only one regret: I hadn't thought to bring a couple of beers with me. *If only they served beer on planes,* I thought. *It would be magic.* Then a stewardess appeared pushing a trolley laden with fruit juice and water and – oh my God – beer! I was in ecstasy.

Travelling eh? This was the life for me!

It was late when I arrived at my small hotel but not too late to find a little place the tourists didn't know about called *Zorba's Hideaway* – where I stayed till they threw me out some time in the middle of the night.

The next morning when I awoke I was ravenous. What did they do for breakfast in Greece? Cornflakes? Porridge? Boiled eggs on toast? I went down to the breakfast room.

In front of me was a long table groaning with bread, cold meats, cheese, olives, tomatoes, sliced fish, fruit. I took a plate, heaped it up until there was no space left, sat at my appointed table and wolfed the whole lot in three minutes flat. I sat there, drinking my breakfast coffee and cursing myself for not taking more. Then I saw four tourists at a table across the room blatantly stand, walk to the table and help themselves to second helpings.

I was horrified. *Typical tourists, I thought, stealing food.*

Then the four British tourists on the next table to me did the same thing. And the staff stood there watching this casual brazen theft and doing nothing about it.

It then began to percolate through my hungover brain that you were actually allowed to go up for a second time. I was from the north of England, where you ate what was on your plate and that was it. I had never seen a buffet, let alone at breakfast. I took my plate loaded it up again, all the time waiting for a heavy hand on my shoulder to stop me. None came, so I sat down and ate the lot.

Greece, I thought. *It's wonderful.*

Kurt was a muscular American about 50 years old. His girlfriend, Marie wasn't much older than me and she was stunningly beautiful. Their daily routine was to wander down to the beach, Kurt carrying a cooler full of drinks and Marie wearing a bikini which wouldn't have made a decent meal for a moth. In Kurt's cooler, he had ice, a large bottle of Coke and a bottle of Glenfiddich. By three in the afternoon, when the bottles were empty, Marie and I would help him back to his room where he would sleep until dinner. Kurt and Marie were from Los Angeles.

"What do you do, then Kurt?" I asked.

"I'm in the movie business," he replied.

"So what are you doing in Corfu then?"

"Talent spotting."

As I've mentioned I was very young and very naïve and it was quite a while later when it dawned on me to wonder exactly what type of movies Kurt was making. Obviously I didn't have the right talent.

I spent two days lying on the beach and swimming in the sea and on day three I decided to do a bit of sightseeing –possibly because I was as red as a tomato and burned in places I didn't think the sun could even reach. I took a local bus into Corfu Town and wandered around for a bit. It's a lovely place, every bit as beautiful as a sun-soaked town in the Mediterranean ought to be. The main square is surrounded by colonnaded arcades with cafes and restaurants and tables outdoors shaded from the sun.



The main square: Corfu Town

The old town is a picturesque riot of narrow, winding lanes, old pink and white and yellow houses, small stores selling cakes, fruits, vegetables and everywhere, flowers. In baskets, trailing from verandahs, even grapevines growing outside; shops and bars next to old churches and tavernas and dusty squares with old men drinking tiny cups of thick Greek coffee in the sunshine.





The old town, Corfu



...and everywhere, flowers...

And just a stone's throw away the blue waters of the Ionian

Before setting out for Corfu I had read and very much enjoyed the book, *My Family and Other Animals*, by Gerald Durrell. The house in which the Durrell family had lived was only a few miles away so I decided to hire a motorbike and go to see it.

"Driving licence?" asked the proprietor of the bike rental shop.

I cursed. I hadn't thought to bring my licence along.

"Left it at home," I said, shrugging my shoulders.

"No matter," he said, shrugging his shoulders and five minutes later I was astride an ancient Vespa that had probably last been used by Odysseus on his way home from the Trojan wars.

It was a beautiful day, riding along the road by the coast and passing through a tiny, sleepy village I decided to stop for lunch. In a small, cool, dark taverna I had a feta cheese salad and a hunk of crusty bread and a bowl of olives washed down with a cold beer. What I wanted to do then was to stay there for the rest of my life but instead, I climbed back onto my trusty steed and headed north. As I struggled at walking pace up the hills I decided that the pop band 10cc had named themselves after the size of my bike's engine, but eventually, I rolled down the hill into Kalami Bay.

The Durrell house was exactly as they had described it in the book: square and white and ancient, and looked a wonderful place to have spent four years of your childhood. I wandered around in the woods and down to the beach where the fishing boats were drawn up, taking photos and had a brief dip in the clear blue sea. Then I headed back to Corfu Town.



The house in Corfu where the Durrell family spent four years in the 1930's. Now a restaurant serving traditional Greek food

Back at the hotel I had a shower and changed. I was feeling very virtuous. I had done my sightseeing and tonight I was taking care of the cultural side for I had a ticket for an extravaganza labelled *The Authentic Greek Night*. Lots of Greek food and wine and bouzouki music and wine and Greek dancing and plate-smashing and wine. What could possibly go wrong?

A coach picked us up and we were taken to a taverna, a huge place with long wooden tables and a stage where Greek people danced Greek dances while bouzouki music played loudly.

I was sat next to a bunch of middle-aged English tourists from Birmingham. Many bottles of Greek wine appeared. Now, I knew that there were two kinds of wine: red and white and that if you drank lots of them you'd be carried home. That was the entire extent of my wine knowledge.

The Birmingham tourists were taking the different bottles and saying things like, "Ooh yes, good tannins that," and "Hints of raspberries and tobacco," and "This one's not nearly so full-bodied as the last one," and so on. I asked for a beer. Then I asked for another beer. Then I excused myself and went for a wander.

It was down a long narrow corridor and halfway down that I saw a room on the right where two Greeks were filling up many random wine bottles from two enormous barrels of wine. I returned to my table and, as the Birmingham lot were talking about aromas of gooseberries and so forth, I said: "It's all the same wine. They just fill up the bottles from this big barrel down that corridor."

There was a long silence and then this 50-year-old with a moustache said, "What do you know about wine? Nothing, that's what. Now get lost." They all agreed with him and I was moved to another table.

Later, I was invited to join the Greek dancing on the stage. It was easy enough. You put your hands on each other's shoulders, turn, kick left foot! Turn, kick right foot! The tourists from Birmingham were standing at the foot of the stage, laughing. Then I kicked the left foot when I should have turned and I kicked the man with the moustache in the face. Divine justice it may have been but I spent the rest of the evening hiding out in *Zorba's Hideaway*.





Another of Corfu's stunning beaches, washed by the clear blue waters of the Ionian Sea

The following day, having put Kurt to bed Marie asked me if I was going to the disco. What disco? She told me where it was and I duly rolled up there that evening. Lots of tourists, lots of skimpily clad women and a bar. My kind of place.

I sat at the bar with a beer watching this girl twitching about to some rock music. She smiled at me. I smiled at her. This went on for two more beers until I summoned up the courage to walk over and ask her to dance. I performed my impersonation of a dysfunctional robot in need of urgent mechanical repairs and then the DJ put on a slow dance. The girl smiled at me, I put my arms around her and she screamed. Very loudly. The music stopped and everyone in the place was staring at me.

"I'm really sorry," she said in English (she was from Birmingham). "Only I fell asleep on the beach and I'm really sunburnt and it really hurts."

In the meantime, two very large, very unfriendly Greek guys were walking across the dance floor. I tried to explain but it made no difference. They threw me out and warned me what would happen if I ever came back. So I went to *Fernando's Hideaway*.

The girl who worked behind the bar in *Fernando's Hideaway* was older than me but still very attractive. Having failed miserably in the disco I decided to try to pick her up. I mentioned that I was all alone in my hotel. Then the bar owner appeared. The pretty bartender was his wife. So they threw me out of there as well.

After eight days, I flew back to England. This time I turned up at the airport on time. As I sat on the plane, drinking my beer I reflected on my first ever foreign trip. Eight days of sun, sea, sand and... salty kisses.

Well, I thought: three out of four isn't bad.



GLENYS NELLIST

What a great story, Trevor. I was right there with you. Loved it.

Reply



Mel Hughes

That really made me laugh, Trevor! Fabulous story. The image of Odysseus riding a Vespa really tickled me. Excellent!

Reply



PAMELA BEN MARDHIA

Great read. I feel you may be qualified to write an article entitled "Bars I have been thrown out of", although it might be rather long!

Reply



Paul

Trevor

Wonderful story! It was just like we all remember—our own first tentative steps into the world of Alan Whicker.
Paul Hatzler

Reply