

Date: 16/02/2011

Place: Athens

Kms walked: 2018

Hello all and a somewhat belated Happy New Year. It's quite a while since I wrote – reasons will become clear later. But first I hope everyone had a blessed and peaceful Christmas (if you can remember back that far!). Certainly my first Christmas on my own turned out much better than I expected despite a slightly dubious start. I woke up that morning and like the little kitten I had rescued in Italy, one of my eyes was glued tightly shut. I had conjunctivitis! “This is somewhat inconvenient”, I thought to myself, “I hope there's a duty chemist open”.

I had come to Naxos in search of sun and the island had not disappointed. The morning again had dawned with blue skies and sun so I was in good spirits as I set off to Christmas Day Mass. It was warm enough to wear the turquoise cotton dress that I had last worn when I was a tourist in Split. I found a chemist open and was able to get the eye drops I needed without the palaver of a doctor's prescription.

Later that day I was introduced to the wonders of Skype. This is something I had meant to investigate years ago but never quite got round to it. Anyway I was fortunate in having free wifi where I was staying so downloaded the software and off I went. It was surprisingly easy. The technology enabled me to talk to my family as well as a good friend which was really great and made me feel less isolated. And my 'red cross parcel'? Had great fun opening all the packets, one of which had chocolate Santas, some of which I put on my little tree. Another contained mince pies so my Christmas dinner consisted of taramasalata, mince pies and mavrodaphne (a sweet red Greek wine).

As I said earlier, the Naxos climate turned out to be just what I hoped for. It was generally mild to warm and sunny. The island itself was beautiful – again just what I hoped. I found people friendly and most spoke enough English to enable me to communicate. Also my 'landlady' introduced me to a good friend of hers, an Australian lady. Again I found we had a lot in common and had coffee with her on several occasions. She presented me with some delicious Christmas cake and during the course of my stay gave me a guided tour of their museum of Folk Art.



First glimpses of Naxos island



A typical street in the old part of town



Pause for prayer at a street shrine in the town



Naxos coastline

So how did I spend my time there? Well I have to confess I did not explore as much as I thought I would, nor did my feet itch much. Having obtained a bus timetable I was disappointed to find that although I could take a bus out to some of the inland villages, in many cases I could not get one back til very early in the morning. This put paid to plans of walking out to the village and getting the bus back. One of the days I set off at about 10:00 and walked about 8kms to a very old Church then crossed into the next valley and back by a different route. Although I did very little exploring, I was mindful of the fact I was still on pilgrimage and continued to pray daily for those who had requested it and I was able to attend Mass nearly every day.

Time passed so quickly and it seemed like only a few days after I arrived when suddenly it was the day before I had to leave. I said goodbye to the Priest and he started saying something about the weather. I wasn't quite sure what he meant (we were speaking French) but alarm bells sounded when he said something along the lines of "check with ferry agency". On arriving at the port office I was told that the weather was changing to stormy and would be like this for several days. They did not know if there was a sailing that day, let alone the next and I was advised to come back at 15:30 and if there was a sailing, to take it as there might not be another for several days.

It was imperative for me to leave the island on time because at the same time I had arranged to come to Naxos to rest, I had also arranged to return to the UK to do an 8 day silent retreat to prepare for the next part of my journey. I was booked to fly out on the 18<sup>th</sup> January and not only would I lose money if I missed the plane, I would also miss the start of the retreat because the flights were not daily.

The change in weather was a blow because the sailing (if there was one) would not get me into Pireaus port until midnight and the people at the ferry office could not tell me if there was a transport strike or not, so I did not know if I would be able to get into Athens and even if I did get into Athens centre I was not relishing the thought of wandering around that late trying to find accommodation. With all this going round in my head I went back to my room and packed.

To cut a long story short I did get the ferry, there was a train into Athens and I met a couple of Guardian Angels with whom I travelled and we three managed to get a taxi to the hostel where I had stayed previously and which had 24hr reception and plenty of room. I was unable to settle down and sleep though until about 3:00.

Next day I met as planned a very kind woman who had agreed to find somewhere for my pilgrim staff and large rucksack to be stored while I was on retreat. We chatted over coffee and I went back to the hostel where I had arranged to call a friend using Skype. Then disaster struck.

It was 20:30 and I was literally just a couple of yards away from the hostel when someone came up behind me and the next thing I felt was the strap of my bumbag slipping away from under my arm. I had had it strung over my shoulder and I think the guy must have cut the strap as it came away so easily. He ran off and I ran after him but it was no use, I couldn't catch him. Going back to the hostel the full ramifications of what had just happened hit me – and it was a nightmare!

In the bumbag were my credit and bank cards, my passport, my glasses, my phone with most of the photos I had taken of Naxos, my EEC health insurance card, my paper money. I still had my purse in which was loose change, but it contained less than 1€. I quickly sent an email explaining what had happened to my friend who was expecting my Skype call and then set about getting my cards stopped and my mobile blocked. I had all the numbers written down on a piece of paper but of

course had no phone! The hostel phone was prevented from making international phone calls but there was a public phone available but I had no money. I was able to cancel some cards over the internet (the hostel had free wifi).

Then Guardian Angels started to come to my rescue. First the chap at reception gave me 10€ so I could buy a phone card. I went out again and searched for ages before I found a place open that sold them. En route I went by the police station to try and report the theft but after waiting for 20mins I felt I needed to get the phone calls made so gave up and returned to the hostel where the receptionist lent me a pair of glasses so at least I could read!

After making the necessary phone calls I paused to think about what I should do next. What about the flight the next day and my retreat? It was now about 22:30. Checking my travel insurance I found that it was a condition that I report any loss or theft to the police within 48 hrs. I thought long and hard. As it happened I had a second passport so I was not actually prevented from travelling. It was not too late to change the document details on the plane ticket. Should I be busting a gut to catch the flight or abandon my plans and stay here in Athens to start sorting stuff out. Something told me I should bust a gut and not abandon my plans.

A second and third Guardian Angel now appeared. The second was another member of hostel staff (the reception shift had changed). I was saying I had to go now to the police and he was concerned at the lateness of the hour as this was not the most salubrious part of Athens. He went over to a young lad from Australia who had only checked in a short time ago, explaining my situation he asked the lad if he would escort me to the police station. The lad immediately said yes. I warned him it could take more than an hour but he was adamant that he would come. I was so relieved and grateful to both. I dashed off another email to my friend to let him know what was happening and then went off to the police station. The visit there took over an hour. On the way back the lad gave me 15€ so I would have enough money to get to the airport (and back if something happened and I couldn't board the flight).

It was now about 01:00 and at long last I could relax and phone my friend who promptly insisted on contacting the retreat house the next day to arrange to pay the balance of what I owed and also a bit extra that they would give me in cash. I checked my English money and had enough to get to the retreat house though not much more. We chatted for quite a while, during which time the Australian lad went to his dorm after giving me a note telling me his room number and instructions not to hesitate in waking him up if I needed anything.

I never went to bed that night, after all the events of that night and the previous one I was exhausted and fell asleep beside my netbook in the lounge area. After a couple of hours I woke up and went out to try and find an internet café to print off my revised boarding pass but with no luck. In the end I headed out to the airport – en route trying another internet place but they didn't have print facilities. However the chap on the information desk kindly rang the airport for me to make sure I could get my boarding pass there and as I turned to leave, having overheard my tale of woe an Englishwoman offered me 50€.

And then I was on the plane winging my way back to the UK. Annoyingly I just missed a train from the airport to the house but it gave me a chance to relax and have a coffee. Then on the train when I was on the last leg of the journey, a sense of peace washed over me. It really felt that I had made the right decision to come back to the UK to go on the retreat instead of staying in Athens.

As I mentioned earlier, flights from Athens were not daily and I was a day early for the retreat. This was a real blessing as it gave me time to do a detailed list of what was in my bumbag and make sure I had covered everything (like requesting a claim form, a new E111 etc) so I was able to start the retreat without a jumble of distractions. The retreat went very well though I found it difficult to be in such cold weather after the warmth of Naxos. My customary ambling strolls round the grounds turned into brisk walks but I did take some photos – see below.



Winter garden



A winter garden resident

But very very sadly there were 4 things in my bumbag which are irreplaceable. There was my Pilgrim Credential with all the stamps from Churches, Monasteries etc along my route. Then there was a set of Rosary beads given to me by a kind lady in Pratoveccio, Italy. These beads were made from olive wood from the garden of Gethsemane. There was also an orthodox prayer rope given to me by a member of the monastic community at Marango in Italy, and finally a set of Rosary beads given to me in 2002 by 2 very dear friends when I set off on my very first pilgrimage. I have carried those beads always ever since. I am very sad that those things are gone but take some comfort from the words of the secretary at the retreat house who said that they would bring a blessing to the person who had taken my bumbag. Who knows what the consequence of that might be.

I relate the above incident in detail not because I want sympathy but because I wanted to tell you all how kind people are. I also look at the whole thing as a warning – carrying all that stuff in one place might was obviously not the wisest thing to do. And if I was going to be robbed, it couldn't have been better timed, on an evening just before I was due to talk to someone in the UK and just before I was due to come back to the UK.

I had hoped to go back directly from the retreat to Athens and then on to Macedonia to resume walking but it soon became obvious I would have to go home first to pick up the new cards and sort out my replacement passport etc. I thought this would be relatively plain sailing but not so! Again I cut a long, rambling story short and just list what went wrong.

1. I decided not to buy a new phone as my previous one would suffice. A week after I went home the screen of the phone gave up the ghost. I had to buy a new one.
2. I bought a new phone, same brand, different model but after a few days discovered that it would not run the word processing software I needed it to do. I had to get another model.
3. I got another model and instead of it taking an hour or so to install the word-processing software it took a day.
4. I have a large screen laptop that I use as my main PC. I closed it down one evening.

Everything was fine. Next day I turned it on and it would not load because an operating system file had got corrupt. I tried the recovery disks for it but was warned all my data would be lost so that one will have to wait til I get back.

5. I bought a replacement USB drive and when trying to transfer files from one PC to my netbook the USB drive went corrupt and un-readable.
6. Just as I got out of the car at the station to catch my train to London, the strap on my daysack ripped. I have already repaired it 3 times so I decided I would have to get another. I tried the shop in London from whence it had come but they have changed their design and the new one was too small so I still need to get a replacement.
7. As I mentioned above I bought a new USB drive but neglected to pack it!
8. After several days at home my replacement credit cards still had not arrived. I rang one to be told that it had not been ordered as I had not completed security checks when I had reported it stolen. I did vaguely remember I was unable to complete the checks because the phone card was running out. I waited a few more days for the other card but it still didn't arrive. I rang that one and was told the replacement had not been ordered though they didn't know why.

Still, I did manage to find somewhere quiet to stay before I returned to Athens. It was a Priory in London where I was able to join the community for prayers, something I have not been able to do since I was in Italy.

So I am now in Athens and will collect my rucksack this evening. Hopefully tomorrow, if there is not another transport strike (there are still strikes here in Athens) I will be on my way back to Ohrid.

Take care and God Bless

Ann