

September, 2013 Travel Column for "Experience"

By Valerie Graczyk

OUR FAVORITE PLACE

If someone were to ask you what is your favorite place to travel to what would you say?

Over the past eight years Wayne and I have led tours to at least 14 to 16 countries, so our answer no doubt is a bit different from yours. Unless of course you have travelled to Greece! Yes, it is the most magical, beautiful, historical place we have ever traveled to, so we have decided to return in April, 2014!

We were supposed to go to Egypt in 2011 but civil unrest erupted. We were leading a large group and the travel agency asked me what other country would I want to take the group to? I had just finished reading a book about a mother and daughter traveling to Greece titled "Traveling with Pomegranates" by Susan Monk Kidd and Ann Kidd Taylor. I closed my eyes and replied "Greece".

We did go to Greece and it was unforgettable! One of our travelers wrote on her evaluation "Greece was NOT on my bucket list (she used a word here that was a bit stronger). "WOW was I wrong!!!"

So what made Greece so exceptional? Well, to begin with, it is the birth place of democracy. We have a photo of the entire group standing in front of the Acropolis which is high above the city of Athens. When we took the photo I thought this is so surreal. I have seen the photo of the Acropolis since grade school in history books but to be standing right there was a "pinch me" moment of was this really happening?

We travelled to Olympia, the site of the Olympic Games, and I ran the length of the field where the first athletes ran. Stones are dated to around 2000 BC. The first games were held in 776 BC with the final games in AD 393. Women were not allowed to watch the games with the exception of one. She was a priestess of Demeter Chamyne, who during the games sat at the goddess's altar. Only Greeks were allowed to participate in the games.

Another fascinating place we visited was Delphi the home of the sanctuary of the god Apollo on the slopes of Mount Parnassus. On the day we toured it was a gorgeous clear, cool blue sky morning and the views were breathtaking. We were the only tourists and we could feel a sense of sacredness as we walked up the steep incline. The temple was situated at the highest place on the mountain where pilgrims devoutly climbed to be told their future. It was here the Oracles would interpret the prophesies. It was here where annually the fumes of volcanic gas that came out of the ground placed the priestesses in trances speaking gibberish with the Oracles translating. Our expert guide, Voula brought it all to life for us.

Cruising the islands of Mykonos, Crete, Santorini, Ephesus and Patmos was a delight. Each island was unique; Mykonos had windmills, Santorini white painted buildings with blue domed roofs, Hydra had donkeys as the only mode of transportation to carry household items or your groceries. The islands were hilly with narrow cobble stoned streets, and dogs lying in the sun. In fact, everywhere we went in Greece there were dogs sleeping or wandering. The dogs were calm and friendly. We were told there is

a law in Athens that the dogs belong to all of the community and they are fed by the restaurants nearby. They were taken care by a veterinarian team paid by the government and they are valued as part of the community. Wayne threw a dog a dinner roll and the dog turned away. The waiter said the dogs enjoy the best meats from the menu and a dinner roll would not suffice.

In the book I mentioned earlier Susan Monk Kidd describes going to the island of Ephesus and visiting the House of Mary, the mother of Jesus. In the book the women who were traveling with her visited the house. There is a tradition of writing a wish or a prayer on a sheet of paper and sticking them in a crevice of a huge tree on the property. I explained this to our travelers and a number of them joined me in this ritual. It was very touching to see all the white slips of paper carefully placed with hopes of being answered. It is an interesting piece of history. The very house had been excavated and it is believed to be where Mary lived out her final days. I bought a book on the history and enjoyed reading it as we continued our travels.

You can't go to Greece without enjoying the food. There are so many different and delicious tastes and smells. We tried everything and enjoyed some of these dishes: Spanakopita, a pie made from phyllo dough, spinach and feta cheese stuffed and layered; Baklava, a well-known Greek pastry; Souvlaki, a gyros pita filled with lamb, or pork or chicken with a yogurt cucumber sauce, and Moussaka, an oven baked casserole of layered eggplant and meat filling.

Wayne and I will be presenting on Greece at different area libraries this fall. We have some great photos and stories to share and will bring the rich history alive. Call the library near you for the date and time. We hope you will join us at the Campbellsport, Oshkosh and Ripon Libraries in September and October. The library travelogues are free and open to the public. Dates are also on our web site at www.somedaytravel.com

Valerie and Wayne Graczyk "Making Your Someday Travel Dreams Come True"