

Michelle Sherman, 2007

June 2, 2007

Today, we started off by visiting Eleni's aunt, who lives in Argos (oldest city in Europe and famous for orange and lemon produce). We met her aunt, her aunt's husband, Eleni's mother and Eleni's cousin (Marina?). Our whole group was greeted with an explosion of hospitality and warmth (including of course, food!): cherry juice, bundt cake, and loukoumi (the Greek version of "Turkish Delight"—but don't dare call it "Turkish Delight" in Greece!), smiles, kisses, and the juiciest oranges I've ever eaten.



From there, we plunged into the center of the city for the bazaar/market (reminded me of Porta Portese in Rome!). Since Kim and I wanted to take it easy, we settled down for a glass of frappe and pear juice at a café in the square of Saint Peter of Argos. We both agreed that Greece has the best pear juice. Before we stopped at the café, though, we went to see the interior of the church. GORGEOUS! I feel that after taking Dr. Barber's course on Byzantine Art, I encounter a renewed passion for Byzantine studies and art history every time I enter a church in this fantastic country. We asked women who were cleaning if they had a restroom, but since we do not speak Greek, they motioned for us to go into one room at the left-hand side of the Church. To make a long story short,



Kim did get to use a restroom, while I enjoyed admiring the frescos of the interior while walking along the nave approaching the iconostasis.

The architecture of the church exterior is admirable as well. The pieces of masonry that made up the church's façade are shades of pastel: pink, blue, green and yellow. Kim and I noticed that above the entrances to the church were metal awning-type structures which had 3 soccer balls stuck behind its railing. I assumed they were from when children accidentally kicked them up there and they got caught. Sure enough, while we were sitting at the café, about four youngsters came and started playing a game of soccer! Kim said something about how back home at her parish [in Gaylord, Michigan], the priests and the parish office would get angry with children who played on the church premises. As I watched the children enthusiastically involved with one another, I realized why playing ball in front of the church here would be seen as perfectly acceptable behavior here [in Greece], as opposed to some parts of the USA. Here, the Church of Saint Peter of Argos is situated directly in the center of town, as with many other European cities. As the center of social life—geographically as well as spiritually, in a country that is 97% Greek Orthodox, of course kids would be encouraged to remain within the same square as the church building.



The Greek Orthodox "Church for the people, by the people" mentality was also addressed by Fotop when he was talking about how Greek Orthodox saints are recognized. They are first honored by their local communities as people who lived holy lives and then over time, the institutional church will recognize them. This way, Fotop asserted, the process of recognizing Saints seems less legalistic.

Today we also learned about the Greek Educational System. We visited the ESL Academy where Fotop & Eleni taught. We sat in one of the classrooms and met the founders, Renee and Sam. Greek students attend regular school and then proceed to specialized learning academies until around 9pm every day. At the end of high school (which divides students into specialized learning tracks), the students take additional tests. The results of these tests

decide whether students can continue their education at the university level (and if so, what their major will be) or be sent to trade school... basically, these tests are a BIG DEAL! One's occupation rides on these scores. With this system, Fotop said, you unfortunately end up with "a lot of people who hate their jobs."

After the ESL Academy, we walked a bit to see a recently discovered temple of the Egyptian goddess, Isis. We returned to the Hotel Elena (where we will be staying for the next four nights), changed into clean clothes, and loaded into Dimitri's bus for one more tour and then dinner. We visited an ancient cave which served as a temple and site for worship of Pan and Dionysius, later converted into a Chapel for the Virgin Mary-- an excellent example of how religious sites can adapt to the needs of the people. Now, there is a church built right along the cliff. Dinner tonight was one of my favorites so far: Greek salad, lamb chops, and rose wine – and equally as important as food, fellowship! I love it when we all eat together in our group!



So that was today! Intercultural encounters, food, ruins, churches, and nightlife! Tomorrow, Epidauros and Candia beach!