

**KALAHARI TO THE GREEK ISLANDS...**copyright Geof Prigge  
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Generally I'm the type of traveller who likes to move slowly, to go by foot or donkey, horse or buggy, and not to frequent airports or autobahns.

A month ago however, after a hectic two months of travel in East Africa which included a safari in Kenya (one night we even had lions in our campsite), a wild bus journey through Tanzania at night, a relaxing birthday on the island of Zanzibar, a train trip through Zambia, falling sick on the Zambezi River and marvelling at the many designs of razor wire and electric fences in Namibia, I was faced with the decision of where to go next.

With exorbitant airfares within Africa the norm, and a civil war in Angola to the north, I chose the budget approach and flew to Greece, where I'd been four months earlier before the annual influx of tourists. So from one day being in the vicinity of the Kalahari Desert, I found myself 24 hours later on the island of Paros, which at the time I thought was somewhat of a record. I'd met all my connections, and that in itself was a surprise, because I flew Olympic.

It was late September and the majority of tourists had long gone...well, three weeks maybe. But that makes a world of difference on a Greek island. One minute there are people everywhere (the local population swells from 10,000 in Paros to 200,000 in July and August), and the next it seems there's almost no-one. Go there in May for example, or September and you wouldn't believe the difference.

In May, and in fact to some extent even in June, before the true mayhem starts, you may be lucky enough to be on a ship with just a few dozen people, bare decks, space to lie down and enjoy the pre-summer warmth, and when you arrive at any given island, you experience not the madness, but instead the build-up, the excitement of what's about to happen, a bit like arriving at the circus half an hour early. Last minute touches are being made to the white-wash, shop owners are polishing their windows, restaurateurs deciding on what they'll put on their menus, bar staff arranging chairs and tables so that the patrons who are about to start their annual influx have the best possible view of the setting sun while they sip their ouzo or guzzle their cocktail.

Yes it's all quite different in the fringe months, the shoulder periods! So it was too in September when I set foot on my chosen island, Paros. Things were winding down, businesses were packing and their owners starting to leave. Deck-chairs and umbrellas were being put away and windows boarded up. Hand-written signs were being placed in shop windows saying: 'Thanks for your business – see you next Spring.' The beaches, cleaned and prepared before summer were looking tired. Now there were too many cigarette butts and plastic bottles. The storms will

look after them. They'll be blown and washed away to another island to be cleaned up next year.

I'd been to Paros in the 1970's, lived a whole year there in fact and had on occasion over the years returned, but only once during the height of summer. Never again! With 100,000 registered beds on the island nowadays, it's a very different place. Where, you might ask, do they put the other 100,000 visitors at the height of the season? Well they're scattered throughout the island in the private homes of the opportunistic Greeks, and taking shelter from the sun under the rare tree or in one of the many camping grounds. Some are in the hospital too. With such a sudden increase in vehicles, mostly mopeds and motorcycles, a lot of people fall off them. Part of this is due to the sun – no helmets, no hats, no common sense, and part of it is due to the fact that no-one slows down even when there are ten times the number of vehicles vying for space on the roads.

Coming straight from Africa, did I experience culture shock, people asked me. No not me, but others would have. Greek islands don't have any razor wire, and electric fences are certainly not a common sight. In fact fences of any description apart from the ancient stone ones are a rare sight in most places. There are so few fences they still even hobble their animals. But then that's another story. Culture shock...hmmm - I suppose the only real shock a person might experience is that you still can't flush your toilet paper down the toilet...the great Greek civilisation of the past, master mariners, home to the modern Olympics and the recent ones too, and yet their 21<sup>st</sup> century toilets can't take paper. Where does it all go I wondered! Burnt in the local tip.

As with most tourist destinations that experience massive numbers of visitors, some things are sadly neglected. On most Greek islands visitors have to cope with a number of annoyances during their stay. Things like non-existent recycling, the use of appalling quantities of plastic bags, dangerous intersections, speeding and parking problems, use of mobile phones while driving, no capsules in cars for babies, seatbelts that are rarely used even on open roads, and bathrooms that have to be seen to be believed. Why no-one has realised over the years, that by putting the shower and the toilet together leads to the toilet paper and seat continually being splashed, is hard to comprehend. These points having been raised though, the islands of the Mediterranean are still superb. The friendly nature of the people, the wonderful climate, fantastic food, information that's always available, 24 hour health care, improved public transport, signs in English and the promotion of their Art & Culture, make for an enjoyable stay regardless of the drawbacks.

Things have changed a lot in the past thirty years since my first visit. My hope is that the change continues, that further improvements are initiated and that the islands of Greece remain the romantic destination which they have been for many years.