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Paxos

BY ANTHONY AIRMAN

We moored on shores full of night scents
with the singing of birds, waters which left on the hands
the memory of a great happiness.

Seferis. 'Mythical Journey'

The ferry to Paxos leaves Kerkira, Corfu, every morning at nine o'clock if the weather permits. Unfortunately the day I arrived in Corfu there was a festa in progress and therefore no ferries. The Corfuites were enjoying their autumnal carting around of the remains of St Spiridion accompanied by a grand procession from the sacred and secular branches of the community. A be-plumed and epauletted brass band provided the music, and the grand master of ceremonies—an arch-priest dressed in a gold lame dress and a fishbowl hat—danced and chanted before the remains (enclosed in a small glass case), giving us all a regal wave from time to time.

The next morning, through failing to put my watch forward (I thought everyone had gone to bed very early the night before), I nearly missed the ferry, but just made it and set off on the five-hour trip to Paxos. These ferries are simple fishing-boats with a small cabin, but on this day the boat was crowded and everyone sat wherever there was room among the luggage, crates, drainpipes and sundry packages being shipped to the island. After leaving the Venetian citadel of Kerkira behind, you pass down the east coast of Corfu with on one side the hills of the island covered with olive groves and studded with slender cypresses, while across the channel the mainland mountains of Albania appear bleached and bare by comparison. Somewhere near the southern tip of Corfu we picked up a motor-cycle and a huge barrel of wine ferried out from the shore, and then, leaving the rather dirty white cliffs of Capo Bianco behind, we set out across fifteen miles of calm turquoise blue sea towards the hazy green hump of Paxos on the horizon. The sea here is so clear you can look straight down through ten fathoms of water to where tussocks of grey-green weed move ceaselessly in some undersea current.

The first stop on reaching Paxos is Laka, a tiny port at the north end of the island, almost completely enclosed within the headlands of a silver sand bay. Here nearly everyone got off and transferred to the island's only bus, so that when we reached Longos, an even smaller port on the east coast, the few remaining passengers under the age of ninety were drafted into unloading the barrels of wine and the large wicker baskets of vegetables. The east coast of Paxos, terraced olive groves coming down to the water's edge, is deeply indented with tiny bays set among crumbling white limestone promontories, and almost deserted. Ahead is Madonna islet with a white-walled monastery on it. It is here that the whole population of Paxos come by boat for the feast of the Virgin Mary on 15th August, where, after attending Mass, you eat of the meats and fruits displayed on tables in the shaded courtyard before being ferried back to Gaios. Gaios, the capital, is protected by two islets: the outer one bearing the monastery and the inner having on its summit a ruined Venetian fortress where huge iron cannon still guard the harbour entrances from among the crumbling vine-festooned parapets.

This was my second visit to Paxos. I had sailed here the previous year in a small boat leaving from the ancient walled Italian port of Otranto, and crossing the Ionian Sea at night when the winds are usually less strong, to the island of Fano. Surely there can be no more enchanting way to approach Greece. After a long night under the eclipsed, star-brilliant sky, dawn rises almost fiercely as a haze of tawny gold behind the Albanian mountains, so that they seem to be an incredibly high wall along the eastern edge of the world. With the coming of day, the sea colour changes into the deepest of azure blues as you sail goose-winged, the wind behind, the sails wide open and billowing, among the islands of Fano and Merlera and Samothraci towards the sandstone cliffs of Sidari on the north coast of Corfu. Dolphins leaped in front of the boat, and we watched them twining round each other as they plunged into the kaleidoscopic depths. Sidari, and a meal under the pomegranate trees while the moon rose and the whole bay was transformed into a pool of silver, quite still, no sound but that of nightingales singing, the night air scented with cedar and wild thyme. That voyage was destined to reach Ithaca, but never did. Paxos trapped us and, on leaving, it was to Paxos I knew I would have to return.

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Paxos is only seven miles long with one metalled road (most of the asphalt has long since worn off) connecting Gaios and Laka which are served by an antique bus. The bus conductor is a young boy who repairs bicycles from the bicycle-hire shop in Gaios between trips. Now at ten o'clock he is busy loading baskets, parcels, a length of wire and two live chickens into the boot, while within the bus the local priest is chain-smoking and chatting cheerfully with everyone. One prolonged blast on the horn and we are off. The journey takes nearly an hour. First you wind upwards through the olive groves towards the top of the island. Here the olives are replaced by white rocks, green spreading myrtle and slender pencil cypresses.

and as you drive you see the whole of Paxos spread out below, but hidden under the blanketing olives, and the blue sea on every side. Finally, nearing the north end of the island, you journey downhill towards Laka.

Laka is bright with flowers hung in baskets from the whitewashed houses. The narrow streets are draped with vines and bougainvillea, and the tiny square where the bus stops is flushed pink with blossoming oleanders. You would never believe it is mid-November. Across the bay on one of the two headlands is a small chapel, and if you walk round to it and sit below on the white rocks, you face across the blue saucer of the bay not only the hot mid-morning sun but the small white houses and red tile roofs of Laka with the olive-covered hills rising behind to the centre of the island.

Olives and Paxos are complementary. There is no other alternative except fishing, and you only fish if you are unfortunate enough not to have inherited a few olive trees. These olive trees are very old and were established during Venetian rule by grafting onto existing wild stock. Now, especially in the drier south of the island, there are many gaps where the trees have died and the terraced walls fallen. The people say it is impossible to establish new trees because of the lack of water, so nothing fills the gaps but the myrtle. Water is a major problem on the island. There are no springs, and the few wells yield only brackish water. As a result every drainpipe leads to a cistern which gets filled during the winter rains.

It is November and there has been no rain for six months, the olives are fast ripening, the terraces under the trees are swept clean and those people with olive groves wait for their few months of labour to begin. The have-nots fish or, on Anti-Paxos, the tiny sister island to the south, cultivate vines to make the locally famous

wine, black and thick and sweet, and designed to produce the heaviest slumbers and the wildest dreams.

Paxos is therefore reliant on outside sources for almost everything. Not only the ferries from Kerkira but small local traders cross from the mainland with tomatoes and leeks and vegetables. There is a giant of a man who comes over with his son from Previso. His boat is very old and the steering frequently jams so you recognise his arrival from afar by the wildly erratic course he makes. It is always a matter for speculation whether he will actually make the harbour entrance or crash into Citadel islet or the rock supporting the statue to the local hero who tried to fire the Turkish fleet during the war for Independence. Having finally moored, he unloads his bicycle and spends most of his time eating and drinking in Bino's restaurant, leaving his son to sell the tomatoes.

Bino is a little man with a permanently stubbled face who manages the only restaurant in Gaios with the help of his wife who, when she is not cooking, sits and knits a beautiful lace table napkin which never gets completed. You can eat very well here, stroll round the back and investigate what is in the saucepans—fish steak grilling over a charcoal fire, lamb stew, beans, korta, potatoes, the freshest bread baked by Spiro, retsina or the black Anti-Paxos wine—and you will rarely pay more than twenty drachmas. The fish could not be fresher. They are still alive as Bino saws them into steaks. Of course there are at least a dozen cats, but they are well mannered and usually fight outside and do not leap for the remains on your plate until you have finished.

Social life in Paxos, for the men at least, centres round the bars. What the women do I do not know; they appear on only one evening of the week when the film comes. The film starts in Laka and is shown in various places on the island until the following Sunday it reaches Gaios. Because of the alternative attraction of the bars, I never managed to see a winter performance, but the previous summer I watched the outdoor showings which were screened against the wall of a house in a small square. Unfortunately there was always a small shuttered window occupying the top left-hand corner of the screen and once, during the tense climax of the film, these shutters opened and two people leaned out right into the film.

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It is certainly true of Paxos that if you stay for four days you will have friends. After that time it will be difficult to cross the square at any time of the day without being hailed from one of the bars along each side. (In fact every shop is also a bar.) As in every community, each bar favours a different clientele. In Andrea's bar, opposite where the ferry moors, those elders who made their money in Athens or America and finally retired to their homeland gather every afternoon to play cards. Here the advocate holds court and makes up in private for what he misses in public, since the actual court has long since been transferred to Kerkira. Because of his training, he insists on using the formal Katharevousa language, quite different from Demotiki Greek spoken by the ordinary person, and corrected my poor efforts to the point of irritation. The most sophisticated senior citizen is a gentleman who once served in the navy during the war, but spent much of his life in Paris, Florence and Vienna. As he led me graciously by the arm, we would stroll through the olive groves towards the end of the island and discuss Cavafis—whose poetry we both admire—and he would tell me something of the history of the island: of how when he was a boy the mainland opposite was still part of Turkey.

If I managed to escape the advocate's beckoning finger or the retired naval officer's sophistry, I would almost surely drink with Giannis, or with Spiro the baker. I am still not sure what work Giannis does, except that he never seemed to do any, and, like Spiro, always insisted on paying for the drinks. No sooner were we seated at a table and he had asked me what I had been doing, than he would hail a small boy to fetch tomatoes, bread, salami and goat's cheese. So we would eat a little and drink a little, and Giannis would help me patiently with my Greek so that I could join in the general conversation and say what I wanted to say. However, it was quite impossible to return the hospitality.

" Tomorrow," Giannis would say.

" But every day is tomorrow," I would insist.

" No," he would reply, winking at Spiro. " Today is today and tomorrow is tomorrow."

But sometimes I managed to buy a bottle of Anti-Paxos wine when he was off guard, and this we would consume during the evening. It was after one of these evenings that Spiro taught me to make bread. I never realised it was so easy. Equipped with a bottle of ouzo, we retired to his shop and alternately tossed flour into

the mixer and swallowed ouzo. Spiro had recently lost most of his big toe in the mixer. I found it difficult to understand, but he did not venture an explanation for he had broken into Italian—of which he was very proud—but it was a variety unique to Paxos and quite dissimilar to any Italian I had heard before. The hours passed very pleasantly. Spiro tried to show me how he could write his name differently in Greek, Italian, American and French—and succeeded. The flour went into the mixer and the cockroaches jumped out. They were the most magnificent cockroaches I have ever seen, and Spiro was justly proud of them, admiring each in turn for size, colour and condition of gloss coat as they made their escape.

One of my dearest friends was the old aunt of a man I know in Rome. The aunt and her daughter live in a very pretty house above Gaios overlooking the harbour; and often in the late afternoon we would sit outside on the veranda fringed with rambler roses and scented by a huge lemon tree and watch the reflections of the boats in the still water and the sun fade in a royal glow of sunset over the hills behind. Sometimes I walked with her over the rough stone tracks to the western side of the island where her sister lived in a small village completely hidden by a canopy of olive trees. As soon as we got there it was the occasion to fetch the bottle of wine and pastries from the dresser, and later the whole village would troop in. Walking back in the darkness, a borrowed torch to show us the track, the old lady would tuck her arm in mine for support, but the moment she heard anyone approach she would quickly slip it out, saying, " Yes, the road is better now "—which it rarely was.

The Greeks live simply, and rarely have a lot of food in the house, but their hospitality is such that what they have they will set before you: potatoes, cold fish, goat's cheese, bread, wine and, of course, Turkish coffee at any hour of the day. I once asked Spiro why he should go on showing such hospitality without expecting or allowing repayment. He smiled and rubbed his forefingers against each other. " Friends," he said. " Close friends." It means something stronger than I have known elsewhere, and yet it is quite undefinable.

★ ★ ★ ★

The west side of the island is far more rugged and wild than anywhere else. There are no beaches, and the Adriatic—more purple than blue—is constantly at work creating natural arches and caves. From the cliff tops or from a boat out at sea it is a frighteningly inhospitable shore, but also spectacularly beautiful. There are caves several hundred metres long, stretching almost to the bowels of the island, and the rock is not the soft limestone but a harsh brittle cinder lava. During storms and gales, the sea foams and boils and sends up plumes of spray a hundred feet into the sky; and through the mist of the spray you see the islet of Anti-Paxos, remote, unreachable, secure in its isolation. Sunset sinks slowly as a crimson hue into the endless Adriatic horizon. Surprisingly, considering how far away it is, they call this side of the island the Maltese side. Perhaps it is a remnant of loyalty to the British who ruled these islands for fifty years and built the roads, drew the maps, made the cesspits and quietly withdrew, handing the Ionian islands over to the new Greek nation.

The sister island of Anti-Paxos to the south is far more remote than it appears, for although the channel separating it from Paxos is only about two miles wide, it is one of the most unpredictable stretches of water I have ever seen or sailed over. In minutes the sea can change from calm to wildest fury. In winter any contact with the island or the people is lost for weeks at a time. There are only about forty people living on the island, and according to Giannis they speak such a simple Demotici language that even the Greeks find it hard to understand them. Their children do not go to school. In spring the menfolk shoot the quail that fly north during their migration from Africa, and in the autumn they shoot them as they return. In summer they tend the vines that produce the local wine, and always they fish.

During my previous visit I often sailed to Anti-Paxos because there exist several wonderful sandy beaches sheltered by high limestone cliffs. Sometimes, after swimming, I would climb up through the myrtle and thorn to the cliff tops and, standing there, with the deep blue sea below and almost touching the sky above, I felt I needed only wings to be a god, only fins to cleave a channel through the sea and chase Poseidon's horses through the waves. Such thoughts did not seem vain; they were merely, I suppose, part of the inspirational seduction the island had on me. And watching those same white cliffs from the southern tip of Paxos it was easy to imagine that the people who live there are the forgotten descendants of the children of some

ancient god, their privacy still jealously guarded by Poseidon. Later, when the weekly boat came into Gaios for supplies, I found myself watching them for some sign: webbed fingers, a single eye, serpents for hair. But why look for a deformity ? They could be beautiful.

Paxos is small enough to know and elusive enough not to know. What is there to it? The main colours are blue for the surrounding sea and the sky overhead; white for the rocks, the limestone cliffs and the plastered houses; green for the silver-leafed olives, the spreading myrtle, the slender pencil cypresses. Add a sprinkling of black for the fat, ripe olives; red for the blossoming oleanders in the glaringly white square; orange for the dawn rising swiftly beyond Previso; crimson for the sunset slowly sinking into the Adriatic; black for the night sky. For sound, there is the perpetual murmur of the sea; the sudden unmusical tinkle of goat bells from among the myrtle, that emasculated braying out and braying in of a donkey; the shrill pipings of small birds among the trees; the humming of the cicadas; the beat of a boat engine making out of harbour; the klaxon of the bus before it leaves Gaios; the cockerel that crows at midnight. The air is so clear it distils all scents—not even the harbour smells of fish—so clear you

can hear a voice a mile away and on a fine day see the outlines of Lefkas Island fifty miles to the south. Sitting under the olive trees it is easy to believe you could fall asleep for a thousand years, and neither you nor the olive trees would age. But the people do age. Perhaps it would be more realistic to liken ourselves to the olives, for we are eroding all the time, and soon we will fall under the silver canopy of leaves and Hades will collect us one by one.

Paxos is an island of old men and women and young children. The older children go away to school in Kerkira. The women squat under the olive trees collecting the fat black fallen olives or, barefooted in the harbour, mend the fishing nets, their bobbins weaving quickly.

The children of these islands are old men and women. Their children have gone to collect wealth in Athens and America, even as their parents collect fish and grapes and olives in their season. But what more to life is there than that? To eat the fish and drink the wine, to marry and to have children, to love and to mourn.

'The companions with lowered eyes died one by one.
Their oars mark the place where they sleep by the shore.

No one remembers them. Justice.'

Seferis. ' Mythical Journey '