

## Out of the Blues

Greece. The cycladian island of Naxos. Mid-August. Mid-afternoon.

It is hot and cloudless. The village is deserted because the knowing locals are sensibly hiding in their homes. It's only tourists who are out and most of those are basting themselves on the beaches. Not us. We are hiking the mountains of inner Naxos. Mad dogs and all that.

We have been navigating the lanes of this traditional compact village for a while. They wind intriguingly among blue shuttered white washed houses swathed in cascading pinky purple bougainvillea fluorescing in the sun and neighbouring derelict bare stone wrecks choked in overgrown weeds. In the distance a strip of blue is beckoning but it will be a while before we are back within foot dipping distance.

We have reached a church that proudly presides over a pretty village square. It too is shuttered and white washed, it's brass bell framed by a pristine white tower that stands out beautifully against the sky. We are in a trance-like state looking up. Heat, tired legs and beauty combined can do that to you.

"Where are you from?"

The words echo ethereally off the buildings bordering the empty square. Startled, we look to where they are coming from. A stooped grey haired lady dressed in an ill-fitting long, thick woollen "widow indicator" black coat is coming out of the cool blackness of the church clutching what appears to be a colourful icon of the Virgin Mary. I start to itch.

The question is in Greek. It never crossed her mind that we might not understand.

"England" I am able to reply because I do speak a little Greek.

"Why are you here?"

The village's quaint winding lanes, peace and tranquility have put it on a well marked tourist trail so her question baffles me even though today we are alone. But I answer as best as I can, stumbling and stuttering over words in a language that does not come naturally and I am soon locked into a conversation with a toothless old lady barraging me with questions.

Why do I speak Greek? Why are we out walking? Who is the blond boy? Why can't he speak Greek too? Is it summer in England now?

It is hard work keeping up. It is taking all my focus.

"Where are you from?"

I groan inwardly. I fear the conversation is going to go around in circles. She clearly isn't listening to my answers. But then it occurs to me that that the voice that asked the question is different and I sense someone else by my side. I look down. Another stooped figure in black is grinning at me toothlessly, patiently waiting for my reply.

"England"

"England? What is it like there? As bad as here?"

Yet another voice, this time coming from somewhere behind me. I spin around to see a third stooped figure approaching. And then another two. As if from nowhere.

Now the village square is alive with voices talking over each other as they bark questions at me. Most are a repeat of those already asked by one or another of them but the ladies are fully immersed in this wholly unexpected and rare moment so nobody but me seems to notice. They are determined to make the most of it and so when they have asked me everything they can think of they turn on each other. They are no longer aware of our presence; they are far too occupied comparing ailments, airing complaints and animatedly telling stories.

Noticing that the impromptu gathering has gained its own happy momentum we try to slip away. It isn't quite so easy though; the lady who had first approached us has noticed and carefully puts down the icon. She turns to me and takes my hands between hers, squeezing them as tight as her strength will allow. It takes some effort for me to extract them and even more to leave.

I have no idea if any of what they talked about was true. Some stories told certainly seemed extreme. Did a son-in-law really kill a husband with a shovel during a family lunch and did another succumb to a broken heart over the death of his prized donkey? Or were these stories the result of overactive imaginations bought on by the boredom and loneliness that comes with the deserted lanes, peace and tranquility that draw tourists to their village?

And does it matter anyway if the consequence of our happening to wander by means that five old widows found a little unexpected respite from their boredom on what would otherwise have been just another long, lonely, hot August afternoon?