

Postcard



Picture: Getty Images

Soaking up the hospitality

Marian McGuinness gets an intoxicating Greek welcome.

Only three kilometres from the coast of Turkey, the island of Samos is as remote from smoke-addled Athens as you can get. We were the Aussie Eight and had hired a mini-van to explore the mountain villages and baking ruins that were famous for being the birthplace of the goddess Hera and the legendary mathematician, Pythagoras.

Leaving the seaside town of Karlovasi, we threw the van into first gear and headed almost vertically for the mountain village of Hydroussa.

We ground the gears up the razorback track, hairpinning through terraces of cabbages and

grapevines, almost taking out a party of puffing hikers. Even a goatherd we passed shook his head as he ushered his flock to safety on the now precipitous, thistle-strewn slope.

The road petered out as we neared the village, so we parked and walked.

A wiry old man appeared from a whitewashed lane and disappeared again. He was carrying a blue plastic shopping bag, dewy on the outside from its contents of freshly caught fish. We followed him past strings of drying grapes, past a huddle of chatting yiayias (grandmothers), and into the village square. Three wizened look-alikes of Aristotle, Socrates and Plato were sitting on rush chairs under the shadowy spread of a plane tree. Their tin table held three shots of Greek coffee, a plate of silver sardines and broken, rustic bread. The air was silent except for the clack of worry beads that swung in arcs from the fingers of the three philosophers.

We explored the tiny whitewashed church at the side of their square and emerged back into the sunlight. Word had gotten around that strangers were in town.

That's when Grammetiki appeared. And she came bearing gifts. Unlike the other black-clad yiayias, this woman, with wild red hair, dug into the pocket of her flannelette shirt and produced a clutch of walnuts. She threw them on the ground, crushed them with her heel and scooped the smashed offerings to us in the earthy crescents of her fingernails.

And her hospitality continued. She gesticulated wildly, until we followed her down the hill to a gap in the wall where she drew back a curtain and ushered us inside. This tiny room held her life's possessions. We all

squeezed around a table backing onto a thin staircase that curled upstairs to her bed space. She rummaged in her cupboard and produced a paper bag containing an odd assortment of tumblers. Next came a Fanta bottle filled with a clear liquid.

Over the next 10 minutes, Grammetiki plied us with her moonshine.

There were six stills in them thar hills that the villagers shared to make their lethal brew called Souma.

As we staggered out of her Lilliputian home, Grammetiki grabbed sprigs of basil growing in a fetta tin at her front door. And like a bunch of high hippies, with blossoming basil tucked in our hair, we drifted back to our mini-van ready for the challenge of the descent.

Greece

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