

# Call me pilgrim

By Chris Morin  
Correspondent

(This is the second of a two-part reflection on Sisters art gallery proprietor Chris Morin's visit to the cradle of Western civilization).

Greece embraces mythology as perhaps no other nation does. When 25 percent of your people are employed in the tourist industry and 20 percent of the GDP comes from tourist dollars, presenting Zeus and his family along with monolithic marble columns front and center becomes a necessity. People no longer travel here or anywhere on vacation to discuss virtue, essence, and meaning. Sentimental notions of rousing coffee café discussions don't stand a chance against mega-tour groups, selfie sticks and Starbucks.

A few of the great monuments in or within a day's trip from Athens include the Temple of Zeus, Panathenaic Stadium, Temple of Poseidon, the Oracle of Delphi, and the city of Mycenae. These sites can be visited on your own or with street, site or professional guides. Many times, the only real difference between them is price.

The guides persevere with the desire to remind visitors how they might interact with these significant works. Historical importance and sheer beauty can take precedence over a "hit-and-run" bucket-list photography mentality. Sometimes they succeed, often they don't, but thankfully they remain steadfast with their endeavor.

Museums only whet the appetite for most visitors, so a vast range of souvenir, gift, gallery, and museum shops allow a person to leave Greece with a tangible remembrance of what has been seen, particularly if that has to do with the ancient times. And just in case you're an all-inclusive pan-world individual, a handful of Asian-market knock-off souvenirs can be found on the city street sidewalks.

The arrival and continuing influence of Christianity upon Greece in the form of the Eastern Orthodox Church, post-Grecian and early Roman eras, remains alive, readily apparent and greatly respected. Due to the deeply revered history of the faith, this particular branch of Christianity weaves an imponderable societal fabric between the ancient past and the present — it is both then and now, it is neither of these, it is beyond any of it.

The most dramatically scenic location for this religion occurs in Central Greece

at Meteora. Atop cliffs and pinnacles rising hundreds of feet in the air are the six remaining Eastern Orthodox monasteries of the region, most of which are still in use by nuns or monks. Originally constructed as a means for isolation during the Ottoman Empire occupation, as recently as one hundred years ago ropes provided the only access to these perched sanctuaries.

Socrates, the first of the three great philosophers and perhaps the most significant ancient Greek of all, has no site that someone might visit in order to ponder his life. He never established a formal school and was, in fact, a master of the informal, particularly with what we might call inquiry.

Across Athens and the Acropolis in particular, Socrates held class by approaching individuals from all walks of life to pose a question, one with no finite answer—What is Truth? What is Beauty? What is Goodness? — while nonetheless receiving an authoritative reply more times than not.

It was a time of dogma, naivety, assuredness and ignorance — traits still occurring with some frequency today. Upon the Athenian's reply to the question posed, Socrates launched into further inquiries regarding the correctness of the answer, ad nauseam. This eventually led to the conclusion that neither the responder nor Socrates

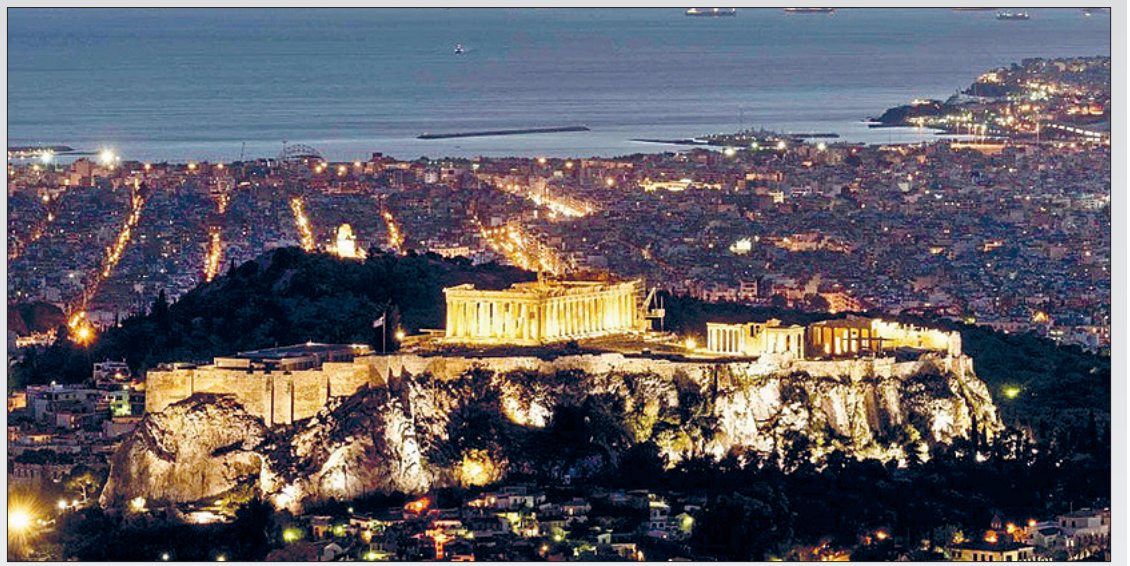


PHOTO COURTESY CHRIS MORIN

The Acropolis remains the symbol of ancient Greek civilization.

knew a true answer. The practice of attempting to methodically investigate sources of facts and knowledge thus began with him.

While this type of discourse might sound like a potential window into nihilism or an early version of Alice's rabbit hole, consider the era. Grecian society was claiming absolutes on understanding, knowledge, action, and possibility; let alone more finite matters such as fairness, justice, and equality. To broach and engage in these sort of discussions — dialogues as Plato later called them — and essentially question authority was virtually taboo at the time.

Today, while we take for granted what we call free speech, Socrates founded it without giving it a label. He later paid for it with his life, sentenced to death for refusing to stop his informal inquiries. When the state then turned squeamish about the harsh sentence it handed

down, he fulfilled the edict himself by drinking hemlock, saying, "No one is above the law so then this must be my sentence."

An American visiting Greece today doesn't have to learn even a few words of Greek to get by in country. Probably one-third of the population speaks at least some English, and half of those who do speak it do so rather well.

One of the things that Greeks today pride themselves on are traditional food dishes — time-honored moussaka and souvlaki, decadent baklavas, healthy grilled fresh fish and salad entrees, breads — pita, lazarakia, and daktyia, condiments of olive oil or tzatziki, and all of it rather inexpensive.

Their regional wines and sweet aperitifs remain abundant. Indeed, the respected Mediterranean diet is alive and flourishing in Greece with both locals and tourists alike.

Yet another thing their

society echoes with today is a robust nightlife. The evening scene of bars, music, dancing, partying and revelry occurs at least four times a week during the shoulder seasons, every night in the summer, and whenever it does, it goes deep into the night. Join 'em or bring really good earplugs. Certainly though, at age 60, this is not what brought me one-third of the way around the planet.

An intellectual orphan in my youth, these sojourns to the Academy and Lykeion have been intended for paying respect to these revered mentors and what must be the deepest roots, the first better angels of the Western world. Yet the only physical traces remaining have turned out to be threadbare, decaying, and nominal.

"So it should be," I want to imagine them saying, "What's instilled within matters, not what's worn outside nor a shrine erected." And so I take leave. Call me pilgrim.

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