



“In a rare moment we have caught a glimpse of what really goes on in the Home Office”
Daniel Finkelstein

From The Sunday Times

October 21, 2007

The next step

Our correspondent's search for a Greek island base for her walking-tour company turned into a four-year odyssey; but all that legwork is finally bearing fruit



◀ IMAGE :1 of 2 ▶

Gilly Cameron-Cooper

Old Yakovos thrust a glass of wine the colour of a faded bloodstain into my hand. “I made 2,000 litres in a good year,” he announced, a sweeping arm gesture embracing the property I’d just bought from him. I smiled brightly, discreetly disposed of the potent brew and worried about what I’d do with 2,000 litres of it.

A year later, my neighbour Yannis Vasilis, who makes a fine light rosé, surveyed my work. “You nearly destroyed the vineyard,” he said gloomily. My overzealous pruning had left the grapes exposed to the intense sun of the Greek summer, shrivelling them into raisins. Our suburban existence in southwest London had not prepared me for the good life on a Greek island; Yannis, by contrast, is an expert in winemaking traditions that stretch back 5,000 years.

According to Greek legend, the god of wine and feast, Dionysus, was born on Naxos and blessed the island with fertility after settling down with Ariadne, the Cretan princess dumped there by Theseus, hero of the Minotaur’s labyrinth. Today, Naxos, the largest of the Cyclades, in the southern Aegean, is one of those rare Greek islands dominated not by tourism and runaway development, but by farming – thanks in part to the water that filters through the limestone into natural subterranean reservoirs.

It is a working island that exports olive oil, potatoes and cheese, yet retains a wild landscape – high peaks, broad vales, coastal plains and fabulous beaches – made for mythological romps, and the walking holidays my husband, Robin, and I planned to run. We decided to change our lifestyle five years ago, while we were still fit and able. I was approaching 50, Robin was 55. Both of us had demanding jobs at a senior level: I was in publishing, Robin in advertising and head-hunting.

It took us four years to decide to buy – and to work out where to do so. We scoured the labyrinthine alleys of steep-stacked interior

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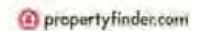
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BACKGROUND

Harmony out of Chios
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New life in the Cyclades
The next step

villages, built far from the coast to protect their inhabitants from pirates. The three estate agents showed us tiny, thick-walled village houses for £70,000 if they needed work, or £90,000 if they had been restored. In Naxos town, the capital (population about 7,000), we were offered modern two-bedroom flats for just over £170,000, or a traditional house with only one bedroom, but filled with antiques, for £207,000. The most prolific dealers in property were the local architects, who sold compact neo-Cycladic villas in windy but stunning coastal locations at prices ranging from £145,000 to £240,000 (for two to four bedrooms).

We looked longingly at tower houses, legacies of the long Venetian occupation and ruined by centuries of subsequent neglect. A 14th-century noble's house in Naxos town, with its own chapel, was available for £620,000, a partly restored country residence for £362,000.

Nikos Salteris, an insurance salesman who moonlights as a property scout, found us an abandoned miniature tower house set in the dappled shade of olive and almond trees in Mesi Potamia, an inland village eight miles from Naxos town, in a verdant valley. The price was £78,000, but in the village kafenion (cafe), I learnt that it was being offered to Greeks for £7,000 less.

We had a business to run, though, and needed an yparchei spitti (a "house that's there") to move into immediately. What we finally found, in July last year, was neither quaint nor pretty: a block of six two-room flats, sitting on an acre, with all services connected, 14 single beds and countless plastic chairs included in the price, and only one previous owner: Yakovos Anevlavis. He had built the block in the coastal area of Kastraki, 12 miles south of Naxos town, 20 years ago and planted vines and olive and fruit trees. The building was unattractive, but the view from its wide terraces was of a sweep of sea and sky. The sun set behind neighbouring Paros, and the floating outlines of Ios, Folegandros, Sikinos and many other islands emerged as the northerly breeze cleared the air.

We paid Nikos 1% of the selling price to act as negotiator. "I know this family: Yakovos is a very good man," he assured us during the first meeting, at which Yakovos plied us with home-grown figs, melons, tomatoes and aubergines. "I think he likes us," Robin said. But we wouldn't have got the house for £145,000 (£80,000 less than the price quoted to rival bidders) had it not been for Nikos and his family connections.

Sofia Cherouvim, my lawyer, who is based on the island, speaks excellent English – vital to guide me through the unfamiliar territory of Greek housebuying, which is more casual than in England. Yakovos, for example, didn't bother to turn up to sign a revised contract, as he felt he had clinched the deal with his bone-crunching handshake. Cherouvim ensured there was nobody else with an interest in the property who might be unwilling to sell their share; a surveyor checked on the condition and compliance with planning regulations.

On exchange day, two months after the first meeting with Yakovos, all the paperwork was sorted, signed and paid for – in cash – in person, three hours before the agreed time for completion at the notary's office. Yakovos and his tiny wife, Maria, were there in their Sunday best. The notary read out the 10-page contract, Sofia translated and I handed over the money.

Everyone wished me kalo riziko (good roots). I felt queasy about blowing my entire savings on a place I was not sure I could cope with. It will cost about £100,000 to insulate the roof, make the windows leak-proof and convert the flats into a single home, but for the same money as a modern fourbed villa on shared land in this area, we will have four bedrooms, two offices and an open-plan kitchen/dining/living area – and all those vines. The business (www.walkingplus.co.uk) pays for our island lifestyle, and I freelance as a writer. More handy income comes from the two lodgers in our London home.

We spend about half the year here, driving minibus, office and



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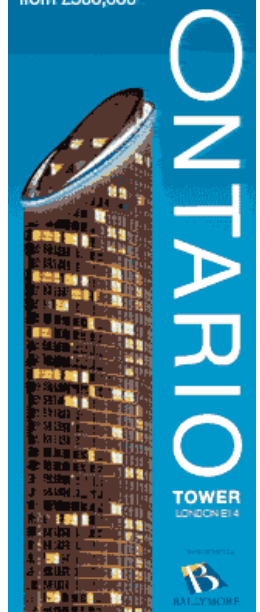
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dogs to Greece at the end of March and returning to Britain in November. If necessary, I can leave Naxos on the 4pm flight to Athens, change planes and be in London by 9pm – or, if my eco-conscience bites, take a ferry and a two-day train journey over a spectacular cross-section of Europe. As for the damaged vineyard, Yannis harvested 20 baskets of grapes, and we'll have 150 litres of rosé by Christmas. It won't taste right in a Tooting Bec winter, so we'll leave it here. There's plenty of space.

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