

Breakfast in Iguomenitza

The thick cabin door rebounded on its hinges as the steward hurriedly pounded out a wake up call. He delivered his message as he made his way along the ferry's passageway — maybe it was Italian or possibly Greek, might even have been English. It didn't make any difference we all knew it was time to get up.

I fumbled for the switch over my narrow berth, flicked on the little reading light, pushed back the coarse woolen blanket and checked my watch — 4:30 a.m. We had only slept for about five and a half hours. We dressed in silence, putting on the clothes we had been wearing since leaving Rome almost twenty-four hours earlier. The cabin was too small to accommodate the four of us and our packs, so everything else had been stored in an area down on the lower vehicle deck. All we had held out were our toothbrushes and small hand towels.

The ship shuddered as the props changed direction and began backing towards the landing. We stumbled down to the main vehicle deck. The smells of diesel fuel and exhaust mixed in the cold, Mediterranean air. The giant ferry was less than half full; no more than a dozen semi rigs were secured in orderly rows. All but two were still tied down.

We walked out on to the deck and started getting our things from under the ropey net that had been thrown over the top of them for the night. A deck hand looked up startled and then realized what we were doing. Our daughter Andrea, still expressionless, flung on her ponderous daypack, then she and Lesley, our other daughter, sleepily worked their way toward the gangway. We smiled and waved goodbye. The deck hand returned the smile and no doubt shook his head as we stepped over the bulkhead and through the companion way.

By the time we had our daypacks on and took account of our possessions, the enormous ship had skillfully backed up to the ferry landing and let down the main vehicle ramp. Diesels revved, headlights penetrated the dark, a bit of hand waving on the part of the deck hand and two semi rigs moved out. No time was being wasted on Iguomenitza.

The plastic wheels of our roll-on packs were cold and clattered over the rough diamond plate ramp. The vibration rattled our shoulder joints until we reached the smoother blacktop surface of the dock.

It seemed only a matter of minutes before the ferry was pulling away, upper deck lights blending into the darkness of the sea and sky. It was then that we began an assessment of our situation.

I had a momentary flash of us all dressed in heavy woolen clothing with our belongings on a large wooden-wheeled handcart, refugees in a foreign land. I took note of a couple of semi tractor trailer rigs parked and waiting for another boat, half a dozen taxi cabs out on the road. In the opposite direction of what appeared to be the center of town was a single little café, brightly lit. Since no agents were at the Passport Control office, we rolled our bags through the barricades toward town.

The air was still, the temperature cool, maybe 45 degrees Fahrenheit. Lesley and Andrea were wearing their blue rain jackets with the stripe of

reflective tape across the back. The girls hated those jackets, but they made good windbreakers. At that point a cab driver, with sleep in his eyes and hair pointing in all directions, pulled up along side and asked, "Where are you going?"

"The bus station," I answered. English, what a relief, I thought.

After an exchange about which direction it was and how far, we loaded our bags into his trunk, tied the lid with a ratty piece of rope and rattled along the winding main street into town. It was probably no more than a mile, but on empty stomachs at 5:00 a. m., the price was right.

The chilly bus station was occupied by a couple of old ladies cut from the pages of National Geographic with the black skirts, black sweaters, rolled down stockings and black babushkas; they sat on a hard wooden bench and gave us only the faintest acknowledgement as we came through the door.

The ticket agent glanced up as we entered. Immediately her face took on a look that we'd grown accustomed to seeing. It was a mixture of surprise, confusion and pity, clearly wondering what set of challenges we might present. Fortunately for us she spoke some English.

"Four tickets to Ioannina." I took a chance and followed this with, "Is there a place to leave our bags while we look for something to eat?"

"Over there." She pointed to the adjacent office. "He will be glad to help."

Well, maybe not glad, but he was accommodating. Our four large packs and three daypacks just about finished off any unused floor space in his cluttered little cubicle. We smiled and made a hasty retreat into the street before he changed his mind. It was warmer outside than in the still air of the unheated bus station.

Out on the street we would soon learn that in Greece the distance to a warm, inviting, often extravagant bakery or patisserie is never more than about 100 feet, no matter what town you're in. Some pastries and milk for the girls, Greek coffee for me and Carla, and all was well. We had made a successful landing in Greece. Relishing the grainy Greek coffee, I reminded myself of the simple formula for happiness I had developed over the past six months of travel: "A full stomach, a ticket forward and clean socks!" All things considered, two out of three wasn't bad.