

Sydney, Australia: The Harbor City with a Strong Greek Culture

Contributed by Peter Griziotis

By Peter Griziotis "Are these my fasolakia, Kosta?" So here I am, somewhat high on Tsantalis Ouzo, sitting astride a wobbly old chair in a restaurant that oozes atmosphere and the tantalising smells of lamb, oregano and fresh skordalia. "The Corinthian" in suburban Marrickville and tonight the owner, Con, has no idea that his establishment is the subject of the first paragraph of an article on the delights of Sydney for the Greek visitor. I know it's not much by way of cutting edge social research but the question driving a month's worth of sight-seeing, pub-crawling, beach-combing, church-going, clubbing and relative-visiting is "what can a travelling Greek get out of Sydney?" This is day one.

This is day one. The ouzo in my blood has, if anything enhanced my senses, which is just as well because "The Corinthian" is not a fancy place. It resembles those modest places on the outskirts of Thessaloniki or Larissa where people go, or used to go, to have wholesome family meals in surroundings not dissimilar to the dining room at Uncle Nikos' name-day get-togethers. The meals, on display in bain-maries, quietly declare their peasant origins, taste better than they look and cost neither an arm nor a leg. In fact, the experience of eating at "The Corinthian" can best be compared to being transported back to the low but honest culinary culture of the 1970's, that golden era of migrant Greek hospitality when slow-roasted lamb was a secret we kept to ourselves. But enough sociology for now, the food has arrived, "Are these my fasolakia, Kosta?" "Me patates" he says. "And for your friends, the arni, the fis and the little soos". "The beaches for a start." So we all dig in, only this time we're eating at "Perama", possibly the most critically acclaimed Greek restaurant in Sydney. By "all" I mean my three friends and I, all Greek, or as we sometimes prefer, Hellenes. In between mouthfuls of food inspired by the Byzantine (yes, Byzantine) cuisine, I ask them to indulge me in a little straw poll. Tonight's question is: what do you think draws Greeks to Sydney? "What, you mean beyond the obvious?" "And what might that be, my dear Athena?" "The beaches for a start." And she downs another piece of haloumi with figs and cloves. "Where else in the world can you choose from among 21 beaches, all within walking or driving distance from the suburbs?" Theo always was good with numbers. "And that's just the ocean beaches, what about the bays and the harbour foreshores like Balmoral?" To which Tasso tastefully adds, "Or the nude beach, Lady Bay, right in the middle of Sydney Harbour itself!" Good point. Nobody knew of any other city in the world where such a, dare I say, haven, existed. The beaches are truly possessed of a magnetic allure. It's not uncommon for parents to go shopping in the morning and then bundle the kids and all the paraphernalia into the car for lunch and the rest of the day passed idly on the sand, in the surf, under the umbrella. We're spoilt for choice. You may have heard of Bondi, but there's also Manly, Coogee and Cronulla, to name a very few. The beaches of Sydney need no promotion, all you have to do is imagine yourself alternating between basking on a beach towel and bathing in crystal clear Pacific Ocean water, with the city a close but harmless echo away: that's Sydney. And if swimming or body-surfing doesn't turn you on, then there's always boating. Sydney Harbour and the waterways of the Georges River, the Hawkesbury River and the Hacking River have provided countless hours of pleasure to all of us, with or without a boat, although I do recommend catamaran-ing on the Narrabeen Lakes. It's not just a Greek thing, but we Greeks have a deep affinity for things maritime and oceanic. "Can't you think of anything Peter?" Athena asks with a teasing smile. "Well actually I was thinking it's integral, the water I mean, it's always there in the back of our minds; the beach, the light, the feeling of freedom; sharks, lifesavers, even honeymooning whales; wellbeing;" "He's raving on again" "Okay Theo, what's your answer?" "Sometimes I do rave on. And don't say the girls".

"Simple." A few weeks later, mid-December, Theo, Tasso, Athena and I, are once again sitting down to a meal. Having just hiked along some spectacular cliff-tops, we can't wait to get into some of my mother's homemade Greek mezedes; on a picnic rug spread over the grass at the Royal National Park, near the Wattamolla lagoon. Carefree children are frolicking in the ankle-deep water, the sea breeze is whispering through the swaying eucalyptus trees and I remind Theo that his answer a few weeks ago ("the incomparable beauty of the girls") hadn't impressed me as much as he hopes it had. "Well how's this for impressive? We're living in the first city, the biggest city, the most important city and the most exciting city in Australia. More retsina anyone?" A kookaburra was laughing its head off in a tree with overhanging branches. A little boy pissed proudly onto the trunk. "It's got everything, no wonder everybody wants to come here. Did you know this park was the first national park established anywhere in the world, in 1872 - four years before Yellowstone?" "How do you know that?" Tasso asked. "And by the way, I reckon Greeks love coming here because they can find lots of friends here, simple." "Simple?" True but not so simple. Sydney is indeed a very friendly place. And visiting Greeks will always be tempted to sample and enjoy the food and the outdoor attractions. And the festivals, which nobody had mentioned yet, must also appeal to tens of thousands of Greek visitors, religiously and perhaps naturally predisposed to festivals as we are. But what Sydney really offers to overseas Hellenes is a distinct and refreshing difference in mentality and psyche, so different from what they may be used to in the many rather more self-important cities of the northern hemisphere. And compared to the cities of Greece herself, with their millennia-long histories, Sydney doesn't have to try to look young, potent and irresistible. To me it seems that Greeks who can travel can look at Sydney as a kind of antidote to the banalities and cynicism of many older, richer and more glamorous cities. They are tired, those cities, whereas Sydney's youthfulness, in combination with her dazzling harbour, the rich variety of her food and the openness of her people, is its

primary asset. Aaaah… it’s nice here… “He’s off with the pixies again, wake him up Tasso.” Was that Theo’s voice? “Hey… what’s with the nudge! I was just resting my eyes and thinking about what you said a few hours ago.” The sun had settled behind the trees casting dappled shade. Most of the people had gone home. We saw a small wallaby nibbling on some low grass.

“… my dad kept chooks.” “We’re just like they are, more or less. But we have kangaroos and wallabies and koalas,” Athena said, keeping her voice down. “Greek people come here ’cause they know we can show them around, they have family here. Did your father keep chickens?… well my dad kept chooks. Don’t say ‘so what?’ it’s all about families. Sydney’s great for families. This church is full of parents and their kids, a lot of oldies too, but we’re healthy ’cause of the mums and dads.” Sydney’s Greek Orthodox parishes can boast churches that are full or almost full virtually every week, let alone on this day, the Sunday before Christmas. What a stark contrast this is to most Protestant and Catholic churches. The building of our churches was driven by migrants whose anangi to face the fierce xenitia of this distant shore inspired them to accomplish great deeds. For the most part the second and third generations are in turn inspired by their parents. Take mine for example. My father was a babe-in-arms in the panic-stricken throng massed at the quay of Smyrna in 1922. He and his family ended up in Thessaloniki. Exiled from Amissos, or as it is known more generally - Samsun, my mother’s family also settled in that city in northern Greece, where a few years later she was born. Little did they know, as they grew up in that period of relative peace between world wars, that awaiting them at the age of 30 was a role in the movement of hundreds of thousands of Greeks to far-flung places all over the western world in search of a better life. In the fifties, the sixties and even in the seventies, Australia welcomed migrants from an assortment of European countries, approximately 250,000 of whom were Greek. Arriving after a month at sea across the length of the Indian Ocean and along the southern reaches of the Australian continent, many of them disembarked at the first sight of civilised habitation – Melbourne. Those in the know or just lucky stayed on for the final passage of the voyage… to Sydney Harbour. They were amply rewarded. They have had that better life, and this city, in this country, generously gave it to them. “Pios thelei kafe;” Today the sunlight is rapturous, the heat intoxicating, the famous fireworks of New Year’s Eve, last night, a perfect foretaste of the true spectacle that today’s dawn has provided to anyone with eyes to behold it, even from here on the verandah of my father’s house, where we have gathered to see through the first day of ’08. I’m coming to the end of this month-long survey. I’ve tried to look at Sydney the way Greeks thinking of visiting might. Perhaps I’ve wasted my time after all. Perhaps all I needed to say was that Condé Nast (the world’s most prestigious travel magazine) awarded its Best City Award to Sydney in 2007, and not for the first time if memory serves. She out-pointed the favourites by scoring big on food and restaurants, cleanliness and user-friendliness. Surprisingly there seems to have been no category for the judging of best Luna Parks, most romantic outdoor cinemas or most stalwart Led Zeppelin fans. Can you tell which city I think would win these as well? Ultimately, and this may be the best way to close this modest, personal account, you’ll have to come and see for yourselves. My friends and I have offered our opinions, but what do we know? We barely scratched the surface in our droll little chinwags. I haven’t written about The Rocks or Kings Cross. The vibrant Chinatown district and Darling Harbour have also somehow avoided my pen. I’ve unforgivably ignored the art galleries and museums, the Sydney Fish Markets and The Opera House. And how I’ll ever get away with disregarding the Blue Mountains God only knows. Have I mentioned the oysters, or the wine, or the beer, or the coffee? How remiss of me. So I turn to the one person who has remitted most of my sins.

“What do you think, mum?” “Peri ti, pethi mou;” “Ti ehei to Sydney pou travaei ton ellina taxithioti;” “E tora, pos na s’to po… yia ’mena, to Sydney einai… san ti zahari sto kafe.” “Thiladi?” “It sweetens the… bitter nostalgia, kala to eipa;” “Katalava.” And I gaze out from the verandah in the afternoon of the first day of the year. It is high summer, we’re full of lunch. The cicadas are buzzing, flocks of birds are wheeling in the clear blue sky, and the sea-breeze cools our skin. I wonder do Greek travellers need their bitter nostalgia sweetened? “Pios thelei kafe;” she asks.