

## RIDING THE ANCIENT ROADS A MOTORCYCLE TOUR OF SOUTHERN GREECE by Brian Rathjen

Walking up the spiraling trail the heady aroma of olive and pine trees hung in the air. Above us, atop the giant rocky peak called the Acropolis, stood the Parthenon on all its ancient majesty.

We had flown into Athens, Greece arriving earlier in the day and, after a nap and a quick shower, Shira and I were eager to explore this ancient city with all its wonders. The view from the top was unrivaled.

In the distance we could see the hill called Lykavittos, turning round we could see the Temple of Zeus and far below the ancient Agora.

Returning to our hotel we met up with fellow travelers Mike and Janet Nemlich, from Chicago. For the next few weeks the four of us, with the addition of our world traveling companion Dick Singer, who would be showing up the following day, would be doing a two wheeled tour of the Peloponnese with Greek Moto Adventures. This tour was a long time coming and we were more than a touch excited.

With a few days to kill before we actually got on the road with the bikes, Shira, Mike, Janet and I decided to do a bit of exploring of Athens by foot. Saturday was spent hiking to the Temple of Zeus, the National Gardens and then onto Lykavittos, that magnificent hill where we took the funicular cable car to the top.

From here the view easily equaled that of the Acropolis the day before and a lunch of traditional Greek cuisine was just as good.

Sometime late that afternoon we wandered back towards the hotel and that evening we met Dick at the hotel bar and went out for a bit of nighttime Athenian exploring which, as you would think, involved excellent food, great wine and a seriously good time.

Mid-morning Sunday we spied a couple of BMWs pulling up to the hotel and we were met by our tour leaders Billy Rallis and his wife Vicky, from Greek Moto Adventures.

Billy and his brother Bobby, who was also along for the tour, were born in Greece, but raised in New York. Vicky, Billy's wife, is a native of the small coastal town of Tolo and they now run guided motorcycle tours of their native land.

Unlike some tour companies that are planned and run from overseas, Greek Moto Adventures have a true feel for the land as it is their homeland, and with the American connection we felt we couldn't be in better hands.

After the initial greeting, in which we went over the basic routes and what everyone could expect, we did a quick tour of the Parthenon, this time with the services of a guide. Then our small group decided to take the brand new Metro subway to the harbor town of Piraeus to take in the sights and grab a bit of late lunch.

Returning in the evening we found our hosts at the hotel and then retreated to the rooftop to watch the sunset over Athens and to see the powerful lights give the Parthenon anew radiance.

The evening found us being treated to a marvelous Greek banquet in an out-of-the-way restaurant and the dinner went late into the night.

It was an excellent first night and great beginning with our new friends, for the next day we would pick up the bikes and get to exploring the Peloponnese in our own way. There were to be plenty of good time ahead we were sure. And, we were right.

### ON THE ROAD ATHENS TO TOLO

After a leisurely breakfast the next day we picked the bikes up from the rental agency, conveniently located right across the street from our hotel.

Shira and I were to double-up on a Honda Transalp 650. Light and nimble, with enough power for us (well, sort of), it would be a great companion for the next nine days.

After taking care of the paperwork on the bikes we followed Billy's lead out of Athens. Although a truly old city it has the congestion and traffic problems that plague all modern cities.

We fought Monday morning traffic and were really glad Billy was taking point as Athens is confusing at best.

Soon we were on the main road heading out of the city and the countryside opened up. To our left the Aegean shone in the bright sunshine, dark blue waters lapping at Greece's shore. We stayed on this major road till we crossed the Corinth Canal and then jumped off onto a smaller local road that wound its way south. Here the roads rose and fell, the pavement mimicking the bays and inlets hundreds of feet below.

The road was lined with miles of dark evergreens and each turn brought another stunning vista of both land and sea.

By early afternoon we rode a tight and twisty road down to the water itself and the small town of Epidavros.

We pulled the machines onto the large pier and found a bayside restaurant. Here we dined on octopus and moussaka while old men repaired fishing nets across from the bikes. Now if the ancient ruins of Athens showed us remnants of the Golden Age, the Epidavros showed us the true Greece as it is today.

Comfortable, easy going, relaxed and unchanging.

After lunch we headed west and away from the sea, although honestly you are never too far from the sea in the Peloponnese.

The valley we rode through was lined for miles and miles with olive trees. Once again their heady filled the air and my senses. This was something the others commented on as well. There were wonderful scents to experience on this trip. Olive trees, orange groves and other scents made the ride ever so pleasurable.

Following Greek Moto Adventures lead we rode into the city of Nafplio. Heading up the mighty cliff that surrounds the city we found the ancient fortress called Palamidi Castle. Built by the Venetians in the late 1600s it has seen many rulers including the Turks, but today just sits atop the mountain like a majestic and noble guardian of the port city far below.

We spent a few hours hiking about the old ruins and we were all impressed at how accessible the castle was. In the United States they would have you a 1/2-mile away behind plexiglass. Here in Greece you could wander around to your heart's content.

From Nafplio we followed along another smaller local road to the resort town of Tolo and the King Minos Hotel with its spectacular view of the Gulf of Argolikos.

It was here that legend says that Agamemnon gathered his fleet for the Trojan War. Once again we found ourselves surrounded by history.

Greek Moto Adventures, or GMA as we started calling them, plan was to use this, their home town, as a base camp of sorts and split the next few days between riding the region and sailing on the sea.

It sounded all too perfect to all of us.

As veterans of many guided tours we really liked the idea of having our own place, even if it was just a hotel room. It made for a far more relaxing trip, since we didn't have to arrange for our gear to be brought from hotel to hotel each day of the tour.

We also liked the idea of the waiting pool and bar each evening. With the pool and view it was like our own little oasis in the middle of paradise.

As the sun set that night we toasted a few Mythos beers and gazed at the twin peaks across the water. We were told they were the Breasts of Aphrodite and we could see how they got that name.

As with most tours, the nightly dinners were a time to compare notes and talk about the day's adventure, and this excursion was no exception.

That evening we dined at a beach restaurant where you could literally curl your toes in the sand.

Our first day out was truly a blast and there was so much more to come.

TOLO TO POROS

I got up early the next morning and watched the sun come up over the bay. A tiny fishing

boat chugged across the water, in search of a place to throw down lures for octopus. One thing I had found out about Greeks was that they are some of the most friendly people in the world. That day we were joined by fellow rider Gregory on an F650 GS and Christian who tagged along (very well, by the way) in a small Mercedes.

We rode back a bit towards the ancient theatre of Epidavros.

For a thousand years Greeks had come here to be healed, as this was the home to the very first real medical facilities in civilization. Dramas and plays were held in the great amphitheatre which was buried by an earthquake long ago. When discovered, a full 95% was still intact.

We were told this was the greenest of archeological sites in Greece, and we believe that so, as it was found surrounded by miles of olive trees and pine forest.

At the bottom of the theatre, where the stage would be, were perfect acoustics. Billy stood in the centre and sang an old Grecian song for our pleasure. I, too, did a classic ñ Warren Zevonís ñ Lawyers, Guns And Money ñ a true standard.

From there we followed ancient roads back towards the coast. The plan was to ride into the town of Galatas and then take the short ferry ride to Poros.

The road down off the peaks to Galatas was wildly twisty, with sweepers to the left and right. I was following Billy and both bikes seemed to dance along the pavement, the others behind us following our lines.

Most folks think of Greece as a flat land. Truth is this isnít Kansas kiddies! 75% of Greece is mountainous and the roadways prove that out.

But, heading through one right hand sweeper I heard that horrible sound we have all heard before ñ the sound of a motorcycle crashing and sliding behind us!

Shira started to pound my side. She didnít have to; I knew what had happened. So did Billy.

We pulled over safely and Shira and Billy went running back while I slowed oncoming traffic down.

One of the group had low-sided in the turn. Things seemed okay, except for the riderís right ankle which was quickly swelling.

We rode into Galatas and then, the limping rider using my shoulder as a crutch, boarded a ferry to Poros where we sought some medical help.

Luckily a doctor was at the local pharmacy and, after wrapping the ankle, made arrangements at a nearby hospital for a few x-rays.

The rest of us grabbed lunch as Billy and Christian went to the hospital with our fallen comrade.

During lunch we heard the bad news ñ this fellow had two separate fractures and a torn ligament.

His tour was basically over.

But, now we had a situation. We were far from any big back-up vehicle. We were down a rider and still had a machine to deal with. We needed a pilot.

It seemed, all at once, that all eyes turned to Shira.

For those of you who might not have read Backroads for the last few months ñ the lovely and talented redhead had torn up her knee. Surgery was scheduled once we returned to the USA. Shira was the only one who could jump into this situation, but could she?

Always a player se agreed to ride Billyís R1150R and Billy would take the other Honda. I hoped that the big-buck DonJoy knee brace would hold all the loose parts of her knee together for the three-hour ride back to Tolo.

Although towards the end I could tell Shira was in a bit of discomfort (well maybe a lot), she rode true. Honestly, although she had to pack her knee with ice at the bar that night, she said she was so glad she rode, even for a bit, in Greece. The route back that day was full of mountains, switchbacks, lefts and rights and we found, to our surprise, that Greece is one of the best places to ride very flickable motorcycles.

Hey thereís a reason we call it Motorcycles, Travel & Adventure!

#### FREE DAY CRUISE TO HYDRA & SPETSES

This part of the trip usually would have taken place a bit later on, but we rearranged the schedule a bit and parked the bikes for a day to cruise to two separate Greek isles. First up was Hydra, where things haven't really changed in hundreds of years. No cars or scooters are on the island, which is a UNESCO Heritage Site. It was truly a special place and one that I certainly was not happy to leave so soon. Spetses was a bit more modern, but had a charm of its own.

#### TOLO TO MYCENAE AND CORINTH

We got an early start this day as GMA had plenty planned for us. First we rode along a few valleys, flanked by high mountains. Here the road was lined with orange groves and the scent of citrus was very strong. This part of Greece is also steeped in history. The Trojan War had its beginnings here and our first stop was to the ruins at Mycenae and the Treasure of Atreus, called by some as the Tomb of Agamemnon. Built into the side of a hill it is a huge bee hive style monument. Looking at the size of these stones boggled my mind. How could the builders handle such sheer weight and size? One main stone at the entrance weighs an estimated 120 tons!

Legend has it that the King was buried here, right after he was slaughtered by his own wife, and her love, while bathing. It seems that old Aggi had sacrificed his own daughter for good favor of the winds in the upcoming war and this didn't sit well with the wife. She had her revenge. Tough lady.

Just across the valley from the tomb we found the Mycenae Acropolis.

Now just to clear something up. Many Americans believe the Acropolis is just in Athens, where the Parthenon is. Truth is that the word Acropolis describes a fortress on a hill. There are many in Greece.

In Mycenae there sits a fortified castle atop the hill, built thousands of years ago. It had only been excavated and researched since the mid 1800s and was one of the most impressive things we had seen yet.

For lunch we rode up into Corinth and dined in the shadow of the Temple of Apollo. The impressive Greek history and archeological treasures never ceased to end or amaze us. Looping back across the Corinth Canal we headed to a mountain-top Monastery of Saint Patapos. The view from the top was spectacular, with the city of Corinth and the huge Gulf of Korinoiakos spread out before us. But, even the view was not as neat as seeing Saint Patapos himself laid out inside the church.

We made the mandatory stop at the bridge to get a bird's eye view of the modern marvel, the Corinth Canal. Construction began on the canal in 1882 and was completed in 1893. This canal shortened travel from the Adriatic to Piraeus by 200 miles and has become famous around the world. Its sheer height and sharply cut vertical walls were incredibly impressive.

We got back to Tolo just as the sun was making its graceful slide into the ocean and that night we attended a party on the beach ñ Greek style with much music, dancing and food. Watching the people dance at the beachside bar, the real joy in their faces, was incredibly heart warming. Many of these locals were family to the Rallisí, if not, then dear friends. It seemed most of Tolo was there as well as people just travelling through. Folks from around the world wrapping their arms around each other or holding hands as they swayed to the music. Some locals broke into traditional Greek dance. I could only move so well in my dreams. That night was beyond anything I would have imagined. The Greeks of Tolo were some of the friendliest folks we have ever met.

This would be our last night in Tolo as the next day we would be moving on, but the little seaside town will always hold some great memories for Shira and me.

#### TOLO TO MONEMVASIA

Once again we were out early, following the road that wrapped around the Sea. Along with us, driving the chase van with Vicky, was a young man named Alex. As the trip carried on

over the next few days we all came to love this young man as Alex was a real pleasure to be with and added greatly to the tour.

To our right, high peaks defined Greece against the blue of the Aegean. The roads that day were both good and bad. It seemed that the Greeks only had enough cash for so many miles of new pavement and they used them where necessary. Not a problem, the Honda\ TransAlp was very happy in these conditions.

We turned inland and then along the Parnonas Mountains. Here we found small villages built into the foothills, their white buildings and red roofs contrasting the azure skies of this Hellenic world. As we passed through the tight one-lane roads of one town we would scythe the next some kilometers away. With every passing hour, we road into more and more rural areas. Near Leonidio we followed beneath a huge escarpment, actually just the beginnings of an incredible gorge-like part of the Parnonas.

First we found lunch at an old bayside Taverna and dined on fried fish and roe. Across the walkway the crystal blue waters teemed with life and I spied sea urchins clinging hardily to the pier.

It was quiet, peaceful and I wondered why the ancient Greek sailors would even bother sailing from some place so beautiful.

Following Billyís lead we headed up the gorge. We went higher and higher, the road twisting along through the mountains. This piece of pavement was a very tight one and just a half-laner at best. A mistake here would necessitate as recovery. A rescue would not be in the cards. We rode accordingly.

As we got higher the temperatures dropped and we rode from Greeceís summer into their autumn. The leaves turned yellow, then red and then the most fiery color of orange I have ever seen on a plant.

Through my sunglasses it almost seemed as though the bushes and trees were on fire and I half expected to hear Zeus bark out some commands at me.

Eventually the fall fiesta fell away to more stoic evergreens and atop the peaks we found a little Greek Shangri-La called Kosmas.

To our surprise we found it a bustling town full of life. Today was the National Greek Holiday of October 28 ñ the day Metaxas told Mussolini to kiss off and the Greeks went to war with Italy. Italy lost.

We had a few good Greek desserts and coffees and then headed, once again, to the sea.

Our destination that evening was the castle called Monemvasia. Built on a small island off the coast it is gotten to by a small man-made causeway.

Now, within its fortress walls which are almost constantly being rebuilt, youíll find a small town, restaurants, shops and the Byzantine Hotel, our fantastic home for the evening.

If, like us, you wished to come to Greece to find some serious history, as well as ride some fantastic roads, then Greek Moto Adventures seems to have this act down perfectly. What a superb day of riding.

#### MONEMVASIA TO THE MANI PENINSULAR, PALIROS AND GYTHEIO

The next dayís ride was done in far different conditions than what we had been served so far in Greece. A cold and windy front had come in over the night and as we headed down the Mani Peninsular things got a bit breezy.

Still the cloudy weather didnít hamper the stunning ride we were to be treated to this day. Passing through Gytheio, where we would be returning later that evening, we cut from east to west across the peninsula through the mountainous gorges that dominate this part of the Peloponnese. This was the most technical riding we had done yet on this Grecian adventure and the motorcycles seemed to move as one as we tossed them through the repeated rights, lefts, hairpins and decreasing radius turns.

It was big time fun!

As we got higher into the mountains the winds got stronger. Across the peaks riding straight down the road without being blown off the side of the cliff became paramount in

our minds. Of all of Mother Nature's weapons in her day-to-day arsenal, it is wind that bugs me the most.

A few hours later we followed Billy down to the Caves of Dirou.

Found just at the beginning of last century they were not explored until the 1950s. Now you can float along on the underground river for more than a kilometer and the Dirou Caves have become one of Greece's most popular attractions. We certainly were impressed as it is rare in the United States to get so close to the actual formations.

We once again found a great lunch spot in another picture perfect Grecian fishing village, with salads and seafood quickly becoming the daily staple of our diets.

After lunch we headed to the southernmost part of our Greek adventure, the tiny bay of Paliros. The road to this spot was taken right from our own menu as this was definitely the road less travelled.

Heading up and over another peak we found another castle where we stopped for the digital moment and then carried on towards Paliros.

The actual road down to the water was tiny, twisted and rutted and we were all glad for our bikes' dual-sport capabilities.

By this time the winds had really picked up again and we were told that our guides had never seen Paliros so rough; that this was usually the peaceful and placid of bays - the perfect hideaway.

From this spot you could see where the mainland of Greece ends and the Mediterranean began - next stop Libya and Africa!

Riding back to the top of the peak I could hear something, even with my earplugs and helmet on. Turning off the bikes we could hear the winds tearing through the mountains. It was unearthly and almost human; as if we had angered the ancient Greek Gods by riding into their most remote hideaway, and they were letting us hear their wrath.

I yelled to Zeus, Hera and their son Apollo that we meant no offense and with respect to the ancient deities we rode back to the port city of Gytheio and our hotel for the night. This was by far the best riding of the trip and the winds just added a bit of edge to the adventure.

#### GYTHEIO TO SPARTA, LAGADIA & OLYMPIA

Our prayers to the Gods must have been heard for the next day was crystal clear. The winds had disappeared overnight, but still there was a price to pay as the front that had passed through the previous day brought in colder weather from the northern Italian Alps. We had a bunch of miles to do this day so we headed up through the mountains on the main road north.

As we got higher it got colder. Much colder. By the time we were riding the crested valley between two ranges the temperatures hovered somewhere in the high 30s.

About halfway up the Peloponnese we pulled over at a café for hot chocolate and to add what layers we had. Fleece, Windstoppers, HADs all got added to the day's riding gear. Eventually we headed down one valley and into the famous city of Sparta. It was a bit sorry to see that once proud warrior city-state had finally been conquered by the nations of Ford, Chevrolet and Nissan.

If I ever need a car in Greece I'll go back to Sparta.

The road rose again and then we cut through the city of Tripoli where Billy took us on a road that Greek Mot Adventures uses quite often. It was the beginning of the Greek Alps and from here the road got more and more serious with each kilometer.

We rode for miles in a tight fir forest, with the trees hugging the road tenaciously. Hairpin after hairpin brought us higher into the mountains.

Coming around one pass the terrain changed once again. Evergreens to be replaced by barren rock and scrub. Once again the road snaked around the peaks, this time heading down. In the distance I could see a marvelous village clinging to the mountainside. This, it turned out, was Lagadia.

Lagadia was one of the prettiest towns that Shira and I had ever seen and, even better,

this was where we were to overnight. It was to be our last night on the road in Greece and Greek Moto Adventures had saved the best for last.

We took lunch in the hotel restaurant and drank in the beauty of it all.

Where before, on the Aegean, we almost always ate octopus, squid and fish, here in the mountains we were treated to baby goat, lamb and the tastiest venison I have ever had.

Can you say Fabulous? I knew you could.

It was still early afternoon so, after unloading our luggage from the chase van, we hopped back on the bikes and rode to the birthplace of the Olympics ñ the place simply called Olympia.

Not really a town, but more a happening, this is the very site where the first Olympics were held thousands of years ago.

The road leading to Olympia was worthy of a ìGold Medalî itself as it twisted its small two lanes around the gorges and peaks. The views were stunning and I wanted to constantly glance at the fantastic scenery, but was far better served paying attention to the road. In places the road was covered with loose gravel, usually along a sheer drop off and at the apex of a turn.

If the height and gravel didn't make you wide-eyed the oncoming traffic of sedans, little no-name cars and monstrous tour buses did!

Think the Hawks Nest for 30 miles, twice as tight, at half the width, with no wall and crazed oncoming traffic at full speed! You get the picture?

Needless to say we all got down to Olympia where we did a short guided tour of the ruins and even got to run in the ancient stadium.

Yes, we kept our clothes on.

The return trip to Lagadia was even better as, for the most part, we had the sun at our backs and there seemed to be far less oncoming traffic to deal with.

This would be our last night on the road with our new friends so we did our best to make it as special as we could.

As with all tours like this, the friendships that are made can last a lifetime and these last nights can always get a bit melancholy, especially when that night comes to an end.

#### LAGADIA TO ATHENS

Whoever the Greek god of weather was, he must have been told by Zeus to play with us a bit more as our day's ride back to Athens had a little bit of everything.

The ride started with one more romp down the exciting and picturesque road to Olympia. In one small town we headed to the north on a small one-lane road that brought us higher into the peaks on sweeping farm roads.

Occasionally we would ride around a curve to find our way blocked by a few dozen goat or sheep. Why the goat herders in Greece insist on having their flocks right on the roads when there is so much open land is beyond me, but we always had to keep an open eye for four legged furry things on the road.

We rode into one village and found our way completely blocked. We made a uiey and took another road that we hoped would go around the town.

Eventually we found the road that we were looking for and also found Alex and the chase van already waiting.

He had talked to a local shepherd and told us that the road we planned to take had seen much damage due to rains over the past few weeks.

As he said, ìBrian ñ it is very, very dangerous.î But then seeing the questioning look on my face quickly smiled and added, ìBut easy!î

I loved this guy ñ ìBut easyî Hah!

We're starting a fund to bring him to America, which is his dream.

We all had a quick roadside meeting and decided if it was really that dangerous we'd turn back.

Strapping on the helmets and zipping up the riding gear we started down the road.

This route, which lasted about 20 miles, was truly not ion the best shape, but was

certainly navigable.

Basically a one or sometimes two-laner it had a lot of wash out, gravel and pot holes. It also had the joy of wrapping itself around an incredibly high mountain with not a thought of a guardrail or wall.

Riding by the edge I glanced over as Shira punched my shoulder and urged me to stay as far away from the edge as possible. She was right, as one glance over the edge at the vast expanse of nothing brought a bit of vertigo and I piloted the TransAlp to left of center roadway.

Right about then the sleet came down.

Excellent.

We kept on around the mountain and down to the dam lake below.

From there we had a far better road to a much needed hot chocolate break and then over a smaller peak in a steady drizzle.

Atop one pass we found a monument to three Greeks and one Italian who were forced to dig their own graves before being murdered by the Germans in the Second World War. Things like this always sadden me but I wasn't prepared for what we saw in the town of Kalavrita. We had stopped there in the early afternoon, parking the bikes and grabbing some lunch, hoping the rain would stop.

It did lighten a touch as I watched out the window while Billy told us the story of Kalavrita.

Once again it involved the Nazis and their occupation of Greece in the early 40s.

It seemed that one German officer was killed by a townsman and, in response, the Germans slaughtered every man and boy over the age of twelve. Every one.

The monument on the hillside above the town was as solemn a place as I have ever seen.

From there we did one or two more mountain passes and coming down through one last stunning gorge my eyes beheld the sea.

For here we hopped on the main road towards Athens and in a short while crossed over the Corinth Canal.

In my mind the tour was complete.

We had ridden the entire Peloponnese down along the coast to the south and then north ñ right through the impressive mountains of Greece. We had seen ancient sights met the most wonderful people and traveled the roads that warriors, kings and even gods had once traveled and, as we piloted the bikes back to modern day Athens, I said a quiet goodbye to a most wonderful two-wheeled adventure and to the ancient roads of Greece.

Greek Moto Adventures hold tours of the Peloponnese region of Greece during the late spring to fall.

Although we did a special tour that ran rather late in the season we recommend doing a tour earlier in the year, when chances of you riding into colder weather are least likely to happen.

Tours start at \$1680 per person riding two up with a double room. Riding solo from \$2280.