

Christmas on Crete, New Year in Athens

written by Marcus | 4 January, 2015



Christmas in the UK is nothing if not predictable. We're introduced to the idea that it's on its way with a few hints around September with shops bringing in the odd bit of Christmas paraphernalia and bars and restaurants imploring us to make that Christmas party booking 'NOW, BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE!'. It creeps up a bit more in October then by November the brakes are well and truly let off as the Christmas machine rolls into every town with tinsel and lights appearing everywhere you look. By the time advent actually starts the whole country is in such a Christmas frenzy that it's hard to imagine that it can last another 25 days (or more). But somehow it does and the expectation heaped on the Big Day is finally released in a flurry of gift unwrapping, turkey

stuffing and TV viewing.



And it's usually great with the whole family getting together and enjoying a fantastic feast but it's just a shame that the Christmas spirit is diluted so much in the build up. We've been able to avoid the whole pre December build up and thankfully only started to hear Chris Rea crooning about Driving Home for Christmas very recently (even in Greece they have the same soundtrack). But without the family gathering to look forward to it hasn't really felt like Christmas at all.

The ferry to Crete from Piraeus is busy so there's a rush to occupy the best seats that have a plug socket for charging gadgets and some space to stretch out for a snooze. We make ourselves at home with our sleeping mats and pillows and settle in for the 10 hour crossing.

There are three largish towns to pick from on Crete and we've decided to head for Chania based on a recommendation from Karen who we stayed with on Lefkada as she had lived on Crete a few years ago. It's just gone 6am when we roll off the boat so we find a bit of shelter outside a closed kiosk and make a brew and some porridge before heading into the town.



We've only got a couple of days before Santa does his rounds so we want to make sure we've got somewhere booked for our Christmas dinner. In the hope of getting some advice on where

to go we head to the Tourist Information office, but they tell us that it's too early to know which restaurants will be open on Christmas day. We should come back tomorrow with a copy of the local paper as by then the restaurants will have advertised their Christmas offers and so they can translate and make the booking for us. This is on 22nd December. Surely most people will have made their plans 2 months ago?

Astonished, we ride out of Chania and up onto the Akrotiri Peninsula to investigate three different monasteries. The island has hundreds of orthodox monasteries and convents though many are now abandoned while others may only have one monk left to look after the place. We stop for lunch at the beautiful convent of Agia Triada and then climb up a progressively steep track to Gouvertneto where the monks have found a very pleasant secluded spot near the top of a short ridge of hills that fall right down to the sea.



Agia Triada Monastery



Gouvertneto



Gouvertneto Monastery

It's a hike to the third one so we park the bike and make our way down a rocky path where we find the ruins of Kotholokin carved out the rock face and forming a wide bridge across a gorge. This was a place for monks who really didn't want to be disturbed but probably enjoyed a swim as it has it's own small beach very close by. There's also a cave where St John the Hermit lived in the 5th century AD, how he survived in there is anyone's guess.



Walking down to Kotholokin



Kotholokin





Kotholokin



Cave of St John the Hermit

Once we climb back up to Gouvertneto it's all too tempting to try and pitch the tent in the grounds of the monastery but there are enough signs to let us know that the monks wouldn't take too kindly to that. We stop briefly to listen to their singing in the small chapel and then drop a bit further down the hill to pitch in an ancient olive grove instead.



Sunset over Chania



Sunrise in the ancient olive grove



Lefka Ori Mountains

On our way back to Chania in the morning we pass signs to a velodrome and are curious enough to investigate if this is actually what we think it is or just an unusually named Greek village. But sure enough we round a corner and find a full size but partially built cycling arena. The location is fantastic with the mountain peaks rising over the open air track but it's a sad sight as it's all going to ruin. It was never complete as the project ran out of money and it's unlikely to see any more funding for quite some time now, if ever. We had hoped to take the tandem out for a lap but this idea is soon dispelled when we see the broken glass and steel struts sticking out of what should be a smooth wooden surface.



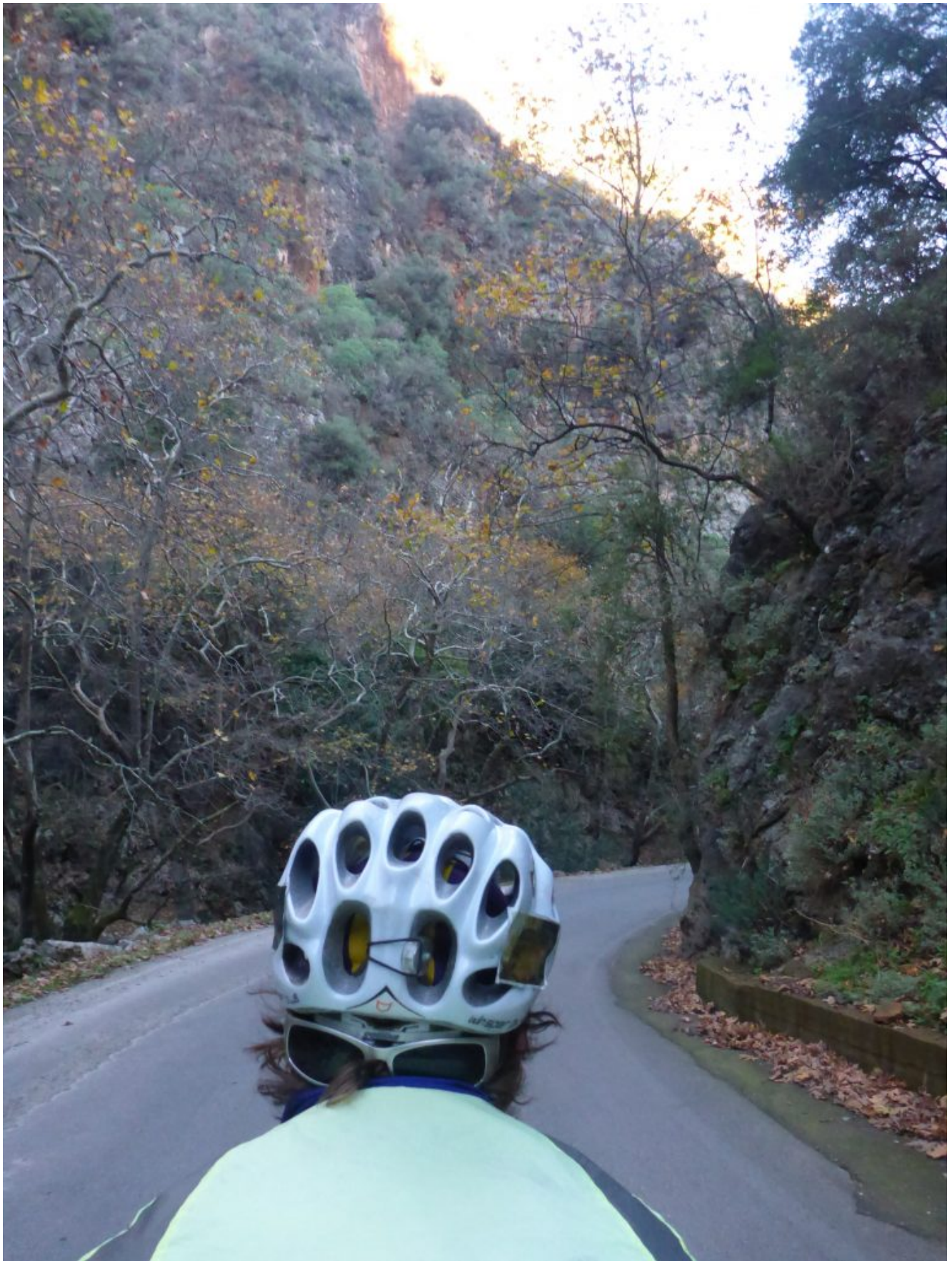
Chania velodrome

Once back in the town we have a look round the Venetian harbour, the mosque that is now a market place and check our possibilities for places to eat for Christmas dinner. But unlike the UK none of the restaurants are advertising any special Christmas meals so we return to the tourist information office, this time armed with a local paper, to see what they suggest. The paper now has several adverts in it which we work through and eventually pick one that has a mouth watering 5 course menu, live music and a great location down near the harbour which is promptly booked up for us by the helpful TI lady.



Chania harbour

The rest of the afternoon is spent riding uphill. The Therisso gorge had been recommended to us by a contact we'd made through Warm Showers and he'd said it was a 'must see' while in the area. What he hadn't warned us about was that the 10km climb would take us up 650m and although it's very beautiful it's hard to appreciate fully while hauling the bike up in the granny gear. But we make it to the top and reward ourselves with a drink in the small taverna in the village before pitching the tent behind a church. We ponder the possibility of setting up our sleeping mats in the church itself as it looks very cosy but given the next day is Christmas Eve it's likely we'd be discovered in the morning.



Therisso Gorge

Instead we have a frosty start first thing and with 10km of freewheeling ahead of us no chance to get warmed up. We do get

a better opportunity to admire the wonderful gorge though with high sided cliffs on either side of the narrow passageway that the road follows. We bought a Christmas decoration with bells on it while in Argos and now have it jangling off the back of the bike to accompany the goat bells.



Therisso Gorge



Therisso Gorge



Jingle bells

Once again we find ourselves heading back into Chania and on our way pick up some Christmas treats from the inevitable

Lidl. In fact the panniers are so full of stollen, cream liquor and tasty cheeses that one of them is literally bursting at the seams which will require some kind of repair job later.



Sacks of olives waiting to be pressed



Olive oil sold in industrial quantities

The real treat however is that we're staying in a very nice hotel right in the old town and a stone's throw from the

harbour. This is thanks to a very generous gift of a hotel voucher given to us by lots of our friends and family and something we're extremely grateful for. Thank you everyone who contributed! The Porto Del Columbo is a converted 600 year old Venetian town house with plenty of history and our room comes complete with a four poster bed. It's similar to being in the tent. But different.



Alleyway to the hotel

Once checked in we check out the details for the restaurant we're going to on Christmas day and discover that we'd

overlooked one small but important fact: the Christmas feast is on the 24th not the 25th, i.e. today! There's just time to get to the launderette then a 2nd hand shop for a shirt before heading back to the hotel to get smartened up.



View from the roof of the hotel

The feast at Pallas is quite something with almost everything being produced on the island from the wine to the wild boar. Granted it's not the same as a traditional roast turkey with all the trimmings but it's a very tasty alternative. We discover that it's possible to make an Andy Williams song even cheesier by playing it in a freeform jazz style on a white saxophone. Niiice.

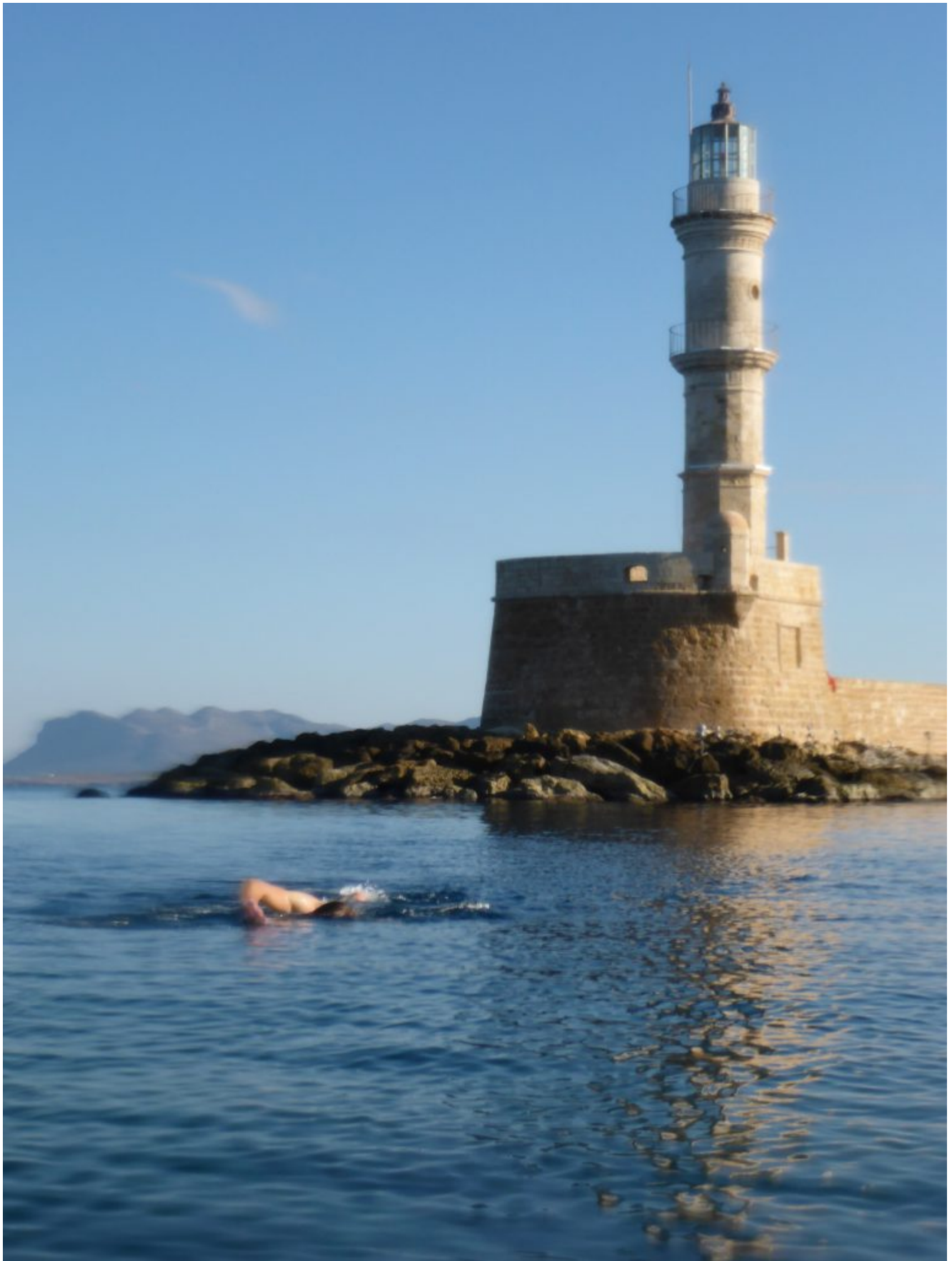


A suitable decoration



Christmas feast

Christmas day lacks the usual excitement as there are no presents to open and no chocolate fuelled nieces and nephews running around but we start with a swim across the harbour then spend most of the day grazing on our Lidl goodie bag which includes roast turkey flavoured crisps. Skype helps us wish our families merry Christmas and get a glimpse of Christmas day back home before a stroll round the town. As much as anything else, it's nice to have a relaxing day without turning the pedals, the first since we were in Belgrade 6 weeks ago although there have been some very short days in the meantime.



Christmas day swim in Chania harbour



Basia Nansy



Harbour cat

But It's business as usual on boxing day as our stay in the Porto del Columbo comes to an end and we're heading back out of Chania. Not far though as we've been invited to stay with a Warm Showers host just outside Kissamos, 45km away. Progress is slow as I'd woken up feeling under par perhaps due to an over dose of stollen and cream liqueur, but we eventually make it to the home of Manu and Fiona with their two daughters Sofia and Giulia.



The bay of KISSAMOSS

Manu is from Boulogne and Fiona from Stockport and they met while working on a turtle preservation project on Kefalonia.

(Unfortunately we were there at the wrong time of year to see the turtles.). After an adventurous year travelling round Europe they've just settled in Crete for no better reason than it seems like a nice place to live. Children are often the barrier for people to do more travelling but Manu and Fiona seemed to just about manage it. The main difficulty was that at least one of the girls suffered from acute car sickness which meant that they were limited on how far and how fast they could go.



Fiona, Sofia, Giulia and Manu

In the morning we're waved off with a belly full of home baked cinnamon bread and more in the panniers. We're now at the far

west of the island where things are very rugged and start to get more remote. It's a great road that follows the coast with views down to pink sandy beaches and out to some smaller islands. On a clear day we'd be able to see the tip of the Peloponnese but today it's shrouded in rain showers apart from one rock that always seems to be in the sunshine. It's a damp morning that requires a mid morning coffee stop with complimentary raki to warm us up. We're not the only ones braving the weather though as we bump into a Chilean cyclist who has been exploring the high mountains and loving it. His Christmas day was spent on his own on a secluded beach.



Looking down to Falasarna



Pontikonisi, always in sunshine



The west coast road

After lunch it dries up and we reach the highest point of the route before turning inland to begin our descent back down to the road that follows the north coast. On our way down we pass through another magnificent gorge at Topolia. In this gorge we're on a road perched half way up the side of the cliff with a steep drop to one side and walls of rock up above. The road narrows to a single lane with a slab of overhanging rock and a convex mirror to see round the corner for oncoming traffic. But we have the road to ourselves.



Topolia Gorge



Topolia Gorge



Tunnel in Topolia



Topolia Gorge

Once back at the north coast the light is fading fast so we pull over at a small church with an inviting lawn. As we're eyeing it up a car pulls up and seeing our camping gear the driver tells us to sleep in the church as it'll be warmer. It's just the invitation we needed and the little church makes for a very cosy shelter for the night.



Cosy church accommodation



Cosy church accommodation



Dinner in the church

It's a main road blast to Rethymno the next day via Iordanis in Chania for the best Bougatsa on the island. This is a delicious sweet pastry cheese pie with sugar and cinnamon that we could have tucked into all day.



Camping next to Rethymno fortress

At Rethymno it's Kirsty's turn to feel under par so in the morning we spend some time looking round and drop into an internet cafe for some blog updating. Here we have to endure a dozen or more Greek kids shouting at each other while they play some sort of shoot em up computer game. Just as the noise level reaches a crescendo the cafe owner tells them all to shut up but that just delays the next outburst.



Rethymno harbour

Out of Rethymno the road continues to follow the north coast, sandwiched between snow capped mountains and the sea. Most of the population live in the north of the island as most of the mountains live in the south. The highest peaks are over 2600m so would make for a great climb. We're tempted to return and take on some or all of the popular E4 walking route that runs the length of the island as it promises some amazing views.



A tiny hitch hiker



Someone wants our biscuits

Another small church by the side of the road provides our shelter for the night before we continue along to the 3rd and final main town on the island: Heraklion where we'll be catching a ferry back to Piraeus.



More cosy church accommodation



More cosy church accommodation

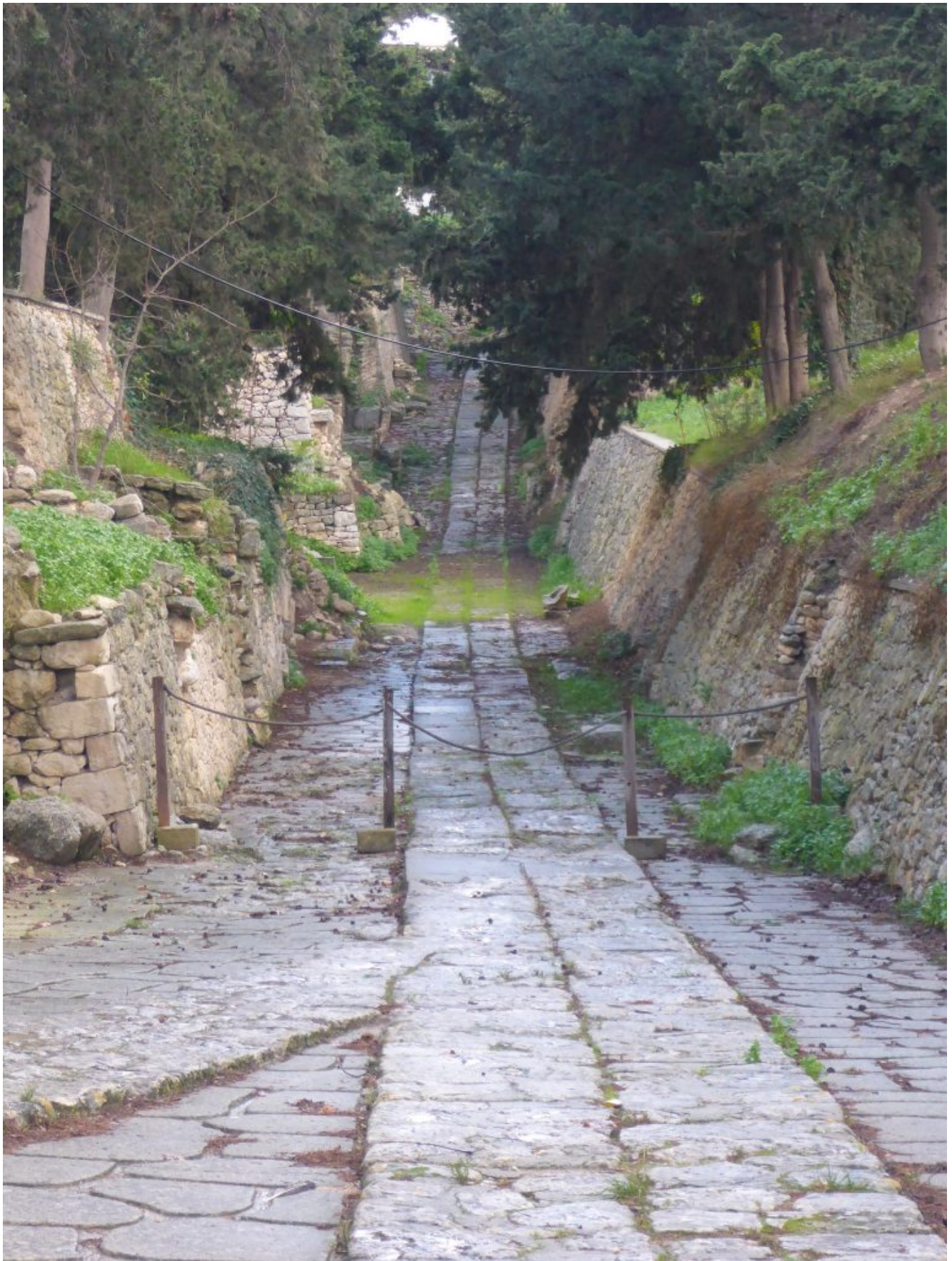
First we're keen to visit another archeological site and so ride up to Knossos. This is the site of an enormous Minoan palace from 1900BC and is also where the myth of King Minos with his Minotaur was said to have occurred. We get a bargain basement tour at 1/10th the normal price from a guide who is struggling for customers in the pouring rain, although I think the whistlestop tour lasts about 1/10th the normal amount of time as a result. It's a very odd place as parts of it were completely rebuilt in concrete by English archaeologist Arthur Evans in the 1930's. His intention was to give the visitor a better impression of what it would have been like but in reality it just looks very false and is hard to establish what is ancient and what is Evan's interpretation. The damage is irreversible and in fact Evan's work is now being preserved and renovated as historical material in its own right. We avoid getting lost in the labyrinth and see no sign of any minotaurs.



Evan's reproduction of the Queens bedroom



Part 3000 year old palace, part 100 year old concrete





Hunting for the minotaur



King Minos' Throne





Horns of the Minotaur

After our history lesson there's time for a quick bite to eat in Heraklion, with complimentary raki before boarding the boat for Piraeus.



Heraklion

It's not nearly as busy as on our way out so there's no problem finding a quiet spot to sleep. Off the boat the wind has picked up and it's noticeably colder so we begin the ride towards Athens but pull over to find shelter in the porch of a church to make breakfast and try and warm up. As you can see we're regular church goers now.



Breakfast booth

The plan is to spend a couple of days in Athens to see in the new year and have a look around the city. We'd also hoped to

find a Warm Showers or Couch Surfing host but the only positive reply was from someone who could only host us on 1st Jan and even he disappears off the radar after we accept his offer. So we find ourselves a cheap hotel for New Years Eve and prepare ourselves for the Big Night Out.

Athens is a grubby little city with plenty of uninspiring architecture and most of it covered with graffiti. In fact most of Greece is covered with graffiti. But it does have its almighty trump card which sits above the town like a beacon for the thousands of tourists: The Acropolis.



Greek graffiti

We catch our first flood-lit view of it from a roof level cocktail bar and the view is added as a premium on the drinks so we don't stay for long. The atmosphere out on the streets is decidedly subdued and it feels much like any mid-week night in a city with a few people drifting from bar to restaurant

but nothing like the revelry that was no doubt taking place on the streets of London or Edinburgh. In fact some bars are shut so clearly aren't expecting much business. We spend some time in a funky little jazz bar, grab some huge plates of kebab in a restaurant and then make our way up to Syntagmos Square at 11:30 which is supposed to be where the main celebrations take place. But other than a few groups milling around in the cold there's not much going on so we abandon that idea and return to the jazz bar. Midnight arrives, a few people shout Happy New Year and there are half a dozen fire works going off but that's it. Apparently there would normally be a big display over the acropolis but the austerity measures have put paid to that this year.



Lift to the trendy cocktail bar



The Acropolis by night

Somewhat despondently we return to the hotel with a feeling that we've missed out on something.

The advantage of a relatively quiet night is that we feel great the next day and make it to the free walking tour at 10:15am. Our guide, George, explains that NYE is a time for family and gambling so most people will have been at home until well past midnight. Things may have livened up by 2am if we'd waited but by then we were tucked up in bed. We'll know for next time.

As it's New Years Day a lot of things are shut but George shows us round the main sights that don't need a ticket and is full of facts and figures to illustrate what we're looking at. The highlight of the day is running a lap of the panathenaic stadium, constructed on an ancient site for the 1896 Olympics, the first of the modern games and as they repeatedly tell us,

the world's only marble stadium.



Presidential guard and Lucy the official presidential street dog



Panathenaic stadium with Acropolis in the background



The worlds only marble stadium



Kirsty in the back straight



Winners and losers



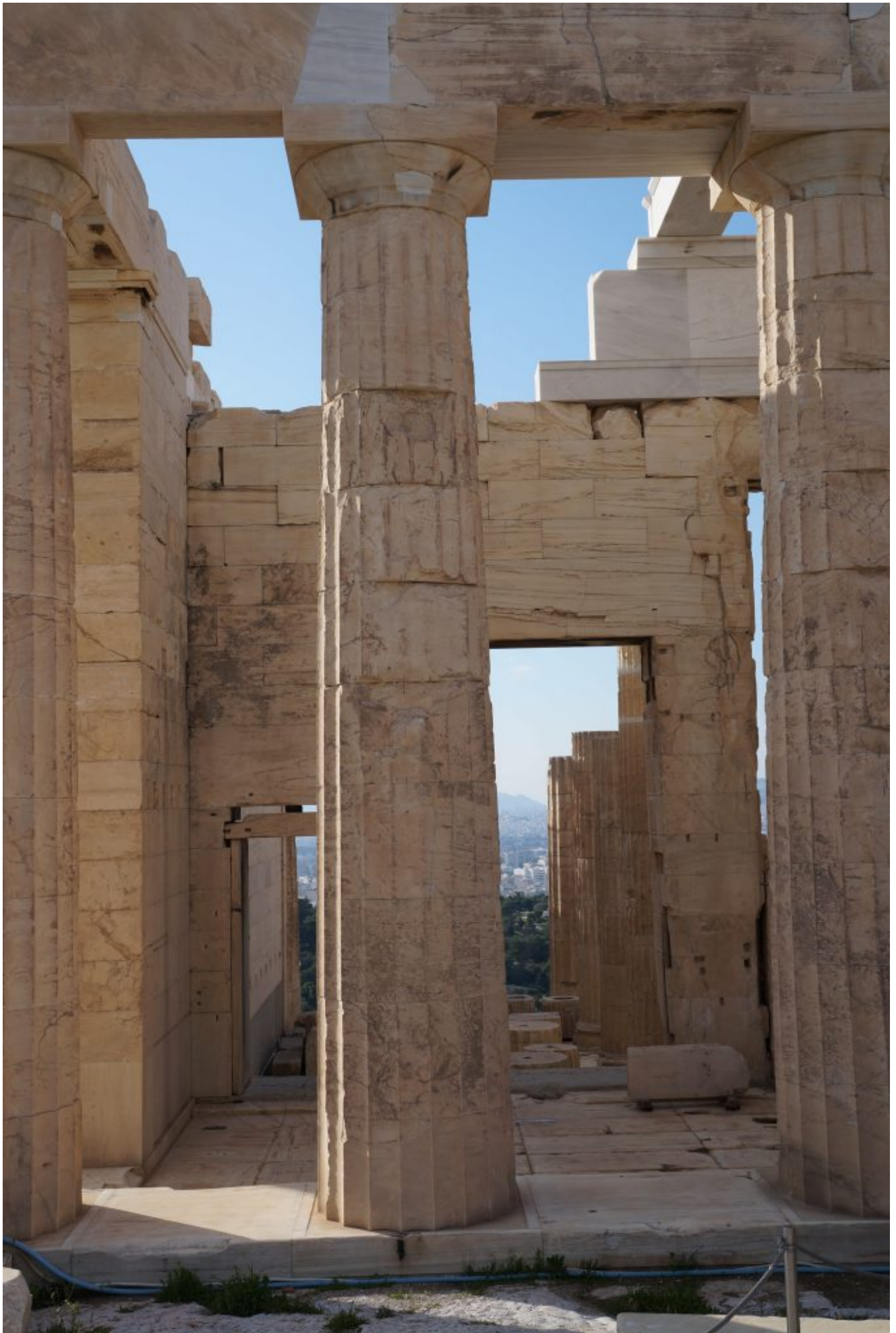
Odeon of Herodes Atticus



Bear, one of the many friendly and well fed street dogs
We get to visit the Acropolis the next day and also the
excellent New Acropolis Museum. The museum was completed just

after the Olympics in 2004, not helped by the fact that if you dig down far enough in any part of Athens you'll find some sort of archaeologically important remains, so the whole thing is now built with a glass floor so you can see what they uncovered when they began digging. As with any good museum it's not so much what you are displaying but how you display it, and this has been laid out in a very stylish way. The amazing thing is that none of the artefacts are protected or hidden behind glass so if you were so inclined you could touch the 3000 year old paintwork on the marble statues. This doesn't seem the best way to preserve these priceless items but it is great to see everything up close. Of course there are a few mentions of the 'terrible damage' carried out when Lord Elgin plundered the site but I suspect that the British Museum will continue to hold on tight to the remnants that ended up there.







The Parthenon



View of Athens from the Acropolis



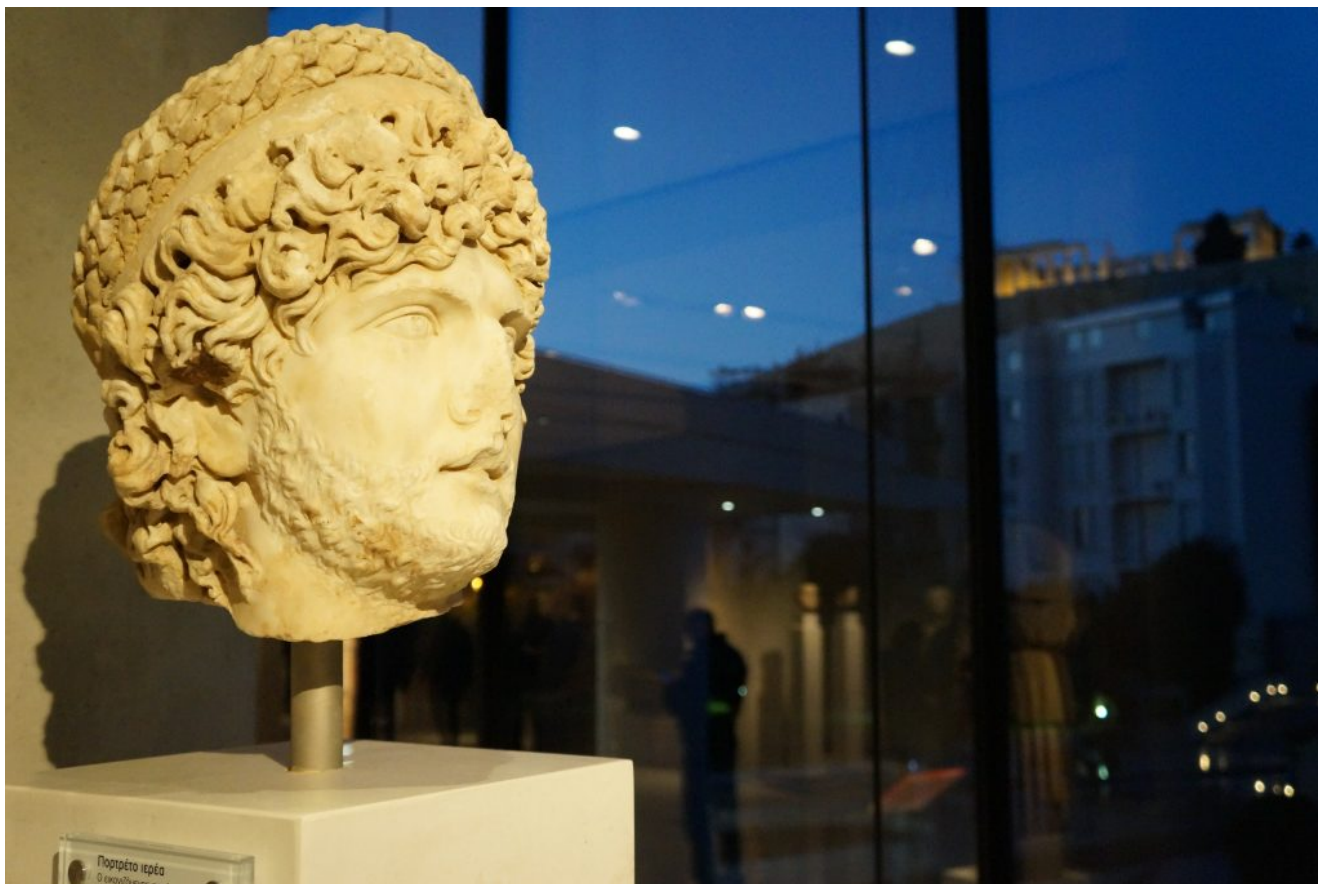
View of Athens from the Acropolis



New Acropolis Museum



Glass ceiling in the New Acropolis Museum



Acropolis Museum and Acropolis



Copies of the Elgin Stones



The goddess Nike adjusting her sandals (with air cushioned sole)

But where to go after Athens? Well Turkey is the plan but January in northern Turkey is surprisingly cold and

unpleasantly wet. Not only that but based on current progress we would arrive in Central Asia while the high passes will still be impassable so we need to bide our time. The solution is that we will be travelling to the island of Paros in the Aegean sea to do some WW00Fing. This is a volunteer programme primarily set up for people to help out on organic farms but now extends to all sorts of different projects. Our hosts, Jim and Irini have a large plot with extensive gardens all built on the principals of permaculture so we'll be helping with the maintenance and getting green fingers. It'll give us time to service the bike, sort out some bits of kit that need replacing or repairing while also learning a few new skills and helping someone out. Hopefully it'll work out well but the only worry is there may not be enough anti-itching powder for our feet.