

Thessaloniki to Istanbul

written by Marcus | 19 February, 2015



There are some cycling records that are truly remarkable feats of human endurance. The round the year award which is to cover as much distance as possible over the course of a 12 month period is probably the most impressive. The current record was set by Tommy Goodwin in 1938 when he rode a staggering 75,065 miles in one year, an average of 205 miles per day. 3 men are vying to better that this year including Steve Abraham who I had the pleasure of riding part of the Mille Cymru with in 2014 and I can only wish him the best of luck for this huge commitment. Incidentally the ladies record of just over 30,000 miles (average of 81 per day) remains uncontested since it was set by Billie Flemming in 1938. Perhaps its time for someone to have a go at this one too?

Taking 6 months to get across Europe isn't exactly a new world

record (last year a friend did it in 2 weeks) but it is a personal milestone for us that we have to admit we're quite proud of. We've also crossed the 10,000km mark without realising. It turns out the trip computer had been calibrated for smaller tyres so had been underestimating our distance and speed by 4% each day since the beginning of the trip. This all adds up so we'd covered 400km more than we thought we had! Steve Abraham will cover this distance every 33 days throughout the year.



The White Tower, Thessaloniki

Our snow day in Thessaloniki starts with a spin across the city to Georgios' shop, Action Bikes. On the way a car pulls alongside while we ride and the passenger insists on giving Kirsty a pair of gloves shouting "Take them, TAKE THEM!".

Georgios has managed to find a new freehub, the one remaining part I wanted to replace on the rear hub making it effectively

now all brand new. His father, Costas, used to turn spanners for the Greek national cycling team so goes about the task of fitting the part and giving the bike a thorough service with a meticulous eye.



Costas the master mechanic



The Action Bike team

We try and arrange meeting up with a walking tour guide later in the day but they send us the wrong location for the rendez-vous so we end up standing around in the cold on opposite sides of the town. Instead of the tour we head back to Georgios' office (the first one) where his partner Eleni shows us to our accommodation for the night: the floor of the board room.



Camping on the boardroom floor

On our way out of Thessaloniki the next day we pay another visit to Action Bikes to pick up a new Ortlieb rack bag that Georgios sells us at a price we can't refuse. We have been contemplating buying one of these for several months as, with a bit of rear end reorganisation, it should give us a bit more capacity for when we need to carry more than 1 or 2 days worth of food and water. Georgios sends us off with some recommendations for our route east and also the number for a friend who lives in a village along the way who he suggests we visit.



The posh new biscuit carrier



..with easy access to our supplies

We've been sent on the hilly but quieter route and pass through the appropriately named Panorama that gives great

views back down to the city. There's still plenty of snow high on the hills all around us but it's a cloudless bright day. Over the top we get to see a range of much bigger mountains over the border into Bulgaria as well as the lakes that we drop down to follow for the afternoon.



Panoramic view of Thessaloniki



Up to the snowline



Snowy Shrine



Bulgarian mountains in the distance



Incoming!

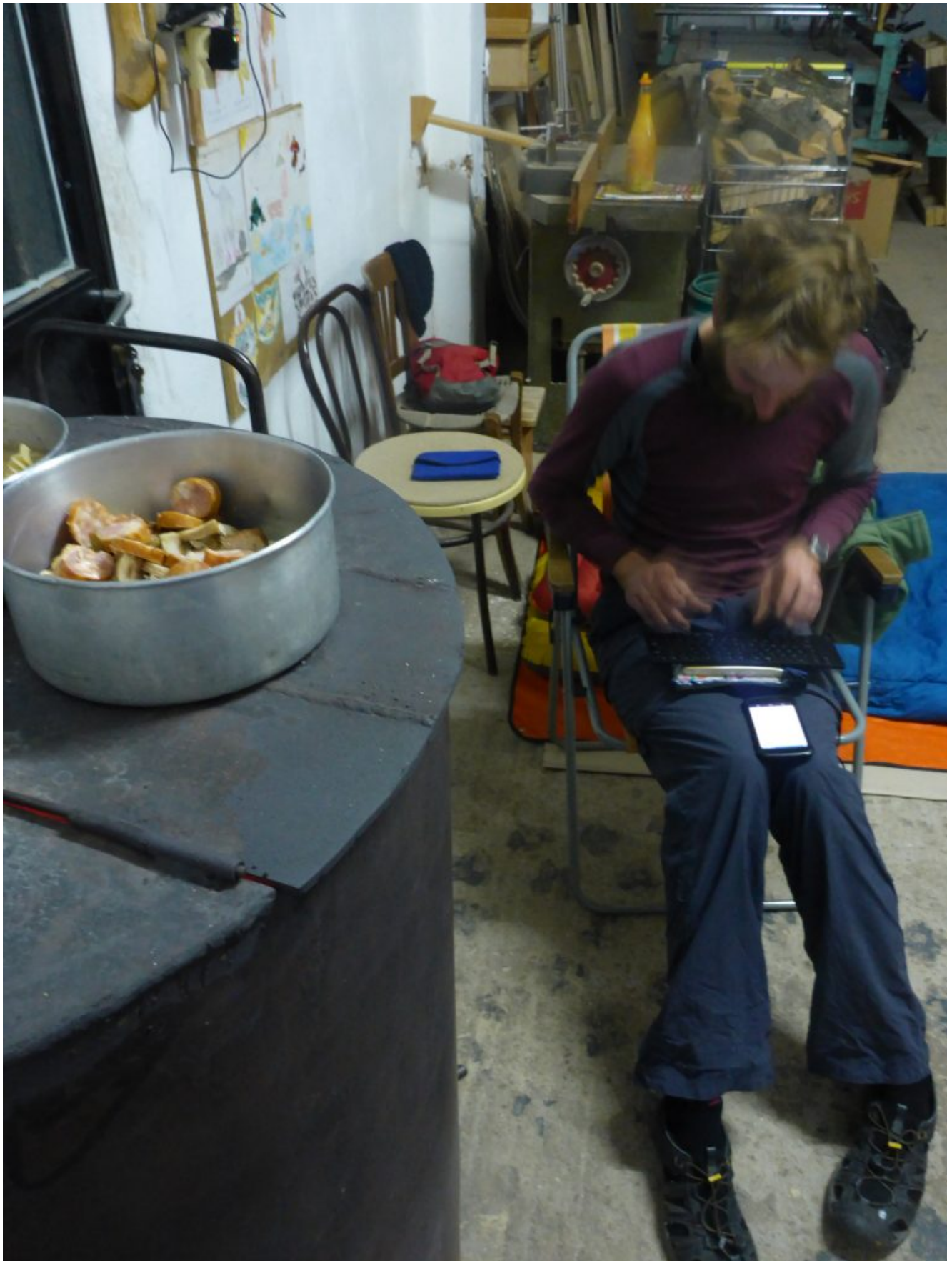
By the evening we've made it to the coast at the north east tip of Poseidon's Trident: Halkidiki. The forecast is for subzero temperatures overnight so we're keen to find some shelter if we can but there are no cosy churches in sight along the sea front at Vrasna. We stop to ask someone if we can camp in an olive orchard on the basis that he has a scarecrow on a bike in his front garden so must be cyclist friendly. While he's trying to direct us to a campsite (that will definitely be closed), his wife comes out and invites us in for coffee. Their wood burning stove, fresh coffee and even fresher roxakia cakes, a traditional Macedonian delicacy, are all very much appreciated and bring some warmth back into our toes. Ah yes, this is the Greek region of Macedonia and the reason why the country that sits to the north west has to be called FYROM.



Tiny cyclist on rocking chair

While we enjoy the coffee and cakes their Dutch neighbours are brought round to translate so we explain what we're doing on a

bike on a freezing February evening. Before long we've been invited to make use of a carpentry workshop just round the corner, and the owner, Vassilis, sets to work sweeping the floor and loading up a huge stove with broken pallets. It soon becomes very warm and inviting and we're left to set up our beds and use the huge band saw as a dining table.



Dinner in the carpentry workshop





Vassilis brings us fresh bread in the morning then sends us on our way back following the coast to the east. Its cold but clear and when we get the chance we turn up towards the mountains to generate a bit more heat with some climbing.



The lion of Amfipoli from 4th Century BC



Riding towards the mountains near Mesropi



Standard chicken selfie

A kind cafe owner refuses payment for our coffees at the top of the hill, then we drop down to the coastal town of Kavala. Here we get chatting to the owners of a small kiosk while we try to buy some stamps for some nieces' birthday cards and get another complimentary coffee and a big bottle of water. This side of Greece seems to be much friendlier than the west, possibly as it sees fewer tourists but also maybe because we're getting further east.



Spring blossom above Kavala



Kind kiosk owners in Kavala

The mercury is set to plunge again overnight so once we've found a nice spot on a clifftop looking back to Kavala we get a small fire going and sip some of the ouzo we were given before pulling on all our clothes and diving into the tent



The aquaduct in Kavala



Cliff top camping near Kavala

Sophia and Antonis, the friends that Georgios had recommended we visit, live in a small village on the banks of the river

Nestos which is where we're heading the next day. The factor that convinced us to call in is that Sophia runs a small bakery, so when we arrive in Toxotes we head straight there and begin choosing from her range of delicious pastries. It happens to be the first day of a carnival season that runs up to Easter so to celebrate there will be some festivities later that afternoon and Sophia tells us we're welcome to attend.

There's time for a coffee and to tuck into the pastries before we join Sophia at her house then walk down to the village hall where a BBQ has been loaded up with souvlaki and meatballs. With loaded plates and cups of wine we get introduced to some of the other villagers while the local priest fires up a pair of turntables to try and instigate some dancing.



Souvlaki and wine!

The children are all dressed in various costumes and Sophia's daughter Eva has come as a leopard. We get to watch a puppet

show in Greek that we think involves a witch, a river and a judge that is actually a love story. Afterwards there's sack racing, more music from DJ Dog Collar and then we retire to the house of some friends of Sophia and Antoni's for another BBQ and homemade tspirou. Strong stuff!



Puppet show



Lunging for the line in the sack race



Home baking and home brew

The couple who put on the puppet show, Miltos and Sozo have given up life in Athens to set up a farm in the mountains and suggest that this is something more people should be doing. It's a surprisingly popular dream amongst people we've met all through Europe with a common desire to become more self sufficient.

Sophia and Antonis kindly offer to let us stay for the night to avoid having to pitch the tent so we're grateful for another warm bed. We'd only originally intended to stop to buy food!



Sophia and Antonis

In the morning we call into the bakery again to load up the Ortlieb bag with fresh supplies for the day then wave goodbye

before rejoining Route 2 eastwards.

After 20km we spot a sign for thermal springs at Loutra Potamias so decide to take a look. We find a steaming hot ditch full of water with a small bath house alongside that the proprietor lets us dip into in return for one of Sophia's biscuits.



Hot springs at Potamias



Hot springs at Potamias

A collapsed bridge forces us to push through a stream to get back onto the main road again and then we come alongside Lake Vistonida. It's a prime spot for bird watchers, but even with our limited ornithological knowledge we can recognise the flocks of flamingos all on one leg, then later a dozen or so pelicans.



Short cut at Potamias



Flamingos at Lake Vistonida



Lake Vistonida



Pelicans on lake Vistonida



More Flamingos at Lake Vistonida

After lunch we venture onto another shortcut that takes us onto a minor road beside cotton fields. As with previous shortcuts it presents the odd challenge with 3 or 4 fords to negotiate and one that requires shoes and socks to come off and we get cold toes.



Cotton fields near Komotini



Cold feet (Mum)ford

The landscape is changing with rolling plains and bigger gaps between basic villages. We're also seeing more mosques than

churches as this region was formerly Turkish and retains a large Muslim population.



Spot the photographer

We set up camp next to the remains of the Via Egnatia, a Roman road that linked Rome to Istanbul and crosses from Albania through Greece into Turkey. There's enough of it left to invoke images of chariots making a similar journey to ours 2100 years ago but we're glad to have nice smooth tarmac instead of cobbles.



Our last campsite in Greece, near Mesti



Mesti



The Via Egnatia

We're woken just before dawn by the ezan sounding out from the mosque in a village below us then the sound of barking. A pack

of 7 or 8 dogs have decided they don't like the look of our tent, and they like the head that pops out of it even less. They soon get bored though and leave us to enjoy our last breakfast in Greece.

We climb over a ridge then swoop down to the coast again into Alexandroupolis. Here we pay an emotional visit to what could be the last Lidl in Europe so stock up on some of our favourite biscuits and sheep's milk yoghurt.



Plain near Mesti

We need to print out our Turkish visas before we reach the border and look for possible options while riding down the high street. A computer printer shop seems suitably equipped and is more than happy to oblige.

But at the border our freshly printed visas aren't even checked and after visiting 5 different men behind 5 different windows we're through and into our first new country for over

2 months. As is often the case with roads leading away from borders, there is a large dual carriageway with barely any traffic due to the natural throttling effect of the passport control. Also typical of roads in and out of a border are the number of petrol stations. It's as if drivers are being told that this is their last chance to fill up with good quality Greek/Turkish fuel before crossing into the unknown.



Country #24

After 20km we're still 15km from the nearest supermarket and the light is fading fast, so we stop at a petrol station with

restaurant attached and ask if we can camp behind it on the basis we'll be buying our dinner from them. This seems to be a popular tactic with most cycle tourists passing through Turkey as there is almost always a nice picnic area beside each service station. So the answer comes back "Of course, but we have a hotel here too!" but we politely decline and pitch the tent then enjoy a romantic valentines meal in the empty restaurant, huddled round the only heater in the room.



Do we need a reservation?

As well as the picnic area the service station has a coop full of chickens and a peacock and also a mini mosque so we get the combined cry of cockerels and ezan to rouse us in the morning.



Standard Turkey selfie

We have a windy and hilly day on a road that reminds us of a similar stretch in Finland. Curiously this is the D110 and the road in Finland was also the 110 so this is clearly a number saved for tedious roadways. The day is brightened a couple of times by some complementary çay when we stop for a breather at a cafe and later a service station.



The picturesque D110 into Turkey

By the afternoon a heavy drizzle has set in so we're thankful that we have a reply from a Warmshowers host in Tekirdağ offering us a place to stay. But there are some complications. Zafer won't be home until 11pm so has suggested we go to stay with another friend until he gets back. While we're sat in a cafe trying to arrange this, another email arrives from Serpil saying we can stay with her, so to save rushing around town in the middle of the night we accept Serpil's offer and send our apologies to Zafer. He doesn't mind as Serpil is one of his friends too!



The D110 in Tekirdağ

Serpil's flat is at the top of a very steep hill but once we arrive and catch our breath she, along with her daughter Ada and cat Bleu Orage make us feel at home allowing us to dry out and warm up again. Although she's not a cyclist Serpil loves travelling and loves hosting travellers just as much. It seems a shame that she's never been to Greece despite it being so close though but the EU Schengen visa is prohibitively expensive for her. We should be very grateful for how easy it is to travel as a UK citizen.

In the morning Zafer makes a surprise visit so we get to thank him in person for trying to help us. He offers us a generous gift of a kilo of chocolates which should require roughly the same number of calories to haul them up the hills as we get from eating them.



Zefar and Serpil

Back on the D110 its a similar ride to the day before only the traffic begins to get heavier as we get nearer to Istanbul. At the risk of sounding like a broken record the wind is of course blowing in an againsterly direction so we're keen to find shelter when it gets to lunchtime. While standing out of the gale behind a closed supermarket, a couple of security guards spot us and invite us into their cabin to offer us some sort of fruit drink that tastes fantastic. The four bar heater is a welcome sight too and there's a risk we'll not be able to extract ourselves and get back on the bike. But we just about manage it and just in time for the rain to start again.



1kg of chocs

The D110 becomes the notorious D100 at Silivri and the change of number only seems to increase the volume of traffic.

Inevitably a city of 15 million people sat on a land bridge between two continents creates a mighty bottle neck that has to be served by some major infrastructure. The subject of how to ride into Istanbul without perishing is the subject of dozens of blog posts and Internet articles with many reaching the conclusion that the best plan is to use the train. Minor roads are few and fiddly and cycle paths start to appear nearer the city centre but for now we have to just grin and bear it on the hard shoulder, which is thankfully wide enough to keep us away from the trucks speeding past.

At the top of a long, soggy climb into Büyükçekmece and with energy levels low after a tough day we pull into a service station to check for emails. We'd sent 2 last minute Warmshowers requests and were praying that one of them had been accepted but unfortunately both of them had to decline. The garage staff take us into their office and serve us çay while we check for nearby hotels on Booking.com. 15 minutes later we're checked in, muddy panniers are chucked in the shower and its a relief to lie down in a warm and quiet room after all the noise, fumes, cold, rain and hills.

It was colder than we thought outside as in the morning there's a compete white-out. A few centimetres of snow has fallen and its beginning to snow again when we set off which should make the D100 even more interesting.



Snowy start to the day in Büyükçekmece



Slidılg cars in Büyükçekmece



Snowy start in Büyükçekmece

Luckily the road is well gritted and the weather is slowing the traffic down to a speed not much greater than ours. I position the bike right in the middle of the lane to prevent any unwanted overtaking manoeuvres and we seem to be getting plenty of space from all the drivers. Most of them quite rightly think we're mad being out in this weather and a few wind down their windows to tell us exactly that, but with plenty of smiles and waves of encouragement. The snow is falling heavily again and after a long downhill from the hotel the front of the bike is coated like a giant coconut cake and I have to prevent total snow blindness by wiping my glasses every 30 seconds.



Snow and traffic and snow on the D100 into İstanbul



Stoker's eye view during a blizzard



Snow capped bar bag

Eventually we get to turn off the main road and pick our way through side streets crammed full of shops selling anything and everything and with the aromas of all sorts of interesting smelling foods wafting out of doorways.

We arrive at the tall apartment block that the Garmin tells us belongs to our host, Erdiñç but the entry code we've been given doesn't seem to work. Nor does the doorbell and he's not answering his phone. Cold and wet and standing in the foyer we contemplate our options but just as we're trying to explain our situation to someone living in the block Erdiñç calls back and asks where we are. We're not outside his flat that's for sure as that is where he is calling from, so we hand the phone to a bemused cleaning lady who has been watching us and she describes to Erdiñç our location. While we wait for Erdiñç to rescue us we get given an orange by the cleaning lady and offered çay by a security guard. We were actually a 10 minute

walk from the correct apartment block so not too far out.

So now we're finally in Istanbul, gateway to the east and with a vast city to explore. Only we've been housebound for the last 2 days. The snow continued to fall heavily and there's at least 50cm filling up the balcony and covering cars and the surrounding roads. Flights have been cancelled and there were 800 reported traffic accidents on Tuesday so we have to be very glad we made it here when we did. It's the heaviest snowfall for at least 10 years. But the chances are that if we try to get a bus into the centre we may be stuck on it all night, so our best option is to sit tight and wait for the big thaw which should be starting by the weekend. Luckily Erdi and his parents are superb hosts with the typical generous Turkish hospitality that we've already seen so much of. If we'd been one day later then we could well have been holed up in the tent behind a service station right now!



Cars stuck everywhere

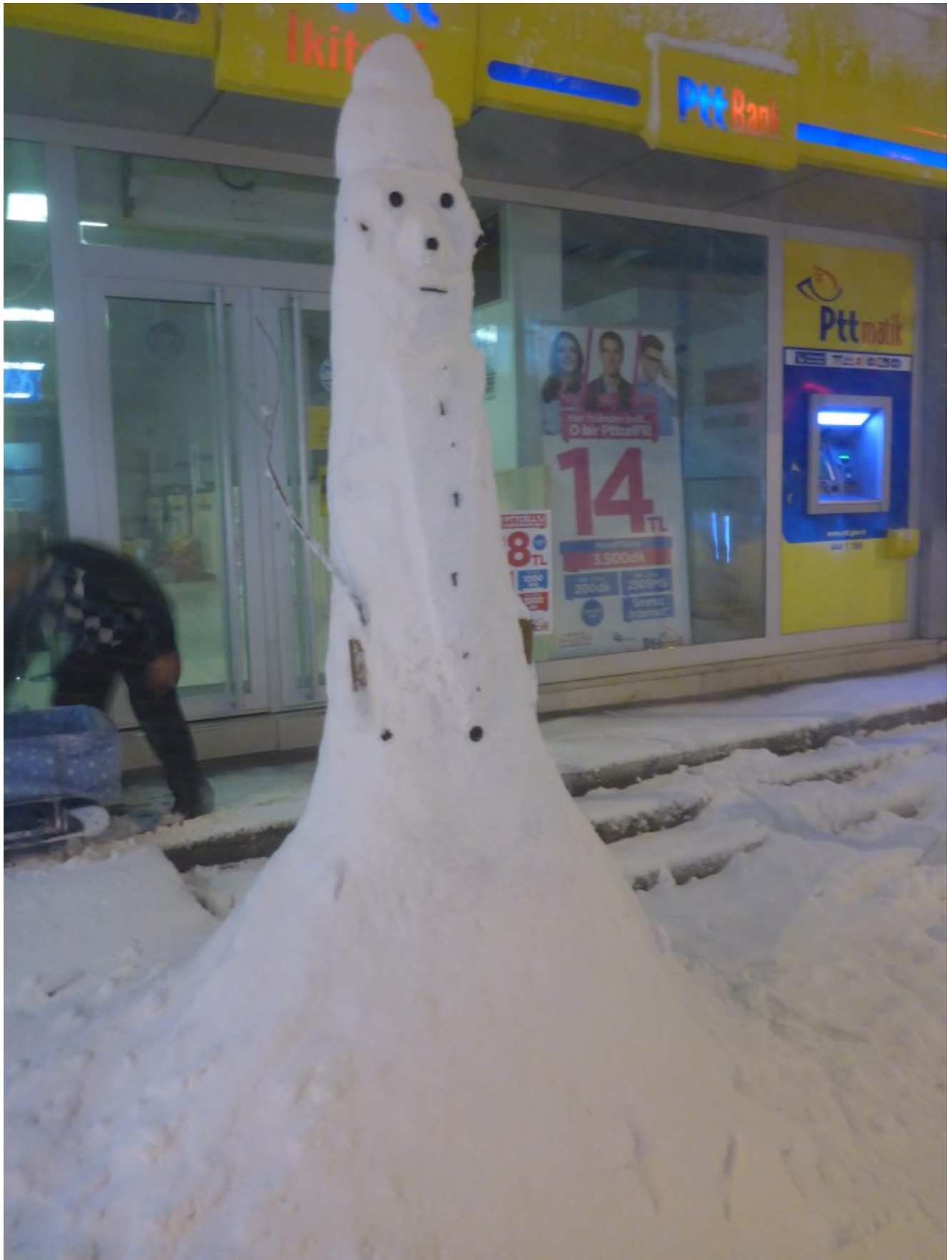


Deep frozen fish



Comparing snowy beards with Erding







Snowy Istanbul skyline

Weeks 2 and 3 on Paros

written by Marcus | 19 February, 2015



At around 11 o'clock each morning we hear the jingle jangle of goat bells on the hills above the garden. The goat herder spends all day walking them round the valley while they eat everything in their path so the trick is to not walk them over

the same route until the scrub has had a chance to grow back. It's not a bad way to spend the day, walking on some beautiful hills then home for some fresh feta and yoghurt as long as you don't mind permanent tinnitus from the bells.



Goat in a tree

Our hosts on Paros, Jim and Irini have got a great lifestyle too. Both talented craftspeople with skills in leatherwork,

sculpture and jewellery they seem to be able to turn their hands to making all sorts of things. But Jim has found a good niche with men's wedding rings and has a successful internet shop through Etsy for selling them around the world.



Jim's workshop

It's a fantastic lifestyle business that in theory he could operate from anywhere that has a good internet connection and

reliable postal system (it's debatable whether Greece offers the latter) and there seem to be a steady but manageable stream of customers interested in his work.



Meanwhile when not preparing a feast in the kitchen Irini looks after the letting of the three pretty cottages that are tucked away in the garden. Popular with anyone who wants to get away from the usual holiday spots and find some tranquillity they've had all sorts of writers, artists, dancers, yoga groups and families staying for a few days or a few weeks. If you don't mind having to drive to the beach and not having a bar within walking distance then this is the place to come.



The Olive House

Kirsty and I have been enjoying trying out a career in gardening for size. I'll admit that I've never really had the

patience for horticulture in the past as there always seemed to be something more exciting or more pressing in the diary but by removing any other distractions, and also any time constraints, it's allowed me to see what some of the attraction is. Ok, Alan Titchmarsh and Charlie Dimmock shouldn't be fearing for their jobs just yet as most of what we've been doing is pulling out weeds and tidying up but that in itself can be quite satisfying.







The weeds then get chopped up and mixed into the compost to then be spread back onto the beds to allow more weeds to grow. I think this is what Elton John was referring to when he sang

about The Circle of Life.



Steaming hot compost

There's been a bit of dry stone wall repairing which also rewards patience with some satisfaction when the stones fit together just right. Paros is covered with enough dry stone walls to surround every field in Cumbria, Yorkshire and Derbyshire but luckily I only have to work on a very small part of a very low stack of stones.



Walled terraces

Kirsty has been broadening her skill set in other ways too. She revealed to me that her childhood ambition was to become a

hairdresser so I handed her the scissors and invited her to practice on my unruly barnet (but not the beard). I came away looking nearly as smart as the flower beds we'd been working on and even retained both ears so I think this could be a possible job opportunity for when we return home.



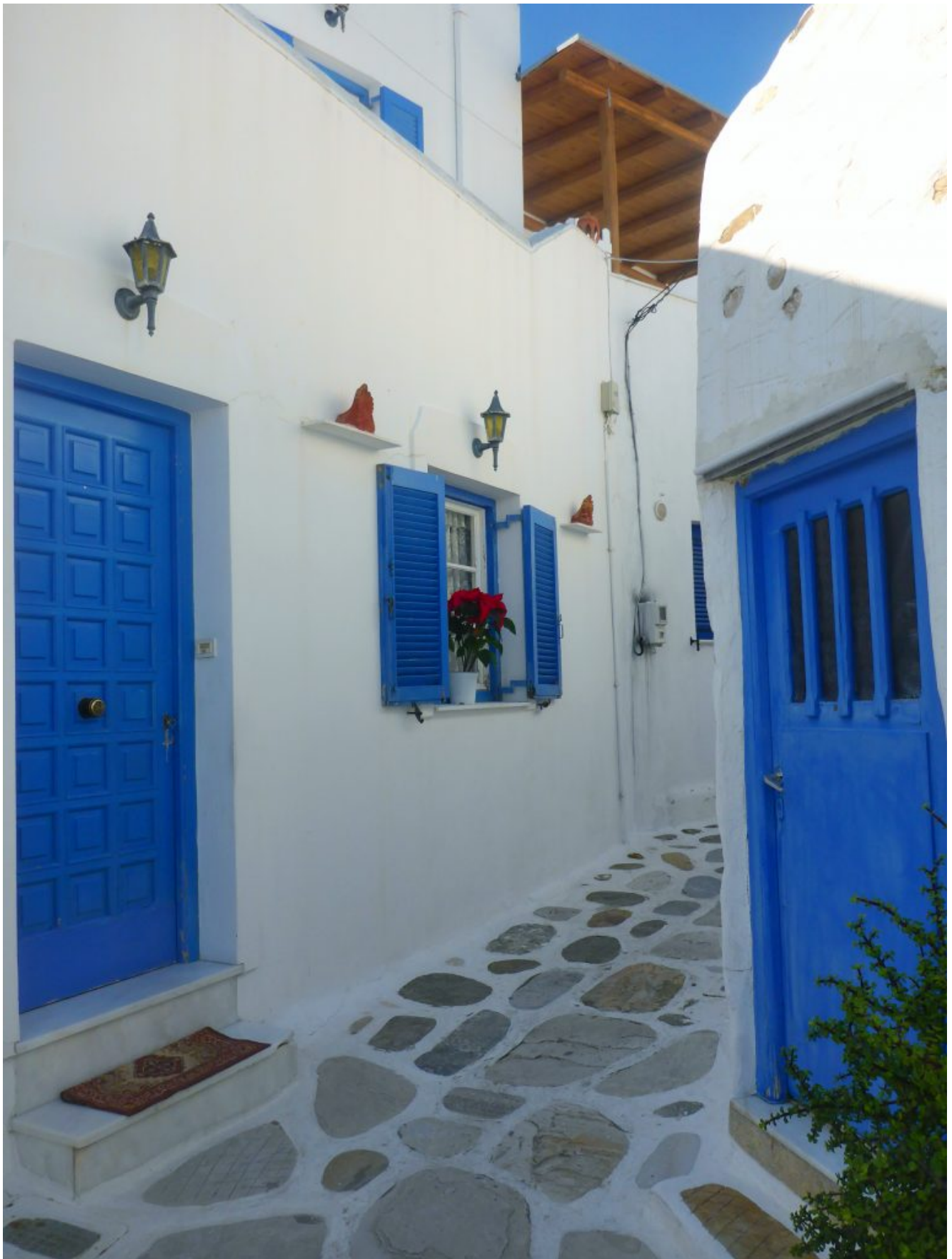
Before the chop



Post chop

Away from the garden we've had some time to explore a lot of the island on foot and by bike and even managed a night in the

tent just to make sure we remember how to put it up and to make sure we haven't gone soft having spent so long under a proper roof and with a proper bed.

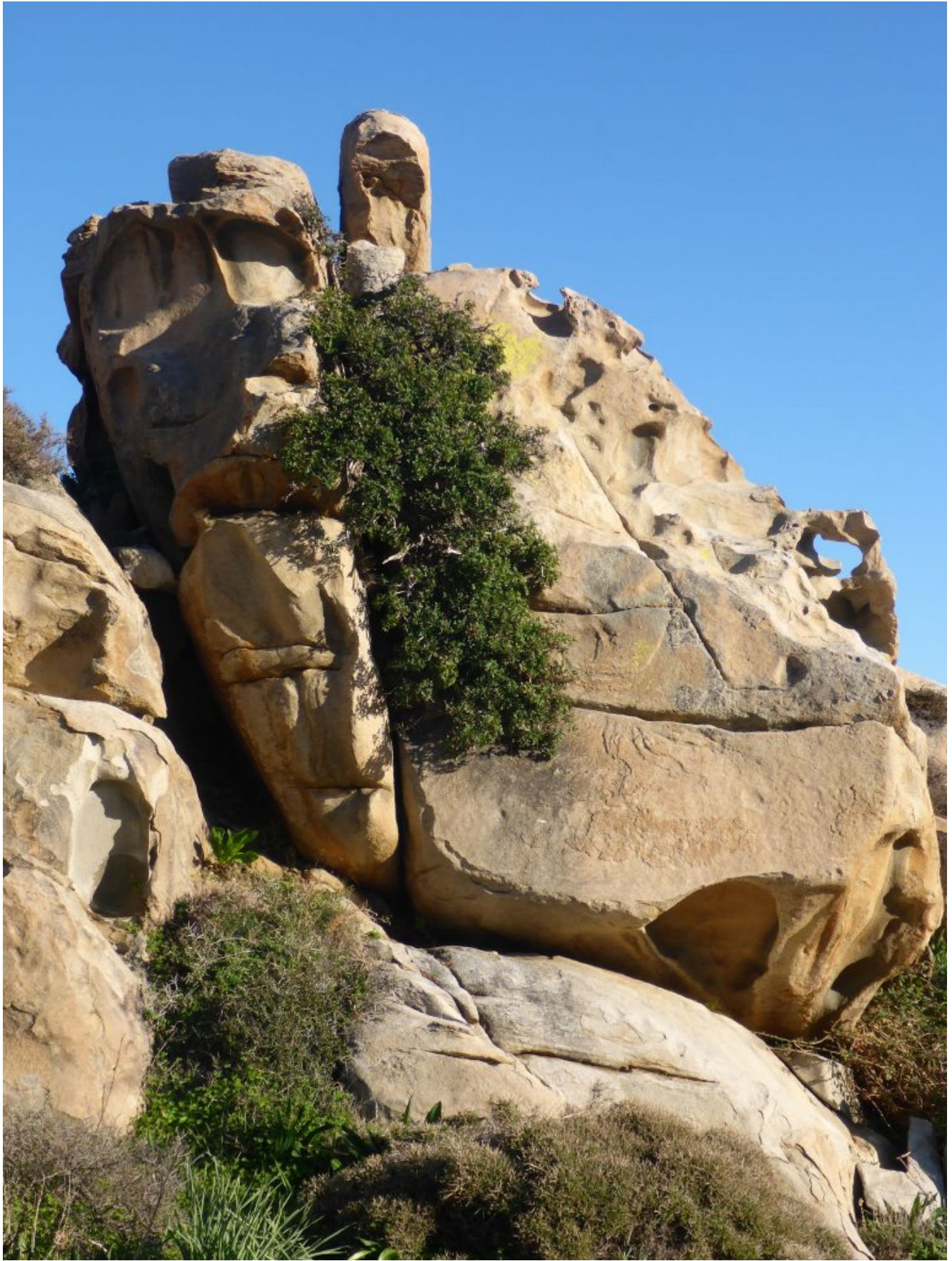




Sampling the local Bugatsa



View of Kolimpithres from the Myceanian Acropolis



Amazing rocks at Kolimpithres









Lighthouse at Dawn

We've also been able to read proper books from Jim and Irrini's extensive collection. Although the Kindles are brilliant when we're on the road they're never the same as holding real paper in your hands. In line with developing some patience for gardening I picked up a book called *In Praise of Slow* by Carl Honoré which explores the virtues of taking your time in all aspects of life. It's an interesting read so comes recommended for anyone who spends most of their time running around like a headless chicken. It's premise also rings true when it comes to cycle touring. Go too quick and you'll miss the good stuff. I hope Kirsty will agree that I'm getting better at changing down a gear or two and stopping to admire the view but there's probably a bit more work to be done before I'm fully switched out of 'race mode'.



Choppy crossing to Antiparos. There is a swim across here each summer with local resident Tom Hanks taking part last year.



Agion Theodoran Monastery



A windy island means plenty of wind mills (big and small)

And it's not long before we pack up and (slowly) ship out

again. We've bought our Turkish visas and are plotting our route to Istanbul with a view to heading North from Athens next week. Our plan to stay put while the weather starts to improve in Turkey seems to have been worthwhile as the forecast has been improving day by day further north. Hopefully it'll continue. We could easily find ourselves staying here indefinitely but a whole new continent is waiting and besides, those goat bells are getting a bit irritating.



Week 1 on Paros

written by Marcus | 19 February, 2015



By popular demand here are a few stats from the journey so far:

Total distance ridden: 8554km

Number of countries visited: 23

Nights in the tent: 83/141

Coldest night in tent: -6c

Highest altitude: 1,233m

Longest day: 121km (Brighton to Felixstowe)

Number of ferry journeys: 24

Favourite country for biscuits: Latvia

Favourite country for pastries: Poland

Favourite country for bread: Serbia

Most expensive coffee: €4 Turku, Finland

Cheapest coffee: 50 dinar (32p) Pančevo, Serbia

Surprisingly useful bits of kit: Zefal spy rear view mirror, Click-Stand and Grabber inc. Space Blanket (used to line the tent and for picnics)

Lost kit:

Zefal spy rear view mirror (somewhere in Lithuania)

1 tent peg (somewhere in Sweden)

And finally the current score in the worlds longest game of 'Horse':

Kirsty: 1009

Marcus: 1008



Paros

So here we are in our wonderful winter accommodation on Paros in the middle of the Aegean Sea. Somewhere for us to sit tight while the worst of the winter passes with time to give the bike a thorough clean, rest cycling muscles and build up gardening muscles.



View of Jim and Irini's place

Jim and Irini have lived here for something like 40 years and in that time they have built themselves a home, a huge garden and several smaller houses for rental to artists, sculptors or anyone who wants somewhere peaceful to retreat to. They have also hosted numerous WW00Fers in that time and a lot of the construction work and garden upkeep has been carried out by the volunteers. In return the WW00Fers (including us) get room and board during their stay. It's an arrangement that works really well for all concerned.



It's been particularly well timed for us as the cold days in Athens were followed by even colder days once we sailed into Paros with the unexpected arrival of a few centimetres of snow. Our surprise was matched by Jim as this is the first snowfall for 10 years and unwelcome by most of the islanders, apart from the children who get to enjoy what is probably their first ever snowball fight.

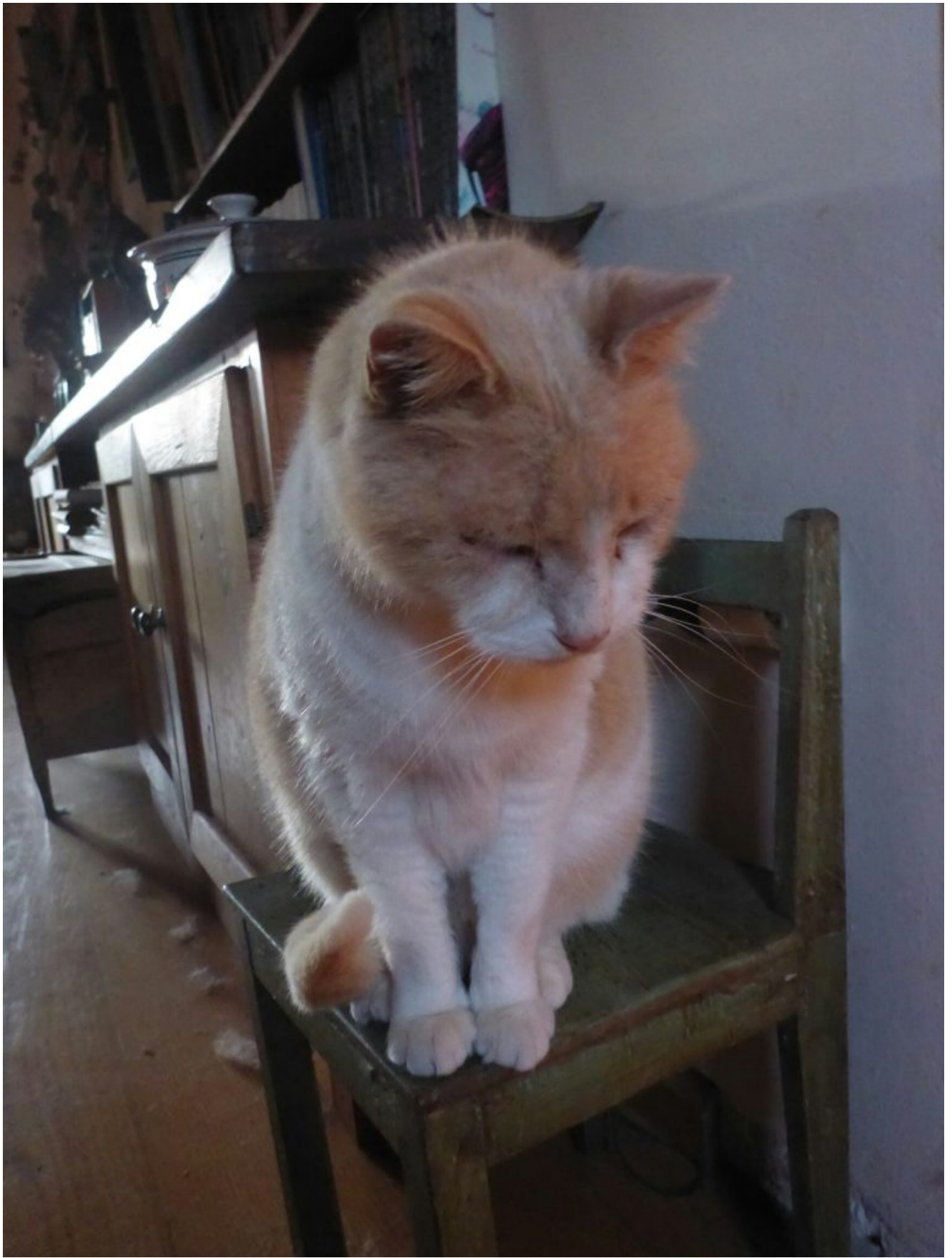






As well as Jim and Irini the house has several other occupants with 2 dogs and 3 cats with inside privileges and 1 dog and 2 cats who are not supposed to come indoors (occasionally Paco the dog gets a taste of how the other half live). The outside animals are lucky strays who have found their way to the house and been adopted but not fully integrated into the family (yet). There are also nearly 30 Muscovy ducks that provide the occasional egg...or Sunday roast.







olive



Paco





Charlie





Pepe

The snow that turned to sleet that turned to rain has hampered our progress in the garden at the beginning of the week. Disappointingly it also meant that the traditional Epiphany ceremony whereby the priest throws a cross into the harbour at Alyki to be rescued by some hardy local swimmers didn't happen. I was stood on the harbourside with my speedos and goggles, ready to dive in only to find it wasn't going to happen this year.



Shelling almonds

But as we've already found, the weather in Greece changes rapidly so by Wednesday the sun was starting to make an appearance and the island was able to thaw. A bit of work shifting bales, digging out rocks and pulling up weeds helped keep us warm.





The main project for the week was the construction of two compost silos out of the bales we had gathered up. Building the silos didn't take too long but they then needed to be filled. That meant harvesting a huge pile of green stuff and learning the fine art of wielding a scythe. It's a surprisingly satisfying tool to use when you get a good swing with it but we may need a bit more practice before we take on a field of corn.





Composting is much like baking a cake, only not as tasty. It needs the right ingredients, mixed the right way and plenty of heat and moisture to get it going. There are also plenty of different recipes and advocates for a variety of techniques but we stuck with the traditional 3:1 straw to green ratio plus some special additions. We hope to see some signs that the clever little bugs and grubs have started breaking it down by next week.



Compost heaps ready for something to compost



Mississippi "helping"





Compost heaps full of future compost

There are hills all around us so lot of walking to be done. On the way back from one particular stroll we were ambushed by a small and noisy kitten who then clung to our heels and followed us home. Jim had seen this little animal before and was not happy to see it again. It had turned up with some other guests last week and had been taken back down the valley but this time it seemed determined to stay. And stay she did after a half hearted attempt not to encourage her and being chased up a tree by the dogs a few times before they began to accept her. So Mississippi is now the 6th cat to join the family.



Mississippi



Mississippi climbs a tree

Apologies if you logged on to read a cycling blog but found Gardeners World and Pets at Home instead. The bike has been

used for a short ride down to the village for supplies but has mostly been left neglected. Hopefully we'll get out on it for a ride round the island soon.



The Peloponnese

written by Marcus | 19 February, 2015



While travelling through Eastern Europe we've brushed up on a lot of our knowledge of modern history so have a much better idea of how all these countries have changed shape over the past decades. I'm not sure I'd be any more capable of remembering the date lines that Mr Symonds used to try and get us to learn back in junior school but in rough terms we've got a fair idea what has happened. Now we're in Greece it's time to think back to my Classics and Latin lessons with Mr Hooper as we've started to see some familiar names like Mycenea, Sparta and Argos cropping up on the map that until now only existed in my ancient history books.



Friendly grasshopper

Back on the mainland after the ferry from Kefalonia and straight away we start to see brown signs on almost every road to indicate an ancient some-thing-other or a very important historical place-you-must-see. The country is full of artefacts, bits of column, statues, carvings, temples at every turn so it would take a while to stop and look at every single one. We've decided to pick Olympia to visit as fans of the modern interpretation of the Olympic Games it will be great to see where it all began 2,500 years ago.

On our way we stop at Lidl for supplies in Pyrgos. Make no mistake it's not Tesco that is taking over Europe it's the Germans as the big yellow and blue signs have been one of the few constants in almost all the countries we've been to so far. They're also a meeting place for anyone shopping on a budget so it's no surprise to find another couple of cycle tourists just coming out. Irma and Or have ridden from Spain

on bikes and with kit they've acquired for free and are travelling with barely any cash and aiming for Or's home country of Israel. What's more remarkable is that they also have another companion in the form of Bemba the dog who rides in an improvised trailer. Apparently the Alps had been particularly difficult for them through Bemba does get out and walk on the hills. Like everyone else they're heading across the Peloponnese then onto Crete but hope to hitch a lift on a fishing boat to save on the cost of the ferry. This sounds optimistic but if they've got this far then they must have confidence in their blagging abilities.



Or, Irma and Bemba

An hour after Pyrgos we pass a sign telling us it's 2km to Olympia, followed 100m later by another saying it's now 1km. The distances on Greek road signs seem to be measured with an accuracy of +/- 5km so after 2km it's no surprise that we're still riding up a hill with no sign of Olympia. What is

surprising is that the bike has started bouncing gently up and down at the back. This could be either a dodgy, undulating road surface or there's a problem with the wheel. It turns out to be the wheel as the tyre wall has torn and caused a bulge that could burst at any second. It's the cheap tyre that we bought as a temporary fix way back in Lithuania so to be fair it's done remarkably well to get this far but now it's beyond repair and we have to walk the remaining 2km into Olympia. It's not a big town but when we ask if there's anywhere to buy bike tyres we're directed down the road 'about 500m'. 1km later we're still walking and ask for directions at a petrol station where we're told there's a shop in another 1km. 1km later we flag down a cyclist who might have a better idea and he tells us the nearest place for bike parts is Pyrgos, now 18km away.



Dead tyre

It would be a tedious walk with the bike and we wouldn't get

there before the shops shut so I leave Kirsty to hide behind a church and get the tent set up and stick out my thumb for a lift. No joy after half an hour so I ask a nearby hotel to call a cab and in under an hour I'm back at the tent with a brand new tyre ready to fit. Adding in the taxi fare it's the most expensive cheap tyre I've had to buy but with it being a Monday most shops were shut so I had to get whatever was available there and then. Luckily the taxi driver had had a heavy right foot, knew where all the bike shops were and even lent me the cash to pay for the tyre until we passed a cash machine on the way back to Olympia. Another case of what could have been a major disaster in another location was just a bit of an inconvenience here.



The church has a tap alongside that could well be dispensing holy water so the next morning we fill up our bottles and hope it brings better luck. The site of Ancient Olympia is fascinating and we get the chance to race in the very first

Olympic stadium (Kirsty wins). There's no sign or mention of the velodrome though, or the sponsors enclosures or even the room that would have served as the volunteer's canteen but I expect these are all yet to be uncovered.



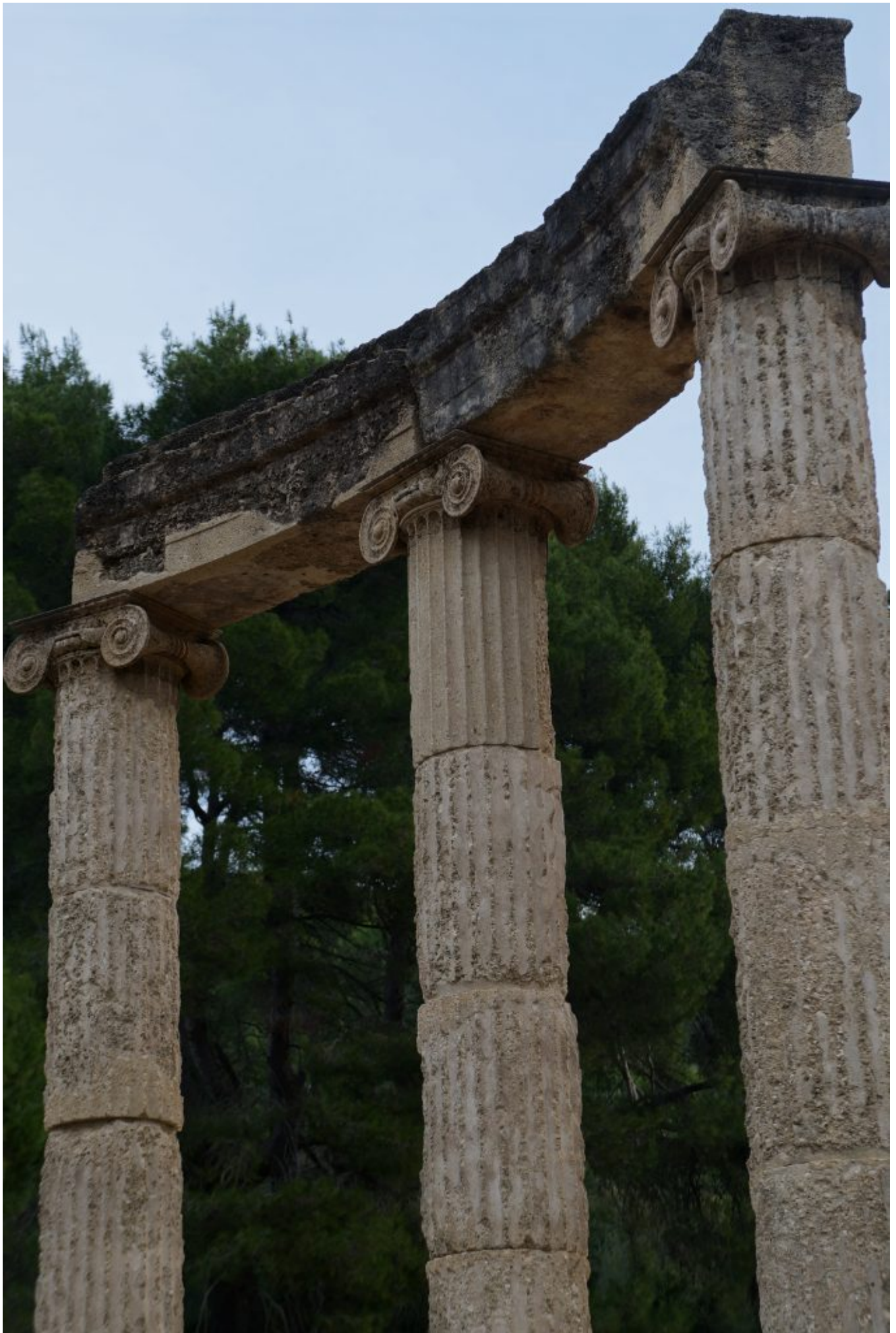
The original Olympic Stadium



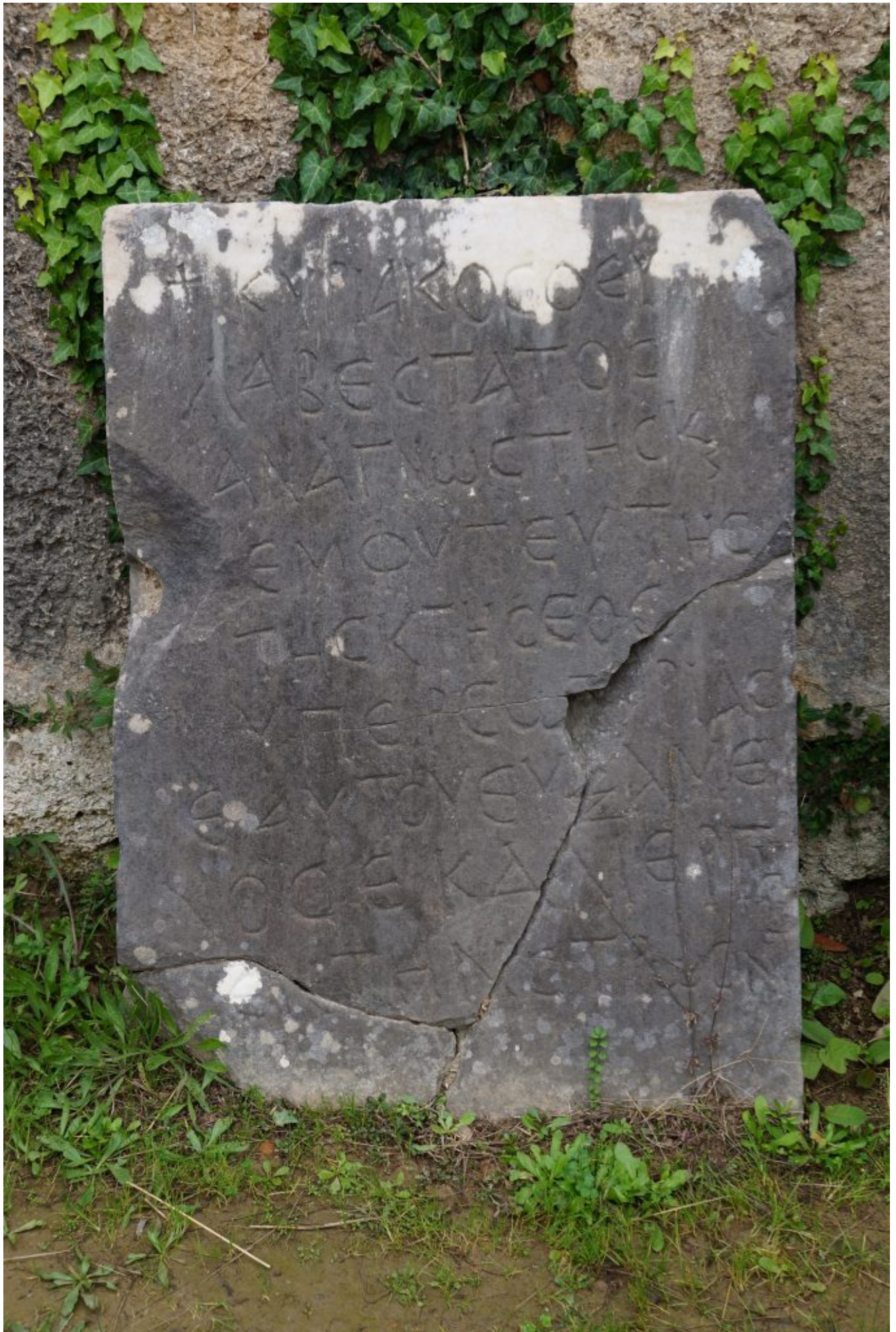
On your marks!



Ancient Olympia



Ancient Olympia



ΚΥΡΙΑΚΟΟΕΥ
ΧΑΒΕΤΑΤΟΕ
ΑΝΑΤΝΩΕΤΗΚ
ΕΜΟΝ-ΕΥΗΕ
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Ancient Olympia



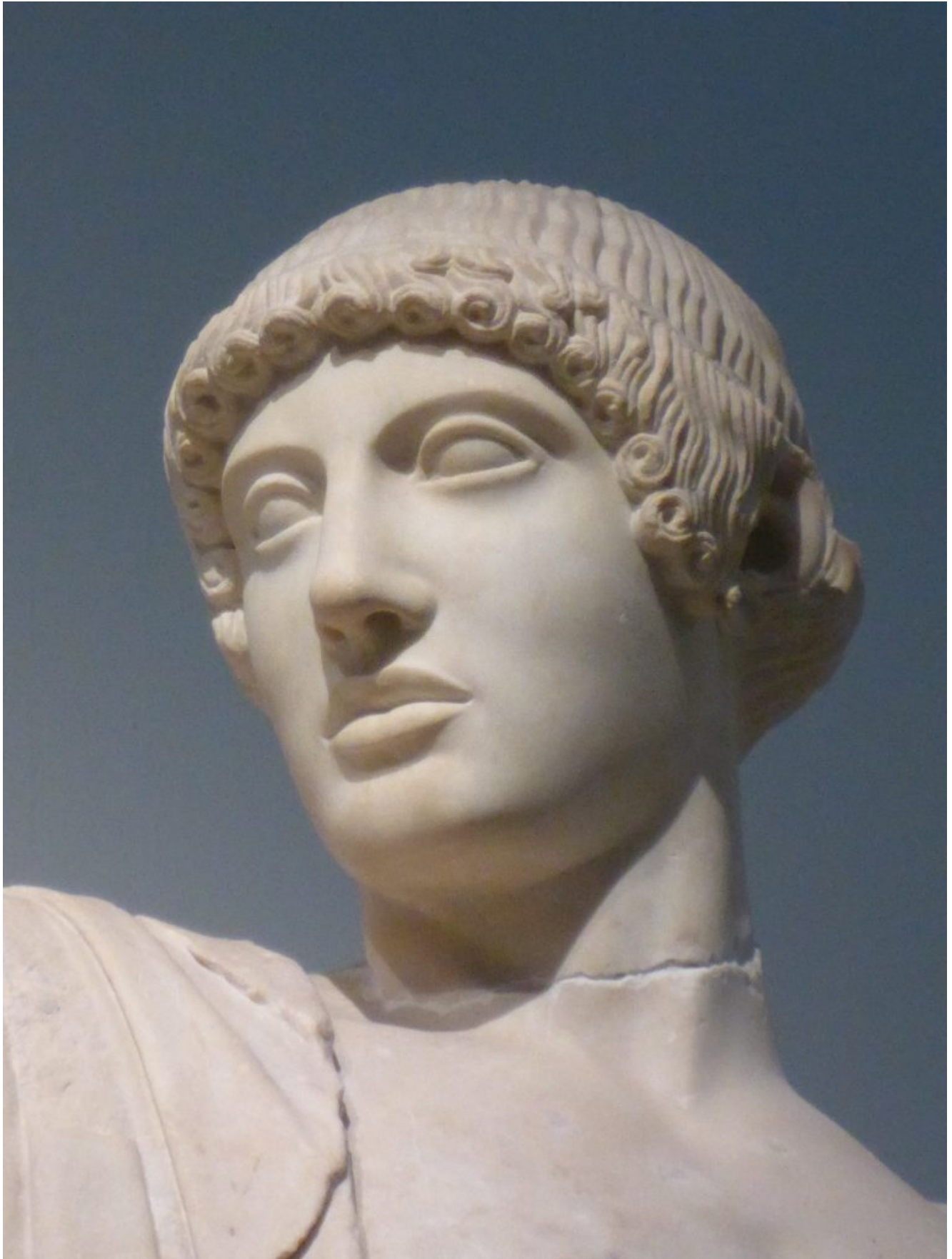
Museum of Olympia



Still some digging to be done



Museum of Olympia



Museum of Olympia

After lunch we bump into Irma, Or and Bemba who have taken a day to cover the 20km from Pyrgos so have a slightly more

sedate travelling pace than us.

Not far out of Olympia we set up camp in an orange orchard and gorge on freshly picked fruit. We're also becoming addicted to fresh sheeps yoghurt and greek honey with the honey inevitably being used on our porridge each morning too. But we must have made the gods angry as the rumble of thunder overnight and heavy rain indicate that Zeus is unhappy. He allows some respite with enough time to pack the tent in the morning before the rain starts again and carries on all day.



Angry gods, angry sea

We keep moving to keep warm and head back to the coast and follow it for 40km before turning inland again and into some rolling hills. It would have been very picturesque if it wasn't masked in grey clouds and yet more rain.



Sheltering at a church for lunch

Just before we stop to set up camp in an olive grove the rain stops and the sun comes out so we get to see the wonderful evening light on the mountains at last.



Palm avenue

There's more of the wet stuff in the night but again it stops just long enough for us to get packed up in the morning and dash to the nearest petrol station with a convenient cafe attached. The sky looks very ominous and as we're due to climb quite high that day we decide to wait for the impending storm to pass before setting off again.

It proves a sensible decision as there's plenty of thunder and lightning accompanied by heavy rain for the next 2 hours and it would have been no fun being on the side of a mountain in those conditions. Unfortunately we've run out of cash and like a lot of places in Greece the cafe doesn't take cards so we have to sit in the corner and hope they won't mind. But the staff eventually feel sorry enough for us to bring us some tea on the house which is just what we need.

The storm passes and blue sky follows so we crack on with the

climb. It's steady for most of the way before we drop down to the town of Megalopolis. Not as impressive as it's name might suggest but a convenient spot for lunch and we watch some workers busy with a cherry picker hanging Christmas lights. This is the week before Christmas so they clearly don't like to get into the Christmas spirit quite as early as in the UK round here.





After the storm

There's more climbing after lunch and then we drop onto a plateau at just over 700m above sea level to find our highest camp spot to date.

In the morning the tent flap swings open like a frozen door. There's been a heavy frost and as the tent is sopping wet from the previous nights it was very cold inside and out. The condensation that drips from the ceiling, a common problem with Hilleberg tents, did little to help.



Frozen camp site



Frosty saddles



As any physicist will tell you, for every 100m of height gain the temperature drops by 0.5 – 1 degree so while it was a pleasant temperature lower down, up here it sank below zero

overnight. Thankfully as soon as the sun peeps over the mountains things warm up and dry off quickly. We've also got another climb to haul ourselves up which gets the blood pumping to all extremities.

Once over the top we get a great view of dense clouds sat just below us then we zoom down into them on our way to Tripolis, lunch stop then out the other side and inevitably more mountain roads.



Above the clouds



Riding back into the hills





This time the huge rock cliff faces are being lit by the setting sun and we get treated to some amazing colours on all sides of the steep valley.



Sunset in the mountains





The road tops out at 800m and we're keen to lose as much altitude as possible this time before pitching the tent. It's a lovely swooping road at a shallow gradient with long corners allowing the brakes to stay off and the speed to pick up. At 50kph I often wonder what would happen if we punctured and the answer is that the back of the bike starts to squirm, it's hard to steer and all the brakes need to be applied to bring us to a controlled stop to avoid disappearing over the edge of the mountain. The brand new but cheap rear tyre has less puncture protection and has just proved it's not really designed for this sort of hardship. We're still over 500m above sea level but are conveniently next to a nice flat patch of grass so as the light is fading fast we decide to pitch up there and then fix the tyre in the morning.

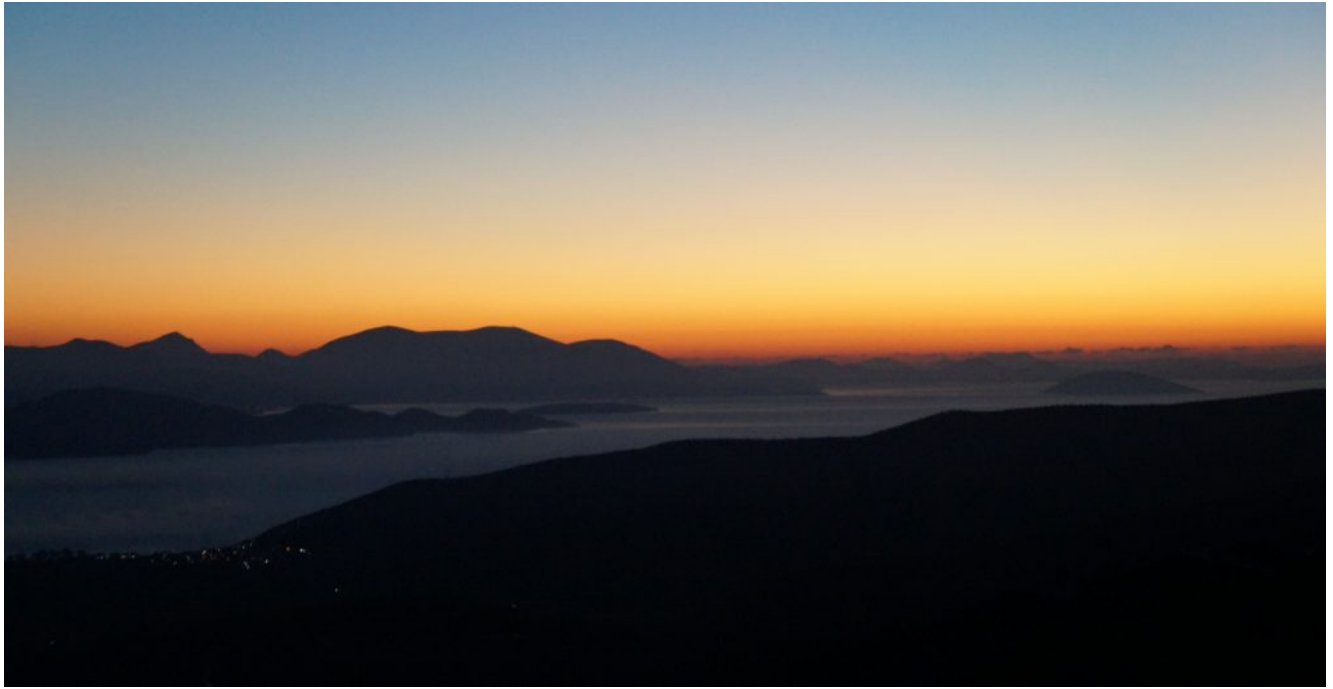
There are a few rocks lying around so it's entirely possible this is the site of some kind of ancient monument. I pick up what could well be the remains of a valuable artefact and use

it to knock in the pegs.



View of Argos from the tent

It's a much warmer evening than the previous night and in the morning while fixing the tyre I get to enjoy a glorious sunrise over the bay of Argos below. Annoyingly an important bolt that holds the cable for the drag brake goes missing amongst the stones, gorse bushes and goat droppings and despite a lengthy search it stays hidden.



Sunrise over the bay of Argos



Campsite near Argos at dawn



Puncture repair with a view

With only the rim brakes to rely on, the descent is taken carefully which is fortunate as we pick up another puncture part way down, this time thanks to a rogue shard of glass. The front tyre has been fine which shows that Schwalbe Marathons are worth the extra cost.

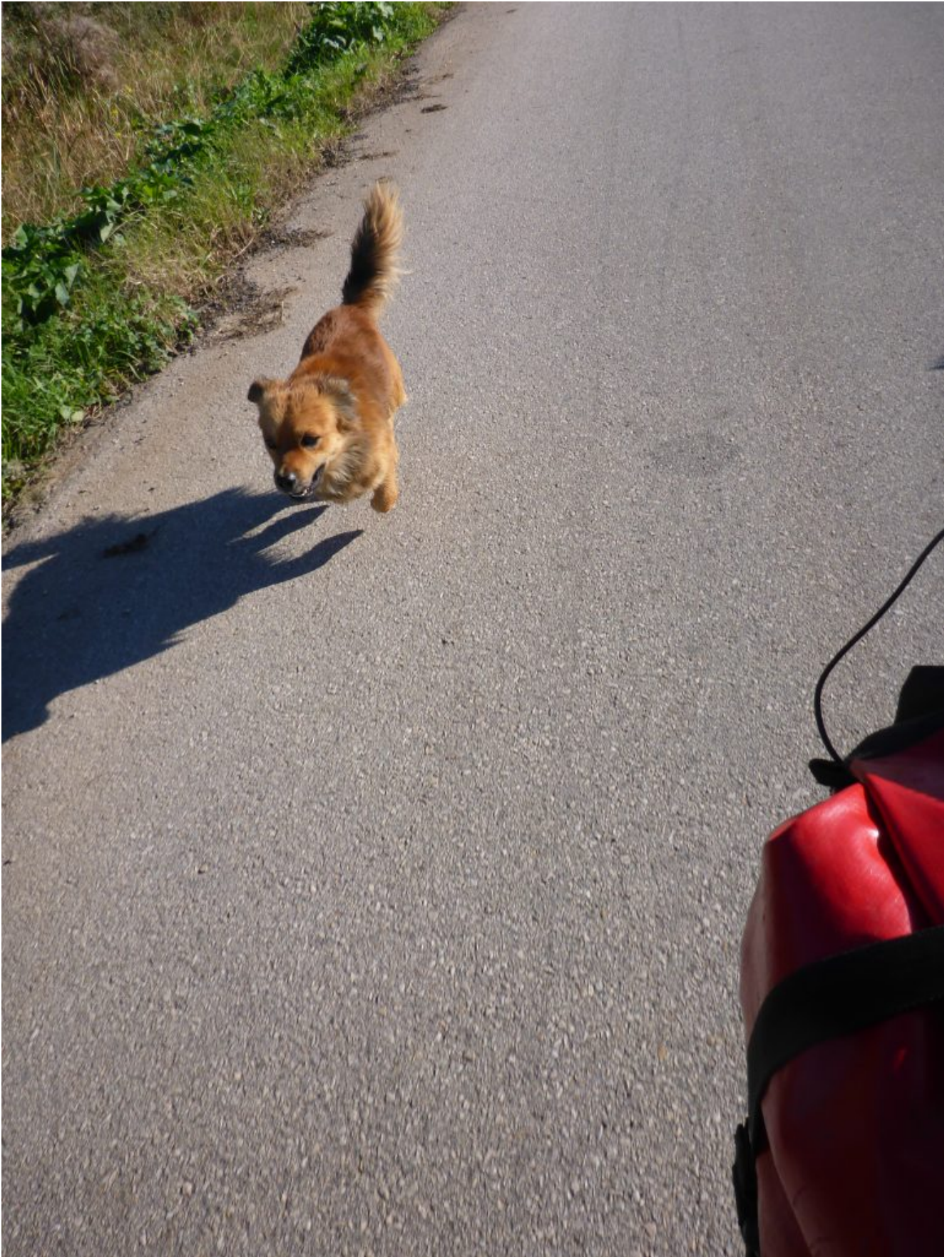


Roadside Shrine

It gets fixed and this time we make it down to the sea and on to Argos to find a bike shop. The bolt we need for the drum brake is not a common bike part so my expectations of finding a replacement are low but 5 minutes after stopping at the very first shop we find the owner has dug out exactly what we need, fitted it and sent us on our way. You really can buy anything in Argos!



Heron in the bay of Argos



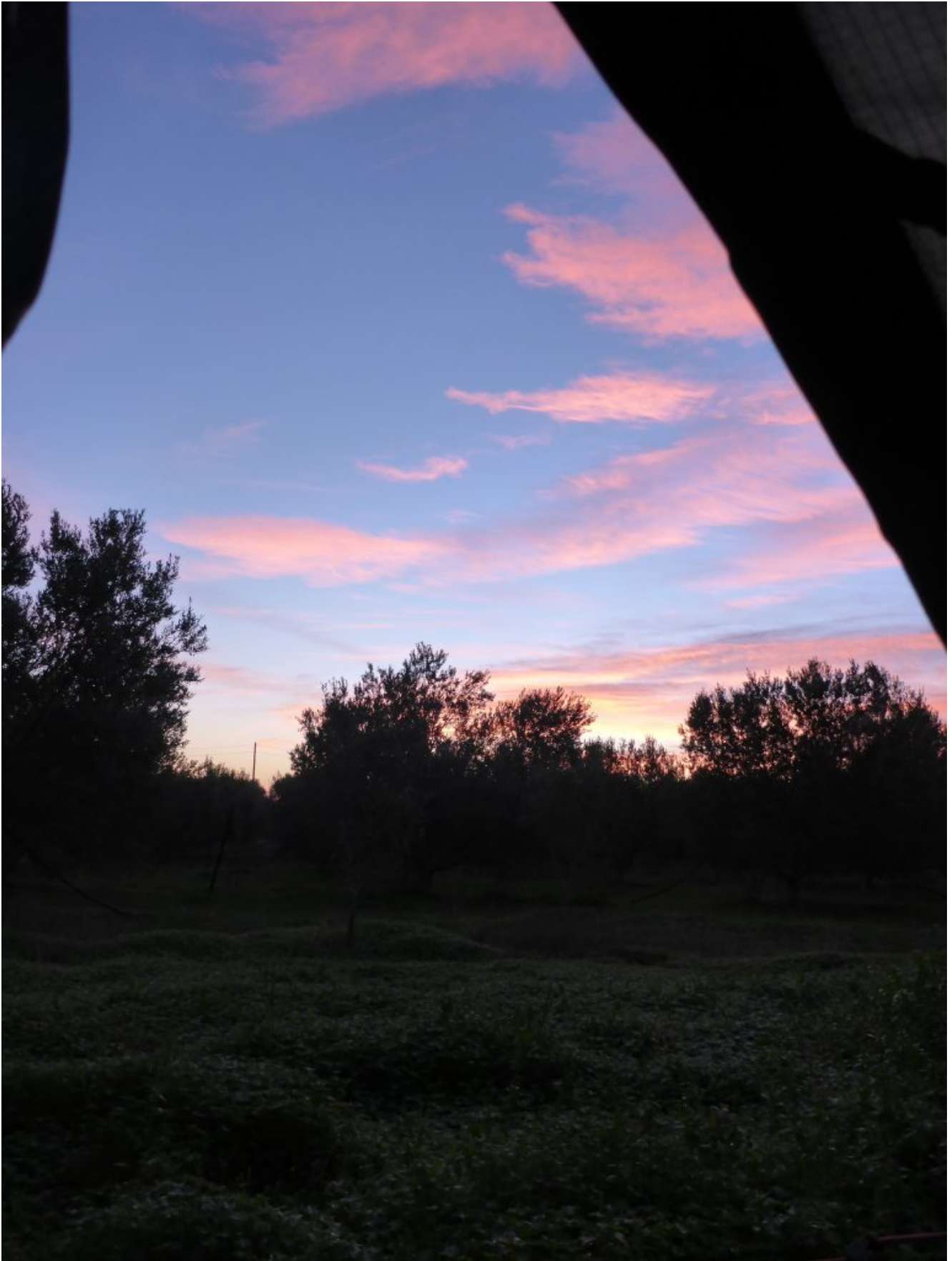
Chasing dog



After another short climb we're nearly out of the mountains and have a lovely long descent to stop at an olive grove for the night just outside Corinth. On the way down we call in at a petrol station for more fuel for the stove and the owner is very concerned that we are filling a bottle with unleaded and not water. Despite trying to explain that it's for cooking she just doesn't understand so I make a motorbike noise to add to the confusion while she looks for the engine on the bike.



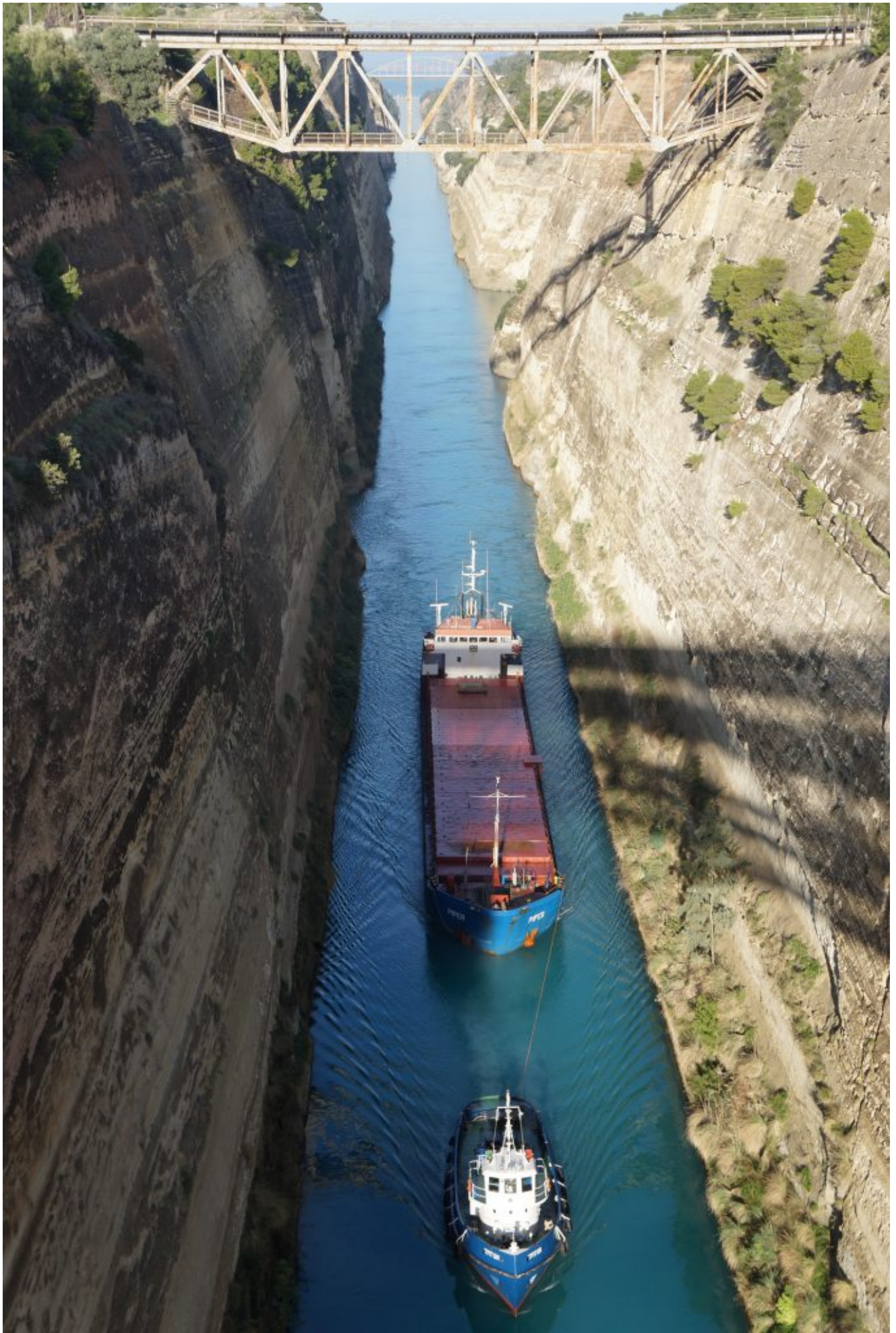
Acrocorinth Castle



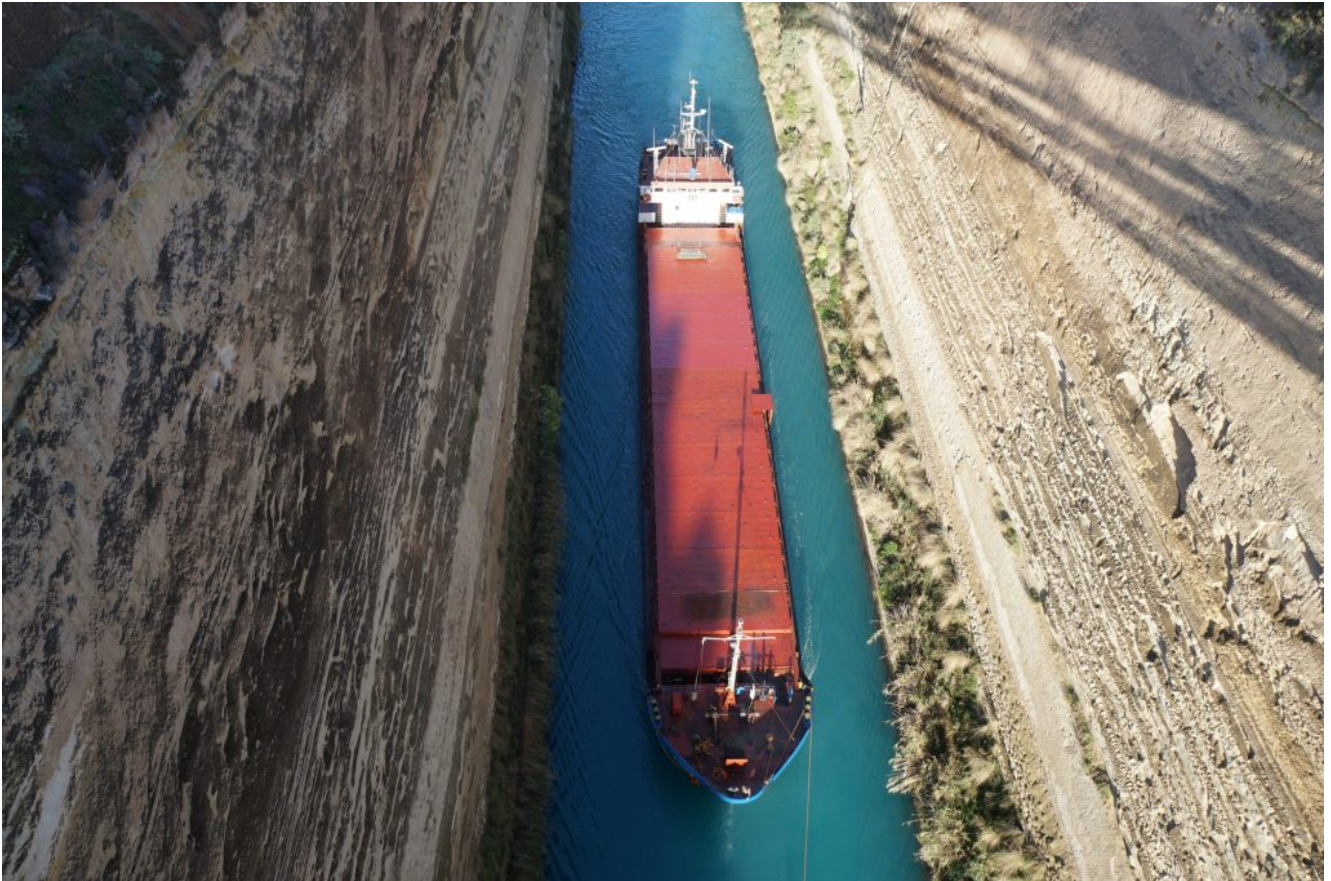
Sunset in the olive grove

The next day we cross the Corinth Canal which is a very impressive piece of engineering. The 6km passage through 90m

of rock was finished in 1893 but what's even more impressive is that the first 700m were dug in the 1st century with emperor Nero collecting the first basket of dirt. It was not completed though as they thought the sea was higher on one side than the other as the tides were at different times.



Corinth Canal



Corinth Canal

From Corinth we pass a few huge oil refineries and out in the bay there are several tankers waiting to offload their cargo. Our small road sticks to the coast with the main highway higher up the cliff to our left and we get some great views out towards the Saronic Gulf. It's a Sunday and there are lots of road cyclists out on club rides. Given it's over 20 degrees we're in short sleeves but most of the locals are dressed up in full winter gear, clearly feeling the 'cold'. At one point a small peloton comes past and we manage to latch on to the back for a couple of km but then our road turns right while they carry on straight on so we have to wave goodbye.



Tankers at Corinth



Catching the Peloton

Our destination is the Port of Piraeus and to avoid the beginnings of the urban sprawl of Athens we decide to hop onto the island of Salamis with a ferry from there taking us stright into Pireaus. We roll down into the first harbour just as the ferry is lifting its ramp but they spot us just in time to lower it and allow us to ride straight on with perfect timing. The tent comes out at lunch time for some much needed drying out in the sunshine then we ride to the other side of the island to catch the next ferry into Piraeus.



Riding towards Piraeus



Riding towards Piraeus

The final boat trip of the day is the overnight crossing to Crete but we have a couple of hours to kill until the 9pm departure time so we install ourselves in a cafe and dig out the kindles while munching on gyros kebabs and greek salad. While we sit there a man comes in trying to sell us enormous watches, phone chargers and fake Ray Bans which we politely decline. Half an hour later another chap turns up with a similar assortment of tat. By the time the fifth one comes round to bother us we're losing patience so politeness goes out the window.

Eventually it's time to board the ferry for the 10 hour crossing and as expected the boat is busy with lots of people either heading home or heading off on holiday for the Christmas break. We're looking forward to a few easy days on the island too though it's going to be an odd Christmas compared to usual.



No matter how much they dream about it, I doubt they'll be getting a white Christmas here