

Paros to Thessaloniki – Back on the road

written by Marcus | 12 February, 2015



Things had changed while we were on Paros and I don't just mean the tyres on the bike. Greece now has a brand new government and many people are half joking about the possible return of the Drachma to replace the unpopular Euro.



It's impossible to speak to anyone here for more than 5 minutes before the discussion turns to politics and who can blame them for wanting to try a new tack. We've heard stories of huge property taxes on existing homes, 50% unemployment in some areas, retrospective taxes on income earned years ago and pensions being halved leaving people in their 80's having to grow their own food to survive. Whether Tsipras and his new coalition have the answers to countless problems remains to be seen but the weight of expectation is enormous.



Peeping Kirsty

Our changes were a bit smaller. In our quest to try every model in the Schwalbe tyre range we've now fitted Marathon

Plus Tour, reputed to be 'unpuncturable'. We've had great service from our kit suppliers with Trekit (on behalf of Exped), Portapow, Power Traveller and Leatherman all replacing under warranty equipment that was playing up. Pleasingly, the new Leatherman penknife is purple. After all the issues at the end of last year I've rebuilt the rear hub with new cones and bearings having found what could be the last spare parts in the UK for our 14 year old 'vintage model'. Luckily there were 2 sets available so we have 1 as a spare in case we have problems again but I'll keep a closer eye on it this time.



The new boots.

The temptation to stay on Paros longer was tugging at us but with everything packed back into its rightful place on the bike we manage to roll away from Jim and Irini's house and down to Parikia to catch the boat back to Pireaus. We couldn't have asked for better hosts and they, along with all the animals will be sorely missed. On the animal front,

Mississippi made good inroads into being accepted into the family, albeit only with outside privileges (for now). Unfortunately Paco the dog was being sent to the local animal sanctuary to be re-homed due to the imminent arrival of two more rescue dogs. We would have loved to have taken him with us but we're not sure he would have liked Turkish food. But if you can give him a new home then get in touch with PAWS (<https://www.paws.gr/>) who send stray animals all over Europe. It would be great to see a happy ending for Paco.



Jim and Irini (+Zoo and Charlie)



Mississippi



Paco

The overnight boat deposits us bleary eyed in Pireaus at 5am. Rolling off with us is Jörg an Austrian cyclist who has just

completed his first tour through Italy and Greece on the advice from his doctor that he needed to lose weight. He's had great fun and already planning something longer so could well be chasing us to New Zealand.



Parikia harbour

I love riding into the dawn and soon the sky begins to get lighter before the sun eventually makes an appearance. We make good progress out of Athens helped by it being early enough for most people to still be in bed. There is an incident with a closed road forcing us onto a pavement and colliding with an orange tree leaving Kirsty with a bruised leg and me with a guilty conscience. I try to remember to recalibrate the width I need for the bike now the panniers are back on.



Sunrise near Athens

There are plenty of hills to test our rested legs on but the bike appears to be much heavier and slower than last time we tried to climb on it. It must be the bag of almonds that Irini sent us off with. To help lighten the load we stop to cook porridge in a layby and get told not to start a forest fire by a concerned cafe owner.



Helping a lorry driver fix his truck

By lunchtime we're in Thiva and while stopping to consider bakery options we meet Anson, a cyclist from Hong Kong. He's already ridden from Cape Town to Cairo and has just arrived in Greece to continue up into Europe then across Asia back home. He has Afghanistan and Pakistan on his itinerary so is both braver than us and presumably more persuasive when it comes to obtaining visas. We promise to keep in touch from time to time via his Facebook page – The Answer is Out There.



Anson. He's from Hong Kong.

The early start is taking its toll by the afternoon and at one point I'm sure I hear snoring from my sleepy stoker. But we

make it 30km from Thiva into the middle of an enormous plain with tractors busy working away in all directions.



Road closed, unless you're on a bike

While eyeing up a suitable camping spot in the corner of a field a pick-up pulls alongside and the driver asks if we need help. After telling us to camp anywhere as no one will mind he drives off only to return a few minutes later to dispense some historical facts about the area. Apparently the plain used to be a lake but 150 years ago ‘...an Englishman came along and dug a tunnel into the mountain and took the water...’. So we spend our first night camping at the bottom of a lake and are back to deciding how many layers of clothes to put on before climbing into bed instead of which setting to put the electric blanket on.





There's more flat riding in the morning before we reach the edge of the plain and have to climb back onto 'dry' land again. And up we go for several km on a warm sunny day that makes us glad to be back in the saddles.



Once over the ridge we get views down to the coast again and in the distance our destination for the day, the island of Evia.



Herbie goes to Greece



This of course means another ferry but after a rapid descent we arrive at the harbour of Arkitsa 30 mins too late so have to make do with a leisurely lunch in the sunshine while waiting an hour for the next one.



Waiting for the ferry at Arkitsa

The plan is to land on Evia then ride the 10km to the other side where we can catch another ferry back to the mainland. This corner cutting exercise should save 100km or so compared to just staying on the mainland and takes us into some more scenic countryside. There's an hour between the first ferry landing and the second one leaving which should be plenty to cover the distance but as soon as we bump off the ramp of the first ferry I can feel that something isn't right. It's a flat on one of our unpuncturable tyres. Hastily squeezing air back into it we hope that it's slow enough not to go down before we get to the second ferry but it needs topping up another 3 times on the way. We make it with what we think is only a few minutes to spare only to find that the timetable changes each week and in fact it won't leave for another hour.



Chimney tops

As it's getting late we decide to stay on Evia for the night and find a piece of waste ground to begin pitching the tent

and replacing the inner tube. The flat tyre has actually been caused by a patch that has come unstuck from a previous repair rather than a puncture so the Marathon Plus Tour's retain their unpuncturable title, for now.

While unpacking our kit an old man calls us over and asks what we're up to. After miming our explanation he tells us to pack up again and follow him. We're not sure if we're in trouble or if he wants to help but follow him anyway. He lives just up the road and says we can camp in his garden where it will be safer. His huge Alsatian should keep an eye on things for us and we have a great spot securely behind his gate. He even brings some fresh water for us to use for dinner.



Gated camp site, Agio Kampos

The Alsatian is a bit too effective by barking at us for trying to take our own bike in the morning but we manage to get away with it and catch the early ferry back to the

mainland. We ride through more rolling farming country where almost everyone drives a pick up truck. After a winding climb at a comfortable 5% gradient we drop onto another huge plain and a rare thing occurs: the wind is actually behind us! We barrel along nicely feeling like we have super strong legs.



Waiting for the ferry at Agio Kampos

But it can't last for long and with another ridge to climb over it begins to rain and then we turn west while the wind turns to hit us from the side.

The last 40km into Larissa are unsheltered so we get buffeted by the cross wind and by the huge trucks speeding past. But 10km from Larissa we have a short break when we spot Eric and Charlotte, a French couple riding in the opposite direction. While we chat and exchange blog addresses the wind seems to drop (www.plqa.fr). We hope to see them again in Cappadocia or on the silk road so we wave an 'Au Revoir' and have a nice

final spin into Larissa.

Our couchsurfing host Panagiotis welcomes us into his flat but after a shower we're off out again as he's invited us to join him at a swing dancing lesson. We're clearly out of our depth as everyone around us spins and bobs in perfect time so we spend most of the time practising the basics in the corner.



Lindy Hopping



Larissa street art



The theatre, Larissa

Our talents seem to be stronger in the simple movement of legs going round and round and in the morning we get to demonstrate the fine art of tandem riding to Panagiotis as he has offered to guide us for the day. He's a keen Audax rider so jumps at the chance to spend a day in the saddle and takes off with all the enthusiasm that riding a lightweight, unladen bike deserves.



Panagiotis leads the way

We spend most of the day chasing due to our slightly more cumbersome steed but it's a great route that he leads us on with views of Mount Olympus from several angles, a lovely swooping road along the coast and then the final stretch over expansive marshlands.



Mount Olympus



Kiwi orchard by the coast



Sulphurous spring at Kokkino Nero Melivias

Here, housing is prohibited without a licence but this is largely ignored as there are plenty of holiday homes,

including one belonging to the mayor of Larissa. The road we follow was funded and built solely for bikes but is conveniently wide enough for two cars to pass.



House covered in shells

As we near the end of the day Panagiotis' engine seems to be running low on gas and admitting he feels 'a bit tired' he drops behind us and we provide a strong tow like only a touring tandem can. However he does have a swing dancing party to get to so he may be saving his energy for that. We wave goodbye so he can catch a train home while we set up camp by the beach behind a hotel's tennis court with the gods on Olympus keeping an eye on us.



Panagiotis on Olympus beach



Sunset on Olympus beach



Low cloud on mount Olympus

Thessaloniki sits in a huge estuary with three major rivers pouring into the Aegean sea. Cars have been well provided for with a motorway following the direct route round the coast from the south but bikes have to come inland by 20km to get to a suitable bridge to get across the first river. We have a cunning plan though to avoid the extra distance.



Precision landing

We approach the motorway with the intention of riding the 4km on the hard shoulder to get across the river then back onto minor roads on the other side. But there's a problem: All our maps, both paper and electronic show a junction where we're standing but in fact it's not been built yet. They've made a start but seem to have abandoned the idea leaving half a slip road and no bridge to the other carriageway. Time for plan B.



Someone forgot to build the bridge

Kirsty had spotted another bridge on a very minor road not far away so we make our way towards that. While stopping to consult the map our nostrils detect the unmistakable aroma of meat being cooked on charcoal. The man in charge of the BBQ spots us and can obviously tell we're peckish as he invites us over. But before we get to sample the burgers he offers us some of his homemade ouzo. It's not bad but the burgers are better. We eventually leave after asking about the bridge we're trying to find and he points us in the right direction then hands us a bottle with more ouzo for the journey.



BBQ man giving us some Dutch courage with his ouzo

The road becomes a track and before long we find the crossing. It's an old railway bridge that spans a fast flowing river in

full spate and by the looks of things it's not carried any sort of traffic for several decades. There is an attempt at a walkway in the form of rows of 3 sleepers running the length of the bridge on each side and these are laid on widely spaced cross struts that leave a 30cm open gap down to the torrent below. It's not rideable.



The adventure bridge



Don't look down

I carefully lift the bike up onto the sleepers and begin inching my way across. Occasionally some of the sleepers have

rotted away and I have to balance on the same one as the bike, tightrope style. There's also some carrying of the bike from one side to the other when all the sleepers on my side have collapsed.



Careful now



After a precarious 50 mins the bike and I have safely negotiated the 100m bridge and 10 mins later Kirsty makes it back onto terra firma too. No doubt the 16km detour would have been quicker but where's the fun in that?



Safely across

After the bridge a muddy track spits us out into a motorway

service station where we get plenty of confused looks while wolfing down a baguette. Then we're back out onto a proper road for what should be a straightforward run into Thessaloniki.



And it is, apart from the road we want being flooded and requiring some extra km to get across the next river.



Flooded road into Thessaloniki

Finally we make it to the home of our host, Georgios which is in fact an office block and is his temporary accommodation as

he's 'between houses'. He coordinates the EuroVelo routes that pass through Greece along with various other cycling initiatives so is hoping that the new government will find more money for cycle infrastructure. We suggest a bike path into Thessaloniki that uses the old railway line as a good starting point. We're very pleased when he presents us with a large map showing all the EuroVelo routes as these are surprisingly rare.



Meat feast

We don't stay at the office for long though as Georgios has to catch a late train to Athens for a meeting, a 7 hour trip to cover the distance that has taken us 5 days to ride. So we're whisked across to the home of his friend, also called Georgios who has kindly offered to host us instead. On the way the first Georgios points out the roadworks for the metro system that they have spent 4 years trying to build. But each time they dig they find ancient artifacts which complicates things.

The same happened in Athens and there each station is a mini museum showing some of the items that they found.



The Rotunda, Thessaloniki

The weather forecast looks to be cold and snowy so the plan is to spend 2 nights in Thessaloniki before continuing on east with the hope the snow won't last for long. This gives us a chance to pay a visit to Georgios' (the 2nd one) shop, Action Bikes, and have a stroll round the city.



Thessaloniki harbour with Olympus behind

It's been a great return to life on the road and just the kind of week we needed to get us fired up for the next stage of the journey. Just a few days left of Greece... and of Europe.



Bread in all shapes and sizes

Weeks 2 and 3 on Paros

written by Marcus | 12 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.

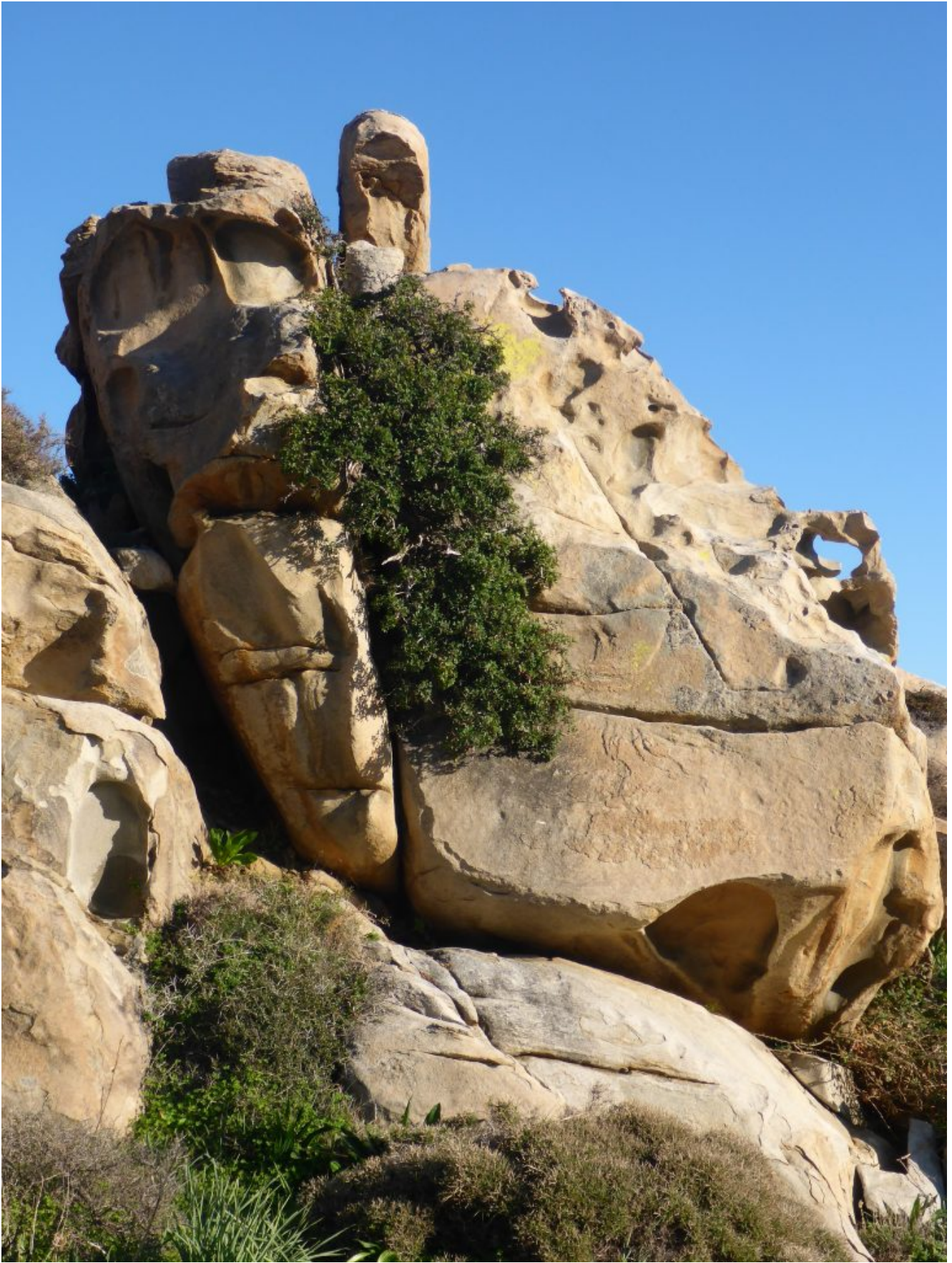




Sampling the local Bugatsa



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 | 12 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 WWOOFers in that time and a lot of the construction work and garden upkeep has been carried out by the volunteers. In return the WWOOFers (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.

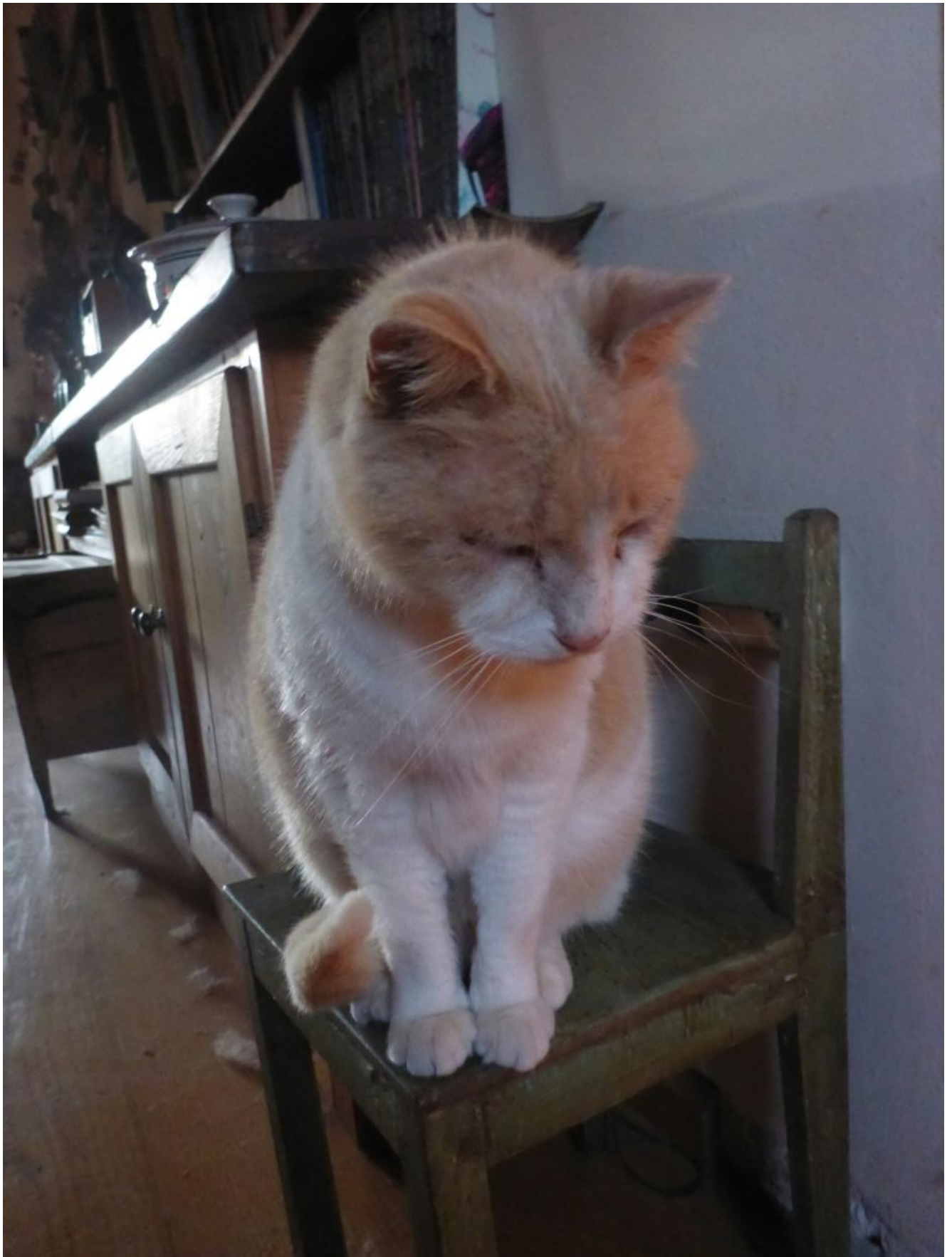






As well as Jim and Irini the house has several other occupants with 2 dogs and 3 cats with inside privileges and 1 dog and 2 cats who are not supposed to come indoors (occasionally Paco the dog gets a taste of how the other half live). The outside animals are lucky strays who have found their way to 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.

