

16 Kardamili: a walk on the North Side

Having trekked to the villages to the south of the Viros Gorge it was time to take a look at the northern side. The route began up the gorge to the Agios Sotiros monastery, an hour at a good pace now that I was acclimatised to the heat and used to hopping from rock to rock on the dried-up riverbed.

In the event it took longer than expected. One of the differences between walking in the mountains around Kardamili and other places I have been is that, because effort is made to maintain and waymark the paths and there is the good Anavasi 'hiking map', a lot more people feel confident to venture out. On the day, as on each of the other times I was in the gorge, I met several groups, some on their way back to Kardamili having set out early in the cool of early morning, overtaking others walking more slowly. There were very few Brits but I met Belgians, Dutch, and a large number of Norwegians in small groups. There seemed to be a lot of Norwegians in Kardamili at the time. All were happy to stop and pass the time of day before moving on.

There is a shared affinity in the mountains everywhere, people always greet each other. But it seems that there is something about the sunshine which brings out the sunny side of people even more. All the walkers I met were North Europeans and all had the same message: *"The weather back home is lousy. Isn't it marvellous here?"* And that's the point. It was! The day's activity can be decided without having to check the weather forecast. You know you can walk in the sunshine with no need to carry gear for multiple weather changes from blistering heat to windy, wet and cold. The Norwegian affirmation of this sentiment is always the same, a sonorous *"Yaw! Yaw!"*

Stopping to chat slowed down forward progress but was very enjoyable, plenty of boulders to perch on and be sociable. Two couples appeared out of the vegetation on the right.

"We've come down the path from near Agia Sofia. Great views."

"Have you been up to that church on the rock pinnacle."

"What is the path up from Agios Sotiros like".

A general exchange of information between folks who were luxuriating in a shared passion for walking with the sun on their back.

The last was the path I was taking up to the northern side of the gorge, after a stop at the monastery to take on-board large quantities of ripe black mulberries, still dripping from the trees in the courtyard. I had guessed from their appearance that mulberries were rich in vitamin C but a check on the internet had shown considerable health benefits are ascribed to them in relation to, for example, cancer, ageing and neurological diseases, inflammation, diabetes, and bacterial infections. As well as vitamin C they also contain vitamins A,



B-complex, E and K and, unusual for fruit, iron. Other compounds help protect against infection, inflammation, strokes and one even protects the retina from harmful effects of ultra violet rays. I admit these benefits were not at the forefront of my mind as I ate what would probably amount to a year's health protection and ability to discard sunglasses. I saw no mention of fibre content but anticipated that the colour pigments, used for tanning fabric and increasingly as food colouring, would soon reveal themselves.



Looking down to Ag Sotiros church and monastery

Unfortunately because my Canon S95 was stolen in Patras I didn't have a camera in my hand for the quick shot. I resolved a few years ago when I tripped on Tilos and the SLR took the brunt of the fall that on broken ground, and this was very broken ground, it stays in the rucksack out of harm's way. It kept the camera safe when I did take a tumble later in the day but I missed the opportunity to photograph a fast moving snake on the way up the side of the gorge (I was on the way up, not the snake which just disappeared under a bush). But I did manage to photograph one of the vividly sulphur-yellow butterflies which I had chased around the mountain at Parga and failed to photograph wings-open.

However, the overwhelming thought as I headed upwards was that this was an ancient pathway, trodden for centuries, linking the Sotiros monastery with the village of Pedino.

Steep as it was, the climb up the path seemed to flash by. Suddenly I was in the village, which looked as if time had stood still for centuries. I sat on a rock to have some water and mused about the perception of time. I was very influenced in my thinking on the subject by reading the 'The Magic Mountain' by Thomas Mann when I was in the 6th form in school (Years 12 and 13 in modern parlance). Simply, if your time is full of interesting and novel stuff then it seems to go quickly as you pass through it but when you look back on it, it seems to be longer than it actually was. Conversely if nothing new is happening and you're bored, time drags but when looked back on seems to have flashed by. That's why climbing up the side of a gorge is more interesting than trudging along a road and is more full of memories but the latter seems to have taken a shorter time in

From the monastery a path rises very steeply 1000 feet to the village of Pedino on the rim of the gorge. A long pull up in the heat but interspersed by pauses to take photos of the views and the wildlife.



Sulphur-yellow butterflies everywhere.

retrospect. The truth of this has been confirmed over the years ever since. It seems self-evident.

Having decided I need to bring my thinking about the subject up-to-date, *The Magic Mountain* having been published in 1924, during the time I was in Kardamili I was reading a book on my Kindle called *'Time Warped: unlocking the mysteries of time perception'* by Claudia Hammond. One of the things she says is: *"I believe monotony and variety are crucial to explaining many of the mysteries of time"* then goes on to acknowledge the contribution of *The Magic Mountain* which *"pre-dated and seems to have anticipated much of the research on the perception of time"*. Too right !!! It anticipated it by a century given that Thomas Mann started it in 1912. Not much to be added to the basic premise. Hammond gives it the catchy title the 'Holiday Paradox' and basically re-states the Mann thesis but adds a sharper, more academic, distinction between 'prospective' and 'retrospective' views of time.



Hammond concludes the 5th chapter with the view that: *"our concept of the future is tied up closely with our perception of the past"*. She also quotes Churchill as saying: *"The longer you can look back, the further you can look forward"*.

Hammond applies this concept at the personal level but as I sat by a carved stone basin at the edge of Pedino I couldn't help thinking that it also applies culturally as well. Despite all its failings, the 'Old World', Europe, has got history in spades over the 'New World'. 'New World' countries have largely destroyed previous cultures. In Europe nowhere has more sense of history than Greece. The country's cultural heritage is everywhere: in the ancient monasteries; ancient settlements; old pathways; as well as the vast amount of extant remains going back well before the Christian era. Moreover, there is a pride in and a cultural connectedness to that sense of history.

Rumination finished, thirst quenched, muscles eased after the steep climb, I wound my way at a gentler gradient up through Pedino and then on to Tseria, at an altitude of about 600 metres the highest settlement on this side of the gorge at the foot of the next steep rise into the Taygetos.



From Tseria, Kardamili far distant

Tseria was deserted. I saw no-one as I turned into the village and wandered along the narrow main street. Clearly people lived here because the houses looked lived-in but shutters and doors were closed against the heat of the sun which at near-solstice height and at near mid-day kept locals in the cool of their homes until late afternoon. Only idiots roamed around.

When I reached the diminutive village square in front of the church and looked coastward, Kardamili seemed gratifyingly distant.

Still perspiring heavily I wandered a little further, enjoying the cooling effect of a faint breeze, looking around the village, composing photographs in my head until my hands dried before getting out the camera. A small stone courtyard outside one house with a



stack of Coca-Cola crates and a white plastic table and chairs greyed with age could mean one of three things: the occupants had an unhealthy appetite for cola; it was an art installation; or it was a taverna. Hoping it was the latter I went up the few steps and sat down waiting for the owner to come rushing out smiling, eager for custom, bubbling over with φιλοξενία.

The door was open but no-one came. I began to look around nervously thinking I may have presumed wrongly and was sitting in someone's garden.

I hadn't walked all the way from Kardamili to be so easily put off so I rapped on the door with my knuckles and went into what seemed like a very large kitchen with a table in the centre, a sink, crates of cola, and not much else. A thin-faced woman with a sour expression appeared wiping her hands on an apron and said inquisitorially, almost accusingly «Ναι!?» (Yes!?) Clearly no English spoken here and no warm welcome for foreigners wandering in in the middle of siesta.

«Έχετε ένα φραπέ? » Before the words were out of my mouth I knew the chances of her having frappé on the Drinks List, or even a Drinks List, were nil. Less than nil. Asking for something so outlandish only widened the gulf between us. «Μόνο ελληνικό». Despite a determined effort to develop a taste for it, I dislike Greek coffee so that was a non-starter. I reckon that even the diminishing number of Greeks who drink it dislike it. The old men who sit outside tavernas and kafeneions all morning over one cup of ελληνικό take one sip and have to wait an hour before they can steel themselves to take the next.

Using my great observational and deductive powers I reckoned that she may have the odd bottle of Coke, even though the crates outside seemed to contain more empty beer bottles than Coke. But I dislike cola even more than Greek coffee. No point in flouncing off in a huff to the next taverna. It was as certain as it gets that there would not be another one in Tseria.

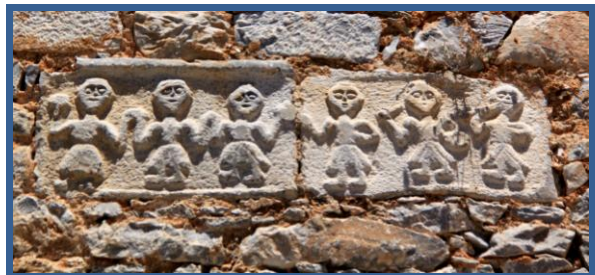
Then rescue, I spotted a small crate of orange drink in the corner and settled for that. Having opened it for me and taken my €2.50 (for once I declined the offer of a glass, out of concern for my health), she turned on her heel and disappeared again into some dark recess as I went outside, sat on the grey plastic chair at the grey plastic table and tried to convince myself that warm orange drink was enjoyable.

The fact is, I was enjoying myself. I had a sense of achievement from having walked a long way with new experiences seemingly every few minutes. My guess was that this taverna

and probably the whole village, hadn't changed since before WW2. It was likely that occupation soldiers had sat at the predecessor of this plastic table and supped, who knows what. Probably local wine. Maybe news that I was Welsh not German hadn't spread to Tseria from Prastio hence the frosty reception. Maybe she simply doubted the sanity of someone wandering around in the heat when the rest of the civilised world was at siesta.

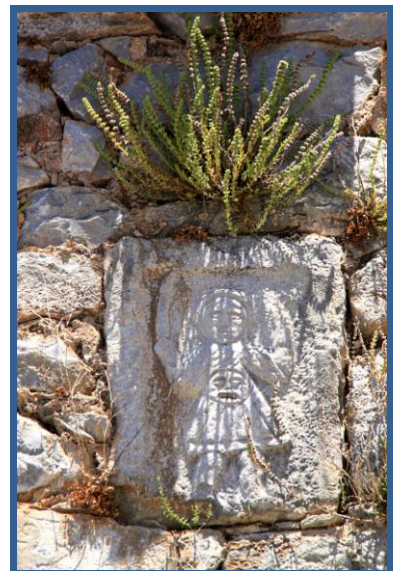
Bottle emptied, I thought that it must by now be well into the afternoon but my watch showed it to be only a few minutes past 2 o'clock. Still plenty of time for the rest of the plan which was to follow a path down to the floor of the Viros Gorge and then climb up to Kolibetseika and the very fine Gorge Hotel.

As I walked back through the village towards the path, the impression that I had passed through a time portal several decades if not centuries into the past was reinforced when I passed the village church. It had a number of 'picture stones' set into the walls. One stone dated the present church structure back to 1836 though it looked much older than that. The nature of the stonework implied that an earlier church



had been incorporated into it.

Some of the carvings had a medieval appearance though the religious significance of others was difficult to fathom. The carving over

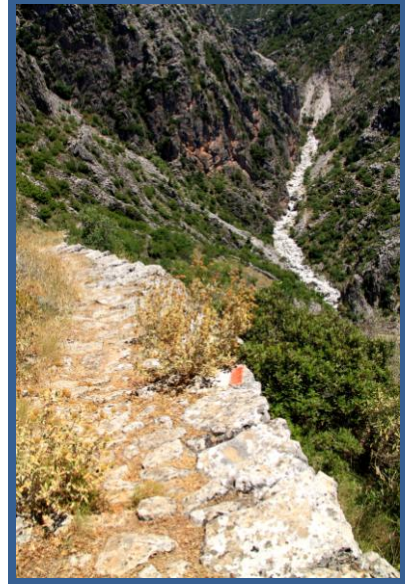


the main entrance was more traditional with the cross and the double headed eagle of Byzantium looking to both east and west.



The path to the bed of the gorge was spectacular. For the most part a very good stone-paved kalderimi with supporting terraced walls to maintain an even gradient, all the time looking at the boulder-strewn river bed way down below and the mountain peaks towering way up above. Only at the bottom was there a difficulty as the path had been washed away by flood water necessitating a scramble down a collapsing bank. But no real problem.

From the riverbed the climb up to Kolibetseika and the 'Gorge Hotel' on the rim of the gorge was straightforward and I was spurred on by the prospect of a frappé and a chat with the friendly Maria. This was the third time I had walked to it and the view from the terrace was still breathtaking. Profitis Ilias, highest mountain in the Taygetos still with patches of snow even in mid June, was clearly visible, no haze or cloud cover shrouding it this



time.



Maria was as welcoming as always, sharp contrast to the reception in the taverna in Tseria on the other side of the gorge, barely a kilometre away in a straight line.

While I was standing at the rail, once again admiring the view I fell into conversation with the only other customers there, a couple from Manchester. The open friendliness of Northerners makes them

generally more willing to pass the time of day and have a chat with strangers than are those of a more southerly aspect and less sociable disposition. There is a much higher probability of a conversation with someone from the North of England than those from the Saarfest who generally remain aloof from anyone they haven't been formally introduced to, though there are pleasant exceptions.

We agreed that the view would be difficult to beat, how pleasant it is to have predictable sunshine, and agreed also that the sense of history which is everywhere in Greece is one of things which makes the country special. The conversation fitted perfectly with the rest of the day.