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GETTING LOST

Lost in the Odyssey



Matt Gross for The New York Times

The chora, or main village, on Kythira. [More Photos »](#)

By MATT GROSS

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SING to me of the man, O Muse — that cleverest of men, most favored by the gods, most frustrated by them, too. Sing to me of endlessly lost Odysseus, whose 10-year journey home, from the scorched and blood-stained plains of Troy to the Ionian island of Ithaca, was a decade of disaster. Sing to me of the Cyclops, the

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Sirens, Calypso and Circe, Scylla and Charybdis, of challenges confronted and conquered, destiny delayed and at long last achieved.

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Getting Lost

A series in which Matt Gross travels without the aid of maps, guidebooks, personal contacts or the Internet.



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So sing to me, I begged the Muse one Friday evening in May, or, hey, you know what? Just send me an intercity bus — I've gotta get out of here.

“Here” was the seaside town of Neapoli, at the southeastern end of the Peloponnesian peninsula of [Greece](#), where nearly two weeks of island-hopping from the Turkish coast across the Aegean Sea had come to a sudden and maddening halt. From Cape Meleas — the last location Odysseus himself recognized before the North Wind drove him into the monster-ridden lands of myth — all I had to do was hop a bus or two to the port of Patra, and from there a ferry could take me, at long last, to Ithaca, the place Odysseus called home.

In Neapoli, however, there were no buses until morning, and I had no choice but to spend the night in this cheerful, if sleepy, seaside town. Even a day or two earlier, I wouldn't have minded. In fact, for the previous 10 days I'd been delighted by the capricious whims of bus and ferry schedules. But I was due to fly home to New York from [Athens](#) in two days, and now this delay was unbearable.

As I numbed disappointment with ouzo at a waterfront restaurant, I noticed something unusual on the sidewalk before me: a penny-farthing, one of those 19th-century bicycles with an enormous front wheel and tiny rear one. The owner, it turned out, was Jim, a 20-something hairdresser from Athens who was sitting nearby with his girlfriend, Chara, a schoolteacher. They were a sweet couple, definite hipsters, and I smiled when they asked me, as had practically every Greek I met on my journey, how I'd wound up here.

“I've come from Troy,” I said, “and I'm trying to get to



Matt Gross for The New York Times

Odysseus sailed these waters off the coast of Turkey, or so Homer's epic goes. While modern travelers do not have to fear the Cyclops, there are other challenges in hopping the Greek isles. [More Photos »](#)

Ithaca. Like Odysseus: no map, no guidebook, no route, no Internet, no hotel reservations.”

Thus began a tale I'd been telling, and adding to, ever since I'd begun my Odyssey in [Turkey](#) outside the city of Canakkale, where ancient Troy was located and, beginning in the late 19th century, unearthed.

But Troy was not where I wanted to linger. It was, for both myself and Odysseus, a starting point. My plan was not to follow the hero's exact route — it stretched, some say, as far as [Gibraltar](#), and was mythical in any case — but to stumble in his footsteps and try to get a glimpse into his psyche as he tried and failed and tried again to reach Ithaca, a mere 350 miles away as the crow flies, off the west coast of Greece.

Or maybe that's the wrong way to put it. For Odysseus has no psyche, not in the modern, literary sense. One of the founding works of Western literature may be a travel story about getting lost, but apart from the image of heartbroken Odysseus crying on the shores of Calypso's island, Homer rarely portrays his hero's disconnection and desperation.

How does that lostness feel, I wanted to know, especially in Greece, where the lonely spaces between rough and empty islands are balanced by an unmatched reputation for hospitality? So, with 11 days for the journey — Odysseus took 10 years, but my wife, Jean, is less patient than his Penelope — I left Troy to find out.

Immediately, I encountered uncertainty. Several Greek islands — Limnos, Lesbos, Chios — lie close to Turkey, but no one was sure when, or if, ferries were running. And that was even before Greece's austerity measures prompted port blockages, transit strikes and sometimes violent demonstrations in Athens. (The ferries, however, have kept running.) The Canakkale tourism office suggested a three-hour bus south to Ayvalik, where I might find a ferry to Lesbos, and if that didn't work, I could go farther south, to Izmir, alleged birthplace of Homer himself, and get the ferry to Chios. So, while Odysseus had sailed north with his 12 black ships to raid the lands of the Cicones, I went the other way.

Unlike Odysseus, I got lucky. In Ayvalik, a lovely Turkish town with a jumble of old streets at its center, ferries were leaving for Lesbos.

The two-hour ride was to be a typical one. Inside the ship, whose homey décor had not been updated in a couple of decades, about 100 families, couples and groups of friends mostly kept to themselves, snacking on sweets packed for the trip. This was a modest ferry; other, larger ones would have free Wi-Fi and show reruns of “Friends” dubbed into Greek. Outside was more exciting: the water flat and sparkling with golden-hour light, small sailboats and fishing skiffs cruising near shore, tiny islands silhouetted by the setting sun.

When the ferry docked in Mytilene, Lesbos’s main town, night had fallen, and I hurried into the nearest travel agency and learned that a ferry to Chios was scheduled for 8:30 in the morning, 12 hours from now. O.K. So, where could I get to from Chios?

The travel agent did not know, and his ignorance would prove normal for the islands. People might know which ferries left from the local port, but from other ports? Might as well ask about ferries in [Indonesia!](#)

This was a challenge. Any embarkation could be a dead end, forcing me to retreat and replan my route. I’d just have to trust Hermes, god of travel, and see what happened.

I would also have to enjoy myself as much as possible, and so I got right down to it in Mytilene, walking through a maze of pedestrian shopping streets until I spotted the Old Market Cafe, which was small, lively and untouristy. But no sooner had I ordered (mint-spiked meatballs, white beans with dill, tomato-cucumber salad) than I heard a commotion outside. Perhaps 200 young people were marching through the dark, chanting slogans and handing out flyers decrying police brutality. (I don’t read Greek, but there was a helpful illustration.) It was my first taste of the crisis that has been engulfing Greece since 2008, and I was tempted to follow the marchers and learn more.

“But there’s no way to hide the belly’s hungers,” Odysseus once remarked. “What a curse, what mischief it brews in our lives!” So I ate, had a couple beers with off-duty soldiers at a bar, and paid too much for a hotel room.

At dawn I boarded the ferry to Chios. Again, a smooth ride through sun-dappled waters. This time, however, my reading material — “The Marriage of Cadmus and Harmony,” by Roberto Calasso — caught the attention of an American couple who used to lead Sierra Club trips around [Europe](#). The man — who had been visiting Greece since the 1950s, had converted to Orthodox Christianity, and had taken the name Theofilos — appreciated my endeavor, and urged me to visit Ios, where Homer was supposedly buried. This was precisely the kind of tidbit I’d been hoping for, and I swore I’d try to visit Ios — wherever Ios happened to be.

First, though, Chios. Once again I stepped off the ferry and into the nearest travel agency, where I learned that a ferry for Samos, to the southeast, was leaving the next afternoon, giving me time — at last! — to explore a Greek island.

But where to go? I explained my quest to the travel agents, who told me that the house where Homer had lived was in the village of Volissos, along with a nice cafe. Volissos was, however, 25 miles away, and with no public transportation I'd have to rent a car. O.K.! Minutes later my little Hyundai was navigating switchbacks up cliffs, cruising an arid, boulder-strewn plateau, descending S-curves to the western shores of Chios and finally parking at the edge of Volissos, whose dense, haphazard lanes climbed a steep hill crowned by the ruins of a castle built during 300 years of Genoese imperial rule.

At Pythonas, a simple, spacious cafe across from a church, the owner, Maria Siderias, spoke English with a strangely familiar accent. She was from Astoria, the Greek neighborhood in Queens, she explained as she poured me good local wine and prepared fava beans with garlic sauce, grilled sausage and a tomato-cucumber salad. She had lived in New York until she was 20, she said, but during a family visit to Volissos 19 years ago she realized she didn't want to leave. New York life was volatile; Volissos, land of her ancestors, would be a new start.

By returning, Maria was bucking the trend. Once, she said, 3,000 people had lived here, but ever since the Germans came, so many villagers had left for Athens and abroad that the population was now maybe 200.

"Germans?" I asked, wondering if she meant European Union bureaucrats, or wealthy Continental property-buyers.

"You know, in the war," she said.

Oh, the war: World War II. Those Germans.

Funnily enough, Maria had never sought out Homer's house, but encouraged me to search atop the village hill. All I found, though, were meticulously restored vacation homes and Stella Tsakiri, an artsy Athenian transplant spattered with paint from renovating her rental properties.

"It's rumors," she said of Homer's residence. Rather, she said, Volissos had been home to a clan that claimed to have descended from Homer. And even if the poet had lived in Volissos, she added, the village itself had moved around, ascending from its original seaside location in the Genoese era.

Rumors, though, were enough for me, and when I returned that night to the Pythonas Cafe (after stashing my things in the free apartment Stella offered), I listened raptly to Thomas Kanaris, an aging saddlemaker whom Stella called “the soul of the village,” tell a different story. According to him, Homer’s house had been “rebuilt and rebuilt and rebuilt” so many times it was no longer the same structure.

The next morning I drove back to the port of Chios and boarded the ferry for Samos. “What are they here?” curious Odysseus would ask of each new island. “Violent, savage, lawless? Or friendly to strangers, god-fearing men?” On Chios, I knew the answer.

Samos, however, was not Chios. First of all, where Chios was rocky, Samos was verdant, a fact I appreciated as I cruised its milder coast in another rented car. But finding a place to stop — welcoming but not touristy, isolated but not abandoned — was difficult. None of the stunning, cliff-perched hill towns I checked out fit the bill. Tourists there were like olives: ubiquitous, entrenched, almost beneath notice.

Oh, but the driving! I kept on west, rounding the coast until the sun melted into the shadows of the hills and the roiling, wine-dark sea. The momentum, both physical and psychological, carried me through the evening, blotting out the throbs of music from a too-close disco as I slept in the city of Karlovassi.

Over all, I didn’t feel let down. On my way back to port the next morning, I stopped for an espresso at North Star Cafe in the beachside village of Agios Konstantinos, and had a nice chat with Little Jim, an old Greek who had worked much of his life in [Australia](#) and had the black-and-white photos to show it.

Our conversation ranged from his father (the first villager killed by Nazis) to the troubles engulfing Greece (austerity, unemployment, ethnic strife) to his mother, who had, at the age of 100, returned to die here in the village of her birth. Little Jim’s eyes, light brown but rimmed blue-green, were tearing up. Like Odysseus of Ithaca and Maria of Volissos, he had, in troubled times, found refuge in his native land.

The lesson of Samos — no expectations — was good preparation for [Mykonos](#), which I knew by reputation as the party island of the [Cyclades](#), a place of beaches, booze, bikinis and stark beauty (treeless cliffs, boxy whitewashed homes, blue-painted shutters). Not where people muse over classical literature.

But Mykonos is also a ferry hub. You can get almost anywhere from there, and it was time for serious decisions about how to reach Ithaca. Some 150 miles to the south, I knew, lay [Crete](#), Greece’s largest island, where I guessed there might be a ferry to the

island of Kythira, roughly 15 miles off the mainland.

This was a gamble. I could get to Crete and discover that there was no westbound ferry and have to backtrack. But I'd been lucky so far, right? So after a day on Mykonos — I went swimming, bought handmade sandals and watched an old woman selling vegetables from her donkey — I boarded a high-speed catamaran bound for Ios.

Yes, Ios, site of Homer's alleged tomb, just happened to be on the way to Crete. I couldn't skip it. And once again, the gods were with me. A portside travel agency booked me into the high-end, modern Liostasi Hotel, a mere 40 euros a night (about \$56, at \$1.40 to the euro). Spiros, a Liostasi clerk who with his beard, tortoiseshell glasses and ironic mannerisms could have been my neighbor in Brooklyn, told me where to grab dinner. And when, with zero effort, I located his recommendation, Katogi, in the labyrinth of Ios's main village, I bonded with the bartender, Anastasia, who wholeheartedly endorsed my plan to pass through Kythira, her favorite island in all of Greece.

In the morning, with hours to go before the Crete ferry, I drove out to Homer's tomb, which lay, appropriately, at the very end of a small highway. A path led through knee-high bushes of wildflowers to a crest above the sea, and a half-collapsed pile of marble blocks. Could this really be Homer's resting spot? Sure, I thought, why not? I plucked a thatch of fragrant wild thyme and returned to the port.

Arriving after dark in Heraklion, Crete's capital, I had another run-in with Greek provincialism. No one knew when or whether ferries ran to Kythira; one port clerk suggested I wait till morning and call the ferry company.

Wait till morning! Spluttering with rage at these insular islanders who didn't even know how to get around their own country, I stormed out of the port and into the bus station, where I drank a calming beer and boarded a late-night shuttle west. The next day I found a ferry to Kythira, leaving in 24 hours. I'd have to wait till morning again.

So again, a rental car. Then the untamed mountains of Crete: goats on the winding road, azure waters below, olive groves silvering the slopes. Again, an honest taverna lunch: lamb stew, sour wine, a tomato-cucumber salad. I use "again" this way not as a complaint, but as an indication of the lush rhythm my life had fallen into. There was a regularity to the joy of discovering these new places, each so similar, none identical.

Below the village of Kampos, I spent hours descending the local gorge, following paths that vanished and reappeared and vanished again, down to a deserted, pristine beach

where I felt like the last man alive, or like Odysseus, cast ashore in unknown lands.

Such episodes provoked ambivalence, too. Because as much as I loved them, I also needed to keep moving toward Ithaca. On Kythira, that feeling grew only more acute, amplified by the island's rugged vastness (3,300 people live on 116 square miles), by my inability to rent a car (for the first time, I was asked to show an international driver's license) and by the crack of thunder and a cold downpour of rain, which hit just after I'd hitchhiked to the island's biggest town and settled under a taverna's awning for lunch.

Of course, the rain eventually eased and I found another, kinder rental-car outfit, and I drove back roads through luxuriously arcing hills to reach teeny-tiny Avlemonas, a village recommended by Anastasia of Ios, where the sounds of cool jazz and blues lured me to the waterside Mirodia Kalokairiou Cafe. For a while I sat drinking Belgian beer and watching clouds rise over a ridge with the goateed owner, Stavros, and his employee, Stefanos, a recent cooking-school graduate.

"That one looks like a man," said Stefanos.

Stavros agreed: "Like the god Hermes."

When Odysseus lost his way after Kythira, he landed 10 days later in the land of the Lotus-eaters. I was there already. The beer, the comradeship, the casual mythological references, the braised goat at Stefanos's family's restaurant, the dramatic gorges and homey cafes and earthquake-ravaged churches — why move on? If Ithaca represents sought-after home, Stavros said: "Kythira is the opposite of that. It's the paradise you can never find."

And yet I had to move on.

So first to Neapoli, then to [Corinth](#) and Patra, 230 miles north and west, then to Kyllini, another 30 miles southwest, then by ferry to the island of Kefalonia, and from there: Ithaca.

After 11 days and untold miles at sea, the island appeared, wreathed in morning mist, mountains lined up, hump to hump, like sleeping green camels. The port stayed hidden from view until the ferry's final approach. Along with several dozen well-dressed Spanish tourists, I stepped onto the land of King Odysseus.

And then nothing. With five hours before the ferry back to Kefalonia, where I'd get a bus to Athens, I took a taxi from the port to Vathy, Ithaca's capital, whose stately buildings edged a shallow bay. There I had a coffee at one cafe, and another at another. I visited

an archaeological museum with a collection of coins, pottery and statuettes dug up all over the island. One was a brass figurine, about an inch high, of Odysseus, his chin jutting, his eyes facing the heavens — in search of signs from the gods?

All around town, wall maps pinpointed the far-flung locations of Homeric sites such as Eumaeus's pigsty, the nymph's cave and Odysseus's palace. Other posters advertised Island Walks, a tour company offering Odyssey-themed strolls around Ithaca. But I ignored them. For Odysseus, Ithaca meant an end to his wanderings, and I wanted to stop moving too, to see how stillness felt.

It felt unnatural. And I knew well why: Odysseus's Ithaca was not my Ithaca. Mine lay elsewhere, back in Brooklyn, or perhaps beyond. And now it was time to go.

Before returning to the port, though, I called up Ester van Zuylen, the Dutchwoman who runs Island Walks (her number was on the posters), and told her about my journey. By chance, she had to drop a friend at the port, so we met there to chat and watch schools of fish swim in the crystalline sea.

For a while she talked about the challenges of getting local government support for her work — clearing the paths, promoting the tours — and in general how difficult it was to capitalize on the island's sole claim to fame. This was a place, after all, where Penelope remained a popular women's name, and although no men were named Odysseus, Homer was quite common.

Minutes later, a Mazda pulled up.

"Oh, here's Homer now," Ester said.

Homer's arrival signaled my departure, and I took my last looks at the waters I hadn't swum and the hills I hadn't climbed. A day earlier, a friend had e-mailed me Constantine Cavafy's poem "Ithaca," and a few of its lines stuck in my head: "Ithaca gave you the marvelous journey. Without her you wouldn't have set out. She has nothing left to give you now." As I boarded the ferry, there was nothing else I wanted.

IF YOU GO

HOW TO GET AROUND

Since there are no definitive online ferry maps for the Greek islands, if you want to plan ahead the best resource is Ferries.gr, which also lets you book tickets no fewer than four days in advance. Otherwise, you can buy tickets at kiosks and travel agencies in the

islands.

Few islands have public transportation, so be prepared to rent cars. All port towns I visited had at least one rental-car outfit. Prices for a manual-transmission compact are 20 to 30 euros a day (\$28 to \$42, at \$1.40 to the euro), including insurance. Some companies insist you have an international driving permit, so get one from AAA (\$15; aaa.com/vacation/idpf.html). Scooters, too, require a different driving license.

For information on how strikes and protests may affect travel in [Greece](#), visit livinginGreece.gr/strikes.

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

Chios: **Pythonas Taverna**, Volissos, (30-22740) 21134.

Kechrimpari, 7 Agios Anargiros, Chios Town, (30-69) 4242-5459, served me the best meal, seven courses plus a bottle of ouzo, for just 20 euros.

Ios: **Katogi**, main village, (30-69) 7659-8659.

[Crete](#): **Sunset**, Kampos, (30-28220) 41128.

Kythira: **Mirodia Kalokairiou**, Avlemonas, (30-69) 7708-1023.

Skandia, Paleopoli, (30-27360) 33700.

WHERE TO SLEEP

Since I couldn't plan ahead, the places I slept were hit-or-miss. Here are the hits:

Ayvalik, [Turkey](#): **Antikhan Boutique Hotel**, 216 Sakarya Caddesi; (90-266) 312-4610; antikhanpansiyon.com; rooms from 40 Turkish lira, or about \$26.

Chios: **Vacation apartments** in Volissos can be booked through Stella Tsakiri's Volissos Travel (30-22740) 21421; volissostravel.gr; from 58 euros a day, including rental car.

[Mykonos](#): **Hotel Sourmeli Garden**, (30-22890) 28255; sourmeligarden.com; doubles from 35 euros.

Ios: **Liostasi Ios Hotel & Spa**, (30-22860) 92140; liostasi.gr; doubles from 115 euros.

Kythira: **Sotiris**, Avlemonas, (30-27360) 33722; rooms from 30 euros.

MATT GROSS, the former Frugal Traveler, writes the "Getting Lost" series for the Travel section. He is writing a book about independent travel, to be published by Da Capo Press.



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