

Abby Spare

DAY 0: Athens

So I've labeled this Day 0 because the seminar hasn't actually started yet, but I arrived a day early to settle into Athens and start to adjust to the time change. The flight over here wasn't that bad, I think after having done some international travel with Princeton's help over the past 3 years, I've gotten used to sleeping on a red-eye. I actually got to the airport at the same time as one of the other undergraduates and so we were able to travel to the hotel together.

A quick nap later and three of us were off to find some food for dinner. We ended up going to the exact place I went to my first night in Athens when I travelled with the Hellenic Studies and Anthropology Department class: Global Mediterranean: Human Encounters and Cultural Exchange. It's a great and cheap little souvlaki place that was a walk away from the hotel we stayed in over spring break and the hotel we were staying in this time around.

After having more souvlaki than probably necessary, we went back to the hotel for a group meeting with the rest of the participants. It was a general overview of what we'd be doing in Athens the next two days and a more specific look at tomorrow. Sleep was well-needed for all these jet lagged students.

DAY 1: Athens

The next morning was somewhat bright and early, leaving the hotel sometime between 8-8:30, I think we said 8am meeting but Greek time means everything is just a little later. On the schedule for the day was going to the Acropolis, its museum, and the Agora.

The day was finished off with a meeting at the Princeton Athens Center with the PIIRS Global Seminar students and the Journalism Program's students in Athens! We got to talk about the research we were planning on doing at the monastery, and then mingling with the rest of the greater Princeton/Athens community both with current students and alums.

DAY 2: Athens

In the morning we were up a little later, not having to beat the crowds and blazing sun for the Acropolis this day! We went off, walking from our hotel to a little past the main square of Athens, Syntagma, until we found a few churches that we would be looking at and discussing. In particular, these three churches that we looked at, the Church of Panagia Kapnikarea, the Little Metropolis, and the Metropolitan Cathedral of Athens, were to serve as points of reference for Byzantine religious spaces and something we could reference throughout our time at the monastery. We continued on to the Benaki Museum, which is one of the largest private collection museums that I've at least ever come across. A lot of the work there is mostly Greek art or cultural objects, like traditional clothing from across different regions of Greece and things like that. They had an incredible section dedicated to Byzantine iconography, and so it was great to prepare for going to a Byzantine monastery by looking at some of the most (quite literally) iconic works.

After the Benaki museum, we got lunch at a place that was by the Princeton Athens Center, before having a discussion with Dr. Nikolaos Bakirtzis who wrote his dissertation on the Monastery of Hagios Ioannis Prodromos. Some of the other people in this discussion who would be with us for the majority of our trip was Dimitri Gondicas, the head of the Seeger Center, and Xenophon, an archaeologist who would also be traveling with us and providing us with relevant archaeological information.

The final event of the day was a concert at the ancient Herodes Theater where we spent 3 hours in this historic place with over 2,000 Greeks listening to contemporary Greek classical

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music. It was absolutely magical, especially when one of the most famous songs came on and everybody started singing along together. We got back to the hotel a little before 2am, after grabbing some food at a canteen by the hotel, and slept super peacefully.

DAY 3: Serres

The day started out really early, as we had a 5 hour drive from Athens to Thessaloniki and then another hour to Serres. We got on the bus, and I settled in with a neck pillow, eye mask, and white noise from my headphones and I fell asleep quickly. We made a stop about halfway through for 20 min to grab food at a rest stop, which was definitely the nicest rest stop that I've ever seen in my entire travel across the US. It was basically a full restaurant meets the nicest convenience store you've seen. Once we got back on the bus, I fell asleep again on and off for another few hours until we reached Thessaloniki

Once we got to Serres and checked into our hotel, we started to walk around the smaller city, seeing some of the most important Byzantine and Ottoman structures still around. Then we got dinner, at a taverna. Greek dinner is the absolute best, with everyone squeezed around the tables with food almost falling off the table because there is so much.

DAY 4: Monastery

It was Pentecost Sunday when we first got the monastery at 9:30 AM. We stopped on an overlook where we could look down at the monastery, and we could hear the voices of the nuns singing the liturgy echoing off of the mountains. When we arrived, we waited until the end of liturgy and walked into the reception area with the congregation to have homemade Greek delights and Greek coffee. After that, we went on our first tour of the monastery, primarily just looking at the parts of the main church at the center. After delicious homemade lunch from the nuns, we began our academic presentations in the monastery's library. Dinner came and went just as delicious as lunch and we left, so the nuns could finish their work and be asleep by 10:30, since they had to wake up at 1:30 for morning liturgy.

DAY 5: Monastery

We started the day somewhat the same, as the Monday still and a fair amount of parishioners coming to the liturgy in the morning, and so a reception was held. In the morning before lunch we had a little bit of time set aside to prepare for the remainder of the presentations, and I especially took advantage of this since I was one of the few people presenting that day. After that time, I had my presentation, in which I walked the group through the main parts of the church and discussed the role of lighting in bringing the congregation from the world of men to the world of God.

Once that was done, we had another delicious lunch prepared by the nuns. After that, we did some more touring of the monastic complex, particularly one of the largest buildings when you enter, in which the monastery's massive library was held before the Bulgarians stole most of it during the Balkan War. More presentations were had in that space. I have to say that I really appreciated the presentations because we were able to hear more fully about what each of us were interested in research-wise, or what work we had done prior to the program.

Following that, we began to do some work helping out the nuns with their daily chores. About half of us were on carrot duty, cutting and peeling more carrots than I have ever seen so that the nuns could later use it to make a vegetable pasta. It was actually really peaceful to be doing such a repetitive task, and I could sense how these seemingly mundane cycles of chores

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actually allowed them space to fully inhabit a monastic life and dedicate the majority of their thought towards God. After we finished helping out with that, dinner was ready and we ate way too much delicious food and went back to the hotel.

DAY 6: Monastery

We arrived a little bit later this morning, so that we didn't come in the middle of liturgy, and started off with touring the rest of the complex. Namely, we went to the ossuary, the garden, and the lab. I don't know if I can quite put into words the experience of the ossuary, where the skulls and bones of the monks from the past hundreds of years were not just laid to rest but almost put on display as a way of honoring them. When we walked in, one of the nuns was in the middle of a ritual to honor the space, with incense cleaning the space. It was positively haunting and beautiful. Nobody alive currently at the monastery knew these monks, and yet the absolute respect and honor given to their bones was touching to say the least.

We then walked down a little bit to the garden, where we met and had coffee with some of the workers. The three men we got to talk with were some of the nicest people I have ever met. None of them spoke all that much English, besides being able to catch names and ask us if the coffee they had prepared was good. They radiated such an air of warmth and welcoming, even giving us each a baseball cap that had the logo of their agriculture company on it.

After that we walked up to the lab of the monastery, where all the herbs and flowers, that were used in the salves and tinctures and teas that are sold, were dried out and created into the final product. There is so much work and love that goes into creating each and every product. The process is both scientific and spiritual, a combination that I found really fascinating to consider, and it helps that everything they make is really wonderful.

After that was lunch, again some of the best food I've had. We then finished up the rest of the presentations in the library and then had a discussion with one of the nuns, Mother Macrena. She's one of the nuns that speaks English, having grown up in South Africa, and has been with the monastery for about 25 years. She's not one of the original four that were sent to the monastery, but she knows so much about the place and its people and the changes it has undergone. The conversation was really quite fascinating, hearing someone who has devoted their life to God talk about the reasons why, and what it means to hear God's voice calling you to a monastic life. She has a certain frankness and kindness to her—she will tell you what she believes very openly and honestly. Some of us then were pulled to help pick weeds and fallen petals from the flower beds, as a part of the daily ritual to keep every stone and part of the monastic space absolutely clean. After that was dinner again, and then back to the hotel.

DAY 7: Monastery & Kavala

As soon as we got to the monastery this day, we went right into helping out the nuns and workers with eerie responsibilities. About 2/3 went to go package pasta while myself and a few others went back to the garden we had been at the day before to help with planting some beans and picking some herbs. Again, the men that ran this place could not have been nicer. We had coffee with them again and they started to get to know us each a little more, asking us through both hand gestures and some broken English whether we liked Greece, if we had been before, whether we wanted to come back, all of that. We tried our best, in hand gestures and broken Greek to answer and ask them about their lives.

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Once we were done helping with the garden, having done what they needed from us, we went back to the monastery for lunch. I think I've said this for every single meal we've had in Greece, but wow it was amazing.

The afternoon took a very different shape than days past, as we actually were taking a trip to Kavala, a port city not too far from Serres that was an important place for both the Byzantine and Ottoman empire. It also has some nice beaches that we were able to take advantage of. We rushed back to the hotel to grab some bathing suits and towels and then were off to Kavala.

Kavala was absolutely beautiful. The water was a bit cold at times but not too bad, mostly refreshing. The city itself was also quite beautiful, a mixture of old and new. We walked around for quite a while before settling into a nice long and delicious dinner. It was Xenophon's favorite places to eat in Kavala and so we just let him order all of the food for us and it did not disappoint. Greek dinners are quite long so while we started around 8:30, we didn't end until close to 11. It was a bit of a long drive back, but worth it to see this beautiful city.

DAY 8: Monastery

We had a bit of a later start to this morning too in terms of getting to the monastery because we first started off by going around Serres, to the Archaeological Museum, and to one of the highest points in the city. While we had toured the city a little bit after the day of travel, we hadn't had really a chance to see some of the important museums and sights. The view from the highest place in Serres was incredible and I'm definitely going to miss this city.

When we got to the monastery, we started with having a long conversation with Mother Macrena, another really interesting conversation that went from talking about the bats that are in the monastic complex to figuring out what love means. We then broke off a little bit into some separate time, with some of us (myself included) talking more with Mother Macrena and the Vice Abbess. By the time the conversations were done, we were ready for lunch. After lunch we started to do some rehearsals for the performance at night. Annually on the night that the Princeton students leave, we do a song and dance for the nuns. Mother Macrena told us that it's the only real entertainment that they have during the year, and so we practiced a traditional Greek dance and a song together so that we could perfect it.

We then had some dinner and did a little bit more practice before the synaxis (not sure if I spelled this correctly). The synaxis started a bit later than expected because of issues in getting a projector up in the back. It took a little bit of time and maneuvering, but we finally got it working and were able to present a slideshow of all of the things that we had done over the week. We gave our thanks to the nuns for their hospitality and kindness, and then proceeded to try our best at the dance. The space was pretty small and so we all felt like we were stumbling over our own two feet, but the nuns seemed to love it. They were laughing and smiling almost the whole time, probably laughing at us but none of us cared. The song we sang was equally received with smiles.

Then the nuns got to their portion of the night, a half an hour long video detailing the history of the monastery from when they first entered the dilapidated space three decades ago until now. I don't think anybody in our group quite realized how absolutely inspiring and empowering these nuns are. They quite literally rebuilt this place from shambles, both in physical terms and spiritual ones. From a monastery with one monk and almost unlivable space,

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to now one with 26 nuns and an absolutely beautiful space. Even after a fire in 2010 that destroyed an entire wing, they all persevered and have continued on strongly.

Saying goodbye to the nuns was so bittersweet. I was so grateful for the entire experience and for their kindness towards us, but was sad knowing that I wouldn't be able to return next year (as a rising senior). The experience at the monastery will always be with me.

DAY 9: Thessaloniki

The drive to Thessaloniki was short and sweet. There wasn't anything too exciting about it. We put our suitcases in storage and began to tour the city with Xenophon. The city of Thessaloniki was definitely different from both Athens and Serres. Athens was definitely a busier city, and Serres seemed like it was more condensed. Thessaloniki worked at a lower pace, and was a bit more spread out. Everyone seemed to really be enjoying every second, not rushing off to do anything. Some of the major places that we visited included the Jewish Museum, St. Demetrius' Church, the Arch of Galerius, and the Rotunda.

After we toured, we went back to the hotel and went back to rest before dinner. Dinner was at a place that Xenophon recommended and it was also the birthday of one of the graduate students, so we had a full and fantastic dinner. After that we walked a little bit more around the city, heading down to see the water at night. We then walked back to the hotel to go to bed.

DAY 10: Thessaloniki

The day started off with visiting some of the older parts of Thessaloniki, all the way up the hill of the city. Looking out from that vantage point, it's possible to see basically the entire city, and with the fantastic weather, you could see for a while. After that we had some time to wander around by the waterfront until heading onto the White Tower, one of the most iconic landmarks of Thessaloniki. After that Xenophon's wife gave us a private tour of one of the largest contemporary art museums in Thessaloniki. The work was primarily work that was donated by a Greek curator in order to further a sense of Greek national identity. The work was confusing but wonderful. I don't think anybody understood a 100% of it, but I think that's really the beauty of modern art.

After that was done, the day was still almost unbearably hot so we decided to take a 30 min boat tour of the harbor. It was bright blue and beautiful, a perfect way to close off the experience. We had dinner later together as a group, another one of the huge and long Greek dinners, and saying goodbye was both hard and not. I think everyone knew that we would see each other back in Princeton, but also knew that it would be quite different. I don't think I have words to properly summarize how much this experience has meant to me. The words aren't fully there. But I'll love and cherish these 10 days forever.