

"You gave a wide place for my steps under me, and my feet did not slip." (Psalm 18:36)

May 31, 18

I arrived to Thessaloniki. I am tired and probably look homeless with my oversized sweater and sleepless eyes. As I stumbled to find my way out of the airport I picked up a map on a stand by the exit doors. The buses are right outside the main exit, and following people casually with your eyes is key to survival because that is how I figured out that I have to buy a 2 euro ticket from a small kiosk by the station the machines on the bus do not give out change. You have to stamp your ticket! (hint: bus 78 is now X1, that is what you need to hop on to go into Thessaloniki). After hopping on the bus I realized that it is getting crowded pretty quickly so I stored my suitcase on the designated area and squeezed next to someone who seemed to be slightly annoyed because it was very hot...smile and move on.

What you should do when you get on the bus:

- Ask about your stop in advance (something I should have done)
- Do not depend on the screens at the front of the bus because they are shifted and eventually stop working
- Sign language is UNIVERSAL (if you do not have some Greek under your belt, like myself)
- Smile, be polite, ppl are very kind and friendly

What actually happened when I got on the bus:

I tried to follow the screen until 30 minutes later when I was nervous about missing my stop I asked a lady next to me about Aristotle's Square and even though she did not speak any English she was able to scold me because it was my stop so I understood that I had to get off quickly, and I did.

Finding the hotel:

- Used the map to ask a travel agency where I was (no English→ point and use your hands to signal)
- The gentleman pointed out that we were actually in Aristotle's so at least I made it to the right area, then he pulled me from my shoulder and took me to the street to point me toward I. Dragoumi street
- I made it to Dragoumi and there asked a small restaurant for the exact building
- I arrived to the hotel at around 5: 40 pm

I took a shower then went out hunting for food but after getting "traditional pasta" realized my stomach was upset so I asked to take the food to go because I knew I will get hungry later. (while having dinner there was about 10 police motorcycles that went around and people starting coming out of their stores to investigate what was going on with their curious eyes, but I just found it funny that each motorcycles had two policemen holding on to each

other....). I head back to the hotel after and I tried to sleep however got up in the middle of the night to eat my pasta and it was the cheesiest and nicest pasta I have had in a long while.

Jun 1

Good morning,

I woke at up at around 8 am to pack my overnight belongings and to head off to Hotel Olympia to meet up with the rest of the group. I arrived to the hotel and Sophie arrived right after, we waited for people then checked in our rooms while my excitement was building up to start the adventure. The plan is to spend the day sightseeing in Thessaloniki. We started with the Jewish market and the museum, I realized that I never imagined a Jewish Thessaloniki since that the Greek Orthodox population dominates in our current day. The museum has many details that caught my attention, brought flashbacks from the holocaust museum of Washington and a cultural taste of the narrow streets of Old Egypt in Cairo. In the lunch break I grabbed some freshly juiced oranges with Niki, Alice, and Sylvie....it was so delicious. We then head to the waterfront and I joined the group for a longer walk to the Umbrellas by the waterfront because I could not have enough of the water. Niki and I decided to sacrifice the dryness of our clothes to test the waves, we then napped under the sun to dry off. Twenty minutes later, Joe had to disrupt our peace by waking us up! After strolling back to hotel with Niki we all went for dinner at the Bazaar the food was delicious (also my favorite table wine, pretty sweet). I am so tired, so I opted out to crash right after.

Jun 2

Kaleemera,

A long morning shower...it was well needed. While grabbing bfast I had the chance to listen to Nicoletta discuss a bit of what she does, the way she talks about art reflects her passion which lightened up my day even though I am very far from being an artist or an art expert. Another day of walking around, but Fonda saved us from walking up the City Prison so we took taxis. After spending time going around the walls of the prison and overseeing the city we started walking down and going through churches.

The Greek icons are very interesting since that they embody more human-like depiction of the characters than that of the Coptic icons. Oh, I saw beardless Christ for the first time and it was...different (I have pics of it). The churches were like a history book, one that is more interesting to me than normal because every corner seemed to have so many signs of the different eras and people who occupied the city. The basilicas are huge, especially Saint Demetrius.

We later grabbed dinner in the market with really loud live music, the food was delicious but the wine did not top that of the night before. Some of us went for a later walk, I grabbed "Bueno" ice cream from the corner store in Aristotle's square...the hazelnut and chocolate combination was heavenly. We then went by the water, but the convo with Joe turned to take a theological turn so we decided it was time to go back to bed eventually.

Kaleenekhta.

Jun 3

Kaleemera,

I woke up early to pack, then I went down for breakfast. I was not sure if I wanted to go shopping for some souvenirs or to go to the museum...Nicoletta invited me for a walk in Thessaloniki so I joined her for one. We went through the streets and allies, visiting the flower market. We then got to the Tom's self-service Cafe to meet up with her friend. I decided to try the espresso even though I am not a coffee person it was a chance for a wholesome experience. We spent time talking and talking till it was time to get back to the hotel to check out. After checking out, we went out to have a group lunch and a conversation with Lisa about interviewing the nuns and having meaningful conversation while keeping them comfortable.

Bus time, we started heading out to the monastery and the beauty of the mountains was overwhelming. We passed by a herd of cows and another of horses that were roaming the mountains peacefully. After getting to the monastery I was hit with a mix of emotions that initially were just a fascination with the location and the view but I realized it was like a chain reaction of too many things coming up at the same time and so I felt that I was not able to understand how I receive the place emotionally! The nuns were so welcoming, however their names are very hard...we had a big meal of extremely delicious food where you can taste the love in every dish. I feel very exhausted so I was looking forward to having a good night rest.

Jun 4

Kaleemera,

It is the first morning in the monastery. I had a good night rest, I reached deep sleep in and feel relaxed. I woke early and decided to walk outside to sit up by the working areas for some detox time. We were called to breakfast and we had it indoors but it was so delicious, the jam was so fresh and I believe the darker brown one is some fig jam which I have not had in so long. I decided to join the farming group after helping clean-up for breakfast so we went down to the garden. Elias' warm welcoming to Laurie touched my heart, his kindness was all over the place. We went down to harvest and despite the heat and the radiating sun I loved the smell of fresh meant, it is just like the mint we have in our backyard! Malina, Joe and I started discussing tea options in different cultures and tea is an essential part of my life. We took a break with Elias and Basil and they prepped cool espresso for all of us. After enjoying our coffee and chit chats we realized that we probably ate and rested more than actually working but it was valuable time. The rest of the day was mainly to get used to the routine of having our lunch around 2 and coffee around 5, with the dinner being the capping stone of the deliciousness around 8. We had three presentations today and I was the last one to present! It looks like I would not have as much time to journal everyday but the interactions with the nuns seem to get more meaningful as they open up to us bit by bit. My rose for today, is the before bed talk with Macrina and Veriene...I think I am already getting attached to them!

Kaleenekhte :)

Jun 5

It is an early morning,

It is the Serres day, so after breakfast and lunch we took three taxis to the town that is only about 15-20 minutes away from the monastery. We also visited the monastery's mini-monastery visiting site in Serres to learn a bit about the relations between the nuns and the people of Serres. We visited multiple other churches and we had the chance to walk around for some quick shopping before dinner. We later had dinner at Serres and a musician was playing as he walked through the streets (go back to the short audio recording of the auditory chaos of Serres). The lady who advised us to stay "thin and beautiful", the turtle amongst the Hellenic stones in one of the churches all added up to a wholesome experience at Serres. We then head back to the monastery and Theologia was waiting for us to let us in through the kitchen :)

Kaleenekhte.

Jun 6

Kaleemera,

After having breakfast and helping in the kitchen for a bit, Nikos arrived! It was time for the grand monastery tour. I loved the chapel's sit down discussion of its history and art and despite the lengthy discussions the narration was very interesting. I noticed the chi-rhos all over the liturgical books (Jack alarm). Sophie's nose started bleeding toward's the end of the chapel's tour and I got nervous but it was her first one in the monastery, but she started feeling better after a bit (heat and exhaustion...probably). We also went up to the bells and the clock for Niko's to start its ticking. The view is beautiful even though the tower does not seem that high, but the stairs were tedious. After some rest we up the tower, and the sound of the waterfalls mixed with wind and the priceless pieces in the "library" are rejuvenating. I am hoping that may be if I visit another time I will find that there was progress on returning the stolen material to the monastery since that the two chapel's icons of Christ and Virgin Mary seemed to have been returned miraculously. The "room of the resting skulls", as I call it, on the other hand made me speechless, I guess I expected the remains to be in some sort of glass windows or containers...but they were not! All the skulls were just staring at us as if we were their guests. The smell was distinctive too, it almost smells as if the air has been evacuated from any odors...not fresh but not that of imagined death. The day was very informative since that we visited the major areas of the monastery...Nikos knows a lot.

I could not journal a lot today...it was a long day.

Kaleenekhte

Jun 7

Kaleemera,

It is beach day!! We woke up to hop on the bus to start our day outside of the monastery. We stopped for a quick breakfast, and after reaching our first destination we grabbed some coffee and we met our accompanying dog who followed us through the streets of Serres. Serres seems relatively small yet every street encapsulates so much history. The green church, and the abandoned mosque of Serres smoothly scream the history of Greece its Greek Orthodox populations and Ottoman occupations. In Kavala Muhammad' Ali's residence and hotel and dual Egyptian and Greek flags in Kavala made it a cultural and historical reminder that we are more similar than different. We grabbed ice cream in Kavala and I decided to try the Mastika for the first time because Veriene mentioned the other day that it was her favorite...and it was yummy. Before heading to the beach we had a seafood lunch at Nikos favorite local restaurant and the fish was so good, it reminded me of Alexandria's fresh Mediterranean fish. It started drizzling on our way to the beach but it was all worth it because after the heat the sea was waiting for us. I opted to wait till we get back to the monastery to shower, and dinner was waiting for us so after eating quickly I ran to enjoy a quick shower before heading to bed.

Biggest lesson learned: make sure you stay hydrated when you are outdoors and under the sun, Greece gets really hot.

Jun 8

Kaleemera,

It is the Senaksee day so we planned out our schedule so that after we help the nuns with some chores we head to the library and start working on the Children's book. After working for a few hours it was time for me to go talk with Macrina and Veriene. I was nervous about how the conversation will unfold but I just kept listening to Macrina till it was time for me to open up and I have not felt that strong of a connection in so long, she genuinely tries to understand. Then Veriene decided to join even though she was busy and initially apologizes that she would not be able to join. Veriene reads minds...despite the fact that we do not speak the same language and the words that may be lost in translations we were able to connect. Their words shall be remembered for a long time. I did not realize how long we talked for but apparently I missed dinner so that was a few hours, so then they gave me food and I went down for the last minute Senaksee prep. All the nuns gathered to just watch us, and the excitement in their faces just made my heart happy. The video the nuns prepped for the monastery got most of us emotional but it was another reminder of how strong these women are and how their passion and love towards their home helped them overcome a lot of struggles. They gifted us all with their generous gifts and the sages blessed us all before we head to bed.

Kaleenekhte, it has been a long day and an emotional roller coaster.

Jun 9

I woke up early to attend the liturgy and it was so relaxing, it is my first time attending one with the main chorus being solely nuns. After the liturgy we had breakfast and helped in the guest kitchen as many guests arrive on the weekends, then we head to Lisa's presentation. It was interesting to me as both Malina and Lisa were digging into death and its rituals which challenged me to think more around cultures, religion, and how they intertwine with personal beliefs and practices even when it comes to death rituals. I was very tired as I get a few hours of sleep the night before but the delicious lunch picked me up for Nikitas' presentation. I then head upstairs for a nap but me and Sophie were exhausted so we decided to stay back and did not join the group for their hike :(but I knew that I needed to rest up a bit before the flight. After the group came back we took taxis to Serres for a dinner with the lovely garden men. Last night of sleep at the monastery...

Jun 10

Kaleemera,

So we woke up and packed up really early, I kind of could not sleep too well because I knew it will not be the best thing to say goodbye. I stayed by the church with Laurie and Sophie for a while...I was mesmerized with Laurie's list of "pets" that she had and I think I like the name fire the most! Laurie then took me and Sophie to the waterfalls since that we could not join them yesterday and they are GORGEOUS. I took a very short nap on the big rock on the water fall's peak using Laurie's comforting purse as my pillow. We head back for breakfast and we ate our last delicious meal before we had to say goodbye. Some of us, of course that was not Sophie and me, got emotional while leaving but Veriene and Macrina's last words to me will be forever engraved in my memory. I promised them that I would do my best to see them again. I was told when I was younger that those who pray together will meet again in life, and we prayed liturgy together so I shall wait to be in their joyful company again.

Holy Ysasas,

To the love, memories, and kindness of Greece.