

Samos is Bleeding: Tourism, Migration and Survival

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SAMOS ISLAND, 22 August 2013 – Sadly, Samos has not experienced the tourist boom which has been widely reported in the mainstream media in Greece. Whilst we should be sceptical about some of the claims about a resurgent tourist industry as the rulers here are desperate to find any light in the darkness of austerity, there is no doubt that Samos has not benefited. There are a number of reasons for this including the sheer expense of getting to the island. For some reason, Samos is much more expensive to get to than many other islands. There is also the fact that every year we see charter companies reducing the number of flights. This year we have seen flights from the UK, Germany and Finland reduced. Friends who work in some of the tourist hot spots on the island report as much as a 20 per cent decline compared with last year, others say it is pretty much the same (i.e. depressed). All agree that the majority of tourists are not spending so much money whilst on holiday whether in the shops or the restaurants.

Nevertheless, the atmosphere on the island is generally more up beat in the summer, and especially August. Although, it is worth noting that the tourist season seems to get shorter year by year. Maybe it was due to the late Easter here (early May) but few tourist resorts were fully open until the middle of May. Now the island only seems to be busy for the few weeks either side of Maria's day on August 15th.



Idyllic Fantasy?

The Greek state actively promotes the idyllic qualities of the islands and their people. Their beauty, their beaches, the timelessness of island life all figure centrally in the tourist propaganda. It is a big lie now and hides more than it reveals. Yet visitors from abroad can be very easily duped into believing this fantasy. Many here know it is fantasy but to keep the tourists, to help them spend their money they are compelled to act in this bizarre theatre of being care free with a passion for life and laughter. Who in their right mind would want to expose their pain to visitors and then hope for a

prosperous tourist industry? Most who come here on holiday do so to relax and not to be faced with more angst.

Tourism is crucial to many people. It is needed. But a tourism that never confronts the new realities – an authoritarian government, a bewildering array of police and security agencies which have been deeply infiltrated by the fascists as well as 6 years of extreme economic decline and austerity, actually brings pain as much as it does benefits. The fact that you see so many people enjoying holidays when you are wretched because you face a mountain of debt and where a holiday with family and friends is an impossible dream causes pain. The fact that so few tourists seem interested in what the crisis has done to people makes you feel sad, alone and sometimes angry. We need tourists, but we also need a tourism of solidarity. It is not obvious what such a tourism would look like and its forging will need the active involvement of those who visit as well as those who live here. We welcome your thoughts and questions as this is surely one area where might have a chance to make things better.

Fantasy and Reality

Greeks account by far for the largest group of tourists coming to Samos and many of them are from the diaspora and have family ties with the island. They come 'home' for their holidays, to stay either in properties they personally own or with their families. It is this influx of visitors who transform villages such as Ambelos during the summer. Family parties are common as people come and go. With a rich music tradition, and warm summer weather, these parties fill the village with music and singing on many nights. It is beautiful in so many ways and these August nights transform the village and lift the gloom of austerity.

Despite differences between the diaspora generations who return there is a shared deep yearning for the village life they have left behind on Samos. For some undoubtedly, it reinforces a kind of romanticized notion of the simplicities of village life which they miss, whether in Australia or the USA. It can give a sense of stability in a fast changing world when it seems that village life continues as it always did. And this is just not wishful thinking as there is much here in Ambelos which has not changed with a pattern of life still largely determined by a farming calendar and pattern of work that has remained unchanged for generations.

But there is fantasy too. Ambelos no longer has a school. No longer has a bus service. For most of the year its population is predominantly older people. Income from farming is not only low but declining rapidly. Here is one example. A year ago, a close friend suggested to his now disabled father that they should sell some of their vineyards. They needed the money and more importantly did not have the capacity to cultivate so many vines. Both factors are due to there being little income from grapes. His father's reaction was outrage. No way was he going to sell any of his land. They were a farming family. This had been their life for generations and he wasn't going to

be the one to destroy this legacy. But a few weeks ago the prices were issued for this year's grape harvest. Down again. It seems that the island's wine co-op is in severe financial difficulty. For Giannis, our friend's father this was the final straw and with fury and anger told his son that he should start selling off the land. Of course, there are no buyers.

A New Exodus

There is now the additional sadness of living through a new wave of exodus, something which many did not expect to have to live through again like their grandparents' generation. This year it is especially evident that family re-unions not only bring back to the village those who left as children, 50 to 60 years ago, but much younger men (overwhelmingly) who recently left the village to seek work and wages and are returning for a summer break to be with their wives and children. The joys of re-union are constantly shadowed by their impending departure. These are families fractured by austerity.

Islands and other places on the Greek periphery (i.e. far from Athens) have always experienced outflows of people especially to Athens which offered so much more than a (hard) life of farming or the super exploitation of the tourist industry. It was a highly normalized migration and was nothing like the kind of rupture experienced by those who left for Australia or the USA during and following the Civil War. After all moving to the capital city meant that they were still in Greece and only a ferry ride away. Migration to Athens is now no longer a feasible option for here – 'everybody knows' that Athens is now hell on earth.

So what we are seeing in Ambelos, a small hill village on Samos, is people leaving for increasingly far off places given that austerity Europe offers little, neither the U.S. nor Australia. One young family who left the village four years ago to the nearby larger town once the village school closed are moving this September to the Congo. Rarely a week passes when we don't hear similar stories of people off to various parts of Africa. It seems too that the on going exodus is differentiated in that those with university qualifications tend to look for work in Europe including eastern Europe and the Balkans whereas unskilled and skilled manual workers are looking to Africa and beyond.

One smaller consequence of these latest developments is that many people now spend hours on Facebook and Skype keeping in touch with scattered friends and family.

It's deeply sad, as this is not how people want to live their lives and never anticipated this kind of existence. One of the recently fractured families in the village had returned from a five year stint in west Germany about 10 years ago. They had made enough to build an elegant stone family house and to set up a construction business. They believed that the sacrifice of moving to Germany had secured the future of their family back in their home village. The father is now back in Germany and will stay

there as long as necessary. This is no repeat five year stint to build resources but rather a matter of survival. Their eldest children are in university and both have said that they see no future here in Samos nor Greece and will leave as soon as they graduate. All of them don't want to do this but see no other choice.

It is one thing to migrate with the intention of returning to build a life in Greece and another to consider emigration without any plan to return. These feelings can change with circumstances but at the moment there is more of the latter and less of the former. There is very little hope at the moment. Austerity has done much to expose the historic corruption and criminalized behaviour of the ruling elites in business and in public services where little is done without a back hander and bribe; where so many jobs were secured by not what you could do but who you knew. For many we meet there is no question in their minds that until that system is swept away there can be no sustainable future for them in Greece. But the collapse in trust in the existing political class – across the left/right spectrum compounds a sense of hopelessness as they see no alternatives which give them confidence. Even Syriza, is affected with many here expecting that Syriza will join the system rather than fundamentally change it. Golden Dawn on the other hand continues to attract support, and even those who detest its fascism and racism applaud its attacks on the established political class as Mafiosi who need to be punished and held to account for their criminality.

Samos is bleeding. Greece is haemorrhaging. The figures however unreliable point to tens of thousands of Greeks leaving the country. Talent of all kinds, from builders and farmers to doctors and engineers are leaving if they can find the means to do so. In a country of around 11 million people, such a loss of able talent is already and will continue to be catastrophic when it comes to rebuilding this society.

In common with the refugees trapped in Athens, the Greeks who are now leaving are also refugees, fleeing poverty and arbitrary and unaccountable authority. For many the talk and then for some the decision to leave Samos, is no more than a reflection of the corrosive aspects of endless, grinding austerity. It is toxic and destructive. The anxiety of survival attacks your thoughts, your relationships, your children and much else. It makes you ill. From suicides to increasing mental health problems there is no shortage of data which highlights the on-going destruction of well-being. That these numbers are not higher is a testament to the resilience and resistance of the people and the diverse ways in which community and family solidarities are mobilized, especially in villages. Summer parties and village dances have taken on new significance as moments when we can find some momentary release from the mind numbing impacts of economic decline and poverty. Drinking, dancing, laughing together do much to lift the spirits and provide a sense of normality in an abnormal world.

Most Greek migrants have 'papers' and can travel abroad with few problems. That they are 'legally documented' means that they are not labelled as refugees either by the authorities and often not by themselves. But documented or not, most of the new

exodus are refugees. And as such they share many characteristics with other refugees. They are all looking for a place where they can live and realise themselves with dignity and to support families and households; many are full of sadness at being forced to leave their homes never sure if they will return and when they might see their loved ones again – apart from through Skype or Facebook. All those we know who are leaving, are not looking for riches and wealth. Their hope is to find a life with some peace in it, free from debt, insecurity and anxiety. In Greece, it could make such a difference if the people here realised their common cause with all refugees. With such an awareness it is hard to believe that the fascists and the government could continue to demonize, punish, torture and abuse the refugees trapped here with such impunity.

Why is it that we now live in a world with all its enormous resources and wealth but will not meet such basic human needs of growing numbers of people across the globe?

Concluding Thoughts

When you see in these summer days the villagers partying in the streets with their friends, don't be tricked into thinking that all is well and that people are untouched by this crisis. Celebrate their moments of joy and happiness. Marvel at the hospitality as you are invited to join them. Above all recognise their strengths as they face and endure a catastrophe. But note well that these are mere moments of joy and assertions of humanity in a world that threatens much and promises, as yet, so little.

Please think about what you can do if you are a visitor to Greece.

Please ask questions! Above all, WHY! ?