



Wheels of Freedom: Cycling the Cyclades

Cranes idle in the harbour of Naxos,
the largest of the Cyclades

Cycling allows the industrious and intrepid a view of Greece no motorised vehicle can offer – slow enough to smell the flowers, fast enough to cover considerable territory. Brady Kiesling takes a daring tour from Athens to the birthplace of Apollo

The ancient Greeks saw the Cycladic islands as dancing a stately circle-dance around little Delos, the holy birthplace of Delian Apollo and Artemis. The dance of those islands was religious but also political. Every year the Athenians sent their state ship full of well-born youths and maidens to charm two highly strategic divinities with their dance. For ordinary travellers, to bypass Delos was to invite a painful divine arrow in the posterior. Why take a chance now, especially when bicycle wheels will do the dancing for us?

The driest and most comfortable bicycle pilgrimage to Delos involves high-end bicycle touring company CycleGreece, the love-child of former New York City tenant rights lawyer Colleen McGuire. An avid cyclist who has bicycled on spiritual and/or political pilgrimages all over the world, Colleen decided in 2006 to share her joyous adventures with paying customers.

Colleen's whoops of enthusiasm at the crest of each hill are an eye-opener in two senses. To the casual observer, cycling in Greece might seem insane. The roads around Athens are narrow, bumpy, and crowded with drivers whose driving test was greased with an envelope full of 50-euro notes. Islands are, by definition, half-submerged mountains, many of them steep indeed. The Aegean sun is relentless, and the *meltemi* wind can break the strongest heart. And yet Colleen's insanity makes perfect sense...

The ten of us began our adventure on the pedes-

trian way near the Acropolis. We adjusted CycleGreece's featherweight Specialized™ road bikes to fit, then handed them up to Fotis, our driver, who anchored them in the elegantly designed roof rack of our van. He then drove us south along the coast to where the traffic thinned to begin our shake-down ride. We discovered we were not the only ones luxuriating in the glorious views and gently rolling coastal terrain in route to the Poseidon temple. Since the 2004 Olympics (and the 2009 economic crisis), cycling has begun to catch hold, and the well-paved road to Sounio is a favourite challenge for Athenian riders.

We saw the temple and fortress at Sounio, ate lunch in the fishing port at Lavrio, then climbed in the van for the fast ferry from Rafina to Tinos, our first Cycladic port of call. After a poolside history lesson over drinks at the Hotel Anthia, we strode off for a dinner of Tinos specialties at Marinis' beach taverna. We would need those calories the next morning.

Tinos earns its antique epithet "Hydroessa," the well-watered." The long climb from sea level to 1400 feet (425m) was hot even at 9 am. But we kept pedals turning, with Fotis behind us for moral support, and before the heat grew dire we reached little villages – Triandaros, Dyo Horia, Arnados – nestled in folds of the mountain, each with its spring of cool water protected by an icon of the Panagia and shaded by plane trees. We admired the flowers outside village houses, found the key to the little folklore museum of Steni, bicycled past the

A high-end road bike tour is the pleasantest and safest but not the freest way to travel the islands. From the Acropolis it is only 35 minutes by mountain bike to Piraeus port with a change of shirt, sunscreen, and a good book in the pannier bags. Bicycles board for free. You pedal off at the first harbour that beckons.

Delos

As a slow caique took us south past
Delos,
The sea transparent and inscrutable
To signify what god is out of sight,
A pair of dolphins suddenly finned out
Between us and the sunken ancient
harbor
Whence boats would ferry the dying
and the birthing
To Rheneia opposite for a Sister's care;
Their blue backs shedding sudden
silver, they
Stayed with us as we angled through the
strait:
We had our glimpse—it's all that we
may get
And blue enough to say: "Perfection is
here
Also; for a moment we were home,
And spoke the fearsome language
faultlessly."

Demeter's temple, Naxos

What dare we ask? A temple is a house,
Though twistier than a good woman
has.
What can we ask? A woman has her
reasons,
ϕ
Whose manners shift, whose mind
remains the same,
But unrevealed. For us her body is
The sign of knowledge, symbolizing
grief;
For us her body, splendid in its foison, 's
The sign of longing, symbolizing
chance.
We see the temple when we park our
bike,

ϕ
Check out the likely route and start to
hike.
The path down alternates its flowers and
thorns,
But is not so devious or risky as
A dawn's embrace, because a mystery
Is what we are graced with as the
greenest way
To enrich the mind's confusion and
confirm

ϕ
Labor's sacredness and its mean
constraints.
Grainlife and starlife, say those signs, are
one,

Say faith in things is foolish or insane:

⌘

She opens her white arms to sun and
rain.

An eagle grabs a rabbit, a hawk a mouse,
An owl a snake. Such mediation warns

⌘

That given images are female feints,
And there's no trust in mountain clefts
and horns.
Her sacred dance sways to a belly dance

In which her belly is a mound of grain.
No wonder I am hot; the sun's a spike;
I shed my shirt, you open up your
blouse.

⌘

The path's descending progress is not
plain,
Winding through burning sun and
shade's relief:
Of all her movements twisting is the
chief.

⌘

Among her terraced fields, away from
sea
Or Naxos town, her temple's stones still
form
A mental map of land's fertility

⌘

To guide the wayward eye through
starlit seasons
That measure life and death—ploughed
soil, cold, warm
New shoots, stacked grain and burning
yellow hay.

Nature's terrors that her dark grievings
tame
Heap barley, wheat, oats, vetch, and
sesame
As offerings displayed upon a tray.

Having climbed down, guided by her
glance,
Past tended churches of her minion
saints—
Byzantine rubble for a change of
name—

⌘

To this ruined hillock (her ruins hide
her fame),
We sit and rest, convinced by what we
like
Or fear, and then her hymn's words
start to swarm.

Jeffrey Carson



Eurokinissi

The lions of Delos

ruined Venetian castle atop Exombourgo hill. Then a brief descent to Volax, nestled in its private valley among huge volcanic boulders, there to watch a basket maker practice his disappearing craft before our traditional eggplant lunch in the plateia. The return to Tinos town was dramatic and effortless, with a panorama of Cycladic islands spread out before us.

The next morning, from Isteria in the northwest corner, we launched our bicycles down a majestic and empty road along the north face of Tinos. We soaked up an amazing landscape of terrace walls and abandoned hamlets, then climbed back across the ridge at its lowest point. Back on the south coast, at the ancient sanctuary of Poseidon and his bride the sea-goddess Amphitrite, we stood on ancient statue bases and poured a mental libation for the short voyage ahead of us.

It is difficult to reach Delos without an overnight stay in purgatory. The madhouse of Mykonos port was redeemed somewhat

by our ride to Elia beach for lunch and a swim, followed with a fine, hilly trek back to the port via the less-developed southwest corner. Meanwhile Colleen's gifted gastronomer had found us a wonderful restaurant (Diles, hidden in the grounds of the Andromeda hotel). It was sadly empty that night, confirmation that travellers visit Mykonos so they can brag to their friends about the high prices, pretentious food, and arrogant service to be found almost everywhere else.

The next morning was Delos. And I lied. We left our bicycles behind, it being impious as well as impractical to cycle the rocky trails of a holy island that is also an archaeological site. The Alexandrian poet-scholar Callimachus tells us we should have bitten the sacred olive trunk with our hands twisted behind our backs. We didn't do that either. But we soaked up temples and altars and inscriptions, and explored the wonderfully well-preserved remains of a wealthy, cosmo-

With low gears and patience a mountain bike can conquer any island. Reaching the ridge line, your heart soars at the majestic panorama. And then you plummet, oxygen-drunk and singing, down the long descent. Gleaming far below you is a deserted beach. But stop to sober up, lower your saddle and unlock the front suspension before you turn off onto the dirt track that leads there (deep ruts, slippery sand and loose rocks make this suicidal on a road bike). Once at the bottom, lean your bicycle against an oleander, pull off gloves and helmet (sweat-soaked but indispensable), then dive naked into a green-blue sea so magical you might become a dolphin and disappear forever. If your wheels have carried you too far from civilization you can sleep under the stars.

politan trading centre – mosaics, wall paintings, enormous deep cisterns, evocative amphorae. And had the museum not been closed till just as our return boat was leaving (archaeological politics, don't ask...), we would have spent an hour among the treasures the French archaeological school has been uncovering since 1873.

And thence to Paros, a mild island with quiet back roads and the perfect hotel for weary cyclists, the new Saint Andrea just outside Naoussa. One day we performed a ride-by pilgrimage to the villa of Tom Hanks on Antiparos, and lunched where that god had also lunched. Our dinner at Levantis in Parikia was memorable. To excuse it we would make the long climb to Paros's capital in piratical times, Lefkes. There we walked the restored *kalderimi* (signposted "Byzantine Road") to where our van was waiting.

Inspired by a visit to sculptor Aristides Varrias, who carves haunting faces from scavenged chunks of the fabled white Parian marble, we cycled to the ancient quarries, long ago exhausted. An unexpected highlight of Paros was the new environmental park beyond Kolymbithres, where a refurbished footpath leads to stunning vistas from the Cape Korakas lighthouse.

Our next stop was Naxos, largest island

Remember that Aegean sun and wind are merciless between June and August. Half way up the ridge, with not even a telephone pole for shade, the strongest legs may turn to rubber. No amount of water you carry is proof against sunstroke. Oral rehydration salts or Gatorade mixed with the water will buy you greater endurance, but knowing when to turn around is crucial. Try again early in the morning, with the birds singing and the terraces crisp in the sunrise.

of the Cyclades, with mountain roads worth a full week's exploration. Our time was short, alas, but we explored the artists' village of Halki and visited the reconstructed shrine of Demeter on her dramatic hillside south of Sangri. Eirini in Naxos port fed us well indeed. From there our group split, half to the bicycle-unfriendly crater of Santorini, half to Piraeus and home.

The gods were evidently pleased with our pilgrimage. Only three of our group were serious cyclists when the trip began. The average age (even with one college student) was above 50. All of us emerged not only completely unbruised but also thinner (despite the gourmet meals), bronzed (albeit with tell-



The author in spandex

tale tan lines), and uplifted. Seen through the car windshield, one thoroughly guidebooked ancient temple resembles every other. But to the cyclist, each goat on each terrace wall is a discovery. The hillside you conquer with legs and lungs and heart is a monument burned forever into your skin and spirit. 

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