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-

ian 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 drive. 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 Marios’ beach taverna. We would need those calories the next morning.

Tinos earns its antique epithet “Hydrea,” 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...
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 Isternia 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.

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 plummets, 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 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-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.