Rhodes:

Greece Made Easy

(Originally published in the Fargo-Moorhead *Forum*, June 1988.)

By Ross Collins

Tiny windows at the top of the cafe let in colored shafts of smoky sunlight that slant toward a dozen worn tables. Greek patrons hunch over cups of coffee or Ouzo liqueur, rattling away a mid-afternoon siesta with dice and a backgammon board.

The game is popular on the Greek island of Rhodes, as it is along much of the Mediterranean, and here the Greeks play it assiduously. Try the game yourself. Borrow from the stack of boards on the counter, order a drink, and join in one of the Greek traditions you'll find on a trip to this small island in the Aegean: a great nation to the ancients, a popular island stop today for American and European visitors.

Rhodes, one of the 13 "Dodecanese" islands east of the mainland and about 12 miles form Turkey, is Greece made easy. Easy to get to, offering a modern airport and commercial harbor. Easy to get around, by taxi (cheap), bus (dirt cheap), or rented motor scooter (ubiquitous, but watch out! They still think helmets are for sissies).

Easy to understand, because Rhodes is enough of a tourist stop that almost everyone will understand a little English. Street signs are in English as well as Greek, and menus are nearly always in both languages.

Like Hawaii, Rhodes is a beach--or many beaches, soft sand up and down the coast, and 300 days of sunshine a year. Like northern Europe, Rhodes is an ancient monument--its acropolis and ruins echo its past, once one of the great military powers and cultural centers on earth.

In fact, Rhodes has opened its 138 miles of strategic coasts to some of the most important peoples of history, beginning at least 3,500 years ago. It was allied with ancient Athens, then Alexander the Great, then Rome. Visitors to its ancient school of rhetoric included Cicero, Julius Ceasar, and Marc Anthony.

Christianity came to the island in the first century A.D., and Lindos, 35 miles south of Rhodes city, is said to have been a stop for St. Paul on his way to Syria.

Twleve centuries later, the last of the medieval crusaders, the Knights of St. John, established a wall around this eastern outpost of Christianity, defying Turkish Muslims for two centuries. Finally, in 1522, Suleiman the Magnificent breached the wall with 150,000 men, and sent the Knights packing to Malta, where they remain today.

The Turks ruled nearly four centuries, but sleepily, building and destroying little. You can still walk through old inns and lodges of the Knights.

Italy occupied Rhodes in 1911. It energetically restored broken fortifications for Mussolini, who

planned to make Rhodes his fair-weather retreat. The weather stayed fair for the island, if not for the ruler. Rhodes, which had always had Greek traditions, became part of Greece in 1947.

Many travelers delight in the ancient and medieval stories, love to poke through the old city with its stout Turkish influence, to spend hours visiting the museums and monuments. But not everyone likes antiquity.

For them, the new city built around Mandraki Harbor outside the walled city offers modern streets, exclusive shops, a casino and first-rate hotels. The city beach is typically crowded, but if you'd like one that are less popular, a bus trip down the coast offers sun and sand, quietly.

Tan time reigns form April through October. The months on each edge offer the best time to beat the high tourist season, but the breeze is still a bit cool, and swimming is, well, compare it to Big Cormorant Lake (Minn.) around the end of May.

Rhodes residents tolerate topless bathing, but not nudism, though it's likely some of the bold will sneak to a secluded beach. Tourists will find a friendly, easy-going people here, but Rhodes is not easy-going to the point of legal brothels, skinheads with pierced noses, noxious graffiti and street beggars. It's refreshing.

Also refreshing for shoppers is Rhodes' reputation for cheap merchandise. Rhodes is a duty-free zone, unlike the rest of Greece, and the merchants sell luxury goods you'd expect to find in snotty shops in Paris. At the Turkish-style market, on the other hand, you can find great buys in brass, silver jewelry, inlaid and carved woods, rugs, natural sponges, icons, pottery and other Greek craft items.

Food and shelter go from the humble to the hotel standard. For the cheap at heart, wander about the old city to find pensions or small hotels. Many are part of somebody's house, where you may pass the family brood of bantams, a little garden, perhaps and orange or olive tree on your way in. You may wake to the family rooster, at around 4:30 a.m. (not so charming after the first day). Cost is $8 to $16-ish, double.

In the new city you'll have the big hotels, some on the coast, some (but not all) at prices you'd expect in the United States. No rooster, but your own bathroom.

Traditional Greek food is simple and delightful. Don't dress up for dinner. In fact, you don't dress up for much of anything in Rhodes. Just look for a "taverna," and enjoy a Greek salad and pork, beef or fish dishes--squid and octopus are specialties. Greek resiny white wine, called retsina, tastes a bit like turpentine, but interesting, no less. Cost is $5 to $10 for a full taverna meal or more in the elegant restaurants or hotels in the new city.

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