Greece

Caving Among The Cretans

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Imagine yourself in the early days of Western Civilization. After an arduous journey you’ve arrived at the goal of your pilgrimage. A large opening in the mountain marks the entrance to a temple of the Underworld, the sacred birthplace of Zeus. With a lighted torch you enter the main chamber, decorated with strange and wondrous formations. You make an offering in honor of your god and pray for good fortune.

Two thousand years later, a similar ceremony is performed in the underground temple, this time in tribute to the Christian God.

Imagine yourself another dozen or so centuries later, fearfully huddled with fellow villagers while hiding from the invading Turks. If they find your cave, they’ll kill the men and sell the women and children into slavery—or they’ll set fire in the cave entrance, asphyxiating everyone inside.

A hundred years later, and this time you’re fighting German invaders. The cave serves as a refuge for you and your fellow resistance fighters.

The caves where these dramas took place are located on Crete, the largest of the Greek islands. The mountainous island is composed almost entirely of limestone, and over 3200 caves have been discovered to date. Some of these caves have been known for thousands of years, and they have served as temples, churches, hermitages, hideouts, and fortifications. Recent archaeological investigations have uncovered fine pottery, statues, and other artifacts, some more than 5000 years old. (For the sport caver, there are also a number of fine vertical caves, including one 1100-foot shaft.)

My Cretan caving experience came one afternoon during a whirlwind road trip on the island. I convinced my two partners, Valerie and Matt, that a cave trip would be an excellent way of beating the afternoon heat. We agreed to explore Melidhoni Cave, near the town of the same name. The cave had a history similar to the one described above, but it was most famous as the site where 400 Cretan villagers were trapped and killed by invading Turks in 1828. Since then the cave had become a memorial to the victims and a monument to Greek independence.

Melidhoni was a sleepy village nestled among olive groves and goat pastures, and surrounded by barren limestone peaks. We didn’t know the exact location of the cave, but we hoped to get directions or perhaps find a guide in the village. We parked our car on the outskirts of the village and walked into the center of town. We sat ourselves at one of the three taverns which, along with a tobacco stand and a small fountain, made up the town square. We were seated among fifty or so men of all ages, certainly the majority of the male population of Melidhoni. A few of the older men wore their traditional Cretan costumes, with black leather boots and a tasseled bandana. They idled away the afternoon, drinking, playing backgammon, gossiping, and staring at Valerie. Gossiping seemed to be the favorite pastime, and though we couldn’t understand the language, we could see the pattern of heated conversation starting first at one table, then spreading in a wave around the square, and then dying down, to be replaced by another wave of discourse moments later.

The heat made us thirsty, and when the waitress came we ordered three Fantas, a refreshing lemon soda. "Three?" she asked quizzically.

Yes—there were three of us at the table. Minutes later she came out with three large pieces of goat cheese smothered in olive oil. Apparently she thought we had ordered "fetas"

After eating our cheese (and washing it down with three "Cokes"), we headed to the cave, just a short drive from town. Two entrances appeared inside a large sinkhole. The first entrance opened into a room just big enough for three of us to stand in. Bright red and black flowstone covered the walls, and two Mediterranean bats hung from the ceiling. The bats were a lot bigger than those we’d seen in Pennsylvania and West Virginia, and they were much more animated in the warmer climate.

From the second entrance, a stairway led down into a large round chamber, about 80 feet high and several hundred feet in diameter. The floor, walls, and ceiling were full of formations, including three huge flowstone columns.
selective cave restoration project is badly needed, leaving only those which are truly historic: pre-1800, kings and queens, and poets, perhaps.

I had been told that all of the beauty of the cave had been destroyed by German soldiers during World War II. This is not true. In addition to some obvious old breakage, many large stalactites do show recent breakage consistent with hand grenade damage (the guide told me several were thrown in, just in case Greek partisans were hiding thee.), but the primary marble of the cave is by smoke and graffiti. It still is beautiful despite all that man has done.

The geology of the site is intricate, with much metamorphism and some reverse metamorphism evident. The bedding is vertical to steeply dipping. From the back of the entrance room, the cave plunges down dip, widening along the strike. Speleogenesis by rising acidic thermal waters is a possibility.

The daily return flight from Paros to Athens is before the first ferry leaves Andiparos. Thus, for our last night, the choice was to overnight on Paros or to order a special water taxi at dawn, at considerable expense. We chose the former, and prowled the narrow streets and narrower lanes of old Parikia on Paros before turning in. The next day in Athens we picked up Mine. Petochilou at her apartment, dumped our bags at the hotel, then looked for another taxi for Koutouki Cave. Almost at once, Anna spotted one driven by an old caving companion and we were off very happily through the chaos of Athens traffic.

Forty-five minutes later, we were at the cave, halfway up the mountain, somewhat less happily, with the radiator boiling.

Something -- maybe in the water pump -- let go on the way back, and he had to abandon us at a bus stop. But we greatly enjoyed the cave, rather like Luray, but with the sharpness of Luray's lines blurred a bit and no graffiti. Anna did the tour in grand style, in Greek and French, with obvious pride in showing us the 38 meter vertical flowstone pitch below the tight natural entrance. After a vigorous introduction to Athens' busses, she showed me the impressive little club room off the Hellenic Speleological Society, at 11 Mantzarou Street, behind the university. Everyone planning to go to Greece would do well to telephone there between 7:00 p.m. and 9:00 p.m., on a Wednesday evening, taking into account time zones and the different dates for daylight saving time in Europe. The number is (01) 36-17-824, and an English-speaker can usually be found.

With just one more day in Greece, we elected to spend the morning undergoing further cultural shock at the National Archaeological Museum. After lunch, we probed the limestone environs of the Acropolis. It paid off. Though we never learned how to get permission to visit the Grotto of Pan, the Cell of Socrates turned out to be an enlarged natural grotto on the Hill of the Muse (Filopapou Hill) facing the Acropolis.

On the nearby marble knob called the Areopagus, where natural pupits served as orators as Demosthenes and St. Paul, and on the Pynx, just across the street, we found arched grottoes whose deep-smoked ceilings attested centuries of shelter for all the famous Athenians whose names we remember 25 centuries later, and obviously, everyone else, too. Though the sporting caves of Greece lie well to the north, where limestone thicknesses are measured in hundreds of meters, our short week's trip surely revealed that to today's caver, the caves of Greece make the roots of our culture seem close indeed.