

## Driving in Greece

Let me preface this article by saying that, if you already have a trip booked with us or are considering booking a trip with us, don't let the following frighten you. On the contrary, the things I'm going to describe are exactly why you would want to take a private tour, rather than venture out on your own.

Greece is a beautiful country with many beautiful, friendly people. About 12 million of them. Half of them live in Athens, making it the word "congested" seem inadequate. There are hundreds of cars, buses, taxis, motorcycles and scooters, all jockeying for position on main roads and side streets alike. The lines in the road are mere suggestions of which lane to use. At each stoplight, all scooters and motorcycles lane-split between the stopped traffic, scurrying to the front of the line. When the light changes, the two-wheeled vehicles zoom ahead, while the rest of the traffic surges forward...until the next light, where the process repeats. You hardly see any of the cyclists wearing helmets on their heads. They may have them on their arm or strapped to the back of the bike, but not on their heads. When I asked a local taxi driver about this, she explained that, although a helmet law does exist that requires cyclists to have a helmet, the law is written in ancient Greek, instead of modern Greek. So, as long as the biker *has* a helmet, they're in compliance. Nor is it uncommon to see two girls on a small scooter with a child sandwiched between them, while the girl driving is on a cell phone! Awesome coordination!

Because Athens is a very old city, as are most of the cities, towns and villages of Greece, its roads were not designed for cars. When most of these roads were originally laid out, cars hadn't even been imagined yet. Donkeys and carts were the main mode of transport then, along with your feet. So, the roads can be very narrow, especially in the older parts of the towns and villages. This is one of the reasons, along with fuel economy, that most of the cars in Greece are much smaller than here in America. A road that doesn't even seem wide enough for one car can be a two-way road...with cars parked on the sides. This is a country where fold-in side mirrors can make all the difference!

Watching the Greeks drive is more like watching a series of seemingly choreographed near-misses as they move through the streets. Seeing two cars heading straight for each other on one of these narrow roads, only to smoothly swerve around one another at the last second, with only centimeters between them as they pass, is nothing less than surreal.

And that's why I don't drive in Athens. I know what some of you may be thinking..."namby-pamby...I live / work / drive in New York / Chicago / Boston / Los Angeles / or perhaps, unknowingly, San Francisco during the Gay Pride parade, and Athens can't be *that* bad". You're right. It's much worse. I've driven in all of the cities I listed. Even in San Francisco, unknowingly, during the Gay Pride parade. Athens is much, much worse. I think if you weren't actually an Athenian, or a little insane, or both, you couldn't drive in Athens without risk of a brain hemorrhage. When Helen and I are on the mainland, we leave the driving to a professional private taxi service, Greece Taxi. They aren't "taxis" in the old yellow converted Ford police cruiser-type, like we have here in the States, but really plush Mercedes sedans. The drivers are very professional, friendly and informative, telling you about the history of the sites you see along your route. It is quite nice to leave the driving to someone else, relax, and just take in the scenery.

Lesvos, or Mytilene, as it is sometimes called, isn't nearly as crowded and crazy as Athens, so we rent our own car while there. Stratis, from Lesvos Car Rental, is always there to greet us at the airport and help us with our luggage. He is always more than happy to escort us to our resort with any baggage that isn't able to fit into the rental car. As I said earlier, the streets and roads can be very narrow, so your only transportation options are small cars or motorcycles / scooters. You rarely see large vehicles or full-sized pick-up trucks on Lesvos, with the exception of commercial delivery or construction vehicles. The cars Stratis rents are all very clean and well maintained, so we've been very happy with his service.

Driving on Lesvos is still a bit of a challenge but not suicidal, like Athens. I'm actually kind of surprised that, with all of the perceived wacky driving I have seen in all of the times I have been in Greece, I have only witnessed one traffic accident...and it was in Mytilene! I was walking with a friend and heard a crash next to us. I looked over to my left just in time to see an enduro-type motorcycle with its rear wheel completely off of the ground and the rider hugging the gas tank with his crotch (ouch!!) as he slammed into the back of a taxi (one of the regular yellow kind). After the impact, and after the bike rider got his testicles back in place, both he and the cab driver looked over their vehicles, exchanged some words, decided nothing was really damaged (except the biker's nuts), and both drove off. If that happened here in California, they would have been in court for years. I love Greece.

Anyway, that kind of leads into another Greek custom...shrines. When someone is killed in a traffic accident, the family of the victim puts up a shrine at the location of the accident. You can usually see groups of two or more shrines at sharp turns, steep drop-offs, blind intersections and railroad crossings. I know, here in the states people do something similar by putting flowers or a cross at the accident site. It may be there for a few weeks or months. But in Greece, it's a permanent shrine, like a little mini-church, dedicated to the victim. (There are actually shrine stores, like Pottery Barns, along the sides of the road). The shrines will have a picture of their loved one, along with some candles and personal effects. In most cases, when you pass one of these shrines, the candles are lit, indicating that someone in the family is still remembering their lost one. So, we invented a game while we're driving along the twisty, steep, narrow mountain roads of Lesvos called "Count the Shrines". Whoever guesses the closest to the number of shrines we'll see along the route, wins. It is kind of morbid, but it does break up the monotony and keeps me focused on where the really nasty parts of the road are (shrines).



Parking (or trying to) can also be an interesting adventure. Usually, when we go into the city of Mytilene, we try and park in the main city parking lot that is free and centrally located, so we can leave the car and stroll around the city. It's a fairly large lot that is laid out just like any grocery store parking lot here in the states - rows of stalls that you park into nose first, between the other cars, with an aisle running between the rows. But, here in the States, we're missing a great opportunity. If we drive down the aisles through the lot and see all of the stalls are taken, we assume the parking lot is full...but it's not...at least not by Greek standards! There's all of that empty space *in* the aisles. That's right! Right down the middle of the aisle. The first time I saw this I was a little amazed. I wondered "is that legal?" "Will all of these people be getting tickets?" The answers...apparently and no. If you're parked in one of the stalls and want to get out, and someone has taken advantage of all that empty space behind you, have your friend or passer-by give you some guidance and prepare for a 20 point backing maneuver. If you're one of the free-thinkers parking in the aisle, make sure to fold in your mirrors. Just because you're parked in the middle of the aisle doesn't mean there isn't room for other cars to drive in the two new narrow aisles you just created on either side of your car as they look for an empty spot. Also, if your car already has some scratches and dents, it makes it easier to park in the aisle (or at least you won't care as much). The only way they can pull this off is because, like I said earlier, most of the cars are much smaller than in the States.

The last time Helen and I were there, we went with her cousin, Illias and his wife, Julia. They live in Piraeus on the mainland and wanted to take a vacation on the island. We drove into my favorite parking lot and it was packed. Even the aisles! We drove around for a bit, spotted an empty aisle spot and parked (folding in the mirrors). We noticed a Greek gentleman and his friend trying to get their Toyota truck out of a parking stall. We all watched for a while as his friend guided him..."a little more...more...more...STOP! Forward a bit...more...more...more...STOP! Back again...more...more..STOP!" (all in Greek, of course, punctuated by many flailing hand gestures.) It wasn't a big truck but it was just long enough that he couldn't make it out. I noticed that the car blocking him was quite small. I suggested, half jokingly, that since there were four of us guys, we simply pick up the car and move it. Surprisingly, (or, maybe not so much) the Greeks thought this was a great idea! We each grabbed on at the rear of the little car in the aisle and, on the count of "three," started lifting and moving the back of the car over. "Ena, thio, tria!" Lift, move. After a few of these, we had moved the car over enough for him to pull out and, bonus, we were able to park in his spot. A win-win deal. The Greek gentleman who had been blocked didn't leave though, until he wrote a note and put it on the windshield of the blocking car. The note said "Malakas!" (a Greek term that literally means masturbator but is a commonly used driving curse for "Jack-Off!") and he even left his phone number. "If he wants to know who moved his car, he can call me!" said the Greek truck driver, as he drove off with his friend. When we returned to our car later, it was fine (no dents, scratches, or threatening notes) and the offending vehicle was gone, with another in its place.

Driving around the island, you see beautiful and diverse scenery, along with some unique obstacles and challenges. You can be cruising nicely down an empty, picturesque, country lane and then suddenly have to stop and wait for a goat-herder to get his goats across the road. Or, it may be a little old man or woman riding their donkey down the narrow street, making it difficult, if not impossible, to pass. The

resulting back-up can become huge. Or, you, yourself can come up on a long line of traffic, creeping slowly along, with no idea of what is causing the back-up. Slow truck, goats, donkey rider...who knows. But, hey, you're on vacation on a Greek island. Are you late for some appointment? Need to get to the bank before it closes? I don't think so. That makes it easier to just go with the flow and enjoy the trip.



Sometimes when you're driving through a town, the locals will offer some advice or encouragement. We were driving with a couple from Holland down a really, really narrow street. It was more of an alley, with people's front doors just inches away from either side of the car. To make it worse, the turns were actually sharp, ninety-degree corners. As we inched our way along, two Greek children sitting on their front step started yelling something (in Greek, or course). I asked Helen what they were saying (my Greek isn't all that great, but I'm trying). She said that they were telling us "you can make it...go slowly, slowly". We did make it through, after folding in the mirrors again, without a hitch. The gentleman from Holland was actually pretty impressed.

Another thing that can make it fun to drive in Greece is Greek directions. The only way I can describe how Greeks on Lesbos give directions would be like, if you were driving through some very rural areas of the U.S. and needed to ask directions from the old guy in the rocking chair on his porch, with his hound dog sleeping next to him. "Well, ya' see, you just head on down that way (some vague hand gesture) for a ways until you get to where Old Widow Johnson's place used to be. Then, (another vague pointing motion) you go that way for a bit, until you see the big tree. From there, you can't miss it. But if you get to the old mill, you've gone too far." And, you know, as soon as you're out of sight, that old guy is laughing his butt off. If you end up anywhere near your actual destination with his directions, it will be a miracle. Or, maybe he really doesn't know the way but, he doesn't want you to know that. After all, he's the local and you're the tourists. So, he just makes something up, thinking that you can always ask someone else down the road. Greek directions are something like that...only in Greek...with much more hand-flailing. They genuinely want to help and, I think, they figure "hey, it's an island" so you really can't get lost. If you keep going in one direction, you're bound to end up where you started from. Literally...that wasn't some type of life philosophy. I guess it could be, though. I'll have to think on that a bit.

There are many more different and exciting things to see when driving around Greece. Come join us for a trip and we can see and explore Greece together!

Yia sas!