

Traveling back to Granddad's Greek home

By Bob Carden

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People were watching us. Staring, actually. My 17-year-old daughter was uncomfortable, as was her mother, my modest and distinctly non-Greek wife. On the other hand, our 16-year-old son, who shares his father's Zorba-like hamminess, was lapping up the attention.

We were walking down the narrow streets of Lidoriki, a small village in the mountains of central Greece. Foreigners are rare here, Americans rarer still.

Lidoriki is a lovely little Greek village, unencumbered by tourists, with just a few stores. Each road spills into a large town square flanked by four or five restaurants. At night, everyone in and around Lidoriki comes to this square to do what Greeks do: eat, drink, talk, eat, drink, argue.

Lidoriki is about 40 miles from Delphi — home of the Oracle. Some Athenians keep summer homes here to escape the city heat. The village's Mormos reservoir supplies Athens with its drinking water. So Lidoriki is pretty important to the capital city. It's also pretty important to me.

This was my grandfather's home. James Gardikys-Karandreas left Lidoriki 102 years ago to come to America. He was 13, alone and spoke little English. So he didn't protest when they changed his name at Ellis Island from the unwieldy Gardikys-Karandreas to the manageable and WASP-y sounding Carden.

I've always figured that an immigration officer had just processed a British family from, say, Cheshire, and the name Carden had stuck with him, so he stuck it on my grandfather. Thus, I am a Carden, as is my family. But not one week last summer. That week, the Gardikys-Karandreases were going home.

Home to Greece.

First, let's get the islands thing out of the way. Yeah, Santorini's beautiful, [Crete mystical](#), Patmos spiritual (St. John wrote the Book of Revelation there). Most [tourists](#) fly to Athens, cram onto a ship at the port of Piraeus and make the day-long trip to one or more of these

splendid sanctuaries. And that's where they stay. Big mistake.

The real Greece is the mainland. The [Acropolis](#), Delphi, Nafplio. Olympus, home of the gods. And Lidoriki, home of the Gardikys-Karandreases.

We arrived in Athens last June at the [height of the riots](#) over [Greece's financial situation](#), which learned observers viewed as a contemporary expression of Greece's role as the birthplace of democracy. Maybe. To me, it sounded a lot like my grandfather and his friends screaming politics at each other at the Globe Diner in Elizabeth, N.J., so we never felt threatened.

Our cabbie from the airport was a lot less concerned about Greek debt than the Western media are. "We survived 400 years under the Turks, so who cares if we owe some banks some money?" he shrugged. The bartender at the hotel: The Germans "occupied us 70 years ago; now we take their money. That's okay."

Next to the Acropolis, [the demonstrations](#) were the best part of Athens. Loud, animated, scruffy-looking kids flanked by sleek, well-coiffed cops. Vendors selling cheesy belts and bags to tourists. Live Grecian theater at its best.

If you only have a week or so in Greece, then you don't need more than a day or two in Athens. The Acropolis and Parthenon are true wonders of the world and must be experienced. The Plaka marketplace at the foot of the ruins is touristy but alive with great restaurants and better people watching.

To do the mainland, you need to rent a car. And in Athens that's easy enough. A mid-size was about 250 euros (\$330) per week. Agencies are on Syngrou Avenue, and it's a straight shot from there to the expressways leaving Athens.

As the crow flies, Athens to Delphi is 82 miles. But the crow gets to fly. We didn't. Greece is 80 percent mountains. And urban planners, mercifully, did not carve into those mountains to build roads. You drive up, down, around and over — not through — them. The mountain roads are long and scary. Not hurl-in-the-back-seat scary, but harrowing enough. Still, it's worth it. There's lots to see along the way.

A few miles south of Delphi sits the village of Distomo, site of the worst massacre on Greek soil during World War II. The Germans gunned down 218 men, women and children in retaliation for the killing of three German soldiers by Greek partisans.

(Point of ethnic pride: Winston Churchill, commenting on Greece's defeat of the much larger Italian army during the latter's attempted invasion in 1940, said, "Greeks don't fight like heroes; heroes fight like Greeks." Italy's defeat forced Germany to send troops to Greece and delayed the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, resulting in Germany's being bogged down by the Russian winter.)

Delphi, on the slope of Mount Parnassus, is one of the more popular archaeological sites in all of Greece. In Greek mythology, the god Apollo dispensed wisdom through his Oracle at Delphi. The site hosted athletic games that were the precursor to the Olympics. Many ruins, such as the Temple of Apollo, date from about the 4th century B.C. Unfortunately, many of the treasures of Delphi were destroyed by Christian leaders, out to purge “pagan” gods, around 400 A.D. Walking through the ruins takes about an hour. We got back into the car and left the land of Apollo for the land of Gardikys-Karandreas.

In Jack Kerouac’s “[On the Road](#),” the character Old Bull Lee says that he used to look up from his ouzo in Athens and see “the ugliest people in the world.” That’s not just cruel, it’s wrong. Kerouac never saw Hariklia Trollineau.

After identifying my grandfather’s village, I did an Internet search, and the English-language Web site of a place called [Cafe Louis](#) in Lidoriki popped up. I sent an e-mail and got a response the next day from “Hari.” Hari, who’s bilingual, was excited about people visiting from America and secured reservations for my family at the only hotel in town. I was grateful and made a point of taking the family to Cafe Louis to thank Hari for all his work. I pictured Hari as looking like my Uncle Nick: thick, jowly and with a bit more hair growing from his ears than his head.

Not quite. Hari is short for Hariklia, as in female. And she is sort of a cross between [Michelle Williams](#) and Melina Mercouri. I think my son used the term “blazin’.” She came from behind the bar and greeted us like family. My grandfather and my Uncle Nick always hugged and kissed me, even into my 20s. Hariklia did, too. Though separated by generations, Greeks remain Greek — warm and expressive.

After leaving Cafe Louis, we walked toward the town square, with all eyes upon us. Two men approached; one spoke English and introduced his friend, who was named Costas Gardikys. It turned out that we’re related. He’d even heard stories about my grandfather’s going to America. Later that night we met in the square. Costas brought his son and daughter. They spoke little English; we spoke no Greek. Still we talked, gestured, ate lamb, drank ouzo, ate spanakopita, drank ouzo, had coffee and drank ouzo. Though we could exchange few words, it was important to Costas, and me, that our families were together in that square that night.

The next morning, Costas insisted on taking us to Granitsa, a tiny village about 30 minutes from Lidoriki. He was pretty sure that my grandfather had actually grown up there. We followed his old Fiat around hairpin turns, dodging goats and sheep. In Granitsa, he took us on a tour. There were just a few homes, a small schoolhouse, one restaurant. We sat, had coffee, gestured.

One thing you notice about Greece is that people are always outside talking. You go to the beach one day and see a group at 10 a.m. outside a cafe having coffee, and they’re still there six hours later when you return. After an evening at the square in Lidoriki and then in Granitsa, I got it.

And could have sat at either place for hours. But my family, while indulgent, was getting bored. The beaches of Lefkada beckoned. We bade my distant cousin farewell. I bought him a carton of cigarettes. Like many Greeks, he's a heavy smoker.

Before we leave central Greece, one quick tip. I'm a runner. The hills in central Greece are inviting to the serious or casual jogger. The morning air is crisp, the hills majestic. Still, don't do it. There are many small farms and shepherds in the countryside. And all have nasty, snarling guard dogs that have a particular hostility toward cars and Americans who've changed their last names.

The drive from Lidoriki to Lefkada has some of the most stunning vistas in all of Greece. You descend from the mountains to the highway that runs east-west along the Gulf of Corinth. The emerald green water hugging those mountains is a sight not soon forgotten.

Lefkada is an island in the Ionian Sea. Nevertheless, many Greeks consider it part of the mainland because a bridge makes it the only major island accessible by car. Hence it's popular with the locals, who don't like dealing with ferries.

June is better than August. Perfect weather, manageable crowds and maybe the best beach in Greece, and that's saying a lot. If you're going to splurge for a hotel, Lefkada is the place. We stayed at the [Porto Galini Seaside Resort & Spa](#) on the island's east coast. The hotel has its own beach, with most water sports. Each spacious room has a clear view of the water and the mountains. The nearby beach towns of Nydri and Lefkada have large pedestrian-only streets. Many of the superb restaurants are on the water. As in Athens, the owners work for your business, stopping you on the street, offering deep discounts.

Despite all its charms, you really need just one reason to go to Lefkada: Porto Katsiki (Port of the Goat) beach. Surrounded by dramatic limestone cliffs, this sandy beach is one of the most beautiful places in Greece, if not the world. It's a challenge getting there. We were only a few miles away, but the drive took 45 minutes around winding mountains and through small villages. Once there, you have to walk down about 90 stone steps to get to the beach and into the delicious turquoise water of the Ionian Sea.

It was tough to leave Lefkada. But my wife was getting itchy for a bit more polish to go with our play. And if you want polish, Nafplio, the first capital of modern Greece, is the place.

We crossed the Corinth and drove nearly the length of the Peloponnesus peninsula to get to Nafplio. Fearing a carpet-bombing of culture and museums — and still having Lefkada sand in our shoes — the kids and I coaxed Non-Greek Wife into staying in a small beach town, Tolo, just outside Nafplio. I don't think I'd do that again. Tolo is the Dewey Beach of the Peloponnesus, while Nafplio is one of the prettiest towns in Greece.

Weekending Athenians are crazy about the latter, for good reason. It's just two hours away and filled with boutiques, upscale cafes and beautiful people. And it stays up late.

Venetian houses line narrow cobblestone streets. At dinner, the waiter motioned us inside the restaurant, where he opened ice-packed drawers filled with fish caught that day. As in so many towns in Greece, the streets converge at a huge town square. Kids perform skateboard tricks while you pick at plates of feta and olives and sip the sweet, strong Greek coffee. It's enough to make you not miss the beach.

The next day, it was back to Athens for the flight home. We'd squeezed a lot into our eight days. It was fun, emotional and hectic. Could use a day or two to unwind. Maybe at the islands — if they just weren't so full of tourists.

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 **18 Comments**