Elly’s late July 2015 trip to Italy and Greece

I had a conference in Naples and added two days in Athens beforehand. The conference is one I have attended most of the time since I first went in 1992, the International Conference on Historical Linguistics.

Athens and Delphi
As I started typing these notes, I was sitting on the rooftop of my hotel with a view on the Acropolis; my room had a similar view: gorgeous, although hazy and humid. I arrived here in the late morning and went to the Acropolis and Parthenon first, then the agoras and the Temple of Hephaestus, graffiti hunting along Ermou and Mitropolis, the National Archeological Museum and Piraeus. The second day I visited to Delphi, with Apollo’s Temple that had the Oracle. The Paleo and Neolithic remains fascinate me the most.

The Parthenon

Neolithic pottery, Thessaly, 8000-5000 BP

Neolithic vase, possibly a hedgehog

The harpist from Keros, 4500 BP

Cycladic, human-sized figure, 4500 BP
There is so much to tell about the Acropolis, Athena, the goddess of wisdom, Apollo and Dionysus, both sons of the god Zeus, in Greek ancient religion. The site of Delphi was dedicated to Apollo and the Sphinx was dedicated by the inhabitants of the island of Naxos around 560 BCE. This sphinx is now in the museum but originally stood on a pillar guarding the temple site. Apollo spoke here through the Pythia, a priestess.

As many other countries whose history is known, there have been so many forces influencing its fate. In the case of Greece, it occupies a part of the Balkan peninsula and 6000 islands. Presence of human ancestors dates back almost 300,000 YBP. There are Paleolithic remnants, 40,000 YBP, in the Franchthi Cave, which I would love to visit.

Recent history has been turbulent. Modern Greek independence (from the Ottoman Empire) came in the 1820s in the form of a Republic which was later changed into a Monarchy. The country was involved in the Crimean War, the First WW, the War against the Turks, the Second WW, and the Civil War. Some atrocities, e.g. the devastation of entire villages during WW II, are still remembered. In the 1960s and 1970s, there was a brutal military regime and several economic crises, the most recently in the spring and summer of this year.

That unrest occurred just before my visit when Greece was faced with major economic problems: debt issues that I have heard a lot about and still don’t quite understand. It meant demonstrations and a referendum etc: the people voted oxi ‘no’ but the government went ahead anyway with a deal with the EU and IMF. Restaurants and museums still don’t want to accept credit cards but all else seems normal: no demonstration on the Syntagma Square, by the Parliament, but some bank signs smashed. The street art, graffiti, and tagging are omnipresent and many comment on the vote and the economic situation.

In 1920s only 4000 people in Athens but then forced settlement between Turks and Greeks and 1.5 million were relocated; now there are 4 million thanks to more internal migration in the 1960s and migrants from the Balkans and Africa. I was amazed there were only 11 million Greeks and had thought it to be much more.
Naples, Herculaneum, Pompeii, and Sorrento

I had been to Naples before: its energy is wonderful! There is a lot less street art than in Athens; it is mainly restricted to railway areas, as in the below. Our conference was on the Via Partenope, overlooking the Gulf of Napels and the Egg Castle, see below. So, breaks were wonderful: strolling along the Bay.

My touristic endeavors in Naples were restricted to one day at Herculaneum and Pompeii and the seaside town of Sorrento. Herculaneum and Pompeii were destroyed in 79 CE by the eruption of the Vesuvius. Herculaneum was a more prosperous, but smaller, town than Pompeii so both have their charms.

Herculaneum has amazing houses and one can see the ash layer it was buried under, some 50 feet. In the below picture on the left, the green grass shows where the beach was. The other pictures show what is left of the houses. Some of the people that perished were found with the keys of their houses, possibly one reason not to leave the site, even though they knew of the danger. The town had water pipes (lead), free public bath houses, and beautiful mosaics and gardens.

Pompeii is huge and, at the time of its destruction, had between 11,000 and 15,000 inhabitants. It too had water pipes, ingenious bath houses, beautiful houses, temples, loads of stores, and many other amenities. The day ended with a visit to Sorrento and a beer with friends in Napels.
Herculaneum’s ashes

Herculaneum villas

Herculaneum villas

Crossing the street in Pompeii

Majestic Pompeii

Sorrento’s Cathedral

A very enjoyable trip!