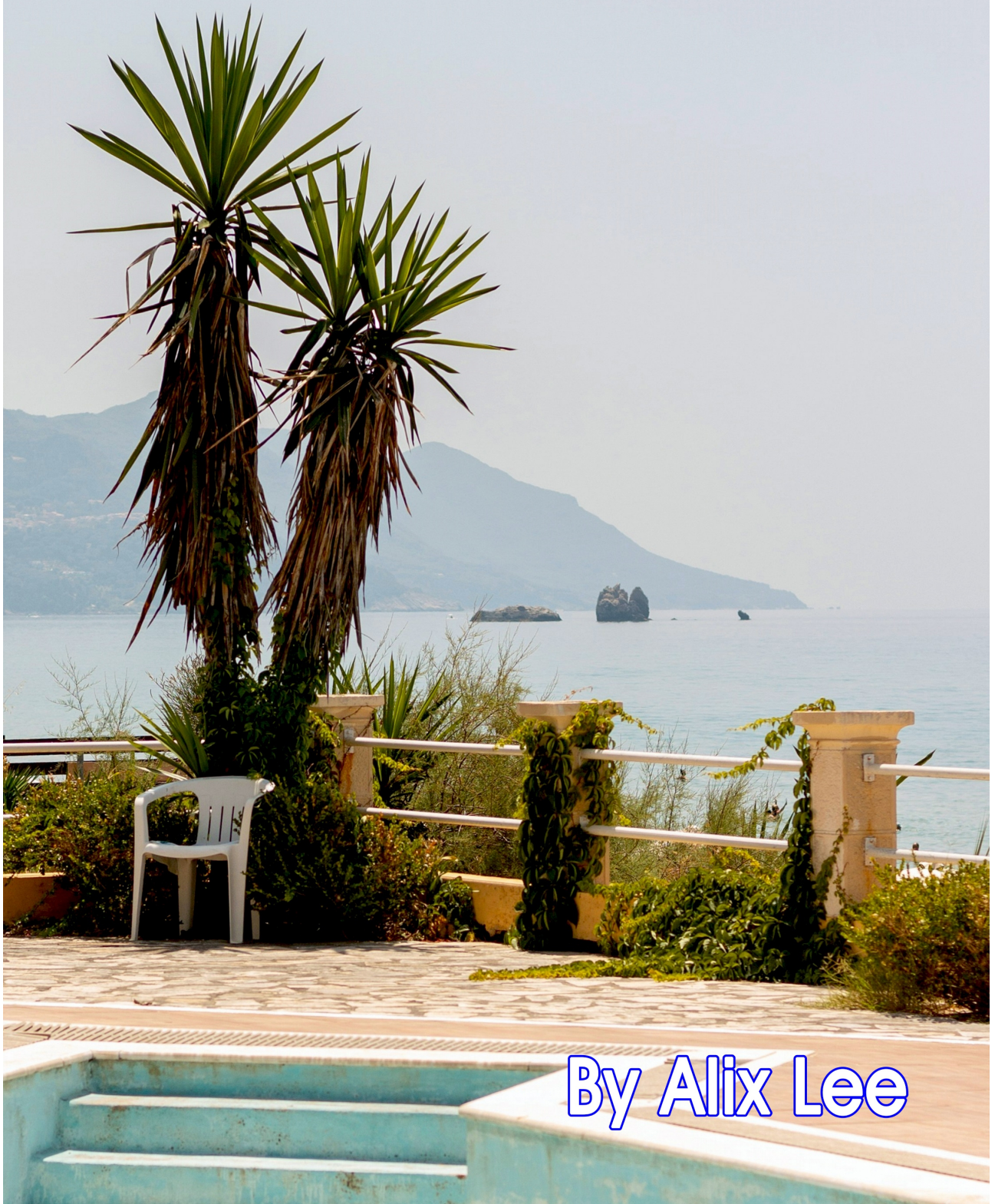


True Tales of a Traveller

Working Holiday



By Alix Lee

Working Holiday

A True Tale of a Traveller, set in the Athens, Greece, in the Early 1980s

1st Edition

by
Alix Lee

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"A journey is best measured in friends, rather than miles."

Preface

The True Tales of a Traveller series of short stories consists of several dozen real-life traveller's tales covering over three decades. Although presented in a short story format (in five volumes) for reading convenience, these stories are not fiction. Apart from some of the characters' names which have been changed to protect their identities, everything in these stories is true.

These stories do not all fit neatly into the 'travel story' genre, although some will indeed meet most readers' expectations in this regard. Others are simply adventures - or misadventures - that happen to have taken place in various different countries.

I began developing an interest in travel in my late teens. For most young people, long-term travel isn't possible without working to pay one's way, and so 'working holidays' are an option taken by many (even more nowadays than in the 1980s) who hope to get a better understanding of a place and its people than a short holiday could provide them with. And this was how I began travelling, and how I came to the Point of No Return (the point at which it was no longer possible to return to the life I had once led).

The second of this series of stories, Working Holiday, is set in Athens, Greece, in 1982.

Tale Two: Working Holiday

The concept of the working holiday has changed over the years. Nowadays, it seems to be something popular mainly with people on a 'gap year' before university.

But not many of the foreign volunteers I knew at Israel's Kibbutz Bar'am and Kibbutz Magen in 1982 considered themselves to be on a 'working holiday'; most considered themselves to be 'travelling'. And Rupert - an upper-middle class west Londoner with a schoolboy haircut, with whom I had travelled down the Sinai Peninsula, as described in my first story - was the only kibbutz volunteer I knew who was actually on what is now commonly called a gap year. He had been admitted to Nottingham University and wanted to remain abroad until September when his first term in electrical engineering would start. I liked his company, particularly his somewhat sarcastic sense of humour, so I was glad to travel with him.

As for myself, I didn't even attempt to describe what I was doing; I just knew that I enjoyed my life travelling around Israel and working in kibbutzim much more than my previous existence in Leeds, so I wasn't keen to return to the UK. Which isn't to say that I had disliked my life in the Leeds University campus overspill area of Headingley; I liked it a lot, apart from the absence of female company and the lack of career prospects. But at that time, I didn't know about the travelling life and had never considered a working holiday. During an '18-30s' holiday to Asilah, south of the Moroccan capital of Tangiers - on my first independent overseas travel - I took a day trip to Gibraltar organised by the travel company and met a fellow Brit of my own age on the ferry who told me all about something called a 'kibbutz' that he had been on in Israel. They were, he explained, Jewish settlers' communities, but foreigners - including Gentiles - could do voluntary work on them, as a kind of working holiday. I was intrigued and decided to look into the possibility after my return to Leeds. That chance meeting changed my life.

A year after that meeting, I was at my second kibbutz, Kibbutz Magen, in the Negev desert. I would have been glad to stay living and working on kibbutzim until such a time arrived - if it ever did - that I actually got tired of that lifestyle, despite its almost complete lack of career or financial prospects and private property, not to mention privacy and time alone, and many other aspects of modern life I had previously thought were things all people wanted to enjoy.

But then something else happened. I fell head over heels in love. And, as is so often the case, that changed everything, once again.

Diane, a short, dark-haired south London girl of 19 years of age when I met her, intended to return to the UK as soon as her two-month kibbutz stint was over; she loved her life back in England. With a buoyant and bubbly personality, a near-constant smile and an accent that made me weak at the knees (and thus gave me the excuse to rest on her bed) Di didn't have to try to win me over. More surprising, however, was that I didn't have to try to win her over either. So we began to make plans to 'stay out' of the UK together for the rest of the year. After that, we would return to the UK together, where she would pick up again on her previous existence as ground staff for British Airways, or find work in a travel agency if the airline job was no longer available. As for myself, I would no doubt find some low-paid, unrewarding work of the kind to which I had become accustomed, but this time in south London.

Though my lack of a rewarding career path was one of the reasons I was only too glad to begin my new life as a traveller, whenever I was with Di, the idea of putting up with all the hardship of low-paid work in the UK once again seemed like a minor detail. Everything about my life - and hers - fell into a different alignment once we knew each other, and that determined our future plans.

By this time, I had already been in Israel over six months, and Di didn't really want to spend a whole year in that country, although I wouldn't have minded. So we worked out a plan whereby I would leave Magen in late April for Athens, Greece. I would find work, and by the time Diane arrived in Athens I would also have a place to live. We would spend the summer there and return to the UK towards the end of the year. This part went to plan remarkably well.

We chose Athens partly because it was on the overland route back to the UK and partly because I had had an elder cousin who had lived and worked there, so I figured it couldn't be too difficult for Brits to pick up work there.

I felt that this 'open-ended' approach to my relationship with Diane was best for both of us. If she changed her mind about me - as I half-expected her to - or if she forgot about me, or became involved with someone else, I would come to terms with that and carry on working and travelling abroad by myself, taking things as they came, as I had for the past six or seven months. Perhaps returning to the UK, but more likely not.

On the afternoon of April 20th, I left Magen to take a very early morning flight on from Tel Aviv to Athens on the 21st. Diane wanted to come with me to the airport, and she did, sleeping with me on a luggage rack. Only then did I realise that I had come to take centre-stage in her life. So I vowed to give getting work in Athens my best shot.

Traveller's Luck

There is a certain kind of 'luck' which comes - or at least can come - to those searching for it. Usually, wanting it on some level but not trying to force it is the best way to bring it about. I knew about that kind of luck. Although it was never expected, I had already experienced it on a number of occasions. These could be called 'serendipitous encounters'. The ex-kibbutz volunteer I met on the Gibraltar ferry was a perfect example of this.

After I had left Kibbutz Bar'am, I had lingered in Jerusalem and Tel Aviv for over two weeks, delaying my new work period on Kibbutz Magen, because I couldn't imagine any other kibbutz matching my first kibbutz, Bar'am, and by the time I actually decided to travel to Magen, I was almost in a state of dread about the place. But, finally, I plucked up courage and by the time I walked into the volunteers quarters at Magen, the first person I met was Linda, an ex-Kibbutz Bar'am volunteer I already knew well, who had left Bar'am before me and was now on her last couple of days at Magen. She was the perfect person to introduce me to the place and put me at ease. That was another example of what I called at the time, for want of a better term, 'traveller's luck.'

At the time of my arrival in Athens, I still regarded all of these incidents of traveller's luck as 'happy accidents'; just coincidences not deserving any further thought, even though the odds seemed stacked too high against such meetings just being coincidence. Arriving in central Athens by a shared taxi from the airport, I checked in at the Festos Hostel, a popular hostel at the time, located smack in the middle of the city centre, close to Syntagma Square. Syntagma is one of two main squares in central Athens, the other being Omonia. Syntagma ('Constitution'), is the most central.

I didn't know it, but another serendipitous experience was awaiting me after I checked into the cheapest dorm that the Festos hostel had available.

I decided to get the 'lay of the land.' I didn't even consider looking for work the very same day I arrived, although I did check out the hostel bulletin board. Walking out from the hostel, onto the street, I almost bumped into a man in his late 30s or early 40s, apologised and continued on my way.

However, his walking pace was the same as mine and after a few paces, still at my side, he asked, in a slightly foreign accent where I was heading in such a hurry?

"Oh, I don't know." I replied. "I've just arrived here and I'm looking for work."

"Ah, you're British, aren't you?" he asked. I nodded, now aware of the French accent. "What kind of work are you looking for?"

"Oh, anything really. Just manual work."

"How about decorating? Can you do that?"

"Yes, I've done that kind of work before, I can definitely do that," I answered.

He told me he had a friend he had just visited less than half an hour ago who was decorating an apartment and looking for help. It all sounded too good to be true. But why would the man want to trick me, I asked myself? Judging by his smart casual clothing, he was obviously a lot better off than me. I had no money for him to swindle me out of, and anybody looking at my scruffy attire - the jeans and t-shirt I had slept in on the luggage rack the previous night - could see that. Could he be homosexual, and saw me as promising pick-up? He seemed genuine, so I decided to take him up on his offer. He drove me to his friend's apartment in his BMW.

Along the way, we passed the Hotel Intercontinental. "That's where you'll stay the next time you come to Athens!" he laughed. It was obviously said lightheartedly. Who would have guessed it would be true, not the next time but at least the third time?

His Greek friend was trying to decorate another person's apartment with the help of one other man, a Swede. But they were pressed for time. Could I help tomorrow and the next day, he asked? I told them I could start immediately, and did, arriving back at the hostel in the early evening, splattered with paint.

It was only two and a half day's work in total. But I was paid cash in hand - as in all the jobs I did in Athens - and given the advice that if I was looking for casual work, I should give the yachts on the coast just outside the city a try. So I did.

On my fourth day in the city, I took the bus from Syntagma Square down the long, straight road to the coast known as Syngrou Avenue (Leoforos Syngrou), with instructions to try everywhere I could see yachts from the point where the bus turned left (east) into Poseidonos Avenue, and not give up till I had got passed the satellite town of Glyfada. I didn't have to worry about the possibility of walking all the way to Glyfada as I found work on a yacht in the first marina I tried.

The huge yacht - more like an ocean liner, I felt - had a full-time American crew of five on board, with seemingly nothing else to do but keep the vessel in tip-top condition, on permanent stand-by. It had recently been repainted, and my first task was to remove the almost infinitesimal specks of paint which had landed on the windows or metal window frames. It paid 800 drachma per day, which I later found out was below the market rate, but I was hardly in the mood for complaining.

After a few days of this, I had enough money to start looking for alternative accommodation to the Festos hostel, and found it in a quiet street off Leoforos Venizelou Eleftheriou, in Nea Smyrni, located conveniently south of central Athens, in the direction of my new place of work. At the time of my arrival in Greece, Athens was by far the biggest city, and Nea Smyrni itself had a population of around 68,000, making it the second-most densely populated municipality in Greece, following nearby Kallithea.

My streak of beginner's luck seemed to continue as looking for accommodation turned out to be as much of a breeze as looking for work. The place I found in Nea Smyrni was a tiny but very comfortable studio flat on the ground floor of a three storey residence owned by an amiable, portly and pampered-looking local by the name of Fanos, who spoke fairly fluent English, and lived alone on the top floor. In the basement flat were two Brits; sisters Kathy and Vanessa from Brighton, who were able to give me no end of 'inside info' on living and working in Athens. Kathy, the elder sister, was a slim, dark-haired and very attractive girl who was in Athens to study Greek, and be close to her Greek boyfriend, Adonis, who lived in central Greece and visited at weekends. Vanessa, blond and voluptuous, seemed to be along mostly for the ride, although she also had a local boyfriend, a friend of Adonis. Together, apart from constituting a mine of useful information, they were also very amiable and helpful good neighbours.

When in Athens...

Over the subsequent several weeks in Athens, I managed to adapt to the differences between daily life there and in Israel. Shortly after arrival in Greece, and only because of its ubiquitous nature, I had a chance to try souvlaki, and was pleased to find I wouldn't miss falafels, my favourite snack in Israel, after all! Souvlaki consists of small pieces of meat and sometimes vegetables grilled on a skewer. The meat is garnished with sliced tomatoes and onions, sauced with tzatziki, wrapped in a lightly grilled pita, and served as a takeaway snack, which was the way I usually ate it. I also found you could usually get away with asking for extra helpings of any the ingredients for no extra cost!

Feta cheese was another new favourite. This is a brined curd white cheese made from sheep's milk, or from a mixture of sheep and goat's milk. It's a crumbly, aged cheese, commonly produced in blocks, and has a slightly grainy texture. Feta is used as a table cheese, as well as in salads and pastries. Most notable is its use in the popular phyllo-based dishes spanakopita (spinach pie) and tyropita (cheese pie), or served with some olive oil or olives and sprinkled with aromatic herbs such as oregano. It can also be served cooked or grilled, as part of a sandwich, in omelets, or as a salty alternative to other cheeses in a variety of dishes. Feta seemed to be there almost every time anything was eaten during my stay in Athens. Invariably, there would be some in the Greek salads I took at restaurants for lunch when working on the yachts, but rarely enough for my ravenous appetite.

Obligated more by pocket than taste to choose local brands of cigarettes, once in Greece the Israeli Noblesse Oblige brand became a thing of the past, and Karelia the choice of the day. The Jerusalem Post was swapped for the Athens News. Yes, even in the early 1980s, the major international English-language (and French and German) newspapers were available at some of the kiosks in central Athens, but they were still hideously expensive in comparison to the local rag, and only an occasional luxury for a shoestring traveller like myself.

And so, by the time Di arrived in Piraeus, the port serving the capital, on the ferry from the Israeli port of Haifa, I had already made as much of a transition to the Athenian way of life as could be expected from a foreigner in just over three weeks. Certainly I didn't need to go the whole hog and wear 'worry beads' (Identical to 'prayer beads', but in Greece, manipulating these braceletted beads was a method used just to pass time and relax the mind) on my wrists, as did many Greek men. I didn't feel I had anything at all to worry about! Everything was going even better than I had hoped for.

Di didn't arrive alone, but with five other Kibbutz Magen volunteers who had left at the same time to travel overland from Athens to the UK. Rupert, and an English girl from Oxford named Melanie came to 'crash out' at my studio flat, while the other three, two British volunteers named Keith and Dave and a Dutch girl named Willeke, stayed at a large budget hotel in central Athens.

The following day, we all met up for a hearty breakfast at the hotel, and it was decided that, provided they could get tickets, Keith, Dave, Willeke and Melanie, would hit the road the same day, travelling by train overland to the Netherlands and the UK.

Rupert wanted to stay around in Athens and see if he could find work. Although Melanie chided him for "playing gooseberry", I was glad to have him along. I felt we made a strong team of three, and would be unbeatable in our efforts to secure work for the summer. One obvious advantage to having three, instead of just two, was that if any one of us was temporarily without work, it wouldn't make such a big dent in the economy of the whole.

"The Perfect Working Holiday"

I had finished my agreed term of employment on the yacht two days earlier, and planned to look for more of the same, but as there were now three of us, Di suggested we first take a look in the local newspaper's classified ads to see if there were any possibilities of work we could do together. And, as luck would have it, there was: there was an advertisement for hotel staff at a place in Glyfada. Glyfada, an Athens suburb - more of a separate satellite town at the time we worked there - lies about 12 km from Athens city centre. The town and its surrounding area is home to many of the wealthiest people in Greece, including political figures and celebrities. It seemed the streak of 'travellers' luck' was going to just keep on coming. The three of us hopped on a bus and were there 15 minutes later.

We walked into the detached five storey Hotel Paris located close to the beach and were met by the manager's wife, who was working at reception. She seemed very pleased to see us, and even asked whether we had friends, as they would need at least five people to help out until the end of September. No, unfortunately, there are only three of us, I told her.

"Well, never mind, that's perfect for now," she replied in fluent English. "But you'll have to have an interview with my husband first, and then -" she broke off. "Ah, here he is now!"

A Greek man in his late 40s or early 50s was walking into the reception area from the back of the hotel, dressed in lose-fitting pressed brown pants and white shirt, which rather than covering up the skinniness of his frame seemed to accentuate it. Sparse hair was combed from far on the left side of his head to cover his thinning scalp and high forehead. This appearance and momentary befuddled manner when his wife spoke to him in Greek gave me the impression of an intellectual.

Another sentence of Greek passed from his wife to him, and his eyes suddenly lit up. "Ah, you've come here looking for work?"

I answered in the affirmative and he asked our names, but before we could give them, he insisted with a flurry of his arms that we move to the bar, where we could chat with more ease. He then ushered us into the restaurant and bar like VIPs, leaving his wife at reception and quickly slipped behind the bar, asking what we liked to drink? We all took alcoholic drinks despite the early hour, and the manager, who insisted we call him by his English first name of Harry, poured one for himself which he left untouched as he listened with rapt attention to our descriptions of ourselves and how we came to be there.

Harry assured us that there was plenty of work for the three of us, but warned that the morning was the busy time. After a two-hour lunch break, there typically would only be a couple of hours more work, and then we were free. If Di thought she could manage it, he suggested, she would do the rooms. That meant changing the bedding and cleaning the rooms, while Rupert and I would help with the rooms too but also do some outdoor cleaning and maintenance and any heavier work required, he said, noting Rupert's strong physique. His wife would be in charge of assigning our tasks most of the time, he added. The salary was only 3,000 drachmas a week, but what would we want money for, he asked with a strange laugh, as he topped up our drinks? We would have free accommodation, free food and drink within limits. It was the perfect working holiday, he assured us with a broad smile, and much more 'holiday' than 'work', he laughed.

"So, when do we start, Boss?" Rupert asked.

"Boss?" Harry looked pained. "Please, I've told you my name is Harry. Please don't think of me as your boss; think of me as a friend...who just happens to be your boss for a short time, just this year! I'm sure you'll come back here year after year for holidays, just as our previous helpers have. And then I won't be your boss, but simply Harry, at your service!" He gave a small mock bow, and we all laughed. I sensed that Di and Rupert felt the same way I did: this was a very likable character.

We returned to my little flat in Nea Smyrni in high spirits, to pack our bags, which for Rupert and Di had barely been unpacked. I pointed out that we could possibly make 1,000 drachmas a day working on the yachts, although I had only made 800 a day so far. But three thousand a week for a job that included accommodation, food and drink, didn't seem bad at all. My flat was rented by the week, and I expected I would have to give Fanos at least a week's notice, but he was quite amenable to just the four remaining days of the present week, and brushed off the difference in a characteristically Greek manner, telling me it was nothing when I thanked him for that. I called at Kathy and Vanessa's basement flat where they were both home eating lunch, and said my goodbyes, promising to drop by to see them in the future.

Taking a Step Up in Life

We had assumed that we were going to get hotel accommodation, but it turned out to be a dank outhouse at the back of the hotel. Although still polite, I noticed a slightly perfunctory tone in Harry's voice as he apologised for the state of the outhouse, and I had a strange feeling he was merely repeating something he had said many times before, and just wanted to get out the way.

It took a lot of cleaning up to make the place habitable. "We should have asked about this first", I commented.

"*You* should have asked about this, you mean", Rupert put in.

"Why me?" I protested.

"Well, you did most of the talking."

"Nothing stopped you from asking, if you wanted to know."

"I suppose you're right there. At least I know now not to leave it all to you next time. Next gap year, in my next lifetime, I won't make the same mistake!"

"Now, come along children!" Di said in the reprimanding voice of a primary school teacher, "We have a lot of work to do and you can all blame each other after we've finished!"

"I suppose we could go back to the flat for the last few days..." I suggested. But we decided make the most of what we now had instead.

So we put our backs into cleaning up the outhouse, clearing out all the old junk and broken furniture, spraying insecticide, then letting the fresh air in, and finally installing a couple of old mattresses Harry gave us to replace the rotten ones already there. The outhouse had two rooms with a connecting door, so we had a degree of mutual privacy and independence. By the time we had finished, in the early evening, it didn't seem too bad at all. There was no running water, but we could use the toilets and showers in the back of the hotel, we were told, or we could use any empty room to take a shower. It was a lot less than ideal, but still, there seemed little to complain about.

The hotel was fast entering the busy season and there was too much work cleaning the rooms for Di to handle alone, so typically either Rupert or me would help out on any given day. Apart from that, Rupert and I just took delivery of food products, cleaned the windows every few days, did a little outdoor painting and other jobs like that.

The content of the work was fine, and no problem for any of us.

The problem was the pay, or rather the lack of pay. We reached the end of our first week without receiving any.

After entering our second week without receiving pay for the first, Rupert brought up the point with Harry's wife, but she brushed it off immediately with the assurance that it would all be sorted out later, when there was time.

I felt this was too imprecise. I wanted to know exactly when we would get paid, so took the first opportunity I got to ask Harry, as he assigned me some outdoor work tasks for the day. "Next week, OK? Two weeks, together."

I left it at that.

Mario was the only Greek working on the operation and maintenance of the hotel. He began working at the hotel halfway through our second week, arriving from his home in north-east Athens each day on his scooter, always dressed immaculately in white shirt and pressed white pants. Mario mostly worked with Rupert and myself on the heavy duty or outside jobs. He was a very amiable character and we were fortunate indeed to encounter him.

By the end of the second week, however, we still hadn't been paid. We began to suspect that we were not going to get paid anything without insisting on it. It seemed Harry had no intention of paying us anything on his own initiative. And every time we tried to bring up the subject, either with Harry or his wife, they were too busy to deal with it.

"We can't just let this pass," Rupert told me as we worked on pruning the trees and bushes by the side of the building. "Otherwise, we're just not going to get anything. Bring the topic up, and they're always too busy to deal with it. I mean, how much time does it take to pay three people six thousand drachs apiece? It doesn't take an accountant to work out the amounts..."

I had been getting quite involved with the work, but having the lack of pay brought up again - something that

was always in the back of my mind - took the steam out of my sails. I put down the handsaw I had just been using on the tree. "You're right," I told him. "I just saw Harry coming back from somewhere; I'm going to catch him now before he makes himself scarce again..." And with that, I ran into the hotel, where I found him in the restaurant.

With already very little money left, I knew I had to press him for payment. I knew also that Di and Rupert were just as short of funds as myself. As politely as possible, I asked Harry about our pay, while physically cutting him off from making a rapid departure without giving me a definite answer. He almost lost his temper, demanding to know what I needed money for? I had accommodation, didn't I? I had food, didn't I?

I pointed out that, for example, my plimsolls had holes in their soles; I needed new shoes, among other things. To do that, I had to sit down and point to my shoe soles.

"Show me it!" Harry barked, gesturing at my shoe. I took off one shoe, and handed it to him. Upon which, he took one glance at the hole in the sole and stormed off, leaving the room without a word.

After a couple of minutes, while I was still pondering on this bizarre behaviour which he had apparently used to enact yet another escape, Harry returned with an old pair of shoes. "Try these!" he ordered, throwing them to my feet. "They're your size."

I suddenly realised that he had not been looking at the hole in the sole, but the shoe size which was still visible there. I tried the shoes on, and they fit. But before I had a chance to make further comment, Harry told me: "OK, it's good; problem solved now!" and walked away.

The shoes fit, but I knew that walking in them would be a pain, and I couldn't even consider going far from the hotel grounds wearing them. In a style popular a decade previously, they were absurdly high, with two-inch soles and six-inch heels! For some moments, I just sat in the restaurant not knowing what to make of Harry's behaviour. As for the shoes, I didn't know what to make of them either. I couldn't decide which were worse, the six-inch heels or my 'holey' plimsolls? Finally, I decided I had to wear the new shoes at least most of the time; the holes in the soles of my plimsolls were getting progressively bigger and they would soon be unwearable.

The only compensation was that I was now taller than Rupert! When I re-emerged from the hotel and he saw me in my new shoes, he could hardly stop laughing. "You look ridiculous! You look like a man on stilts!"

"OK, shorty", I warned him, "that's enough! I'm bigger than you pal, and don't you forget it!"

"The bigger they are, the harder they fall. And you're likely to come toppling down as soon as a strong breeze hits you!"

And it was certainly true that walking steadily in such high heels was an acquired skill. Let alone handling some of the outdoor jobs we had assigned to us, such as the tree pruning I had just been busy doing. But I had no choice; my plimsolls were no longer fit to be worn, except as slippers in the outhouse.

Just Temporary Work

During our third week at the hotel, a fifth employee began work at the hotel; the season was now certainly getting underway and five people were indeed needed. The fifth employee was Mike, a stocky young man of around our own age with blond crew-cut hair, and also a Brit, from the West Midlands. For whatever reason, he seemed to have immediately won more favour with the manager than ourselves, and he was allocated a room within the hotel for his accommodation. We also learnt a few days later that he was even trusted to put things in the hotel safe.

Though our resources were diminishing rapidly, eating out was not an expensive undertaking in Athens at the time, and we continued in the habit of doing so after work, and occasionally for lunch too. So we took Greek salads and local beers for lunch at a nearby restaurant, with a view to introducing ourselves to Mike.

Mike's circumstances elicited our interest. He claimed to be a British soldier who had taken part in the battle for the Falkland Islands, and had only arrived in Athens the previous night, stayed at a cheap pension in Plaka, the city's historic centre, and seen the newspaper ad for hotel staff that very morning. He started

immediately, even though his belongings were still at the guesthouse in central Athens, because he wanted to start earning as soon as possible. "I'm close to broke now, you see," he added.

"So, er, how come you happen to be in Greece?" Rupert asked with a slight tinge of sarcasm, but a broad smile. "I mean, the Falklands are in, let's see, that direction," he said, pointing in a general south-west direction, "...and the UK, would be over there somewhere," he added, pointing to the north-west. "Bit of a detour, isn't it?"

Mike didn't seem to know what to say; he didn't seem to have even considered being asked such a question. After a few moments, he said he was just looking for temporary work while on leave.

"Well, Harry's looking for staff to stay till September. Get long leave in the army, do you?"

Di kicked Rupert under the table. She obviously felt he had no business asking such details in such a skeptical tone. Rupert's opinion, which he aired as soon as Mike was not present, was that Mike was a deserter. But we concluded that whatever Mike had been doing before arriving at the hotel was not for us to pass judgment on, and we should just try to get along with him.

We didn't bring up the topic of pay during our first conversation with Mike, but did several days later, when we took lunch, again at the same nearby restaurant. We had passed payday for our third week the previous day, with no sign of pay. Rupert had once again reminded Harry's wife, who had assured him that we would all be paid at the end of the first month, and only paid by the week thereafter.

At first Mike seemed to think we were joking when we told him that we had received no wages for over three weeks, and didn't believe we would be paid at the end of the first month. But when he realised we weren't, he seemed visibly perturbed. "I'm close to the last of my cash," he told us. "I can't afford to wait three weeks to get paid. I'm here to make money! They told me I would be paid at the end of my first week."

We were all short of funds, I put in, asking if he thought I wore such ridiculous high heels by choice? I then related the story of how Harry had come to give them to me.

Di then suggested - not because she really believed it, but rather to put Mike at ease - that maybe the hotel was just too short of funds right now. After all, the season was just getting underway, and these seaside hotels didn't do much business out of season.

"Short of funds?" Mike laughed, then repeated himself. "No, I can tell you, Harry's definitely not short of funds. I don't know how much is in that safe, but there must be at least a million drachmas in there. They're in stacks of 1,000 drachma notes, right up to the top at the back of the safe."

This news left us momentarily speechless. Before any of us had a chance to respond, Mike added: "And that's not all that Harry has in his safe." The three of us must have looked at Mike for explanation. "He's got a Baretta in there, too."

Di and I were nonplussed. "Oh, great. Just what we need." Rupert responded. "A gun," he added in our direction, "it's a semi-automatic pistol."

The Showdown

On the evening of our fourth week payday, Di, Rupert and I took a meal nearby, where we discussed our next move. Once again, the hotel management had not only failed to take the initiative to pay us, but avoided even talking about the subject of pay when we tried to bring it up.

"I'm down to less than a thousand drachs now," I said.

Di and Rupert were too. "Last week, they promised to pay us today for the full month," I continued. "We know now that they have the money, so I think we should just go in there together, all three of us, and demand payment together. They're bound to be in restaurant right now; the hotel's full now."

"Right! Let's embarrass them in front of the guests, maybe then we'll actually get something!" Di agreed.

Rupert took a deep breath, and stretched. He was obviously in agreement. "OK, time for a showdown!" he said as he rose from his chair. "Let's go!"

I suggested on the way back to the hotel that it would be even better if all four of us confronted Harry and his wife together. Should we go and search for Mike first I suggested?

"Nah, forget it! We don't need him," Rupert said with a tone of confidence. "God knows where he's sulking, maybe gone to drown his sorrows, for obvious reasons". We hadn't seen him all afternoon.

With a new air of resolution, the three of us acting as one, we walked through the main entrance and into the restaurant. It was almost empty, but for a handful of middle-aged Dutch guests. I asked if they had seen the manager, or his wife?

"They were here about an hour ago," one of the guests replied, "then they just disappeared! There were other guests wanting to take their meals here too, but they've given up waiting and gone to eat outside." The man then looked at his companions, and suggested: "I think that's also what we're going to do now?"

"Well, it looks like they've escaped again..." I concluded. "We'll have to leave it till tomorrow if they don't turn up soon..."

And so we retreated to the outhouse, but had barely got inside when Harry appeared at the door, in a fury: "Where is he?" he demanded to know.

"Who?" I asked, but Harry just repeated the question twice more in quick succession, the veins on his neck looking about to burst. He seemed to be having trouble staying calm enough to speak.

We looked at each other in puzzlement, then back at Harry. "Where is your thief friend, the other English dog?" he finally blurted out. "And don't lie to me - I will find out anyway!"

"You mean Mike?" Rupert asked. "No idea; haven't seen him since this morning."

"Liar!" Harry shouted. "You liars plan to meet him to share the money. Where will you meet him? Tell me now and you can stay. You will take me to him."

"What money?" Rupert asked.

Harry was taking deep breaths to control himself. A few moments later, he responded: "Don't pretend. The money from the safe!"

It suddenly dawned on the three of us at once what had happened. Mike had made off with some or all of the money in the safe. Harry suspected we in it together, planning to meet up with him later.

"Wait a minute," suggested Rupert, always the logical thinker. "If Mike's taken money from the safe, as you're saying, why should he need us? He doesn't need to share the money with us, he could keep it all for himself."

Harry rubbed his hands up and down along his thighs for a moment, looking like he was considering Ru's statement. After a moment, he pointed his finger to within a few inches of Rupert's eyes. "You *will* tell me where he is," he stated with finality. "I will make you tell me!"

With that, Harry turned on his heels, and walked back towards the rear entrance of the hotel. We glanced at each other.

"He's getting his gun!" Rupert said with certainty. "C'mon, we can't stay here tonight," he added, and started to walk away.

The whole thing was so unexpected, and it had happened so fast that Di and I didn't know how to react. It seemed unreal. Di looked around for a moment, apparently for things she wanted to take with her. "Do you think he's really getting his gun?" she asked.

"I don't think; I know! C'mon," Rupert repeated with urgency, "we don't have time!" With that, he walked back, grabbed Di by the wrist and began running with her to the front gate of the hotel and the road beyond.

I was still standing there at the outhouse door in my high heels. I knew I could not run in those shoes, so I slipped them off, and was about to put my old plimsolls back on when I caught sight of Harry, re-emerging from the back entrance of the hotel with something conspicuous in his right hand. Di and Rupert were already out of the premises. I looked again at the plimsolls; Rupert was right, I had no time. I threw them aside and sprinted barefoot at full speed in their direction, Harry in the periphery of my right field of vision. I could see that the gate had slipped closed again after Rupert and Di left, and not having time to stop and open it, I leapt right over it! I overshot the pavement and almost got run over by a car. Looking back, I saw Harry, unafraid of being seen waving his gun in the air.

After putting a couple of hundred metres between Harry and ourselves, with frequent backward glances to be sure he wasn't following us, we asked ourselves what we should do now? We had brought nothing with us; I didn't even have shoes! We ended up sleeping on a small beach at the Voula end of Glyfada.

Early the next morning, we made our way slowly back to the hotel, reasoning that Harry would have calmed down by now if he was even awake, but approaching the hotel very slowly, just in case. As we approached, we saw Mario leaving the hotel entrance and mounting his scooter. He noticed our approach, and turned the motor off. Always the dapper dresser, his eyes opened wide when he saw that I was barefoot.

We related the events of the previous evening. "Ha! So, the thief got some of his own medicine," Mario laughed. "But I don't think you will get your pay. I will, because I'm Greek and I know the right channels. That's what I was just trying to get now, without success so far, but I will get it. But Harry is a mafia man, it's nothing for him to deny payment to foreigners like you who have no legal rights here to begin with. I'm sure he does the same thing every year to people like you who just come to this beautiful country for a working holiday..."

We decided the best thing we could do would be to just collect our few possessions and head back to Nea Smyrni and see if I could get my flat back, and we asked Mario to keep an eye on us while we went back to outhouse, in case Harry appeared. He did, but after hearing our vague plans, he also insisted on putting us up at his own house until such a time as we had work again and were back on our feet. He shuttled us to his home on his scooter in two trips. We then stayed at his house for about two weeks, while Rupert and I found work on another yacht in Glyfada.

We had to walk close to the Hotel Paris every morning en route to our place of work. We never encountered Harry or his wife, nor did we see any of the hotel staff. And of course, we never saw our salaries, either. But we did notice a couple of backpacks by the open outhouse door one morning.

End of Story