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Journeyer's Journal: 2008

How To: Hitchhike in Greece

by Pierce Martin

When you find yourself alone, away from the city, confronted with the nighttime sky and all its billions and trillions of natural lights, you can not help but feel that you are only a very small part of all creation, a piece of some gigantic puzzle. When you find yourself alone, away from the city, and somewhere on the side of a road at night in a foreign country, miles away from any place that has a bed, and only your two legs to get you there, the infinite beauty of the cosmos is the last thing on your mind. This was the situation I found myself in somewhere outside of Litochoro, Greece at about ten o'clock at night. I got myself in these seemingly dire straits partly by choice and partly by a lack of planning. I had decided going into this trip that I would leave the planning on the backburner and seek out adventure as a way of self-education. I had traveled alone in Europe only once before this and even then I was on my way to meet another group. So, I had decided spring break in Greece would be my sojourn, my exodus, a needed break from the 50 wonderful people I lived and worked with everyday, to test myself against the pitfalls of travel.

So, I had left my friends in Athens and gone on my own six hours north to a small town called Litochoro. "The city of the gods" is what the brochure had called it in big yellow block letters printed over a picture of Mount Olympus. "Sounds like adventure to me," I thought. Mountain climbing, beautiful views, communion with the gods, plenty of bragging rights, what is not to like? After a brief lesson on the correct Greek

pronunciation of Litochoro from the charcoal-haired woman at the information desk, I was ready to go.

The train I stepped onto was straight out of the Wild West. It came fully outfitted with wooden planks for flooring and a conductor with a pocket watch and handlebar mustache. This was real adventure; this was right. I found an open seat and slowly repeated the correct pronunciation of Litochoro to myself, feeling the tickle in the back of my throat that the Greek letter Chi makes. The conductor smiled at me as he came by to check my ticket, obviously noting my all too American appearance. Flip-flops before June in any European country are a dead give away. Adventure hung thick in my mind and kept me from sitting still. Triumphant visions of myself looking down from the 9,600-foot peak of Olympus made an hour train ride drag on for what seemed like days. However, no amount of daydreaming could have prepared me for what I encountered as I stepped off the train onto the platform in Litochoro.

In the first place, the only thing that designated this single concrete platform as the fabled Litochoro was the call of my handlebar-mustached conductor. No sign hung indicating I had reached the correct destination. No attendant worked in the abandoned brick building, which must have once been the train station proper. No taxis waited to pick up passengers. No bus sign designated a frequent stop existed. I was simply left on the platform with the one Greek word I knew how to pronounce echoing in my head as the last of my train sped past me. "Here we go," I thought.

Luckily, mountains are hard landmarks to miss and I could see Olympus rising gracefully to the West, its pinnacle concealed by clouds. Underneath Olympus and its majestic cliffs

sat a small town. I knew this must be the town called by the name that was mysteriously absent from the train station where I now stood. It turned out that this town was, in fact, the elusive Litochoro and that, for all the tourist traffic the city gets, the train station is 5 kilometers away from the actual town. So, my hiking began a little earlier than I had expected.

There is something humbling about walking along the side of the road. Whether it is the cars flying by you at 40 miles an hour or the very real proximity to being homeless, it makes you reconsider the way you look at things. You see life a little slower on foot. You take notice of the things you normally let pass by in favor of your destination. Little did I know that this would not be the last time I would be seeing the world from the side of the road on that day.

Once in Litochoro, I stopped to take in the view and appreciate the distance I had made. Litochoro is a beautiful town and I now stood exactly in the middle of it. With Olympus to my left and the Aegean Sea to my right, I found myself completely surrounded by beauty and all alone. This is exactly what I wanted. The adventure I had been seeking. My calves ached to climb and the only picture in my head was one of me standing victoriously on the peak of Olympus. Being anxious as I was, I did not pause long for rest. I also knew that I only had a few hours of sunlight left. So turning my back to the Aegean, I faced the mountain which loomed in my consciousness with a sense of both pain and forthcoming accomplishment.

My goal for this half-day of hiking was simply to get to the first of several camp sites on the way up Olympus, where I could sleep for the night and thus be up and down Olympus

the next day. I also had an ulterior motive for this plan, the only thing cheaper than sleeping at a campsite in Europe is sleeping outside on the ground. The hike to this first refuge on Olympus is incredible; most of your time is spent in the gorge made by the Epineas River which flows from the top of Mount Olympus. Waterfalls litter the view from the trail and always before you is that beautiful peak where the gods of Greece once resided. The problem with always having a peak in front of you when you are hiking west, however, is that the sun also happens to set in the west and therefore, one loses light much faster than anticipated. This was my unfortunate situation, but I kept hiking in hopes that I would reach the refuge before all my light was lost. With the sun beginning to set, I stopped briefly to enjoy this once in a lifetime sunset and to try and get my bearings. Sitting there, watching slivers of pink and orange sunlight slip behind Mount Olympus, I began to think about how subjective something like a sunset really is. It is the same passing from light to dark no matter where you are. The only thing different is the setting you are in and whether or not you stop to appreciate it. However, there comes a point, when you are outside with no certain place to stay that the sunset stops becoming beautiful and starts becoming worrisome.

With my last slivers of light passing behind the mountain, which I had been so intent on earlier, I was left with a choice. I could either continue on my way with no flashlight and hope I made it to the campsite before complete dark set in or I could turn around and try to make it back to town at a run. I had no desire to redo the miles I had already put behind me. However, I also had the very natural instinct to want shelter for a night's sleep. I continued onwards for a ways hoping to get a glimpse of the campsite from the top of the next ridge, but my light was disappearing by the minute. By the time I had gained the

next ridge, the sky was a shade less than royal blue and I could see the first stars beginning to appear, and there was still no campsite to be seen. Worry mounted in my mind and I began to consider the possibility of sleeping outside for the night. I knew that I should be fairly safe, but now, with no campsite where it was supposed to be, the question was whether I was even in the right place or not. I guessed by my continually dimming light and by my first few nights in Greece that it was at least seven o'clock, and doubt was slowly eating away at my confidence in my whereabouts. Sleeping outside, even if I was on the right track, would mean terrible sleep and a hard day of hiking, perhaps harder than going back to the town. So after a few agonizing minutes of deliberation, I made my decision. I needed a way out. I certainly couldn't make it back to town on foot from where I was. I had made at least 4 or 5 miles on trail during the day and that meant an even longer return journey at night. Half talking to myself and half praying, I turned around and ran smack into my answer: headlights. Headlights shone like the North Star across the horizon. I am not sure I will ever know what got into me at that moment, whether it was my own desperation or God's urging, though my suspicion is the latter, but something inside me said, "Hitchhike." When you decide on a course of action, especially when it has to do with a place to sleep, you normally do not divert from it. So, I blazed the straightest trail I could towards the road and did not look back.

When I finally made my way to the road, the only light I had left was the light of the moon and the headlights of the occasional car. I had begun walking along the side of the road and putting my thumb out whenever a car passed. This was certainly an adventure, but not the adventure I had planned on at all. More than a few cars had passed by this point and I began to think of going back and sleeping somewhere along the trail again,

but that same urging told me to wait for a couple more cars. As the next car rounded the bend, I prepared myself for another failure, and sure enough, the car passed by me. What I did not see, however, was the car put on its brakes, followed by its reverse lights. I leaned into the BMW that had backed up for me and repeated the one correct Greek word I knew. The non-English speaking couple smiled, and motioned me into the car. I got in and sat down by instinct, all of this passing before me in an unbelievable haze. I was hitchhiking, for the first time ever, in Greece. The drive took about 10 minutes and I was dropped off in front of a hotel that bore the name of the mountain I had intended to climb.

Once I secured a private room for the bargain price of 25 Euros, I opened the door to my room, lied down on my bed, and laughed. I laughed until it hurt, laughed because I was safe, because I had hitchhiked in Greece, and because I was relieved to finally be somewhere. It did not matter that I had not made it to my destination. I was not even too distraught when the owner of the hotel told me I had come a month too early and that Mount Olympus only opened in April. As I sat out on my balcony that night and looked up at the stars that I had failed to notice on the side of the road, I realized that my sojourn had not been about climbing a mountain or bringing back bragging rights to my friends. It had been about learning to live life simply, learning not to worry, learning that in the end everything will be taken care of if you just jump in and live life.