

...from 'Authentic Athens'

Thirteen bricks high, nineteen wide. How many bricks does that make? One hundred and something, sixty-eight is it? Maths has never been my strong point, but there's nothing much else for me to do as I languish in a stuffy jail cell two hundred yards from the Acropolis. When my boss sent me for a holiday in 'Authentic Athens', this is definitely not how authentic I thought things would get.

The day before....

I lugged my heavy luggage from the conveyor belt and set off in search of the exit, grateful the Greek signs were translated into English letters, giving me some chance of working out where I should go in all this chaos. I was hot, sweaty, tired and counting the minutes until I could set up my laptop on a shady balcony and check my emails whilst sipping a cool glass of white wine. After an hour and a half of waiting for my suitcase to show up, my patience was wearing thin.

I emerged into the cacophony of the arrivals hall and flinched as hundreds of handwritten signs were eagerly thrust in my direction, promising transport for Kyrios Rouvas, Mrs Jones, Leanne Kingston. I peered carefully at all the signs but my name didn't appear anywhere. I double checked the itinerary which my PA had carefully printed out and colour-coded (pink for travel, yellow for accommodation, green for activities.) It definitely stated a guide would await my arrival at Eleftherios Venizelos airport and accompany me to my accommodation in the picturesque Plaka district of Athens. I checked my watch. The flight had landed spot on time, so there was no reason for my guide not to be here. My irritation levels increased. I'd only booked this damn vacation because my boss had threatened to fire me if I didn't take a break. It was meant to reduce my stress levels, not increase them. I trundled my suitcase over to a quieter area where I could phone the travel company, but as I negotiated my way through the crowds, six foot something of blundering man careered into me, knocking me stumbling backwards into the very angular, very sharp metal seating which formed rows down the length of the building.

"Watch where you're going, you idiot," I yelled, my voice all squeaky and shrill with pain.

"Sygnome, Kyria," he said, briefly taking my hand, then hurrying on his way.

"That better have meant you were sorry," I muttered, angrily waiting for my phone to connect.

"Kalispera," a masculine voice answered. "Hello? Can I help you?"

"Yes, hello, this is Lia Stephens. I am trying to get in touch with a Mr Sakis Papadopoulos. He was meant to have met me at the airport an hour ago, but he appears to have been delayed."

"Ah, Kyria, I am glad you are here safe. I am Sakis. Where are you? I am in the arrivals hall. I am the one speaking on the phone."

That really didn't narrow it down. Practically every person in the place had some form of electronic device glued to their skull.

"How about you wave?" he suggested.

Feeling very stupid, I reluctantly wiggled my fingers in the general direction of the ceiling. It garnered quite a few waves back. I felt my face turn pink.

"Look, I'm standing in the corner beneath a bloody great big sign for car hire, surely it won't be too difficult to find me?" I hissed.

He made some kind of response but the echoing din of the place drowned it out completely. Somebody tapped me on my shoulder.

"Kyria, are you ready to go?"

"I was ready half an hour ago." I spun round, then bent my head back to see my guide properly. I got a funny sensation in my stomach as I recognised the man. "Oh great, it's the blundering giant."

He looked decidedly nonplussed, then grinned. "Yes, I am Sakis. I am sorry for bumping into you, Kyria. I was in a rush and I forgot my glasses. I hope I did not hurt you."

I raised an eyebrow. "Well if that's how short-sighted you are, I hope you're not driving me to my accommodation."

"Oh no, we are not driving. It is Authentic Athens holiday. We take the metro."

My back twinged in protest at the thought of having to lug my bag any further. "The metro?" I repeated weakly.

"Yes of course. It is the best way to travel into the city." He picked up my suitcase as if it weighed no more than a pillow and gestured to me to follow him. "This is where your experience of the real Athens begins."

Oh great.

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