

# Uncovering Kythera

Volunteers from the Greek Diaspora created history during their archaeological dig in Kythera this year

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Arriving at the Greek island of Kythera in July this year, a group of volunteers from the Greek Diaspora of Australia, Canada, UK, and the US, along with archaeology students from Greece, were not entirely sure what they were looking for, or what they would find.

During the three week expedition, the group, accompanied by five Greek Government archaeologists, uncovered ancient Greek walls, roof-tiles, coins and nails. They also assisted in the reopening of a 720 year old church, built using columns from a temple erected 1900 years earlier.

Greek Australian John Fardoulis, who organised the dig, is not an archaeologist. He's a Sydney based professional, working in the publishing industry, who has a strong link to his heritage and a keen interest in maritime archaeology. Last year during a trip to Kythera, where his father was born, Fardoulis volunteered to take part in a dig on a pirate settlement in Antikythera, an experience which inspired him to organise the expedition this year: an all-consuming task, which took about a year to finalise.

In order to keep costs down, Fardoulis spoke to a local bishop who allowed the full-time team (of 25 people) to stay in the 170 year old monastery Agia Moni, situated on a mountain-top, a far cry from the usual couch-surfing experience. "Staying there was an adventure in itself, it's in really good condition, it was absolutely incredible," Fardoulis said.

The dig basically followed a path winding up a hill overgrown with scrub. Fardoulis said the team "roughly" knew where they were, based on the foundations of fortification walls. "Those walls, we think based on other findings, were part of an ancient marketplace in the city. It was part of the commercial part of the city," he says.

Kythera was a Laconian city for 500 years, with Spartan soldiers guarding it, Fardoulis says. "People have known it's been there because the guy who found Troy went through Kythera in 1888. There's a small church at the top of the hill where we dug, and inside there are columns from 600 BC. They knew there was some remains of the city and that's the period the Laconians were there from about 500-600

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BC to about 100 AD”.

The ancient capital of Kythera had remained relatively untouched prior to this year's expedition, Fardoulis says. "There's a whole city there and nobody's really dug there. We were sort of pioneers," he says. "We had to cut a path up through bushes, thorns, and scrubs. Near some of the bushes we had to wear masks because if you breathed in the pollen you almost had a respiratory attack."

Through clearing the treacherous pathway to the top of



The ancient liturgy rings again in the hallowed grounds of the old Byzantine church Agios Kosmas.



The view from the top of the Kythera ancient dig.



Greek Diaspora volunteers digging in Kythera in July, 2010.

the hill, the group also opened access to a small Byzantine church, Agios Kosmas, which sits atop a mountainside, where the ancient capital of Kythera, Paleokastro, stood some 2,500 years ago.

After questioning residents around the nearby village of Mitata in Kythera, it became apparent that no one really knew when liturgy was last held at the church, Fardoulis says.

John Prineas, a Kytherian-Australian who attended the family's horafia (land) on the local hillside in the 1940s said that even back then there was no living recollection amongst the villagers of services being held at Agios Kosmas, suggesting that liturgy hadn't been conducted at Agios Kosmas for around 100 to 150 years.

"An adjunct to the project was creating a walking path through inhospitable scrub, previously blocking access to Agios Kosmas, thus reopening the small but magical church to the public," Fardoulis says.

The team's "quest to bring life back to Agios Kosmas" involved local Kytherian farmers Jimmy Galakatos and Kostas Moulos fighting their way up the 'agrio' (wild) mountain, armed with chainsaws that tamed the previously dominant agathia (thorns) and suffocating bushes.

Archaeology students from Athens and Greek-Australian youth followed and with a touch of Indiana Jones about them, they set out cutting branches, tramping on thorns to clear a walking trail. The trail allowed for hundreds of people ranging from eight-year-old children to 85-year old grandparents to venture up the mountain in the weeks that followed.

Fardoulis describes visiting Agios Kosmas as a "doubly historic event". "Firstly for being able to see inside a 720 year-old church which exudes a special ambience, cool, dimly lit, with decaying hagiography on the walls dating from the 1300s AD," he says, and "secondly, it is a glimpse into the ingenuity of the Byzantine church builders who

cleverly incorporated pre-existing ancient 600 BC Doric columns into the church to support the roof".

Not content on just discovering history, Fardoulis and his team of pioneers grasped at the opportunity of creating history.

On July 29 the historic reopening of Agios Kosmas took place as Bishop Seraphim and regular church goers were joined by a new generation of neolaia, (youth) in a inspirational church service on the Paleokastro mountain top.

"Staging the first service at Agios Kosmas in well over 100 years was a magical experience; culture in action," Fardoulis says. "The service was a moving experience and if you closed your eyes, your mind could have drifted back a thousand years".

Fardoulis says the entire experience introduced him to fellow Kytherian Australians, whom he never would have

Byzantine church Agios Kosmas was finally accessed by Greek Diaspora youth due to the clearing of hundreds of years of growth.



met in Australia, along with people from America, the UK and Canada, making it an ideal youth project.

"When you share an intense experience from working on something like that it's pretty special. If we can organise to get more Greek Australians over there to do the same thing next year, to discover new chapters of history it would be the community investing in its own heritage," he said.

At a public lecture held at Sydney University in recent weeks, Fardoulis, presented the highlights of the findings from the dig as well as the concept of sending Australian volunteer groups to assist Greek archaeological digs.

Australians supporting Greek archaeology could be a potential movement for other parts of Greece as well, Fardoulis says.

"We put a model in place, in terms of a community backed archaeology concept. We're hoping other

committees in the general Greek Australian community might look into doing it in other parts of Greece," he said.

"There's lots of archaeology there and with the financial climate the ways things are, archaeology has had major cutbacks in Greece".

It was with the help of the Greek Community in Australia and the Greek government that the group uncovered, parts of buried walls, ten different kinds of nails, a range of different coins including a silver plated bronze coin, that as an initial impression may be an ancient forgery of the time, dipped in silver to look like solid silver, Fardoulis says.

"We've done one dig and we'll keep doing it in Kythera," Fardoulis vows. "Now we just want to inform people about what's possible and maybe some others might come along to do the same sort of thing. We're hoping to spark the interest of people in different associations or people interested in adventure to continue digs in Greece."

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