

Attachment C - The first Classics Academy trip – Helen McVeigh



For years, I have dreamt about leading a tour to Greece, and last month my dream came to fruition. I have been teaching Classical Greek for nearly 20 years and created my Classics Academy tutoring business in 2020. We offer Latin and Classical Greek live classes: all are online (except for a week of intensive Latin and Greek in Belfast every summer) and our students join us from every continent.

Expressions of interest for the tour arrived from students in the UK, Ireland, north America and Europe. As a result, it was decided that we would meet as a group in Athens, with participants flying in from the UK, Ireland, France, and the USA.

The youngest in our group was 9-year-old James, who impressed us with his knowledge and delighted us with his eagerness and boundless energy. The most senior was 79, and he entered into every activity with as much enthusiasm as our younger participants.

The programme was full, but not to the point of overwhelm or exhaustion. Our schedule allowed ample time for leisurely exploration. However, my first reaction when seeing that on our first day we were to depart the hotel for the Acropolis at 7.30am was shock at being forced to rise at such an unreasonable hour! But of course the programme devised by our travel company Hellene School Travel was perfect: to see the Parthenon in the early morning sunlight before many of the crowds arrived brought tears to my eyes (this was to be a recurring theme among our group throughout the trip!).

Before we entered each site, a short introduction was provided by myself and the other tour guide concerning how the site was used and what to look out for as we

walked around. I think this arrangement worked better for our group dynamic than a stricter guided tour, since everyone was able to explore at their own pace.

Our hotel in Athens boasted a roof terrace with Acropolis view, and this became our go-to stop to unwind in the evenings.

When we'd spent two days in Athens visiting the Acropolis, Athenian Agora, Acropolis Museum and National Archaeological Museum, we joined our epic coach driver Vassilis for the drive to the idyllic seaside resort of Tolo. From our base there, we would visit Sparta, Epidauros, and Mycenae. We set out early for the two-hour drive to Sparta, and the time passed quickly as we enjoyed the spectacular scenery. This was a busy day: the group visited Sparta Archaeological Museum, the Leonidas statue, the Spartan Acropolis, Theatre and Agora, followed by lunch in nearby Mistras at Vassilis' recommendation. In the afternoon, we climbed to the Menelaion, the remains of a Mycenaean palace, which, of course, I want to believe was the home of Helen and Menelaus.



The following day we visited the sanctuary of Asclepius at Epidaurus where Zoe and James “sacrificed” a (rubber) chicken!



The theatre was breath-taking and while the priests' front row seating was to be admired, a number of us climbed up to the cheap seats to catch the view from the top.

After lunch and a quick visit to Nafplio Museum to see the Dendra armour, we headed to Mycenae. Mycenae is the location of one of the most famous episodes in ancient Greek mythology, memorialised in Aeschylus' play, *Agamemnon*. Through the Lion Gate and past Grave Circle A, where the so-called Mask of Agamemnon was discovered by Heinrich Schliemann, is the palace of Agamemnon, murdered in the bath by his wife Clytemnestra when he returned from Troy. Little survives of the palace but stones indicating where the walls might have stood. Nevertheless, Zoe and I methodically calculated where the bathroom would have been, and where the murder took place. We all particularly enjoyed driving past the Clytemnestra Rooms accommodation in the village of Mykines which proudly displays that rooms come "with bath."



We left Mycenae mid-afternoon for the lengthy drive to Delphi. It has always been a dream of mine to stay overnight in Delphi and our hotel didn't disappoint. The view from our balcony left me speechless, and next morning the group ate breakfast overlooking the Pleistos valley to the Gulf of Corinth.

With perfect weather, we arrived at the archaeological site of Delphi just as it was opening, and the programme allowed several hours to explore the site and museum.



My husband had made tour t-shirts and we agreed to wear these at Delphi. Outside the museum was an excellent opportunity for a group photo. By this point we were at the end of our group activities, with most people returning home the following day, so it was bitter-sweet: new friendships had been forged, and others rekindled. It was a mammoth task to bring together 30+ people from varied backgrounds, but all with one important common interest. That mutual connection, our love of ancient history, was enough that we bonded with each other to such an extent that the group chat created for the trip is still active almost a month later.

Of course, it wasn't all plain sailing. A week before our arrival, a general strike was announced in Greece, on the day on which most of our party were flying in. There was a mad scramble to change flights, mostly to arrive earlier, and Hellene School Travel organised last-minute hotel reservations. Perhaps the Olympian gods wanted to keep us in Greece for longer or maybe we had upset Hermes, the god of travel, but a taxi strike on the day of departure threatened to upset some journeys. Once

again, Hellene stepped in to organise a coach to the airport, so that no-one's arrangements were disrupted.

I can't thank Hellene enough for their help both throughout the process of organising the trip, and while the tour was in progress. Every query or setback was handled smoothly and efficiently.

Since this was the first Classics Academy trip, I have learned things that I would do differently, but all-in-all the tour was a success. So much so, that we are planning another for 2026.

