

Loukas - an Appreciation

By Kirk Hallam

Loukas, according to the stone in the entrance to the Church of Our Savior, was founded in 1788.

Like all history, this is a matter of debate. A historian from Iraklion determined in 2020 that the likely date of first settlement was in fact 1854. But local residents claim that cannot be true. How could their ancestors be wrong? The historian was given a polite hearing, but he was dismissed as merely an “expert”. Especially by the local Orthodox priest.

Loukas, for the first 150 years of its life, was a small, sleepy backwater, a town that until 1935 did not even have a proper road connecting it to the North, from which people, goods and money would flow. Until that year the road, if you could call it a road, comprised a winding dirt track running through the mountains. In the Winter parts of the road could be impassable due to snow. In the Spring it could be impassable due to landslips caused by Spring rains. So, even getting to Loukas by road was a hit-or-miss affair, a multi-day voyage of discovery. And, as the history of human exploration shows, not all voyages of discovery have happy endings. Along the way, numerous animal-drawn vehicles and motor vehicles disappeared off the road down steep slopes, or sometimes into one of the several ravines. As a result, most of the traffic into and out of Loukas was by boat.

Loukas, according to the elderly locals, was a harbor with a small fishing village attached. According to some of the more cynical locals, it also continues to be a small drinking town with a fishing problem.

In the late 1930's, the harbor in Loukas was the focus of commercial and transport activity. Fishing boats landed all manner of fish daily, from baskets of small pan-fry anchovies up to swordfish and tuna weighing hundreds of kilos. The sea was, it seemed, the inexhaustible go-to place for food. Other boats would shuttle along the South coast carrying goods, animals, and occasionally, visitors.

Within 10 years, two events occurred that would ensure that Loukas would never be the same again, and that it would no longer be a haven of tranquil oceanside innocence.

First, the metaled road from the North opened. It used part of the old horse and mule-carriage route, but also took its own route, including several new bridges, and even a short stretch of tunnel. Now, the first motor vehicles began to arrive in Loukas, changing the town almost immediately. The local road cobblestone installers had to learn how to lay the Black Stuff or concrete paving. Slowly, the piles of horse and mule dung at street corners began to disappear, replaced by the faint odor of petrol.

Secondly, and much more dramatically, in 1941 during the Second World War the island was invaded by Germany. However, it was not really occupied. The Germans had no trouble with the North of the island, linked from West to East by a road. However, when they tried pushing through to Loukas and other Southern towns, they suddenly found themselves in unfamiliar mountain territory, where, with regularity, their convoys would be ambushed by a collection of unknown insurgents who would appear out of nowhere, shoot and bomb the shit out of them, and then vanish, seemingly into thin air.

Loukas became a locus for local resistance against the Germans, with resistance members going about superficially normal lives, while sneaking out at intervals to ambush the occupiers. Along the way, several local people were captured, tortured and in at least one case, executed by the Germans. Eventually, at the end of 1944, with English and US troop convoys heading towards the island, the Germans fled to the North and attempted to evacuate their garrisons, although many of them ended up surrendering. The sacrifices of Loukas in World War II are to be found memorialized outside the front entrance of the town church. Every 10th of May the town holds a

memorial service for the victims of World War II, and the town closes for the day.

After the war, for close to 30 years, Loukas went back to being a small, sleepy fishing town at the end of a long and winding road. The road might be scenic, but it was still slow, 3 hours' drive from the North of the island. Single-track, cheaply surfaced, with numerous potholes, and with tightening radius curves and no safety barriers, it was also dangerous. This deterred all but local people and smart visitors from making the journey.

Then, in the late 1960s through to the middle of the 1970s, the hippies arrived. Drawn to the South of the island by its rugged coastline, scenic beauty, lack of regular tourists and low prices, backpackers began to show up. They hitched, bussed and walked along the coast, staying in cheap accommodations, sometimes sleeping on the beach. They caused consternation among locals by smoking fragrant different sorts of substances, and occasionally running naked up and down beaches and into and out of the Lybian Sea. The local people soon began to regard the hippies as a weird collection of nuisances. Eventually the hippy community fragmented as they dropped back into society, and the flood became a trickle.

In the early 1980s, the Germans again began to discover Loukas. This time, instead of riding down the Long and Winding Road in tanks and armored trucks, dressed in military uniforms, they arrived in buses and coaches, or on the coastal ferry boat from Panouryía, dressed in casual holiday clothing, with backpacks and suitcases, and Drachmas. Lots of Drachmas. Which they spent in and around the town. They marched out onto the East Beach at the crack of dawn in organized groups, with just a faint remaining edge of military precision, laid out their chairs, umbrellas and coolers, and sat, read, talked and swam until the mid-afternoon, at which point, again with just a hint of military precision, they would pack up, leave the beach, go back to their accommodations, shower and and relax, then head into town for dinner.

Soon Loukas had a challenge. A classic challenge for a sleepy coastal town which has been discovered by tourists. How much do you cater to the tourists? Too much catering, and prices rise, driving out locals, and resentments take root. Too little, and the disappointed visitors head elsewhere, taking their money with them. There was much local debate, some of it heated. There were local resentments against outsiders (on this island, even people from Athens were regarded as outsiders by many locals) and the town went through 4 different mayors in 12 years.

Along the way, the usual mistakes were made. A hotel company persuaded one mayor to support the erection of what became known among the locals as *áschimo méros* (Ugly Place) - the East Beach Hotel, erected in a hurry in the early 1980s before anybody in Loukas had got around to considering if a 1980s concrete-paneled rectangular box would look at all good next to whitewashed local stone houses (Answer: No).

The next mayor, who ran on the nativist-sounding slogan "Loukas for Loukas", and announced on being elected that he would "get tough on mass tourism", was forced to resign several years later when a local newspaper journalist, digging through an envelope of papers left on his doorstep one night by a sympathetic insider, pieced together the details of a sophisticated heist involving a mainland Greek property company, a mysterious man from Iraklion, who suddenly disappeared one day into thin air, and two women that the mayor was consorting with Who Were Not His Wife.

The Mayor, it became clear, was in the process of doing a deal to sell a large parcel of land on the West side of the town, which had unclear ownership, to the mainland property company, using the man from Iraklion as a cut-out. The two women were some sort of scantily clad, walking talking thank you note from...well, nobody was quite sure, but the list of suspects was short.

The Mayor exited in disgrace, fleeing to Athens. Because of the lack of documentation about the ownership of the land, insufficient hard evidence existed to charge him with any crime, but his life on the island was over.

After the years of scandals, the current Mayor, Mr. Petrakis, was elected. Unlike the previous interventionist neophytes, he is wise, and mostly hands-off. He leaves most of the details to the town manager, who is an efficient and very businesslike woman named Alexandria ,

dressed very soberly in business suits, with long graying hair in a ponytail, although those that know her say that her bark is worse than her bite.

Under the Petrakis stewardship, new development has been allowed on what became known as New Loukas, overlooking the harbor, with zoning regulations, and the influx of money, mostly from Germany, had a trickle-down impact. The importance of fishing slowly declined as the yacht marina was extended, and an outer harbor area was constructed with EU money. Some EU money also went into improving the Long and Winding Road through the mountains, adding passing places on some uphill sections, and widening curves and making them constant-radius. The road is now challenging instead of occasionally dangerous. However, as I found, you still need to drive carefully.

The locals have mostly come to terms with the presence of tourists, but also enjoy the quiet winter months, when only a few people from elsewhere vacation in the town. As the Winter storms blow through, the locals re-furbish, overhaul and improve their businesses, catch up on family matters, and...drink.

Visitors can walk from one end of Loukas to the other in less than 30 minutes, picking their way along the narrow sea front street, past the yacht marina, the harbor bar and its nearby restaurants, and the many bars and *tavernas* that line the street.

The only real eyesore in Loukas is the East Beach Hotel. The hotel, built at the East end of the main beach, was re-skinned with colored concrete panels in the 2000s in an attempt to make it look more attractive, but the result is really no better. However, it offers reasonably cheap accommodation, especially in Spring and Fall. Budget travelers might like to consider it.

When you walk the streets and beaches of Loukas, you will hear a lot of German being spoken; irony of ironies, the Germans, once the invading jack-booted enemy, are now the major source of Summer revenue for the town.

Loukas has adapted to the tourism era, but has lost little of its charm. After the influx of yachts threatened to overwhelm the harbor a few years ago, a local law was passed to severely limit the number of motorized boats, apart from fishing boats, that can reside in the marina. The law had its roots in a personal local tragedy. It was championed by one of the local residents after he lived in Panouryiá, and his next door neighbor's wife lost her left arm when it was severed by an out of control speedboat as she swam in the main bay. As a result, you will see a lot of yacht masts in the marina, and relatively few motor yachts.

Today the town of Loukas has 1600 residents, with the number of residents doubling to 3200 in the peak of the Summer season in early August. The town is still small, still characterful. It has two banks, two churches, a real estate office, a small local government building, a post office, a harbor and yacht marina, a bus station, a police station with 4 cells, a supermarket, a liquor store, and numerous accommodations, from luxury villas, built almost to Monaco high-roller standards, down to modest village rooms costing only a few Euros a night. There are no chain restaurants, and only one chain garage and filling station, at the junction where the Long And Winding Road meets the road to Panouryiá.

Getting to Loukas these days is still a choice between two modes of transport; land or sea.

Loukas is linked to several other South coast towns on the island by ferries. These ferries can carry small road vehicles, a handful at a time, to towns which have connections to the outside world. Some tourists bring bicycles or mopeds, which are more useful in some of the small towns, although the main roads through the mountain are a death trap for unwary moped and motorbike riders. There is a reason why there are so many makeshift stone pile memorials on the roadside.

The ferry runs East several times a day in the Summer, with only trip per day in the Winter, and in January through February, only on Saturdays. That is the quietest time of the year.

The road from the North is still twisting, windy and slow. Driving down that road still takes 3 hours from the North coast road near the airport. Locals can do it in just over 2 hours if they are prepared to floor it and...if they know the road. Not knowing the road...is another part of the

reason why so many of those sad roadside shrines exist.

Everybody appears to know almost everybody else in Loukas. The local people I met were all friendly, except for the owners of a small bar down a side street. More about that weird experience later.

Loukas today has a significant number of transplants from outside of the town, indeed a lot of them are from outside Greece. There are Northern Europeans, from Germany and Scandinavia, French, and Italians. There are even older hippies, some of them the children of the Summer of Love generation, former visitors to the beach campsite, integrated into the little community, and mostly running tourist businesses. Many of them originally vacationed in Loukas, and came back to live permanently, or in a few cases, showed up one Summer, and never left.

The yacht marina is quite full in the Summer, and yachts sometimes end up moored around the other side of the headland or in the East Bay.

The marina, surrounded by older buildings, restaurants, bars and shops, is effectively the heart of Loukas. I will be writing about some of the attractions in future articles, but Panay's is a fine partly open-air *taverna* by the harbor and marina. From there you can watch the streets, and the harbor and yacht marina, including a large catamaran, with a tall mast, from which flutters a flag adorned with mysterious Runic script words. The catamaran is almost always moored against the inside wall of the outer harbor, unless it is out taking people on sunset cruises, or scuba trips, or longer trips in the Winter. It dominates the outer harbor, and when I asked about it, it became clear that some locals believe that the people who own it are strange, although they seemed unwilling to say exactly why.

The coast either side of Loukas is not developed. The rugged mountains and hills mean that most of the area is probably never going to be developed. The Summer heat is slightly more intense than in the past, but then, a few hundred yards away at most, lies the clear, blue waters of the Lybian Sea, a cool, soothing haven, with colorful fish of all shapes and sizes going about their aquatic daily business.

Loukas awaits those who, like me, bothered to see what lies at the end of the Long and Winding Road.