

This story was published in the online magazine *Travel Blogger* (now called *Brave New Traveler*).

Athenians, Buses and Automobiles

by Bob Riel

I leaned back in my seat and looked out through glazed bus windows as we wove our way through a concrete urban landscape, past blocks of apartment buildings strung out along car-choked streets. The roads were lined with supermarkets, banks, clothing stores, fast food outlets and auto repair shops. These weren't the gleaming marble monuments of ancient Athens, I mused, or the idyllic whitewashed villages and olive groves of the Greek tourist brochures, but rather the typically jumbled accumulation of structures that one could find in any overcrowded metropolitan area.

Still, none of that mattered all that much at the moment, I reminded myself. We were here. We were on the road. Lisa and I had been married for a year now and had made a decision to take time away from work, time away from our lives at home, in order to embark on an eight-country trip. It was an opportunity for us to have an adventure together before starting a family, to experience more of the world and to take stock of our lives. Athens was the first stop, and this bus trip from the airport was the first tiny step in a journey that would soon take us to Africa and Asia.

"It's kind of amazing, isn't it?" said Lisa, "We've been talking about doing this for so long, it's hard to believe it's actually happening."

"Yeah, you're ri..." I started to say, but my words were swallowed when our bus suddenly veered into the next lane.

A small car had darted in front of us, prompting our driver to swerve and then to erupt in an outburst of exasperation.

"Idiot! What do you think you're doing? Learn how to drive, will ya?!"

Or something like that. Since the insults were hurled in Greek, I can unfortunately only guess at the words; it's entirely possible that I'm relaying a polite version of the encounter.

A few minutes later, a similar incident took place, only this time it was the actions of our bus driver that elicited angry hand signals from another Athenian, who had a strangely protruding vein on his neck. After the third such episode, it didn't take a genius to comprehend that there was a pattern to this road conduct. None of the drivers, apparently, wanted to relinquish an inch, and this battle for space was obviously more important than any abstract notion about public safety or traffic laws.

In retrospect, I should have perhaps taken these skirmishes as a warning about local driving behavior, but at the time I just laughed. So the Athenians infused their vehicular battles with an extra measure or two of zeal. It was amusing to watch, at least.

The bus eventually made it to Syntagma Square, near the parliament building and the old royal palace. We got out amid the bedlam of frenzied traffic and honking horns, then consulted a street map to help us navigate the final half-mile to our hotel on foot. Although it appeared to be an easy walk, the first step involved crossing a busy boulevard, where we quickly noticed that a stream of cars was galloping by without stopping while Greek pedestrians were brazenly stepping into the street and expertly weaving their way between the hurtling vehicles. *Hmmm, maybe the Greeks really do enjoy putting themselves in danger, I thought.* After pondering our options for a minute or two, a break in the traffic luckily gave us an opening to cross the road more safely. Or so we believed.

Halfway to the opposite sidewalk, we heard the unmistakable squeal of rubber being burned into the pavement as a speeding automobile strained to stop its forward momentum. A car had just sprinted around a nearby corner without looking only to discover two unsuspecting pedestrians crossing the street with their luggage.

Regrettably, we were those two pedestrians. From the corner of my eye, I could see the vehicle's front bumper heading straight for our knees.

It would really be unfortunate, I thought, if we got hit by a car on the first day of our round-the-world journey.

Thankfully, the car's brakes worked. Or we lunged for the sidewalk in time. In any case, the only real damage done was to our nerves, and perhaps to the tires that left strips of rubber on the road. After the vehicle swerved to a stop just a few feet from us, the driver saw that we were O.K. and then sped off on his merry way. It was only later that I read this warning on the U.S. Embassy website: "Visitors should exercise caution when crossing streets and exiting vehicles. The fast pace of traffic ... and at times disregard for traffic rules can create dangerous situations for pedestrians."

Well. So began our Greek education. The landscape of greater Athens may have been somewhat drab but no one could accuse the Greek drivers of being anything but colorful.

Once we had steered our way past that first scare, the rest of the trek was much easier. The traffic-filled boulevard morphed into a warren of narrow lanes that were filled with shoppers, tourists, sidewalk restaurant tables and a small fleet of buzzing scooters. The scooters were slightly annoying, in the way that a swarm of gnats are annoying, but at

least they didn't leave us praying for our life. All in all, it was a pleasantly quaint neighborhood and in less than 10 minutes we had found Adrianou Street and our hotel.

"Welcome to Greece," said the desk clerk. "Your first time in our country?"

"Yes."

"Ah, you will love. Very much fun."

"Yes, we can see."