

# DIFFERENT V

by Heather Campbell Hapeta

“Staff Wanted” the sign said and on a whim I enquired. I’d arrived in Athens two hours earlier – a city I’d vowed never to return to because of the heat, dirt and noise – yet there I was job-hunting.

“Come in the morning,” I was told, and at 8am I was asked if I could cook, to which I replied “yes”. Five minutes later with six long loaves of bread under my arm, I was in the cafe/bar of a hotel. I had a job – the sole manager, cook, cleaner, waiter, bar-staff and dishwasher of A Little Street Bar Named Desire.

I was shown the breakfast menu. With that information, the refrigerators unlocked and a lesson about the till, the doors were opened and the cafe and bar was open for the first time in six weeks.

And so my day began, the first of five weeks working 11-hour days for a Greek rival to the TV show *Fawlty Towers*.

“Write down anything you want and need for the kitchen and I’ll get it,” I was told. In the beginning I did, but slowly the list was forgotten and when the sporadic shopping was done I’d get a double supply of lettuces but no rice, and I got olives for the Greek salad but no feta cheese. Every day was a constant juggle as I conjured up a meal, with the strange food combinations available.

Cockroaches drove me crazy. From ant size to giants, they disappeared down cracks almost invisible to my eye. Other hiding places included the potato bag and onion basket. Morning and night, before guests arrived and after they left, I sprayed to eradicate them. I would lift the basket, bang it down and, as the zillions of them scurried for cover, I’d maniacally do the cockroach stomp and spray.

The beastie stomp, a dance I invented to stop them running over my feet, was the second line of defence and slowly, day by day the population reduced. Another step in the dance was the basket bang. That movement dislodged the ones hiding in the cane breadbaskets which held the guests’ bread.

These steps, the bang and the stomp, were often performed in combination with a shudder of disgust. Books, knife-blades, salt shaker and a bottle of soy sauce were all successfully used to dispatch cockroaches to wherever dead roaches go. My sandals, the tip jar, fry pan, coke, wine and beer bottles; whatever was at hand were used to deal to the fast-moving critters.

The August heat in Athens was amazing; the two gas rings from which I created culinary delights added a few more degrees. The sun poured in over the balcony from early morning and at last curtains were hung to shade the guests’ tables. Some days later a fan was installed and it was 3m from the floor with a 7cm pull-cord. Despite my fear of heights, the need to have moving air meant I climbed a ladder to turn it off and on.

Each morning I lined up for rations. The keeper of the bread, tea and coffee sat behind his desk, a thin line of brown dribble permanently running over the stubble and down his chin. “Tea?” I asked, one of his few English words, and gave him the coffee jar as well. He grudgingly and silently gave me both. As the days and weeks added up, he started to smile at me as I collected the long crunchy loaves of bread. One momentous day, after a large cash turnover in the bar the previous evening, he gave me a hands over the head salute. He was happy – I was making him money.

To relax during the long day I would sit on the second-level balcony off the kitchen. Opposite was a Greek Orthodox Church and on Sundays and name days, bells would peel with great gusto. On Sunday the bells rang out half-hourly from 7am until the service began at 9am. Pigeons, disturbed from doing whatever pigeons do in belfries, flew through the scaffolding and netting, soared skyward and circled for a minute or two. As the last sound faded away, they returned to their haven in the city . . . until, half an hour later, the bells peeled and off they flew again, until once more quiet was restored.

I loved to stand on the balcony and watch Athens in action. Groups of tourists, many with big bellies and white sneakers, were led around, herded into restaurants not of their choice, waiting at the lights for the inevitable late-comers to catch up. Watching the busy three-laned street with the occasional accident, a motorcyclist swerving to avoid a pedestrian and crashing. He yelled at her but she didn’t even turn around.

A taxi and car grazed each other and once again the air is blue. Yellow trolley buses, blue-and-white buses, bright-yellow taxis, and the multi-coloured scooters added to the vibrancy of the city. James Dean look-alikes flew past on large motorbikes, no helmet or jacket to spoil the image. Directly below me the footpath was full of young women looking elegant in the little black dress in its many forms.

This is a very different way to experience Athens and in retrospect it seems fun and laughable but then it was a very different cross-cultural experience.

#### CHEAP OR FREE ACTIVITIES IN ATHENS

Centre of Folk Art & Tradition. Plaka

View Athens from Lykavittos Hill

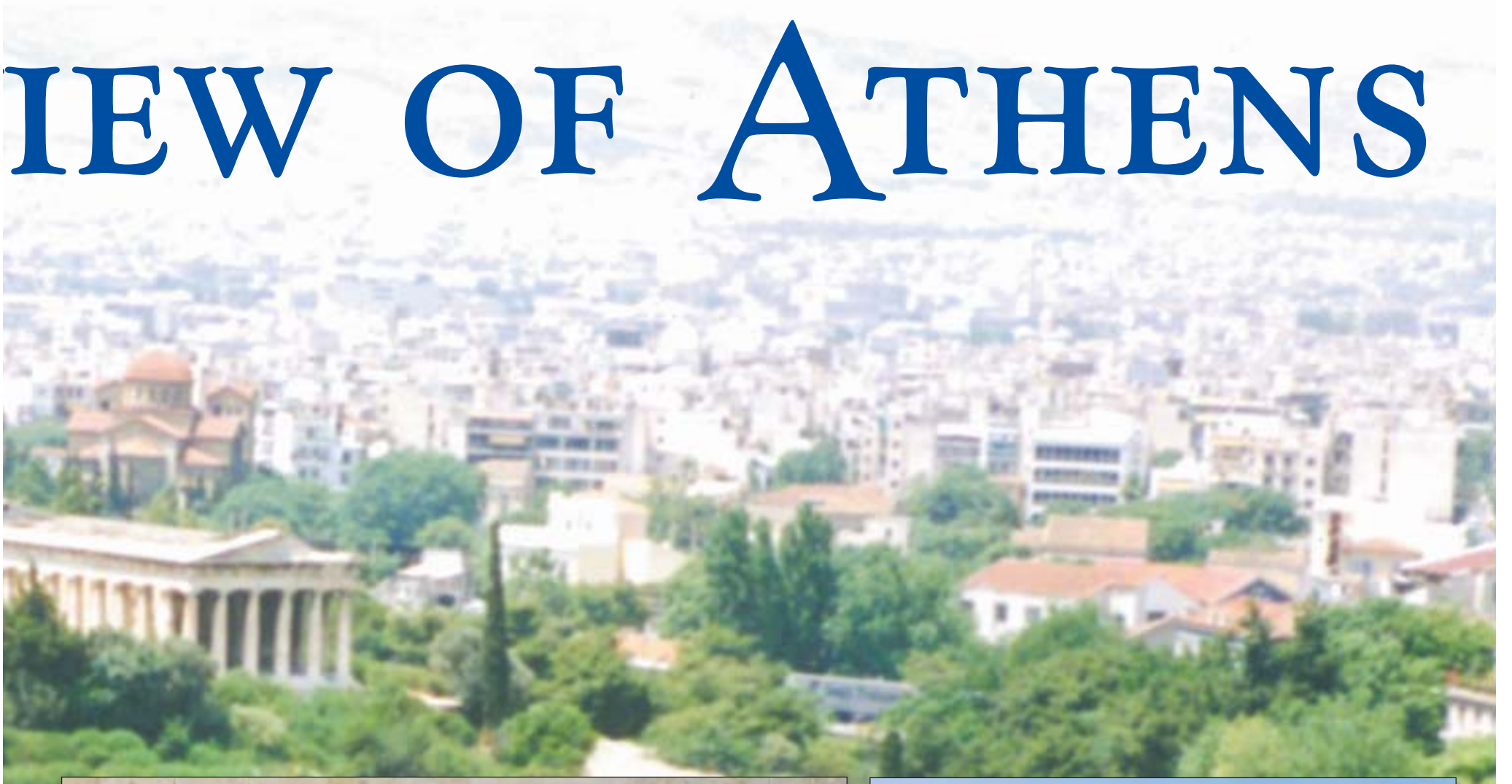
See the changing of the guard at the tomb of the unknown soldier (every hour on the hour).

Visit the National Gardens, Temple of Zeus, Parliament, Haridans Arch.

Eat out every day. Choose little eating places where locals are eating.

Walk everywhere in the centre of the city.

# VIEW OF ATHENS



At the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier in Athens.



The Acropolis.



View from the kitchen window of my temporary home in Athens.



Tomb of the Unknown Soldier guards.



Viewing around the Acropolis.