

DANCING IN GREECE WITH JIM GOLD AND LEE OTTERHOLT

by Eileen Kopec

printed from the December 2010 "Let's Dance Magazine"

If I had to pick only one type of ethnic dance to do for the rest of my life, I would choose Greek. No contest. So when I kept seeing the ads for Jim Gold's trip to Greece in this magazine, and saw it was going to be led by Lee Otterholt, I decided to sign up. I knew from being on other trips with Lee, that at the very least, the dancing would be great. And I was so right. We danced our way from Athens to Mycenae, Nafpion, Olympia, Delphi, Kalambaka, Mykonos, Rhodes and Santorini. We saw incredible sights along the way, but the highlights for me were the dancing and the amazing group of people I met.

Coming from the West Coast, I did not arrive with the bulk of the group. Bleary eyed I stood alone behind another couple who were checking into the Philippos Hotel in Athens. As they turned around I asked, "Jim Gold folk dancers?" They laughed and nodded. Twenty minutes later the three of us were sharing a cab to get to the first folk dance event. The sister of our guide Maroula, Maria Andreolaki, runs a dance class in Athens, to which our group got invited. The three of us got there late, but joined the group for the last hour. They did a huge variety of dances from all over Greece, including Sfarlis, Ikariotikos, Zahroula, Nisiotikos, Chaniotikos and many more.

The next day we were very lucky to see a formal ceremony at the Acropolis commemorating the liberation of Athens from the Nazis on Oct 12th. Later that evening we had a very special folk dance session on the roof of the Herodion Hotel, with amazing views of the Parthenon and the new Acropolis Museum. It was a balmy evening and we were on a lovely wood floor. Lee taught Zonaradikos, Gaida, Pogonisos, Kalamatianos and Syrtos Paros to the group of about 40, who had various levels of knowledge of Greek dances. Then we did requests. As the sun started to set, the lights came on at the Acropolis and it became a magical night. We were all getting to know each other and what a way to do it! People on other rooftops watched and waved. Nice.

The next day we were off on our land based classical tour, ably led by our Greek guide Maroula Konti and Jim Gold. Jim turned out to be the nicest guy ever. His Zen-like approach and positive attitude set the tone for the trip. His philosophizing gave us food for thought during the many hours on the bus. For example, one comment was about dancing in a circle. How you are stepping in the other person's shoes and also reuniting sparks from scattered broken vessels, creating a fire (from Kabala). By going to his website www.Jimgold.com, you can see his many interests and read about other trips. Throughout the next several days we saw so much and learned so much about Greek history, Greek gods and ancient civilizations, it will take months for me to process it all. But since this is a dance magazine, I will mostly stick to the dancing.

In Nafpion we were invited to dance with a group led by Christos Leventis. It wasn't the most special evening but it may have been the most fun, like being at a Greek Festival with a lot of great dancers. We followed, led, sweated and got some good styling tips. I knew most of the dances, but not all their variations. Once I was leading an Island style Syrto with a great looking

Greek god, er, guy dancing next to me. He nodded in appreciation as I did a variation. A definite highlight.

At Olympia, we danced at our hotel after dinner. Hilde Otterholt (as you can guess is Lee's wife) taught her specialty, a very un-Greek dance, hula. But it was a nice contrast. Hilde and their son Sebastian were a wonderful addition to the trip. The amazing four-year old, rather four-and-a-half as he reminded everyone, always managed to keep himself and the rest of us amused, not complaining even with the early wake-ups and hectic schedule. A real trouper. I miss him already.

The next day we jokingly "competed" at folk dance relay races at the original Olympic stadium! Complete with real laurel wreaths to the winners. The thrill of victory! And that evening our waiter entertained us after our dance session with a Zeibekikos. Waiter by day, dancer by night. I suspect that a lot of Greeks are that talented. Another darling man danced a great Zeibekikos at a taverna we were all dancing in at lunch one day – and they actually tossed and broke a plate! I learned they did that so the loud noise would keep away bad spirits. We met so many wonderful people along the way, who were amazed and delighted, impressed and touched, that we knew so many dances from their country and knew about their culture.

In Kalambaka I was blown away by the view of the monasteries of Meteora, seemingly teetering on the edge of enormous jutting cliffs. We'd be visiting them the next day, but that evening we went to a local club. A talented group of six dancers put on two shows, the first in traditional dress performing Demotika – village tradition, including Tsamikos, Pogonios, and Kalamatianos. There was a break, during which our group got up to do some dances and then the performers came back in modern costumes and did Rebetika – urban tradition, including Aptalikos, Ikariotikos, Syrtaki, Kotzari and Zeibekikos. They got the audience – meaning us and another group of Greek tourists – up to dance with them and we had a rollicking good time. For the Zeibekikos, they were quite firm about having the women sit down (you were right Pauline). I've heard that only "loose" women do Zeibekikos, but I've seen evidence that that tradition is fading with modern times. Anyway, the male members of our group, most notably Lee, Jim and Tim, did us proud. I danced a tsiftiteli with the older distinguished looking male performer. Another fine moment. The Greek tour group called out to us and waved as we left. I later heard that they told one of us that they were so proud, happy and surprised that we knew all their dances. Like Jim kept saying – we were ambassadors.

Soon, too soon, we were aboard the Aquamarine cruise ship for a four-day tour of the Greek Islands. It was a bigger ship than I generally like, but we always managed to find each other, as if the group acquired radar. We had dance sessions in the lounge everyday, with a few unexpected guests joining in with great enthusiasm. I hope we sparked a continuing interest in a few people. Lee was wonderful, always meticulously prepared as usual, and reviewed many of the dances we were learning along the way. He taught a beautiful Armenian dance called Yar ko parag. He also gave continuing valuable lessons on leading syrtos. That is something much needed in Balkan dance circles. Could it be one of the reasons not much Greek dancing is done at Balkan dance groups? Or why the dances that are done are usually the choreographed versions?

Our most amazing dance experience was in Mykonos. It was memorable in more ways than

dancing. The minute we got off our bus to walk to the studio, it began to rain. Not just rain, but a downpour. The narrow stone streets of Mykonos turned in to raging rivers. I learned the meaning of being drenched. Luckily I brought a pair of dance shoes that I frantically protected under a shared umbrella (thanks Tim). My other shoes were completely soaked as was everyone's shoes, and most of the group wound up dancing barefoot on a marble floor. We were using hair blowers for days afterward trying to dry out our shoes. Lilian Vlandis, formerly a dancer with the Dora Stratou group, greeted us with good cheer and rolls of paper towels. The expertise of her teaching and styling was a delight to watch. To be able to experience her joy and passion for dance was totally worth the slog through the floodwaters to meet this amazing woman. Among the dances she taught was a Syrtos Mykonos, Syrtos Nisiotikos, Ballaristos, Syrtos Samothrakis and Ballos.

The next day was "Greek night" on our ship. The show started with a great bouzouki player. We wasted no time in getting up on the stage to dance. The inmates were now taking over the asylum! We could now put all our days of practice and Lee's teaching into effect in the "real" world. No teachers, no instruction, just the joy of dance. With an audience to spur us on, and possibly some ouzo involved, we had our wildest and most spontaneous evening. The crew put on two shows, and in between and after we danced. Other passengers came up to join us, including one darling round bald-headed Brazilian man, who was the most eager and animated dancer I've ever seen. What was he drinking? I saw him the next day and he gave me a big greeting. It's moments like that that make traveling so extraordinary.

Our next stop was Rhodes. I wandered into the Jewish synagogue and museum there for a very touching experience, after which the skies opened up again in biblical proportions. It was a relief from the weather that Katerina Dimoglou, daughter of the famous dancer Nelly Dimoglou, came on board for a teaching session. She was worried about her English, which was really fine, but I think that may have made her seem a little hesitant. We had a lovely afternoon with her, and learned more nice dances, including Isos, Diplos Isos from Niseros, Sousta rodou and another and she called pedichtos rodou that was just like a dance I do called messaritikos.

After the cruise, some of us opted for three days of R & R on the stunning Island of Santorini. Every step on that island is a photo op. When you see pictures of those blue domed churches and white walls precariously clinging to cliffs, that is Santorini. Just go there! We had two incredible (I'm running out of superlatives) dance experiences there. One afternoon we all met in the little square in the town of Oia. Lee set up his music and we danced. A few game tourists joined us, as did a local dancer, Kostas Stefanidis (more of him later). One couple who danced with us was from San Francisco and in Santorini on their honeymoon. I told them about Greek Feet at the Presidio! A small crowd gathered to watch, as did a few of the local dogs. People on balconies cheered us on. The dogs barked us on. A multi-hued sunset followed.

Our final day did not disappoint and kept the level of dance experiences high to the end. We met up with the previously mentioned Kostas Stefanidis at the studio of the Santorini Pontic Association. He and his fellow dancers, mostly women and one other man, were dressed in their native costumes. They explained their history, customs, costumes and various implements (and weapons!) to us. Then they gave a dance performance, including Omal, Tik, Kotsari, Serenitsa and Letsina. They were fantastic, but the best was yet to come. We went down to the dance room

and they taught us some of their dances. If you have ever seen the Pontic shaking style you will know how wonderful it was to feel it firsthand. It feels so good to get it right. Then they fed us homemade delicacies – cheese and potato pastries, anchovies, salad and local wines. The Pontic dancers were very special, and they made us feel special. It would be great to see them in this country sometime so we could reciprocate their hospitality. They recommended a web page to learn more about them - www.karalahana.com/english/dances.htm.

I haven't even mentioned the fabulous Greek food we ate everywhere which included the creamy Greek yogurt at breakfast everyday, the dance session in the fitness room of our hotel, the singing on the bus, or the meringue lesson on the ship where I danced with a sweet Brazilian woman, or a million other interesting moments. Obviously I can't capture all of a two-week tour in an article. I hope one day you'll get to experience Greece for yourself. Thank you Jim for being you, to Lee and Hilde for all the cheerful instruction, to Maroula for the tons of information, to Carol for those great meals at Naoussa, to Tim for organizing that bus, to everyone who gave me drugs for my cold, to Diane for being my roommate, and to all the unique and special people I met. I hope we will meet and dance together again. And as for the white terrycloth robe party – well... what happens in Santorini stays in Santorini.