

Short Cuts

AS WE STEPPED OFF the ferry onto the Aegean island of Symi in late August, our thoughts were on sunbathing and sailing. But the first thing we saw was a group of what we soon discovered were Syrians carrying small backpacks holding those few possessions they hadn't lost during the crossing from Turkey. A week later, the number of frightened, hungry and exhausted refugees had grown substantially; when we arrived there were about fifty, now there were around two hundred. An old man with gashes on his face sat bleeding in 30° heat for ten hours waiting for a doctor. He slumped forward, seemingly drunk from dehydration. He'd hit his face against the rocks when the Greek port police fired a shot in the air. Symi is the island closest to the Turkish mainland; the same thing is happening on many other outlying islands.

Nearby a 180-foot yacht called *Kahalani* was moored – oligarchs of one nationality or another bring their boats here – as well as a Turkish fishing vessel called *My Ways*, which had been impounded after being used by the people traffickers. Although the refugees may not have owned super-yachts, they probably not so long ago enjoyed expensive holidays in places like Symi. Neurologists, international lawyers, bankers and judges were among those forced to sleep (the sexes unsegregated) on the concrete terrace of the police station, next to its only (blocked) toilet. 'Ninety per cent of those arriving are college educated, 20 per cent earned over \$200,000,' Costas, an undercover policeman, told me. He spoke off the record to emphasise how hard it was for the police to cope without adequate manpower and facilities. Despite UN requests, the mayor refused to allocate a building to receive the refugees; a doctor was available only occasionally, and there's no hospital on the island.

If they looked in one direction the floating international jetset could admire Symi's amphitheatre harbour and the ochre neo-

classical villas that climbed its hills. But, in the other direction, only fifteen feet away, were 146 refugees wearing numbered armbands. 'Number 126,' Vassilis Milathianakis, the harbourmaster, shouted. 'Ay – m – an?' According to the law, the refugees are illegal immigrants and under arrest until the district attorney in Rhodes has checked their paperwork.

I spent four days with the refugees. Initially many of them were too frightened to speak to me, fearing I was a Syrian agent. They all asked not to be photographed or named. Again and again I was told: 'If the army sees that we're saying what's happening in Syria, they'll kill our families.' A 17-year-old boy was travelling on his own: 'My mother, father, brothers, sisters, aunt – all extinguished.' A student went to his best friend's birthday in the next village and returned to three thousand corpses: 'All killed with poison gas,' he explained. A mother begged an official to let her take her child to the toilet; he refused. 'I'm old, sick man,' another arrival pleaded. 'I'm sugar problem.' He mimed injecting himself with insulin. 'I need eat.' Many had hardly slept for days. 'We looked death in the eyes to come here. I thought we were leaving behind our suffering,' Omar, an engineer, said. 'But it's just beginning.'

One night 183 people lay in rows on the police station terrace, their legs bent to avoid kicking those squashed at their feet. New arrivals were sent to the abandoned post office – the refugees called it 'the ghost house' – where they slept on the floor, sweltering among the garbage.

You have to be solvent to get this calibre of treatment. These Syrians paid up to €11,000 each to reach Greece – including between €3000 and €5000 to Turkish traffickers for the sea crossing, which takes as little as forty minutes. They all wanted to get to Athens, where they hoped to pick up fake passports and other identity documents for which they'd already paid at least €3500. Most then planned to go to northern Europe – some mentioned Germany, others the UK – but someone found

guilty of travelling under a false identity can be jailed for up to four years.

According to the UN, there are now more than three million Syrian refugees. In Symi the numbers are climbing rapidly: nine hundred in August, and up to eight thousand this year, Costas estimated. Relative to the island's population of 2580, that's equivalent to around 192 million people turning up in the UK. Under the Dublin III regulation, migrants are the responsibility of the first EU country they arrive in officially, but because conditions in Greece are so difficult the European Court of Justice has ruled against signatories returning asylum seekers there even if Greece was their original point of entry to the EU.

These Syrians had had a dangerous journey. I had breakfast with two men who made the crossing in a small rubber dinghy: it took five hours. Only 10 per cent of the refugees were women and children. Most hoped to get their families out later, less perilously. Fadia, a 42-year-old businessman with untended second-degree burns, unfailingly polite – as they all seemed to be – had made the crossing with 25 others. He told me that his group – including a 75-year-old woman and Alla, who was six months pregnant – was abandoned by Turkish traffickers on Nimos, a rocky island 330 feet from Symi. They'd had to climb the island's 328-foot rockface to get to safety. 'The old lady kept pleading with me for water,' Fadia said. 'Just give me a tiny drop,' she'd say. And I had to say: 'Sorry, we don't even have a teaspoonful.' 'After we'd been there five hours in the boiling heat, we managed to wave down a passing yacht,' Alla said. 'Its crew threw some bottles of water into the sea for us, and the men swam out to get it.'

Costas predicted disasters this winter. 'The waves are 13 feet high, the boats can't quickly land close to the shore.' Last February 'the traffickers threw 12 or 13 people overboard near Nimos, including a six-month-old baby. The parents jumped into the icy water and managed to rescue their child.' He paused. 'Only 10 per cent have

lifejackets. In 2011 there were ten drownings here.' The issue of migrants dying in the seas around Greece only gained global attention in January when a boat carrying asylum seekers from Afghanistan and Syria capsized in the Aegean while it was being towed by a Greek naval vessel.

'The port authorities treat us like animals,' a scared 19-year-old, once an economics student, told me. 'I was called a "rat" and "vermin".' The hotels were busy because it was high season; those that had vacancies mostly refused to put up asylum seekers. Their presence isn't good for tourism, which is by far the islanders' main source of income.

My 16-year-old daughter and I did what we could: 'smuggling' three children into our shower, getting food and medicine, giving away most of our clothes to those who'd lost their belongings overboard. 'You mustn't talk to them,' Anna Dionsou, an office administrator in her thirties, told my daughter. 'You don't know what diseases they might have.' 'These kids will grow up to carry guns,' George Kalodoukas, another local insisted. 'Fundamentalist Muslims are appearing like pigeons. They're destroying Greece, unemployment is their fault.'

The UN says refugees are entitled to two (free) daily meals costing a total of €5.60, but the port authorities were sometimes charging them €10 a head for one meal. They weren't even getting drinking water until an island resident, Ian Haycox, originally from Rochdale, collected €300 from expats to buy it. 'The refugees talk about human rights,' the harbourmaster said. 'But why should we feed them when they've paid €3500 for their boat trip? They have €5 for a sandwich. We don't have the money. We're the ones suffering – I've had five hours' sleep this week.' Down by the ferry the old man with the gouged face was lying on a stretcher. A Syrian said something in Arabic. 'His pulse is zero,' someone translated.

Caroline Phillips