

Sun, sea, sand and a spell of humanitarian intervention

JORDAN BLAKESLEY/SYMIART.COM

An island holiday took a heartbreaking turn when Caroline Phillips found herself trying to help hundreds of desperate, stranded Syrian refugees

As we stepped off the Dodekanisos Pride ferry onto the Greek island of Symi for our late August beach holiday, our thoughts were on sunbathing and sailing. But our first sight was of 48 dispossessed Syrians carrying backpacks containing their worldly possessions. Within a week their numbers had grown to more than 200 and we could ignore their misery no longer.

Spending our last four days among them, we came across a septuagenarian with facial gashes who sat bleeding in 30C heat waiting for a doctor, as he had for 10 hours. He had hit his face against rocks when the Greek port police fired a shot in the air.

Nearby was the Kahalani, a 180ft yacht whose crew hovered attentively beside those sipping cocktails on board. Little did these pleasure-seekers realise that many of those in misery just steps away had once holidayed on yachts of their own.

This is the modern-day Greek tragedy unfolding on the closest

island to the Turkish mainland, a 45-minute catamaran journey from Rhodes.

It's a middle and upper-class Syrian exodus. In the past weeks neurologists, lawyers, bankers and judges have slept on the concrete floor of the police station terrace beside their only (blocked) lavatory.

"Ninety per cent of those arriving are university-educated. Twenty per cent earned over \$200,000," confided an undercover policeman. He talked off the record to highlight how the police do not have the manpower and facilities to cope.

Despite requests from the United Nations, the mayor refused to allocate a reception building for the refugees. By law they are illegal immigrants, and they are under arrest until the district attorney has checked their paperwork.

At first many refugees were too frightened to speak to me, fearing that I was a Syrian agent. They all asked not to be photographed or named. Again and again I was told: "If the army sees we're saying

what's happening in Syria, they'll kill our families."

There was the once-privileged woman whose driver got lost in Damascus when the electricity went out. "I opened the car door," she said, "and there were heads and decapitated bodies everywhere being eaten by dogs."

Among the group, who were wearing numbered armbands to identify them, was a 17-year-old boy travelling alone: "My mother, father, brothers, sisters, aunt — all extinguished." And the student who said he went to his best friend's birthday in the next village and returned to 3,000 corpses: "All killed with poisonous gas."

"I'm an old, sick man," pleaded another arrival. "I've a sugar problem." He indicated injecting himself with insulin.

Many had not slept for days. "We looked death in the eyes to come here. I thought we were leaving behind our suffering," whispered Omar, an engineer, breaking into tears. "But it's just beginning."

One night dozens of people lay on the police terrace in rows, their legs bent to avoid kicking those squashed at their feet.

The overspill filled the post office, which the refugees called "the ghost house"; it had been described by the UN as unsuitable. Here babies slept on the floor, sweltering amid the rubbish. They were condemned to stay for up to five days while the local police struggled to complete their paperwork.

You have to be solvent to get this calibre of refugee welcome. These Syrians had paid up to €11,000 (£8,700) each to reach Greece — including €3,000–€5,000 to Turkish traffickers for the sea crossing, often just five nautical miles and 40 minutes away. They were headed for Athens to pick up fake passports and identity documents, for which they had already paid more than €3,500. Most were aiming for northern Europe. They could not travel legally or apply for political asylum until they reached their final destination and they risked a jail term if they travelled under a false identity.

While the UN reports that the number of Syrian refugees has risen above 3m, the problem is



rapidly accelerating in Symi: 900 arrived in August, and the police there estimate up to 8,000 by the end of the year. On an island with a population of 2,600, that's equivalent to 126m turning up temporarily in the UK.

One morning I took breakfast with two men who had made a treacherous five-hour crossing in a rubber dinghy. Only 10% of those arriving were women and children. Most of the men hoped to get their families out later, less perilously.

The situation will worsen this winter. "The waves are 13ft high; the boats cannot quickly land close to the shore," the police told me. "In February the traffickers threw 12 or 13 people overboard near Nimo, including a six-month-old baby."

The refugees cannot count on help from the islanders once they land. "The port authorities treat us like animals," said a 19-year-old, once an economics student. "I was called a 'rat' and 'vermin'."

The hotels are now busy because it's high season, but even those with vacancies mostly refuse to let rooms to asylum seekers. It's bad for tourism. Last week the chief of police was yelling to the mayor to find accommodation for a 70-year-old couple. He shrugged and they wandered off, saying they would sleep on the street.

My daughter Ella, 16, and I helped as much as we could, smuggling three children to our shower, getting food and medicine to a handful of people, giving away



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most of our clothes to those who had lost theirs overboard.

"You mustn't talk to them," said one islander. "You don't know what diseases they might have."

A local restaurant, Pantelis, sometimes provides food. The Syrians are entitled to two free meals a day costing a total of €5.60. But last week the port authorities charged them €10 a head for one meal. Jill Quayle is a resident Brit who supports the refugees tirelessly. They weren't even getting drinking water until another island resident, Ian Haycox, collected €300 from fellow expats to buy it.

"They talk about human rights," says Vassilis Milathianakis, the

harbour master. "But why should we feed them when they've paid €3,500 for their boat trip? We don't have the money. We're the ones suffering — I've had five hours' sleep this week."

As we boarded our ferry to leave the island, we saw that many of the refugees were coming too, including the old man with the gouged face. He was lying on a stretcher, and Ella held up his saline drip as he was taken aboard.

Then, one after the other, the 150 Syrians departing with us nodded towards us, put their right hand over their heart and mouthed: "As-salaam alaikum." Peace be with you.

Some names have been changed