



Center for Responsible Travel

Transforming the Way the World Travels

www.responsibletravel.org

A Summer With Plato

Essay and Photo by Alex Hessinger

Traveling across borders within Eastern Europe can be daunting, especially if you're a South American with little knowledge of Slavic languages or culture. I did, however, have an unspeakable desire to explore the unknown. My goal, the summer of 2008, was to set off from Dracula's castle in Transylvania and trek a thousand kilometers to the Greek islands. At an early age, I had fallen in love with Greek philosophy, so I was hoping this journey would illuminate the many books and theories I read growing up. Thanks to Plato, Aristoteles, Parmenides, and Thucydides, I had always been enchanted by the search for truth and a higher meaning.

But, as we all know, reality sometimes gets in the way—in my case, a reality that would help drive home one of Plato's theories, in particular.

First, I had to get to Greece. So, wearing ragged old jeans, and carrying a backpack which, after so many travels, had a personality of its own, I made my way through Eastern Europe. I sat in 17th century monasteries, roamed the perimeters of old city walls, and swam in magical blue lagoons nestled in mountains. I discovered that Bulgarians shake their heads to say "yes," that hotels on the island of Hvar offer free accommodations if it snows (the joke being, it never does), and that Sarajevo has the richest culinary treats I have experienced so far.

In mid-July, a month after leaving Transylvania, I arrived in Santorini, Greece. The landscape, architecture, and scent of the ocean fulfilled the promise of the magical place I had envisioned, and enabled me to understand the inspiration behind so much philosophy. Those first steps and impressions on the island are memories I still cherish today.

It was the next several impressions that challenged my faith. Santorini, I soon realized, was overcrowded. There were hordes of tourists, which meant long lines for all the attractions. Plus, the weather was scorching, and my limited funds were not sufficient for all I wanted to achieve. Fortunately, with a bit of luck, and some audacity, I found a place to sleep that first night.

Ten years later, vividly recalling all my impressions of Greece, I am hoping to do something about the negative ones. As a grad student studying sustainable tourism, and as a research intern at CREST, I'm working to help improve the tourism industry. The good news is that tourism is responsible for roughly 10 percent of all jobs worldwide. It's an industry in which women, minorities, and the underprivileged

find opportunities to flourish. It is also the only service sector that enables trade opportunities for all nations, despite their economic status, providing roughly 6 percent of world exports and 5 percent of global investments.

The year 2017 was an especially good one for travel. According to the World Travel & Tourism Council, the tourism sector grew by almost 5 percent, which was 50 percent faster than the global economy as a whole. It also created 7 million, or one in five, new jobs worldwide. Tourism today is an incredibly powerful tool for development. It can promote cultural diversity, empower local economies, and raise awareness of the value of heritage—if it's done sustainably.

Greece, unfortunately, is failing in this regard. Here's just one example. Water consumption on the islands increases by up to 300 percent during the high season, and the main contributors are tourists. Furthermore, the consumption of water—which includes drinking, showering, and washing—is directly linked to the type of hotel and the number of stars it's been awarded. Consumption ranges wildly, from 80 to 2,000 liters per tourist per day on average, with people staying at five-star hotels consuming as much as 3,000 liters per day.

And nothing's being done about it. Barring drought conditions, the Greek government cannot, by law, impose water-consumption restrictions. Nor is it motivated to do so. Tourism is a major source of revenue in Greece, which, for the last decade, has been suffering a financial crisis. At the end of the day, tourists are consuming Greek resources and leaving the check on the table for locals to pick up.

When it comes to tourism, Greece's challenges are similar to those in many developing countries. It's only by fixing these problems that tourism can be used as a tool for economic development. And this is where Plato comes in.

“Success” in tourism shouldn't be based solely on gross revenues, or, for example, the numbers of rooms a hotel books. It should also include the conservation of local cultures and resources. For me, hotels need to be principal agents of change. Using renewable energy and sustainable food systems, and monitoring waste and carbon emissions, will enable hotels to reduce operation costs while improving the quality of life for locals.

Governments and development agencies must also play pivotal roles, by helping hotel owners who have little to no expertise in sustainability practices and measuring the impacts of their operations. We must make the “green economy” available to the great bulk of hotels, which are small and individually owned.

So, why Plato? He wrote about “forms,” or the ideal, rather than the actual, versions of things, and how focusing on forms is an extremely useful thought exercise. Ideals may seem illusory, like projections into empty space, the complete opposite of reality. On the contrary; Plato encourages us to seek these ideals as we try to comprehend and engage deeply with reality. He urges us to be specific about what it is we want to achieve. I believe it is neither naïve nor immature to ask big questions, to regard the true reach of our actions—as travelers, tourists, hoteliers, and citizens of the planet. To seek the form is to find the

correct way of doing something well; it's a blueprint that may be shared, one which truly represents a deep understanding of our limitations and capacities.

As ecosystems rapidly erode because of climate change, we must also work together to find the precise tools allowing us to understand the role of nature and its impact in our lives. In this way, tourism can evolve from relying, primarily, on gross-revenue indicators to providing holistic services which benefit not only travelers, but locals and their environments.

Transformation will occur only when progress is built on the question of purpose, or what the Greeks used to call "telos." I know this is no easy task. It may even sound naïve. But Plato and my trip to Greece tell me otherwise. Perhaps, in trying to solve the tourism industry's challenges, we're not being too idealistic but not idealistic enough. That's why we haven't found the "form" yet.



Alexander Hessinger, graduate student in sustainable development, research intern at Center for Responsible Travel.