

# Gerald Durrell's Corfu: A Greek Easter and Seasonal Kumquats

I wanted to visit Corfu ever since I read Gerald Durrell's *My Family and Other Animals*, which was set in Corfu of the 1930s, and the spirited character Spiros livened up the writer's depiction of this seaside town. Incidentally, Corfu is known to have one of the most unique Easter celebrations in Greece, an experience I could not have missed!

I finally met Spiros in Corfu. In fact, I met him everywhere; sipping his Greek coffee at the roadside cafes or tavernas, chattily driving me back in his taxi or selling kumquats, that tiny orange like citrus, the size of olives. Most Greeks are helpful and friendly, but the Corfiots add an extra level of warmth and hospitality. Just like Spiros!

Corfu Island's history dates back to antiquity, where its position on the Ionian Sea between Greece and Italy, attracted a lot of attention and hence, many wars were waged on its turquoise blue waters. The God of the Sea, Poseidon, is said to have fallen in love with Korcyra, the daughter of a mainland River-Asopos and a water nymph. Poseidon thus named this island after his beloved, and Corfu today is known as Kerkyra in Greece.

Corfu was ruled by many including the Venetians from 1386 to 1797, where repeated Ottoman attacks were successfully fended off, making Corfu possibly the only place in Greece which remained free from the Muslim invaders. Then the French came temporarily, making way for the English in 1815 and Corfu was officially part of Greece in 1864.

The Venetians, however, influenced it most, infusing their cuisine and their architecture into the Corfiot environment, and a group of Italian Jews even spoke their own brand of language known as the Italkan. Most Corfiots were thus multi lingual and to this day, their Greek is interspersed with many Italian words. The name however has a more fascinating lineage.

Easter hits Greece on 8 April this year and the town will be buzzing with hundreds of tourists gathering in Old Corfu town to witness the many traditions that make this festival the most special in all of Greece.

The festivities begin from Palm Sunday as different activities constitute each day. Holy Thursday onwards processions of epitaphs, paying homage to the final hours of Christ's life are taken out from different churches. An important part of the processions was explained to me by my friendly driver, as I took a taxi to reach my beach side hotel in Aghios Gordios. The driver explained the three major things that any Corfiot family must have: a boy named Spiros, after St Spyridon or the keeper of Corfu (as he saved them from the

plague); a member of the family joining the philharmonic societies, as Corfu has possibly the most vibrant culture of learning and practicing music as a hobby, in the country; a member of the family being a part of the scouts. Thus, as Easter approaches, the scouts and the philharmonic society gear up and practice, especially on Thursday. I had reached earlier that morning and as I threaded my way through the tourists and locals thronging the narrow Old City streets, I caught glimpses of women arranging flowers in elaborate designs inside the churches.

Good Friday arrives and timely processions from various



churches proceed with their own decorated epitaphs, following a designated pathway and are met by respectful crowds swarming for space on the sidewalks. They all congregate in the city centre and by the afternoon, little children carrying baskets sprinkle the pathway with flowers and the various groups of scouts follow, as the philharmonic groups perform.

The red or "Old" band plays the Adagio of Albinoni, the blue band or "Mantzaros" plays the Marcia Funebre by G. Verdi, and the band "Kapodistrias" plays the Elegia Funebre, the Sventura Mariani and the funeral march of Chopin. The

solemn mood lasts the entire day right up until the late hours as processions continue. Saturday however, is the reason why Easter in Corfu is famous all over Europe!

The Corfiots start the day with a tremendous peeling of bells at 6 AM to mark the earthquake, which is to be caused at Christ's resurrection. Homage to the local saint is paid but just before 11 AM, the anticipation reaches to a feverish level and as I tried to launch myself in the best position, everyone tries to find a spot where they can view the balconies of the house in the old city.

The tradition that follows has several origins. Ancient Greeks caused a lot of noise to wake Persephone, the goddess of Spring from her winter sleep, while they threw away old pots to welcome the new year. The Venetians also threw away old pots filled with water to welcome the new, washing away the past. The Corfiots thus hurl huge pots of clay vases from their balconies, filled with water, with an almighty splash.

Now I am not talking about the first or second levels, but even from the fifth level of the hotels in the central square! Everyone stays positioned with their massive clay pots and at the stroke of eleven as the church bells chime, the first of the vases come crashing down amidst shouts of Christos Anesti (Christ has arisen). The furor continues for about fifteen minutes as different balconies take turns on all the levels to throw their pots. The aftermath is a rush to collect the broken shards of clay for luck. The day continues with more performances from the philharmonics and at midnight a massive show of fireworks marks the resurrection.

Easter Sunday finally arrives and a calmer mood takes over as people gather inside their homes to enjoy this festival with loved ones. I walked through the village close to where I was staying on the outskirts of Corfu town and was invited by almost everyone to have a taste of the lamb on the spit called Kokoretsi, with avocado cream and kumquats in their salads.

Corfu can be reached by air or via a long drawn nine hour affair from Athens, with a ferry ride to reach the last leg of the journey. The town is divided into beaches and the city centre is also called Old Town. Until April the temperatures remain very cold, hitting lows of 11 even in the second half and the tourist season really begins May onwards. Until then, it is quite hard to organise a trip to the nearby islands or even taxi rides late at night.

By Reema Islam

Photo: Reema Islam

## মাদার নতুন নাম



কালার গার্ড



কাপড়ের রঙকে রাখে  
নতুনের মতো ঝকঝকে

মাল্টি বুস্টার



কাপড়ের যে কোন দাগ-  
ময়লাকে নিমিষেই দূর করে



সবচেয়ে ফাস্ট, সবচেয়ে কার্যকরী ..