



Indigo Gazelle Tours

Gallop Further

A Meditation on Longevity from Ikaria to Texas

by Alex Safos, Indigo Gazelle Tours Owner & Founder

Short of her 37th birthday, Germany finished off what the Italians had begun and completed the conquest of Greece in the spring of 1941. In her rugged, toil-intensive village of Perdiki, tucked 1,500 feet above the northeast Aegean Sea on the island of Ikaria, the choice was stark and clear. Flee the oncoming onslaught or stay and risk succumbing to starvation as hundreds of thousands of Greeks did during the occupation. In truth, she had little choice: my father, then a boy 5 years old, was closely in tow, and the two of them commenced a punishing refugee odyssey that hopscotched from Turkey to Syria to Egypt, and penultimately joining my grandfather and his brother in Galveston, TX via the



Left to right: My father, Apostolos Safos; my grandmother, Lemonia Kafoutis Safos; and my grandfather, Alex Safos, in Galveston, Texas in the 1950s

rusty belly of the *USNS Marine Carp*, a WW II troop transport ship repurposed for postwar transatlantic passenger/refugee transport. The often muddy Gulf of Mexico was a poor analog to the indigo and turquoise Aegean surrounding Ikaria, but their Two Bits Cafe on Seawall Boulevard (yes, a classic Greek immigrant enterprise) afforded them a plentitude of food and water along with easy, reliable access to

electricity and running water. On those few arid winter days along the Texas coast, perhaps the sea breeze was a pleasant, wistful reminder of "the old country." In the end, modernity was the clear winner, and the Axis invasion made

it no contest. Ultimately, my grandmother, grandfather, and his brother settled in Houston, TX a block from my parents.

Her name was Lemonia—indeed derived from “lemon” or “lemon tree”—and the intense zest of that fruit, the heady fragrance of its flowers, and the healthy ubiquity of its juice in Greek cuisine were perfect metaphors to her persona. She was citron-bright—frequently smiling, laughing, singing, gleefully disguising her voice, and reciting poetry. An Ikarian cousin tells me one could hear her sweet songs across the village, penetrating the slate homes with her tender lilt. Her hands were of Olympian strength, no doubt honed on the hand-to-mouth existence in Perdiki, and without them there would have been no grape leaves to roll into *dolmadakia*, no carnations and cabbage to nurture in her Houston backyard garden, no wet clothes to wring and hang, and no vigorous, rustic healing alcohol rub when I was young and febrile. Years later, she would be my beacon to discovering Greece and my heritage beyond the restrictive ramparts that codified Hellenism in my childhood—namely, the Greek Orthodox Church.



“Yiayiá” (Grandmother) Lemonia and her light-hearted aura, with prop, during a Thanksgiving in Houston

I wonder more now what her pre-refugee years were like in Perdiki and, after immigrating, how much she missed its simple rhythms, sea and mountain views, hypnotic goat bells, and sense of close community where a neighbor’s—or, as is the case on a small Greek island—a relative’s door was always open, welcoming, and just a few paces up or down the stone path. She would bite her lip in adoration and, in quintessential Greek fashion, paddle her hand expressively when she described the painterly “thalassa,” or sea, of the Aegean. She

reserved this same wonder when recalling The Pyramids and The Sphinx—a fantastic salve these sights must have offered her and my dad amidst the deplorable, sickly refugee camps and existential uncertainty.

Greek island village living from 1904-1941 was laborious and scarcity always lurked, so when looking back, we can leave some of the premature romanticism along the *monopatía* (ancient foot trail blazed by goats) which my very young dad would traverse, weekly, for an all-day supply run in the port city of Agios Kirykos. He did have company, though, for the approximate 25km journey down to the coast then back up to Perdiki. Their donkey, Margarita, would bear the burden of whatever staples could be had for that week.

Ikaria's "Blue Zone" status as one of five geographies around the world exhibiting healthy longevity profiles wasn't realized until the turn of the century, and its lifestyle practices were yet to be analyzed and evangelized.

Of course, this island-life romanticism would blossom in time—especially for the traveler-seeker and a select few desiring a dramatic life-change—and the Blue Zone moniker has beckoned more pilgrims. The remote, basic, streamlined, challenging, agrarian, sunrise-to-sunset existence (*bonus: on a picturesque Greek island, no less) would become an alluring tonic for the overworked, hyperFacebooked, jaded capitalists, and generally overwhelmed, desperate for present-moment meaning, catharsis, quiet, and truths. Ikaria is just one of many such off-track sanctuaries across the globe where the contemporary can be disrobed for the traditional, the familiar for the unfamiliar, the crush of humanity for space and solitude. In a post-Covid era, I imagine there will be many more.

I escorted "yiayiá" (Greek for "grandmother") to Ikaria in 1988 en route to a summer internship in Cairo, and her amazement at the frequency and volume of food on that KLM 747 belied the somber lack, once upon a time, in the village she would soon re-visit. I remember getting her to Perdiki for a communion with

family before I opted for more compatible environs for a college graduate—Mykonos. The homecoming was warm, effusive, joyful, and *tsipouro*-filled (Greece's firewater similar to raki). She sat outside, happy, under an arbor of grape leaves astride an old outdoor oven. It would be a long day and night of memories and stories punctuated by laughter and astonishment. The pre-war, version of the radiant Lemonia had returned, and now she could let the village embrace her without fear, celebrating the good and dismissing the worry. A Texas home with a freezer always stocked with chicken awaited her come September.

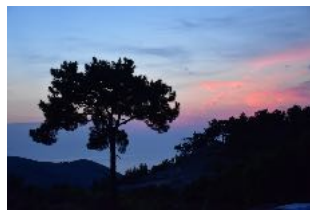
After multiple returns to Ikaria in adulthood, reflections on Lemonia's life both there and in their cosy 2 BR/1 BA ranch home in Houston—with an ample backyard garden (essential!) and patio with picnic bench (a nod to the taverna—also essential!), I now see which Blue Zone keys she still clutched, far away from the source, until she died at 101 years old.

Slow the Tempo. Stress Not.

One of the established keys to longevity on Ikaria is frequently preached elsewhere but infrequently practiced. It is banally unsurprising in its prose but dramatic in its verse. It is adopting a lifestyle of little, if any, stress and slowing down one's tempo to that of long-forgotten 16 rpm vinyl. On Ikaria, this means no clock-watching. "Appointments" are flexible, fungible, often forgettable. The same holds for store and office hours. Many dyed-in-the-wool Ikarians don't wear, less own, a watch. MY GOD, HOW DOES ANYTHING GET DONE?? is a predictable, apoplectic retort from certain quarters. What needs to get done, gets done, in time, with life being enjoyed and relished all the while. The striving for accumulation and consumption—for more and more—is not a preoccupation here. Just enough is perfection.

The slow tempo is enabled by a symphony of the Aegean sea, the taverna, the *plateia* (the village square), the spell of ancient olive trees swaying in the island's legendary breezes, and the daily naps in which many Ikarians indulge. The therapeutic benefits of living near and looking at a body of water are well-documented, so a sipped glass of wine or frappé with blue in view, a slow, mindful lunch or dinner at a beachfront taverna, a leisurely wading in cerulean seas, a doze under the shade of a plane tree, or a very rudimentary homestead with a dazzling seafront perch are all fortifying, pulse-slowng practices of being present. Hypertension is kept at bay.

Lemonia, my *papou* (grandfather) Alex, and his brother, Uncle Steve, did have these soothing sounds—if not the color—of the surf during their time in Galveston; however, in Houston, their taverna replica would be their covered patio in the backyard. Lush Bermuda grass encircling a pecan tree was the panorama in lieu of the Aegean speckled with nearby islands or the Turkish mainland. But their rhythm was unmistakably Ikarian. Each morning, the day would slowly unfurl here on a picnic bench with coffee, a loaf of bread, peanut butter, honey, low volume conversation, and birdsong. There was never any rush.



The Ikarian Diet

A version of The Mediterranean Diet, the healthy properties of which are well-established, the Ikarian Diet is another important facet of its Blue Zone pedigree. Wild greens—the foraging for which is an island ritual—herbs, whole grains, potatoes, beans, local cheeses, vegetables, olive oil, fruits, and seafood predominate with an emphasis on seasonal eating. Meat is eaten infrequently and in small portions. Simple, fresh ingredients deliver a pure satisfaction on the palate and its quantitative and qualitative health benefits have been documented. Ikarian honey is the stuff of myths—so rich in polyphenols and ambrosiaesque—and its viscous heather honey is especially prized; this is the local “a spoonful a day” Rx. Olive oil also gets elixir status as its daily use lowers cholesterol and controls insulin levels. The island’s herbal teas are rich in antioxidants and act as a diuretic; sage, thyme, rosemary, oregano, chamomile, and other mountain herbs can be found everywhere, infusing the landscape. Boiled Greek coffee is also rich in antioxidants and shown to improve cardiovascular health. And let’s not throw shade on the zealous 16% proof Ikarian red wine, rich in resveratrol and a typical accompaniment, in moderation (the exception may be at Ikaria’s famous Saint’s Day festivals), to most meals.

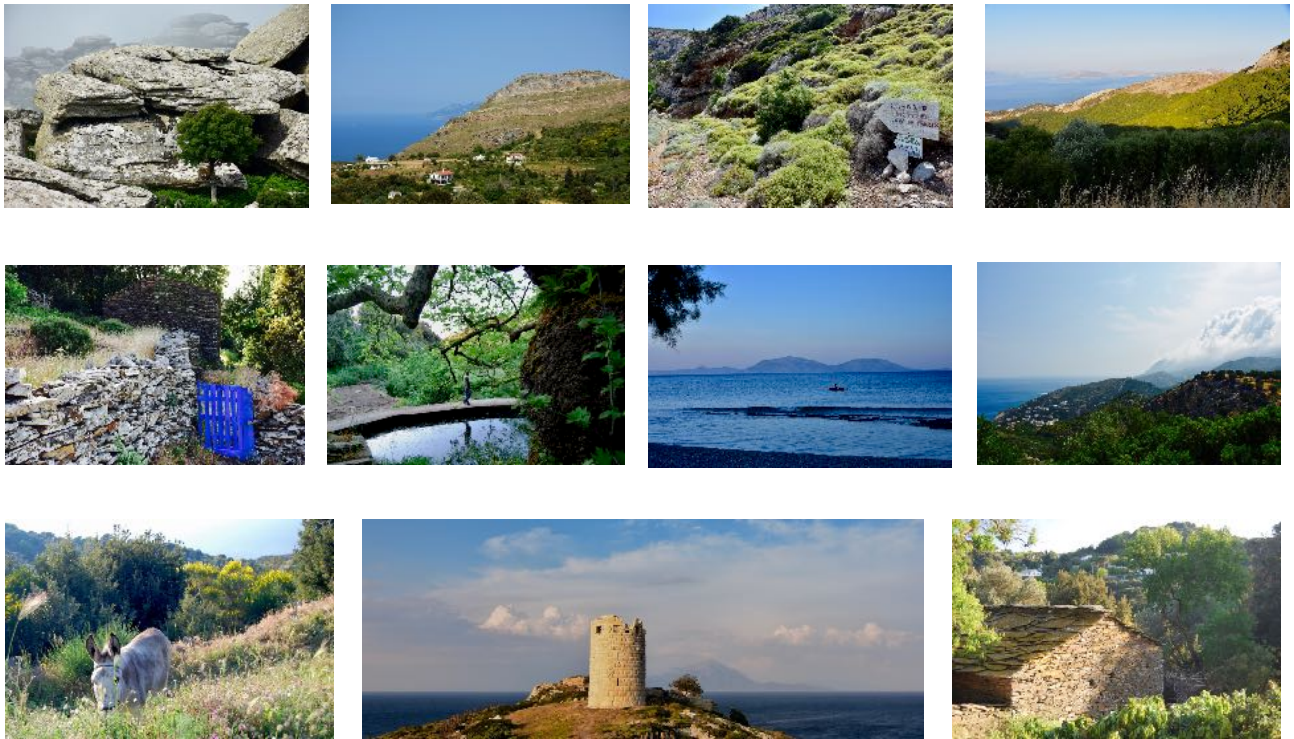
Lemonia’s Texas kitchen, thankfully, retained much of her Ikarian foundation. Processed food would make an occasional appearance, largely to give my grandmother a break from cooking—my *papou* and Uncle Steve didn’t return to this “chore” after Two Bits Cafe was shuttered. So we can forgive the once in awhile Big Mac which dad would procure and deliver for them (as they didn’t drive), and the almost-nightly Corn Flakes that was their sustenance for dinner. Lunch was the featured, large meal—as it was/is on Ikaria—and dolmades, stuffed peppers, sautéed greens (usually spinach and Swiss Chard from her garden), and stewed green beans with tomatoes and potatoes were the traditional Ikarian meals and aromas I remembered fondly. A glass of wine (just

one glass) usually joined this rustic fare. But there was one meal solely for me. It was quasi-Ikarian as it included those hard-to-find tubular noodles called “macaronia” which are a main ingredient in *pastitsio*. For \$5, I would mow their lawn every 1-2 weeks during summer, and my culinary reward was a heaping plate of this macaronia with tomato “sauce” in the form of Campbell’s tomato soup. It was a childhood favorite.



Exercise Naturally

The planaria-shaped island of Ikaria covers just under 100 square miles, approximately 21 miles long by 3-5 miles wide. The mountain range of Atheras forms its spine and reaches a height of over 3,400 feet in just a few miles from sea level. This dramatic geography and terrain—and diverse ecosystems consisting of pine and oak forests, boulder fields, fresh water lagoons, canyons, gorges, hot mineral springs, and high altitude plateaus and valleys—provide a natural gymnasium for inhabitants and another of its “secrets” to longevity. A stair master with sea views is not an idle stair master. Old foot paths, *monopatia*, carved and bushwhacked by goats, mark the island, and walking, naturally, up and down and through this varied topography is the predominant, unconscious



exercise. Sure, there are automobiles for long distances between villages and towns, but this activity is second nature and part and parcel of daily life among all age groups (although, truth be told, some of the younger generation of Ikarians may choose the motorbike over a stroll). Walks to a neighbor's, the church, the cafe, the store, the garden, the beach, the spring to fetch water, along a path to forage, to the vineyard, to Dionysus' cave (where the island's patron god was born, according to legend), to the 4th Century BCE Drakano Tower, and yes, a swim, sail, or row in the Aegean all add up to Ikarians with strong, mobile bodies and aware minds well into their 90s.

The flatlands of Houston were quite the contrast to the mountains of Ikaria where concrete replaced stone, humidity with the dry climate of the Mediterranean basin. But this did not deter my grandparents and Uncle Steve from walking regularly 2+ miles round-trip for groceries along a shadeless path above one of the city's many bayous. Did they regret not learning to drive? Not at all. Walks around the neighborhood or even along a busy esplanade bordered by fast-moving traffic were a hard-wired, daily activity they looked forward to

very much—foreign to the inertia many of us must battle when considering a trip to the gym. From our car, my parents and I would often pass them on one of their strolls, and in a sprawling city where pavement and automobiles reigned and public transportation was negligible, such a sight was an anachronism. But we were the unwise and unenlightened to the benefits of Blue Zone self-propulsion.

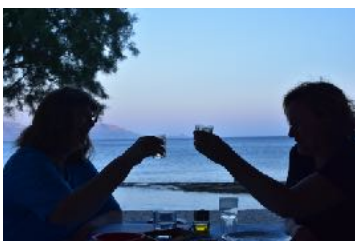
Community + Socialization: Faith, Family, and Friends

Cases of dementia on Ikaria are virtually non-existent, and a major reason is due to the multiple, revered social networks among the islanders which cut across multiple generations. A strong sense of community, independence, and self-sustenance was partly engendered due to geography: the island is in a remote part of the northeast Aegean, had no natural harbors, and many of its original villages were camouflaged in the mountains to hide from corsairs on the prowl. The characteristic, traditional slate, gneiss, and schist dwellings not only provided fortification, but also melded into the landscape's rocky outcroppings. After World War II, during Greece's Civil War, over 10,000 communists and socialists were exiled on Ikaria which then earned the moniker, "The Red Rock." Tendrils of this ideology remain vibrant on the island as it relates to community, and the Greek Communist political party, still has many proud and unabashed sympathizers among Ikarians.

So what are the pools of community that bind Ikarians so snugly as to elongate their lives? Family, first and foremost. Multiple generations may share a home or reside close to each other, and seniors are not shunted to their own separate cocoons (i.e. retirement home, assisted living facility, etc.) to finish out their years. They are revered for their wisdom and fully engaged. Friendships and fellowship are dear too. These expressions play out day-in and day-out at every

possible intersection: cafes (where the sounds of backgammon—*tavla*—are common); tavernas; churches; religious celebrations like Easter, weddings and baptisms; *panegyria* festivals; under a neighbor's pergola; at the town *plateia*; and simply on the street. These interactions are effortless, seamless, and part of the Ikarian fabric. Extended greetings which may spontaneously turn into a more extended shared coffee or ouzo are more frequent and unscheduled than interactions that usually occur in America.

I never discerned (nor was curious enough then to inquire) my grandmother's political leanings, but she left no doubt regarding her social priorities. In one of her disguised, Jonathan Winters mocking-without-malice voices she would often employ—and which I would adore—she would say to me, “Friends are for funny—ha, ha, ha. Family is for... [pause, then hand rolled into a fist and held over her heart] first.” Lemonia was a woman suffused with faith and Greek Orthodoxy could not have had a more stalwart, yet kind and gentle, evangelist. She had an altar in a hall alcove by her bedroom with a Byzantine-styled icon of the Virgin Mary (*Panagia* in Greek) and votive, and regularly attended Sunday liturgy with my parents and sometimes me and my sister if we weren't in the boredom chamber of Sunday School. The church, faith, and fellowship among parishioners were her carryover from Ikaria and this web of shared conviction no doubt fueled her centenarian tank.



Be Festive, Joyful, and Dance like Dionysus

I've alluded to Ikaria's renowned, Dionysian *panegyria*, dust 'til dawn Saint's Day festivals which draw hundreds of Ikarians, Greeks from other islands and the mainland, and foreign travelers. These spectacular, pagan-rooted celebrations of food, wine, music, dancing, revelry, joy—and community—raise funds for a local parish and municipality. They are signatures of summer, happen all across the island, and conjure up visions of a life-loving Zorba who's all-in without abandon. Indeed, there are pilgrims who attend these events with a passion of 1970s Deadheads. Search for "Panegyri [singular] Ikaria" on YouTube and you'll see dozens of videos where the iconic concentric circles of dancers weave like millipedes to the island's ear-worm "Ikariotiko" dance tune. The fiddle gets sinuous and trance-y and dancers young and old cannot resist joining. You can replicate the spirit of these official *panegyria* any where, any time. You just need a musical instrument or two, some wine, and a dance partner or two. You could dance alone, but this solo tradition is more Cretan than Ikarian where joy is best shared. One can understand how these good vibrations and endorphin geysers are, in cumulative moderation, another Blue Zone ingredient.

The closest *panegyri* equivalent in Houston was the annual, autumnal Greek Festival which Lemonia and our family would attend most years. The crowds during this days-long event were immense as the food (*souvlaki*, *pastitsio*, *dolmades*, *keftedes*, Greek salad—and *loukoumades*!) was fantastic, Greek wine was continuously uncorked (let's say the retsina of the period did not hold back its unseemly pine slap), there were kitschy-named shops like "Yiayia's Kitchen" and "Papou's Attic" filled with Greek bric-a-brac and souvenirs for sale, and upstairs in an adjacent church office building, official Greek Tourism Organization films heaved and lurched on Super 8mm. The dancing that took place was largely organized: parishioners, including my sister and I along with cousins, would dress in traditional costumes from X region and learn the steps

and moves to Y dance. I thought this was novel for a very short stint; the year after wearing the baggy, clownish pantaloons from Crete, I called it quits. The Houston Greek Festival was, for a time, the largest of its kind in the southwest and while it did peddle in the same, tired, mustachioed Greek sailor (the sailor cap for sale at Papou's Attic) stereotypes, it did promote the culture through genuine culinary and musical avenues. Festival funds raised, as on Ikaria, went to the church and parish.



Pursue a Purpose / Embrace a Hobby

The final element of Ikaria's Blue Zone achievement is that islanders, as they age, continue to pursue a purpose or embrace a hobby. This is not a sedentary, idle, Boob Tube-watching set of retired seniors staving off or suffering from depression. Minds as well as bodies remain active, attuned. Many Ikarians have their own gardens—a legacy to the island's self-reliance—so tending these flower, fruit, and vegetable gardens becomes a passion. Small scale farming, wine-making, foraging, bee-keeping, and fishing are common vocations or avocations of locals into their 80s and even 90s. Chefs, cooks, and bakers in Ikaria also remain committed to their talents and are valued no matter their age. And Ikarians adhere to an often elusive equilibrium—their edition of the Aristotelian Golden Mean: pursue a purpose but not to the point of stress. Remarkably easy to posit, so difficult to attain.

Lemonia's pursuits were cooking and gardening, the latter of which continued to offer her gratification and happiness in the form of flowers after her era of cooking ended. Spinach, Swiss Chard, cabbage, grape leaves, tomatoes, green beans, and her precious carnations comprised her garden in Houston, and when our fig trees would fruit, she would come to my parents for a day's picking. She could recreate her idealized Perdiki in her backyard with this plenty: her husband and brother-in-law at her "taverna" on the covered patio; *dolmades* steaming on the stove top; icon shining with late afternoon sun; and cicadas providing their hypnotic timbre, provoking reveries from long ago, far away.





Alex Safos is Owner and Founder of Indigo Gazelle Tours (www.indigogazelle.com) which offers small group and private cultural, culinary, wellness, and discovery tours to Greece and Morocco. Guided culinary tours feature celebrity chef, Mediterranean Diet expert, and cookbook author, Amy Riolo (www.amyriolo.com). Indigo Gazelle's "Genuine Greece" tour explores Ikaria and reveals these noted Blue Zone practices across the island. 2021 dates are to be determined. Visit www.indigogazelle.com/tours for details.

