

Lost Tickets



Iraklion, Crete Air Station Gate

It was in the spring of 1973 when I won a small tennis tournament at Hellenikon Air Base in Athens, Greece. The win allowed me to go on, along with a couple of other players, to a regional tournament at Iraklion Air Station on the island of Crete. Shelia went with me. There isn't really much to tell about the tournament itself, although I placed well enough to go on and play at the next level in Madrid, Spain in June. The most excitement came as we were on our way back to Athens.

Shelia, I and the other players had packed our bags and were waiting at a bus stop outside the gate at Iraklion Air Station. While waiting, I and the other guys were "horsing around" a bit which resulted in tumbling over a time or two in the grass. The bus arrived after several minutes and we all climbed on for the ride to the civilian airport, several miles away.

As Shelia and I approached the check-in counter at the airport, I reached into the back pocket of my pants for the tickets and it was empty! The plane was due to leave in less than an hour. My immediate thought was that the tickets must have fallen out while we were waiting for the bus. We ran out of the terminal and hailed a taxi. This was one of those times when I was extremely thankful for having learned to speak Greek reasonably well. I explained the situation to the driver and, unexpectedly to us, he took on the task of finding our tickets as though it were the most important personal challenge of this life.

Honking one's horn is (or was) illegal on the island of Crete. It could result in a stiff fine. Nonetheless, our driver floored the accelerator, laid on the horn and set what must be an all-time record time for the trip to the Air Station from the airport. When we arrived back at the bus stop, the taxi driver jumped out and helped us search for the tickets but they were not to be found.

“They must be on the bus,” the driver exclaimed! I know the bus route. We will catch the bus!” We jumped back into the taxi and made the return trip to Iraklion even faster. He tore through the city, laying on the horn again and finally caught up with the bus on the far side of town from the airport. He pulled up alongside the bus, honking on the horn and yelling at the bus driver to pull over. The bus did stop and I climbed aboard and found our tickets caught in the opening between the seat and the seat-back. He drove like a maniac again, returning us to the airport in time to catch our flight with minutes to spare.

I thanked the driver profusely and attempted to give him a 100 Drachmae bill but he refused to take it. He was genuinely thrilled that he had found our tickets and that we were going to catch the flight home. He was one of many Greeks with big hearts, most of whom I encountered in rural areas outside of Athens.

Sadly, this is what the gate at what used to be the Iraklion Air Station looks like today.



The Crete Aquarium - Looks rather sad....

~~~\*~~~