

**Angela Wade**  
**Stavros S. Niarchos Language Study Fellowship June – Aug 2005**

With the generous support of the Stavros S. Niarchos Language Study Fellowship I spent six weeks at the Ikarian Centre learning Modern Greek. I participated in daily grammar, speaking, and comprehension lessons and attended lectures on various aspects of Greek culture from art to music. My primary goal of reaching a comfortable level of conversation was achieved through total language and cultural immersion.

Before this summer I had never traveled to Greece. I grew up in the Greek Orthodox Church surrounded by stories of Greece. When I arrived, it was amazing to actually be in the country where everyone spoke the secret language of my mother and grandparents. The billboards outside the taxi window displayed what once would have been coded messages, but now I could decipher them.

My first impressions of Ikaria were from the ferry as we circled the island towards the port of Evdilos. Green plants cover the island and tall mountains reach towards the impossibly blue sky. Ikaria is comparatively remote, with only four flights to the island a week and an erratic ferry schedule. For learning to speak Greek it is ideal. Most of the people living there do not speak English so day-to-day life involves complex linguistic tasks.

The school, the Ikarian Centre: Learn Greek in Greece, Greek Language and Art Association, sits on a mountain outside the small village of Arethousa and overlooks the harbor of Karavostamo. The facilities include dormitories for the students and classrooms. On the Centre's website the dorms are described as being hostel-style, which was my chief concern when going to the school. In truth, the rooms are beautiful studios with two person bedrooms and a full bath. This might be helpful to any future student considering attending the program there.

The core of my experience was the intensive language classes. In the morning we had class from nine to one and then a discussion or lecture for about two hours each night. The classes were usually about six students and emphasized speaking and responding. A typical class might include giving out words that we then had to put into a question. This required using the Greek we knew to construct a subject by ourselves. We also had to answer questions posed

by our fellow students. I found this particularly helpful for my conversational skills because I learned to construct what I wanted to say from my Greek vocabulary, instead of thinking of a question in English then trying to translate word-for-word. We also covered grammar, from irregular verbs through continuous passives. In addition to speaking skills, we translated several texts on various subjects including popular entertainers, Greek cultural traditions like weddings, and the environment. From these we built our vocabulary. We were given lists of words to learn that were found in the text. This way, the vocabulary lists were organized thematically, which is helpful in memorizing them.

I stayed at the Centre for six weeks, which meant that I completed three two-week sessions. My fellow students and the instructors changed with each session. The teachers were all amazing and very encouraging. They had distinct personalities and each had special ways of helping the students with various aspects of the language and culture. We had one teacher who, in addition to the language taught us traditional Greek dances. Another taught me about popular music that was on the Greek charts this summer.

Outside of the classroom, I learned more about the Greek culture. Each day after lessons, we drove to the beach or to the larger villages. This gave me an opportunity to meet the local people. In the evenings we journeyed to historical sites around the island and even attended panayuries, or island festivals. On Ikaria, the festivals are still very traditional with dances and the requisite goat soup and wine. The local people, upon hearing that I was learning Greek and was staying on their island for six weeks, were incredibly warm and welcoming. They would patiently speak slowly and simply and actually have conversations with me.

The other classmates were mostly from Switzerland and Spain. They spoke their native languages and very little English. Therefore we spoke only Greek at the school. There was no opportunity for slipping into English. For the first two weeks, I would go to bed with a headache after trying to speak all day. Miraculously, by about the fourth week all the grammar and vocabulary jumbled in my head straightened itself out. I became comfortable speaking in Greek and felt fine using it as my only way of interacting. My language skills evolved significantly over the summer. I am very thankful that I was given the opportunity to spend a full six weeks devoting my energy to Greek studies. I feel that the length of time was important in changing the way I thought in a second language. It also helped me better understand the rhythm of listening to Greek and my accent improved spectacularly.

I would like to extend my most heartfelt thanks to the Stavros S. Niarchos Language Study Fellowship and the Hellenic Studies Department at Yale for providing me with such a great cultural, personal, and academic experience.