

LETTER FROM ATHENS

The Boston Globe

For birthplace of the Olympics, Games are a loss

By Joanna Kakissis, Globe Correspondent | August 18, 2004

OLYMPIA, Greece -- The coral- and- sea- colored Athens 2004 banners had been raised. The ancient stadium that hosts the Olympic shot put competition today had been fitted with a security camera and hardwood stands for visiting dignitaries. The remodeled and air- conditioned archeological museum that featured the god- size sculpture of Hermes of Praxiteles had opened.

Outdoor booths had been stocked with sharp cheese, coffee, replicas of ancient lyres, and glossy maps of the Peloponnese. Sofia Manou had even made a crowd's helping of her acclaimed yogurt, cucumber, and garlic tzatziki dip.

"So where is everyone?" Manou said as she sat gloomily outside her small restaurant in this village of 1,000 people, where the ancient Olympic Games began more than 2,800 years ago. "This was supposed to be our best summer for tourists ever, and it is turning out to be the worst."

Merchants and hoteliers in Olympia, where annual summer tourism is nearly the only source of income, say the 2004 Olympic Games in Athens have devastated them. They say international reports of sky- high hotel prices and the looming threat of terrorism scared away their usual visitors, the annual busloads of archeology- minded Hellenophiles from wealthy countries in Europe. And they say those visitors in town for the Olympics are sticking to the action in Athens instead of venturing to the rest of the country.

It is a familiar lament in countries of Olympic host cities, which usually draw the bulk of the attention and revenue. But Olympia, home of the Olympic torch- lighting ceremony, has waited more than 1,600 years for the Games to come home to Greece.

"Even when the wars were happening in Iraq I saw more people here," said Kyriaki Kontretzou, owner of the Hotel Ilios, which was nearly empty on the weekend before the shot put event and had been that way in the usually busy months of June and July.

"We're waiting for the athletes to come for the shot put on Wednesday, but will the tourists come with them?" Kontretzou said, rearranging the scores of room keys on her checkout desk. "I am a realist. I don't think this summer is going to get any better. It is a lost cause."

Olympia is hosting only one event because it could not retrofit the delicate ancient sporting fields to accommodate modern Olympic standards. The shot put was the easiest event to fit into the stadium, and setting it up did not disturb the archeological site or require remodeling of any kind. The Athens 2004 organizers wanted at least one event in ancient Olympia for symbolic and sentimental reasons.

Olympia sits deep in the western Peloponnese, near swells of mountains dotted with poplar, plane, and wild olive trees and the confluence of the Alpheus and Cladeus rivers. In August, the powerful sun is occasionally relieved by breezes that can loosen a flurry of unripe olives to the ground. Cicadas are the soundtrack, unless a passing radio is blaring Kylie Minogue. At night, an old- style telephone booth lights up as the phone inside rings and rings. No one answers it.

Olympia's residents are quiet and bookish. They can talk with equal eloquence about the founder of the Olympics, King Pelops, and the best way to make braised rooster in wine sauce.

On the weekend before the shot put event, Apostolos Kosmopoulos read Iris Murdoch and sipped white wine in his empty bookshop, Gallerie Orphee. He sat in a windowless corner, listening to the folk singer Savina Yannatou croon about a lost first love. Behind him was a framed photograph of himself at 17,

lighting the Olympic torch in his hometown for the 1964 Tokyo Olympics.

He had read more than ever this summer, consuming a giant volume of modern Greek poetry and a collection of essays from a 1977 symposium in Olympia on meditations about death. On this Saturday evening, he sold a few postcards to a French couple, then sighed. The store was empty again. He returned to Murdoch.

"This is terrible," he said.

Some of his friends said the emptiness was due to the Greek Orthodox holiday honoring the Virgin Mary every Aug. 15, when Greek families spend the evening dancing to traditional music and eating spit-roasted pork. But Kosmopoulos said that's an optimist's perspective.

"No one is going to come here this year," he said plainly.

"That's right," said Dimitris Karabelas, who has run his arts and crafts shop in Olympia for 18 years. "Everyone is having the same problems. There is no business and no interest. It's just a disaster."

About four years ago, Karabelas also opened an adjoining Olympic shop that sells official Athens 2004 products, including backpacks, dolls, T-shirts, underwear, mugs, socks, and beach towels. To honor the shot put event, he has also showcased miniature sculptures of shot put-throwing bearded priests by an artist from the town of Marathon. The sport-loving priests annoy the old ladies in the village, who say Karabelas is destined for hell for featuring them.

Karabelas has bigger problems. What is going to happen to Olympia this summer, he wondered. There should have been some incentive by tour operators and the government to connect vacations in Greece and the Olympics somehow, he said.

"They can do that now, but it is too late," he said. "The Greeks come here out of national pride, but the foreign tourists are staying away. We're actually better off than the rest of Greece, where absolutely no one is going, but we are still suffering. We had hoped for the best."

The sole optimist was Yiannis Papalambros, who is 25 and recently took over his family's souvenir shop. He imagines a stream of tourists coming to Olympia after the Games end on Aug. 29.

"We have got to keep hope," he said. "The Olympics are here with us again, and we must make them memorable."

Outside, a group of Chinese visitors wearing official Olympic identification walked by his store. They were from the organizing committee of the 2008 Olympics in Beijing. They said they were visiting Olympia to get ideas on staging events amid their own history.

They were on a tight schedule and lingered only in the tour of the ancient site. There, they mused about the significance of Hera's altar, where the Olympic torch is lit in a ceremony every four years, and took photographs in the remains of the temple of Zeus. They also posed as runners at the starting line of the ancient stadium, along with a coltish teenage German girl on crutches because of a sprained left foot, a paunchy Greek man and his ponytailed daughter, and a Spanish couple in matching khakis and aviator sunglasses.

One of the Beijing visitors, Chunquan Yu, responded to questions about his impressions of Olympia by handing out Beijing 2008 pins and repeating a sunny and firm mantra: "Have you ever been to Beijing? It is a perfect city for the Olympics."

Manou watched the Chinese officials walk past her restaurant. "Hello," she said to them. "Gyros? Pita? Greek salad?" They smiled and shook their heads. They did not have time to stop, they said.

Manou walked inside to roast more pork kebabs and the spiced meat called gyro. She rubbed her rhinestone cross and frowned.

"Do you have gyros?" asked a slim man with a German accent and two wooden pegs screwed into each ear. "I would very much like one."

He was Lars Leyendecker, a 32-year-old employee of the wireless company that is helping broadcasters with the Games. He had just gotten into town for a week of work and did not plan to stay in Greece for a vacation. He had a sick girlfriend back in Germany and had to return Aug. 30.

But Manou smiled brightly at him and touched his arm.

"My tzatziki sauce is made fresh," she said. "I made it especially for you." ■

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