

Thirteen to Two

By Jim Turner

Other than college basketball and the medicinal value gleaned from the glow of a fireplace, there's not much good to be said for the first three months of a new year. Well, Jean's birthday is in March, so that helps brighten things up briefly. But, all said and done, the days are short and daylight hours are often gray and uninviting. The wind is unfriendly, and the rain days are sloppy. A fireplace, a good book, and a nice meal with good friends can all brighten spirits.

The year 2019 might eventually prove to be an exception because January started off with crazy temperature swings that felt like summer one day and London in March the next. One good remedy for beating the winter blues is to take a memory trip, to revisit a special event or a special time—so that is what Jean and I did recently on a particularly annoying weather day. We took a look back at some photos and relived a wonderful adventure we enjoyed in the summer of 2018. That day didn't get less gray, but our moods certainly did.

Our adventure was conceived during time at someone's home. I don't remember whose, but it is important to note that these are not cocktail hours since nobody in our conversation group could ever be held to such a time restriction. As social chatter is apt to do, the adventure talk began as a small group of four couples, as in husbands and wives—but it morphed into a “come-one, come-all” affair.

Some of the husbands dropped out for reasons having to do with washing their feet or some other urgent matters. Not to worry, though, because the void was soon filled, and the caravan was joined by a delightful gang of young ladies. I mean young by our standards since they were from another generation. Our group settled at 15 people, 13 women and two guys. You decide if that sounds like a really cool thing or trouble waiting to happen.

Eight members of the group were people I had never met before. A couple others were nice women I had met, but I had not spent much time with them. Never mind who knew who or how well, the game was on. We each made our own travel plans to Athens since we were departing from different cities and states. From Athens we would travel together to the beautiful Greek island of Santorini. Sounds pretty cool, huh? Have you ever heard of Edward Aloysius Murphy, Jr.? How about Murphy's Law? If something can go wrong, it will go wrong. Al was onto something.

Those of us on the flight from Raleigh-Durham International Airport arrived in Athens at the expected time and made our way to baggage claim. That's where I first noticed Aloysius leaning against a wall. The second thing I noticed was a member of our traveling party lying ill on one of the benches. I glanced back over at Aloysius and raised my eyebrows. He just shrugged his shoulders and walked away. Fast-forward to the scene outside where our ill friend is being rolled from the airport to a waiting van. Unfortunately, she would be held hostage in her hotel room for the remainder of that day and night and most of the next. She would also miss a fabulous dinner at a roof-top restaurant at the foot of the Acropolis. That's when I saw Aloysius again dining at a nearby table. I knew something unpleasant was coming, and I willed him to have indigestion. On the short walk back to our hotel, victim #2 stumbled on the cobblestone street, fell and suffered an ankle injury. I have a photo of our group waiting inside the Santorini airport—two of them were smiling from wheel chairs.

There were 45 stair steps from the entry gate of the villa leading down to the first level of bedrooms. Another 19 steps down brought us to the second group of bedrooms and a large shared common area. This common space was for the enjoyment of those of us in this eight-bedroom villa as well as for our friends who had booked the villa beside us. The eight young ladies in villa #2 were all a generation younger than us old folks. One was the daughter of our Pine Knoll Shores/Wendell friends and had been instrumental in the whole trip planning process. All of them were successful professionals in need of some serious R&R.

The view from our lower level presented the most breathtaking sight imaginable, and I was not prepared for the beauty that I watched. The rocky landscape cascaded from our patio to the unreachable beach below and to the stillness of the azure

Aegean Sea. We had arrived at our home on the Greek island of Santorini and were about to be spoiled beyond our wildest imaginations.

The stair steps were painted battleship gray, and the stair walls were a brilliant white. They seemed to have been untouched by feet and unsullied by oily hands. Later I would learn that every night the walls were tidied with fresh whitewash and the stairs scrubbed with cleanser. Each of the eight guests in our villa had arrived with the maximum luggage allowed by Greek law, and every single piece, some weighing 50 pounds, was carried down to the assigned suites by one of the villa handymen. Often he brought two bags per trip with one resting on his shoulder and another held in the opposing hand. I called him “Sir.” Sir did draw the line at carrying rolling chairs, so we just tossed the infirmed over the wall and into the pool. Actually, I wish I had thought of that at the time.

Things got better. Victim #1's health improved quickly, and soon she was able to carry her load with the wine consumption. Victim #2 located a crutch and a brace wrap to support her ankle, and she was a real trouper throughout the visit. Back in Raleigh, she would learn that she had suffered a fracture. We plan to award her a prize for something, but struggle with an appropriate award description.

Once settled in at our new digs, we met our two chefs, a delightful couple named Athena (really) and Xeno. They arrived each morning with fresh fruit, homemade yogurt and honey from the mainland—and prepared an unforgettable breakfast that usually included an egg dish or deep-fried French toast, juice and coffee. The meal was consumed outside beneath the canopy and above the temptress sea. While we ate, Athena and Xeno entertained us with geographical and historical stories and gave us good tourist advice. On our last Friday evening there, we booked an evening meal to be prepared and served by them, and I cannot remember a more delightful dining experience anywhere else in the world we have traveled or lived. As hard as we tried, Athena and Xeno could not be persuaded to come home with us.

There were multiple side trips from our villa in Thira to the shops in Fira. This village was about 20 minutes' walking time, but included a billion stair steps. I believe each trip reduced my life expectancy a minimum of two years. The view was “to die for,” so what the heck. There were visits by car to wineries in Akrotini where we watched folks jump in a large wooden vat and stomp grapes. We listened to a Greek musical group outside playing traditional music and participated in the Greek dances done inside the ring. In Cyclades we booked a cruise along the shore which ended with beautiful views of the sunset. Before sunset we were treated to a traditional Greek meal prepared onboard by the crew. While the meal was cooking, most of us took a dip in the salty, very cold sea and grew even more tempted by the smells wafting from the grill.

Leaving the island was not a happy time. We were back in Athens overnight and had a final rooftop meal with the lighted Acropolis behind us. I have a two-hour narrated slide presentation available if there is any interest. So take that, February.

This Month's Puzzle Solutions

U	L	E	X		C	H	A	S	E		S	O	D	S
S	A	V	E		H	O	L	E	S		W	R	E	N
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5	2	1	3	9	6	8	7	4
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6	1	2	4	7	3	5	8	9
3	4	9	8	1	5	6	2	7
7	8	5	6	2	9	4	1	3
1	9	6	2	5	4	7	3	8
8	5	3	9	6	7	2	4	1
2	7	4	1	3	8	9	6	5