

Aerial view of Kos island from my Olympic Air Turbojet window – nothing short of breathtaking!

Back to Where It All Began...

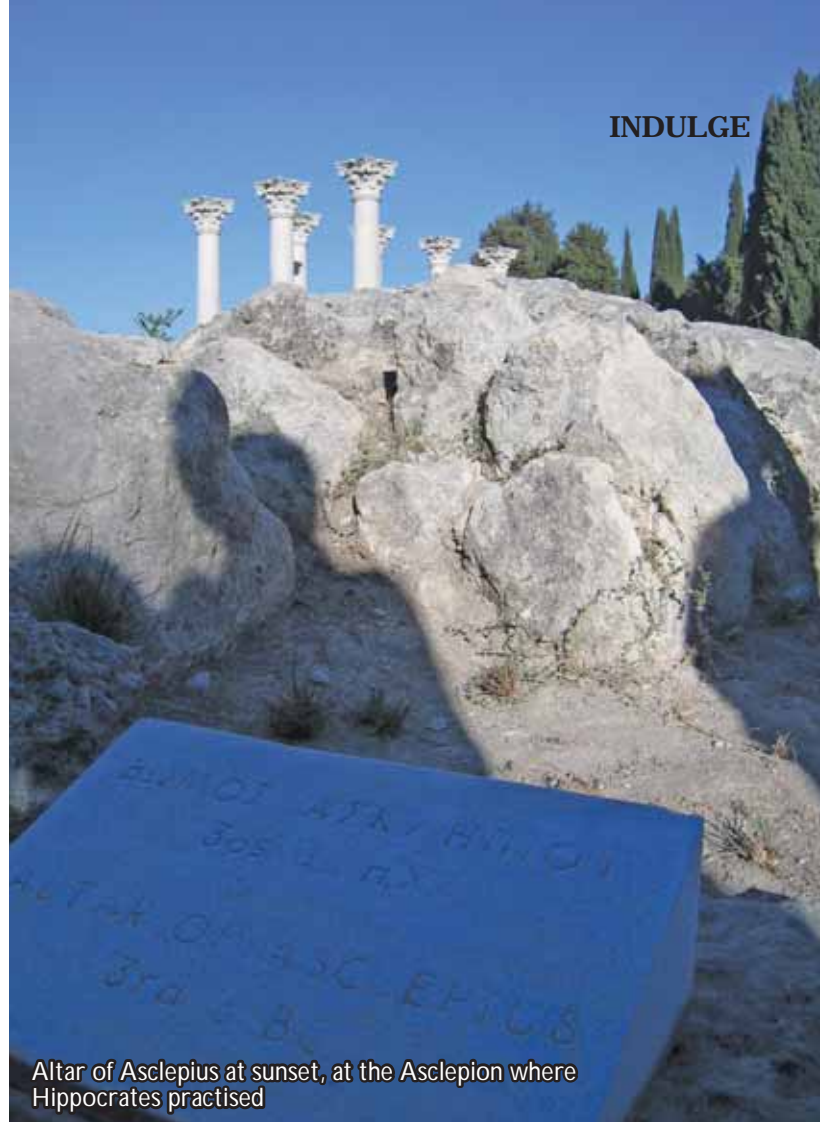
By Dr Juliana Poh

It isn't every day that one gets an opportunity to attend a conference on the Greek island of Kos. Kos was where Hippocrates, the founder of Western Medicine, was born in the 5th century BC. I mean, how many of us have actually reflected on the origins of Medicine, where Hippocrates came from, and what it was like to practice Medicine during his time? Ten other Emergency Medicine physicians must have thought the same way as me when we all signed up to spend five days on this beautiful island of white sand beaches, crystal blue waters, hot springs and mountains in autumn last year. It was to be a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Kos is accessible by plane or boat from Athens, the capital of Greece. From my Olympic Air turbojet window, the aerial view of the Greek islands in the Aegean Sea was nothing short of breathtaking. Most visitors to the island are holiday-goers from Europe, and I acknowledge the tremendous foresight of the Kipriotis family in building the Kos International Convention Centre with its group of hotels to attract physicians from all over the world, who visit Kos to remember why they chose the path of Medicine.

Other than the usual beach stuff, there is plenty to see in Kos. A must-see for all physicians is the Tree of Hippocrates, a plane tree in the centre of the town, which Hippocrates was said to have planted himself and taught under. I stood with my professor under the shady tree on a hot and humid afternoon, trying to imagine how the study of Medicine was conducted outdoors in Hippocrates' time. With a perimeter of 12 metres, this plane tree is believed to be the largest in Europe. It is now hollowed out and its branches have to be supported by scaffolding. It is more believable to say that this is a descendant of the original tree and is estimated to be 500 years old, not 2,400!

Beside this tree is the Castle of Knights of St John, which was first built in 1314 and is one of the many archaeological monuments in Kos. There are many touristy shops crowding its entrance and here, I picked up a copy of the Hippocratic Oath printed on papyrus. Some history to bring home as a souvenir, for only 8.50 euros!



Altar of Asclepius at sunset, at the Asclepion where Hippocrates practised



Back row, L to R: Dr Juliana Poh, Dr Arif Tyebally, Dr Sohil Pothiwala and A/Prof Marcus Ong
Front row, L to R: Dr June Sim, Dr Ho Khoy Kheng, Dr Nausheen Edwin, Prof V Anantharaman, A/Prof Mark Leong, A/Prof Ng Kee Chong and A/Prof Lim Swee Han



Oath taking ceremony conducted in ancient Greek style, solemn and dignified – similar ceremonies are still held for all new physicians in Greece till today



Hot spring at Agios Fokas beach



With the statue of Hippocrates, father of Western Medicine, displayed in the Archaeological Museum of Kos

A visit to the Askleion is a must. As part of the opening ceremony of the conference, we were invited to witness the solemn recitation of the Hippocratic Oath in ancient Greek at the Askleion. This is the site where Hippocrates is said to have received his medical training, and where his descendants continued to practice the art of healing. Today, fresh graduates from the Greek medical universities still attend oath taking ceremonies here! The three levels of this ancient healing sanctuary house the old front terrace where history taking was conducted, ruins of fountains which provided water for cleansing the patients before their physical examinations, an altar where the sick could make offerings to Asklepios, the temple of Asklepios with its many famous statues, and the temple of Apollo. There is also an incubation site where the sick rested. It was definitely thought-provoking spending two hours standing there on top of the hill amidst the ruins, going back in time and appreciating the origins of Medicine!

My quest to learn more about Hippocrates and Kos led me to the Archeological Museum of Kos, which was situated on Eleftherios Square in the heart of Kos Town. The museum boasts an impressive collection of Hellenistic and Roman sculptures excavated in Kos itself, and also many mosaic pavements from houses built in Roman times. The most interesting and important sculpture had

to be that of Hippocrates, dated in 4th century BC. The life-sized statue, which had only one arm when it was uncovered, is placed in a room by itself, showing how highly Hippocrates is regarded in Kos. A short walk from the museum are the ruins of Agora, an ancient administrative centre of Kos that was destroyed by an earthquake in 1933.

Another ten minutes away by foot is the harbour, which serves as a central point for boat tours to other nearby Greek islands. One can even take a boat ride to Bodrum, Turkey, for as little as 50 euros! The beautiful waterfront is littered with many shops and alfresco eateries, selling Greek specialties like *gyros merida* (kebab), *souvlaki* (chicken pita), *barbouni tiganito* (fried red mullet), *chtapodi xydato* (octopus in vinegar) and grilled octopus! Absolutely heavenly! We kept going back every day for more!

For those who get sick of the idyllic beaches and the Mediterranean Sea, and are game for an adventurous workout, there is the option of cycling from along the coast, for a distance of about a quarter of the length of Kos island, to Agios Fokas, a small hot spring carved out by a circular formation of rocks right next to the sea at Psalidi. The ride took me and my companion an hour and the hot spring was a welcome reward when we got there at sunset. As the path was rather undulating and poorly lit, we had to depend on good Samaritans to bring us back to the town centre when night fell. A memorable adventure indeed!

Shopping is best done from evening to late at night in the town centre. There is much to buy from the central market: from ornamental pufferfish, starfish, corals, loofahs and statuettes of famous Greek gods to Greek sweets, delicacies and spices which are commonly used in Greek cooking, such as oregano and cinnamon. One will also be spoilt for choice by the huge variety of olive oil products like soaps, perfumed oils, creams and shampoos! Take a rest and get your portrait drawn for 7 euros along the harbourfront! Well, I shopped as much as I could carry and left little space in my bag to shop in Athens on my journey home!

It was truly a trip for reflection and for renewing the meaning of the words in Hippocrates' Oath: "While I continue to keep this oath unviolated, may it be granted to me to enjoy life and the practice of the art respected by men in all times; but should I trespass and violate this oath, may the reverse be my lot." **SMA**



Dr Poh is a part-time emergency physician, full-time mother, who dabbles in research, education and clan work, leaving no time to spare.



Portrait painting in ten minutes by the waterfront



My own copy of the Hippocratic Oath, printed on traditional papyrus



Delicacies in Kos which are must-tries: grilled octopus...



...and fried red mullet!