

Ask Frau Dulent (Fragen Sie Frau Dulent):

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● Mathematics – Pythagoras on Ikaria

How can you squeeze a trip to Greece out of the math department? Research, research right where it all happened. Well, that was the theory. Go where Pythagoras had his great thoughts – Ikaria, in the Greek Dodecanese islands. Cheap flights from San Francisco to Washington on to London then on to Athens and another mere 11 hours on the ferry. Much waiting in-between connections makes for much thinking. The first math that hit home: Had to pay for the flight myself. The point to be proven was supposed to have to do with surveying the coast line of Greece e.g. is it really the longest coast line of any country on the planet; silly, I know. During the travel to the island I first thought about the Pythagorean Theorem: It doesn’t really work with irrational numbers, does it. On examination of the fundamentals that ensued my confidence was shaken. I mean: Two and two makes four, but then no two are alike so there can’t be four! Can there be? To many cocktails? Perhaps. The other thing is that there is no such thing as a straight line.... Ever! Nowhere! As everything is in motion, all the while. All his sophistry sent me back to the original purpose of my trip: Survey and measure the Greek coastline. Ouzo does not mix with Maphrodamne no accounting for what might happen. It did bring out what had to be faced the next day. When do you measure, at high or at low tide? An even if you are willing to average the length of the yardstick changes the length of the coastline. The smaller the yardstick the longer the coast line gets. How do you account for rocks sticking out of the water? There isn’t any average coming to the rescue. Back to a few bottles of Samos (no Retsina for this talented mathematician.) What was Pythagoras thinking in the midst of Mediterranean food and drink on the shores of the island. Octopuses slamming on the rocks, splat, splat, splat – and he didn’t even come up with the octal system? Sunburn!

Gone fishing, and diving, and boating, and surfing, and drinking, and dinner, etc.

