

## REMEMBER THE SYBARITES

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One of the instructive and fascinating things about independent travel abroad is that in poking along at your own speed with no more than a general plan of direction and goal, you will inevitably run into unexpected situations and come across places of interest you hardly knew existed.

Last year at this time, we were driving along a narrow deserted road on the Ionian coast of Italy, trying to find the remains of the ancient city of Croton. We passed three cars parked in the bushes along the roadside; near them stood a group of disreputable-looking Italian men armed with shotguns. A bit farther on, an equally disreputable-looking armed man—who stepped out in the road ahead of us—waved us down. As it turned out, there was nothing sinister about the encounter; we had just happened to blunder into the middle of an Italian dove hunt. The hunter politely asked that we hold up temporarily so as not to frighten off about ten doves peacefully feeding in the road beyond. We obliged, waited and watched him creep along the bushes to a point about twenty feet from the birds. Whereupon he raised up and blasted away twice at the unsuspecting feeders. He didn't get a feather. Grinning sheepishly, he spread his arms, shrugged his shoulders in resignation, bowed his thanks and waved us on.

The modern city of Croton, on the site of the ancient Croton, doesn't offer much in tourist interest. A chemical works dominates it and its streets are typically dirty, crowded and filled with automobiles and motorbikes. But in the late 5th and 6th centuries B.C., it had the reputation of being the healthiest city of Magna Graecia. Famous for its Olympic heroes and enchanting women, it was the birthplace and hometown of Pythagoras and, during his time, housed not only his famous Pythagorean School but also the finest medical school in all of Greece. One tends to forget that the Greece of ancient history was not confined to the modern area we know now but was a widely scattered, semi-cooperative conglomerate of city states encompassing nearly all the shoreline of the central and western Mediterranean.

There are no obvious relics of the past in today's Croton, but about five miles away on a bluff overlooking the sea at Cape Colonna is a lonely, fluted column rising from a few blocks of temple pavement. From the temple site, a couple of dirt paths lead down—through the yellow roses and wild daisies past a towering precariously balanced, honey combed brick remnant of the city's western wall—to the water's edge. Among the rocks there, more tumbled remains of city walls lie awash in the surf. In the 5th century B.C., the greatest temple of Magna Graecia, dedicated to the Lacinian Hera, Queen of Heaven, stood here. It was supposedly there in the time of Aeneas and, in addition to housing

paintings of the greatest artists of the time, contained one special column of solid gold and the largest gold deposit vault of the empire.

The major Greek city rivaling Croton in the area was the fabulous city of Sybaris, about seventy-five miles away at the confluence of two rivers not far from the Ionian coast and Gulf of Taranto. The story of Sybaris is an interesting one to. When it was destroyed by the Crotonites in 510 B.C., it disappeared completely from history.

If you look up the word "sybaritic" in a dictionary, you'll find it means luxurious, voluptuous or sensual. The city and the Sybarites were once the envy of the civilized world. It was not only the wealthiest city and the greatest market center in all the Greek world, but its citizens were renowned for living a cultured life of ease in luxurious comfort and amid beautiful surroundings. They had the most money and the best houses, wore the finest clothes, possessed the loveliest jewelry and silks and, above all, enjoyed the best foods, wines and sauces known to man. It was Fifth Avenue, Via Veneto, and Rue de Rivoli rolled into one; the swish, gourmet center of civilization.

Despite the reputation of indolence and the impression that they did nothing but lie about on scented couches under silken awnings inventing new gastronomic delights, the Sybarites were energetic businessmen and sharp entrepreneurs. In 600 B.C., in order to capitalize on their trade with Asia Minor ports across the Mediterranean, they founded and colonized Poisedonia (later known as Paestum) on the western coast of Italy below Naples on the Gulf of Salerno. This became a terminal caravan port—which survived the parent city by 1000 years—to which the Sybarites transported, over the mountains, the goods and treasures coming in by sea, thus saving the long sea voyage around the toe of Italy through the treacherous Messina straits and adding immeasurably to the city's fortunes.

According to ancient historians, a group of disgruntled agitators and protest leaders fled from Sybaris to the rival city of Croton and were given political asylum. When Croton refused to hand them back, the Sybarites declared war. It was a bad mistake. The Crotonites not only defeated them and razed the city, but decided to stamp it out for good. This was done by diverting the river Crathis (now called the Crati) over the city ruins and obliterating it under tons of mud and silt. They apparently did a good job.

As we traveled onward last year, heading east along the coast, we passed by the vast plain of Sybaris. There are no crumbled ruins to be seen and only the name gives any credence to the story that a once great city existed here. Qualified archeologists have been looking for Sybaris for almost 100 years now. The Italian government and the University of Pennsylvania, in cooperation, have been searching and digging steadily

since the mid 1950s and only recently do they think they've finally uncovered a part of the city's perimeter wall.

Well, that's the story of Sybaris and Croton. Today in this country, we probably live more easily, enjoy more comfort, have more luxuries and eat fancier food than any Sybarite would have dreamed possible. So the next time you're driving the Interstate in your air-conditioned Mercedes listening to symphonic music on the tape deck and heading for a plush weekend at Sea Island or Ponte Vedra, remember the Sybarites. There may be some Crotonites in our future just waiting to divert the deluge over us.

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