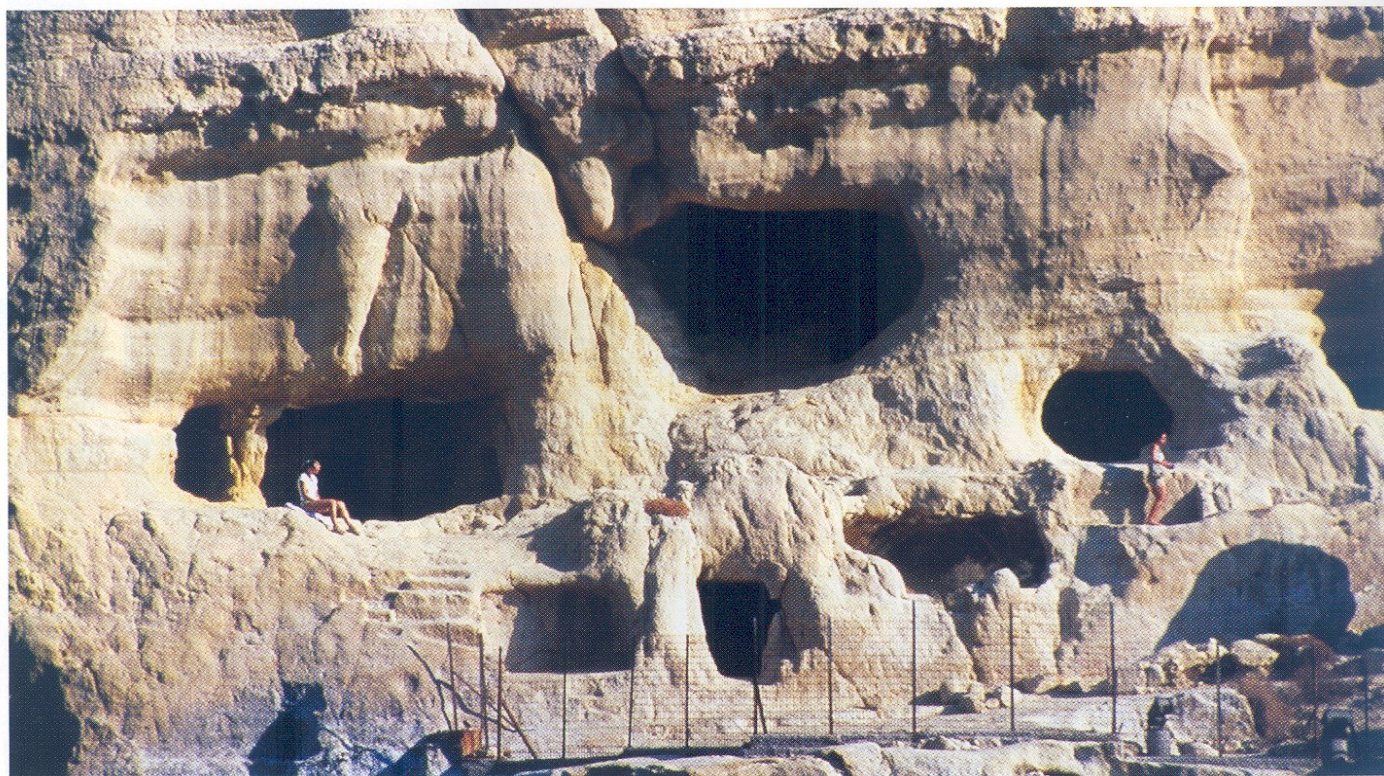




Children of the caves

Joni Mitchell sang of 'scratchy rock and roll' playing beneath the Matala moon, a reference to the honeycomb of caves flanking the beach to the west that became a refuge and symbol of the Sixties' flower children. **Sherri Moshman Paganos** first visited in the late Nineties and returned again this summer.

The moon and stars still startle with their brightness on the beach at Matala, on the southern coast of Crete. Next to the beach, the caves now lie silent at night but in the late Sixties and early Seventies they were alive, inhabited by hippies, mostly Americans and western Europeans.

August 2007 on a windy day in Matala. The Messara bay is very sensitive to winds. It's the *meltemi*, the northerly wind that cools you off in the summer but if it's too strong, sometimes you can hardly swim or lie on the beach. Such a day is today. High waves are beating against the shore and sand is blowing into beach bags and onto towels. As you face the sea, to the right, tourists and visitors are scrambling up and down the cliffs, taking photographs of the "rooms" of the caves, of the magnificent view, the turquoise sea, the deep blue sky, the cliffs on the other side. I leave the beach to walk through the town to find the Zouridakis Bakery. Here is where I've come to find the woman known as "Mama of Matala".

My husband and children and I had met Mama on a family vacation to Crete in 1998. More than anyone else, it was Mama who had helped the 'cave dwellers', the inhabitants who exemplified the hippie lifestyle of the late Sixties. In helping the hippies, she had gone against the prevailing negative opinion about them of the time. I'd been

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told about her generosity and was curious to speak to her. At the family bakery I found her. In her early eighties, she had a sweet, angelic smile, long white hair pulled back in a bun. She wiped her hands on her apron and untied it.

"Oh yes, the cave hippies," she smiled when I asked her. "The first one to come was the son of a German officer stationed in Crete during the Occupation. That was, let me see," Mama paused, "maybe fifteen years or so after the war ended. My family's from Pitsidia, about four kilometers from here, and after the war, we came here and started the bakery. Actually, then it was more of a *bakaliko*."

"What was Matala like back then?" I asked her.

"There was no main street like there is now. All the shops were on the beach. Just our *bakaliko* and *fournos* and a couple of tavernas."

"What did you do exactly to help the hippies?" I asked her.

"I baked bread every day and I gave it to them, I made sandwiches, yogurt, I collected their mail, and some who had money asked me to hold it for them. I looked after them, however I could."

"How did the others in the village feel about the hippies?"

"Not too good," she laughed. "The villagers said they were dirty and there were drugs. It was the dictatorship and the police went after them, so they kept moving higher and higher up in the caves." She motioned with her hand. "There were five levels...And finally, the police made them all leave."

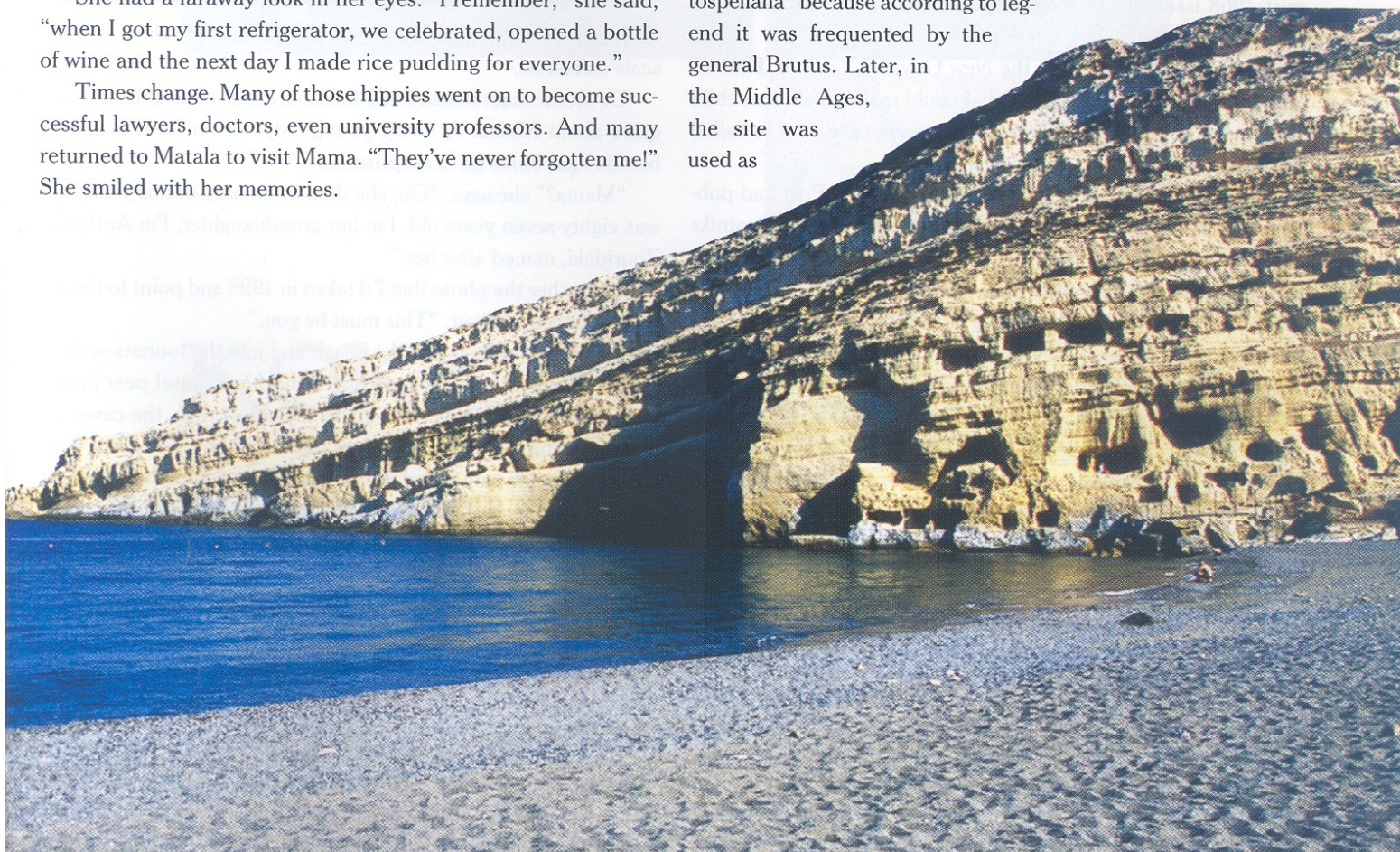
She had a faraway look in her eyes. "I remember," she said, "when I got my first refrigerator, we celebrated, opened a bottle of wine and the next day I made rice pudding for everyone."

Times change. Many of those hippies went on to become successful lawyers, doctors, even university professors. And many returned to Matala to visit Mama. "They've never forgotten me!" She smiled with her memories.

In "Carey", Joni Mitchell sung about the Mermaid Café, where "I will buy you a bottle of wine / And we'll laugh and toast to nothing and smash our empty glasses down". By various accounts, there were two cafes on the beach then. The Delfini Café was the one with the scratchy rock and roll, but the Mermaid Café was the main hangout. One of the cave dwellers, described the Mermaid in 1969: "corrugated faces hunched over kerosene lamps and candles, samples of all the migratory hordes gone A.W.O.L. from the anthills of the world: campus Guevarists in Fidelista fatigues, sexual Leftists and sanyasins in long-flowing robes....Prometheus-poseurs of Hip—all fixated in the dim waxen light like mannequins from Madame Tussauds."

Matala itself has a long history. In mythology, when Zeus raped the princess Europa in the form of a white bull, he crossed the sea and brought her to the beach of Matala. In Minoan times, Matala was used by Phaestos as its harbor and during the Hellenistic period, it provided Gortyn with access to the sea. Most of the ancient city is now submerged, but scant ruins of the acropolis are visible just off the modern mole.

As for the caves, the German officer's son was not the first to stay in there. The honeycomb complex of caves were created in the Neolithic Age, carved out of the soft sandstone cliffs, probably for use as prehistoric dwellings and places of worship. In Greco-Roman and Early Christian times, these shallow caves were used as tombs. It's also believed that early Christians used to hide there from the Romans. One of the caves is supposedly called "Brutospeliana" because according to legend it was frequented by the general Brutus. Later, in the Middle Ages, the site was used as



a leper colony. It wasn't until the 1960s, when the hippies flocked to Matala to stay in them, that the caves became world-famous.

One of the visitors to Matala at that time was Paul Anastasi, now a foreign correspondent based in Athens. Anastasi originally visited for the same reason most did—out of curiosity. When asked what he remembered from the experience, he cited three things: nudity, guitars on the beach, and the rugged beauty. He described the people there to me as “new philosophers, dreamers, idealists, junkies, and just plain cranks.” Matala had gained a bad reputation for reports of drug use, both “real and imaginary”. To authorities of the time, although the thought of drug use was frightening, they refrained for a while from a total crackdown. Anastasi speculated that even though Greece at the time was ruled by the junta, the authorities perhaps did not want to be seen in the eyes of the world as overreacting. The lifestyle there was really no threat to society: just a fad of the time, so you could go home and say “I’ve been to Matala”. Nowadays, Anastasi says, if you want claim the same type of experience as Matala, you need to go further east, to Asia.

Beyond the idealists and those just seeking a good time were people genuinely protesting the political events of the time. The year 1968 is, of course, known as a year of rebellion in America and much of Europe. In the United States, it was a time of violence, the assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert Kennedy, riots in the cities, the time of Vietnam protests and civil rights marches. There was talk of flower children, hippies, drugs, dropping out of society. All of these concerns came together in the August 1968 issue of *Life* magazine in an illustrated article about Matala.

Titled “Crete: A Stop in the New Odyssey,” author Thomas Thompson tries to understand what could make an affluent child drop out of society and go live in a primitive cave, in a so-called “flower child commune” in southern Crete.

Even before the *Life* feature, The Washington Post had published an article in September 1967 under the headline “Beatniks Build an Eden in the Caves of Southern Crete”. The article describes a cliff, “pockmarked with caves...that has become the refuge of droves of European and American beatniks”—beatnik being the word used to describe the counterculture before the word hippy came into use. The word seems to refer to a more innocent time, conjuring up the character of Maynard G. Krebs on the *Dobie Gillis* Show, of Jack Kerouac and his frenetic novel *On the Road*, of poet Allen Ginsberg, writer William Burroughs, and others. Beatniks, hippies, flower children, they were all searching an alternative way of life, which they found in Matala until the police cracked down totally in the early Seventies and closed the caves.

The present-day town of Matala bears little resemblance to the time of the Mermaid Café and the scratchy rock and roll of the Delfini Café. The large parking lot next to the beach charges for parking. Near the lot and the caves, vendors sell their jewelry. The main street is lined with hotels, boutiques, and shops selling beach-



wear or souvenirs; to the left as you face the sea, are clubs and upscale cafeterias.

Down the main street, I find the Zouridakis bakery. Inside I inquire about Mama. A lovely young lady with a fresh face and blonde hair, looks up in surprise.

“Mama?” she says. “Oh, she died in January of this year. She was eighty-seven years old. I’m her granddaughter, I’m Anthoula Zouridaki, named after her.”

I show her the photo that I’d taken in 1998 and point to the little girl in the red chair. “This must be you.”

I decide to walk across the beach and join the tourists scaling the cliffs. I climb up to the so-called “third level” and peer inside some of the caves. With beds made of slabs of rock, the caves indeed have the feel of natural rooms that could hold five or six people. Also on the same level are the giant thrones, chairs chiseled out of the rock, perhaps where the “senior members” sat at one time. Now under the Archaeological Service, the caves have a sign outside the gate saying “Roman Cemetery”, in this way emphasizing only their historic use as Roman tombs. The site is kept carefully locked once the sun goes down.

After sunset, the beach will clear, the tavernas and clubs will fill with music. The caves will stay silent with their secrets, and the moon and stars will shine in the Matala night.