

SKYROS MAGIC



By Crysse Morrison

'What is it about Skyros? It's supposed to have some special magic, but what exactly?'

Like most people who talk about Skyros, I get asked this frequently, in varying tones of curiosity from awe to cynicism. And like most, I suspect, I respond with slightly glazed eyes and a look of indefinable rhapsody. As a writer I should, of course, be able to articulate every aspect from concept to specific elements but in fact it's very difficult to convey the experience of Skyros in words. I find myself saying limply 'Well, beautiful location, inspiring facilitators, and they know how to create a community where everyone can discover and explore who they really are...' before fading inevitably 'You really have to go there to understand.'

Crysse is an author and experienced creative writing teacher who has published two novels (with Hodder & Stoughton) and over forty short stories. She also writes for First Cut Theatre company, performs poetry, leads community projects, is a Writer in residence with Frome's Merlin Theatre and has a regular column in Writing Magazine. She became a full-time writer following a Skyros writing course.

It is genuinely difficult to explain the impact the experience of Skyros has on so many lives. How many other holiday tour operators could throw a party in London and have participants from decades back thronging from all parts of the country? How many other holidays have reunion groups which maintaining contact and friendships for years? But Skyros participants are enthusiasts, not fanatics, and this is an important distinction. Skyros is not a cult, a clique, or a coven. People of all ages and professions travel to a Greek island for a couple of weeks,



experiencing sun, sea, laughter and companionship - all the ingredients of the usual short holiday - and most return with the recognition that their lives have slightly, subtly, altered.

More than ten years ago I went to Skyros for the first time. I'd been on the mailing list for several years and looked longingly at the delicious images and enticing text. This was the year I took the plunge, withdrawing from my university Creative Writing course using the fees instead for a writing course in the sun. It was the best decision I'd ever made. Beneath those blue Greek skies - that intense, bright, fudge-thick

blue I've never found a word for - I made a commitment to writing which started a journey to publication and to becoming a full-time free-lance writer of novels, stories, and poetry.

When I came home I wrote a brief account of the course and sent it to a writing magazine. It was published. Encouraged, I submitted another article, this time on an aspect of fiction. And another... and another. Ten years on I am a regular contributor with my own 'personality column'. I'm also a published novelist, broadcast dramatist, performance poet, and creative writing tutor. So it's difficult to talk about what Skyros has given me without sounding hugely smug, as the list of outcomes includes just about every writing success I've had.

Iwent to the island with no idea what to expect. Skyros courses had a reputation for changing lives but I was wary of this aspect - I wasn't approaching any crossroads as far as I was aware. Of course I was, as we all are, if we look, since every hour offers numerous possibilities most of us choose, generally, to ignore. Going to Skyros showed me that, and showed me the creative energy of accepting change too.

Enjoyable though the writing holiday was, it wasn't the content of the course which had this profound effect. It was a glimpse of the philosophy and ethos of Skyros - the notion that it is possible to make community without hierarchy, based on instinctive goodwill and generous intentions, without any special selection of members. This glimpse, essentially, did change my life.

I realised that if it is possible to create a valuable and rich community from such a simple premise then it must be true that every member is genuinely valuable. As Nelson Mandela asserted, we all have a shining light to contribute; we are all ordinarily unique. Recognising this made me understand there is no limit to the way I can explore my potential and choose to express it.



I made a commitment: to bring writing into my life and to return to Skyros as a full-time writer.

Within a year I was made redundant from my post as FE lecturer in Special Educational Needs and opted for early retirement - I'm proud to tell aspiring writers this when the fear they've 'left it too late' or 'missed the boat' - and to focus on writing. I'd already had some success with short stories so I turned to drama for stage and radio, and co-founded a theatre company devising performances for children. Then I realised that to fulfil my dream I should really publish a novel. Otherwise, I felt, I'd be like a mountaineer who scales only foothills - like claiming to be a

footballer but saying 'I don't do matches, I just dribble.'

Once again I went back to Skyros principles. I took Goethe's maxim: Boldness has magic in it... The risky edge is the place for a writer, I decided. I also believe you become what you do. If I didn't reach out for what I wanted, then I'd become someone who dared not achieve her dreams.

My first novel was taken immediately by an agent who had confidence in my style and my story, though she did tell me 'If you were 20 years younger and had long blonde hair and legs up to your armpits I could get you a publisher tomorrow, but this may take a little longer.' I wasn't offended. This was reality - and overcoming this could act as encouragement for other writers. It took a year for my agent to find the



right editor, at Hodder & Stoughton. 'Morrison's debut proves her a superb storyteller' said The Times. Just before my second novel was published I went on a Skyros course again, this time to Thailand. My life had jolted in another direction just before the start of the trip: my long-term relationship had



collapsed and I was temporarily house-less.

Once again synchronicity convinced me that there is some special quality in Skyros communities which enables universal energies to flow. Which brings me back to the point that it's difficult to convey the potency of Skyros without sounding overly rhapsodic. So to keep a sober tone, my experience was, that once again, Skyros delivered exactly what I needed. I was in no mood to polish

up my word power, so I opted for Hazel Carey's sessions - singing, dancing, playing on the beach, and rediscovery - the energy I needed to face my future with confidence and hope.

For the last five years I've returned to Skyros to lead creative writing sessions each summer as part of the Writer's Lab, enjoying working with participants to achieve their own dreams, and fulfilling that glimpse of an enriching, rewarding, exciting, life as a full-time writer which the island gave me on my first visit over ten years ago.