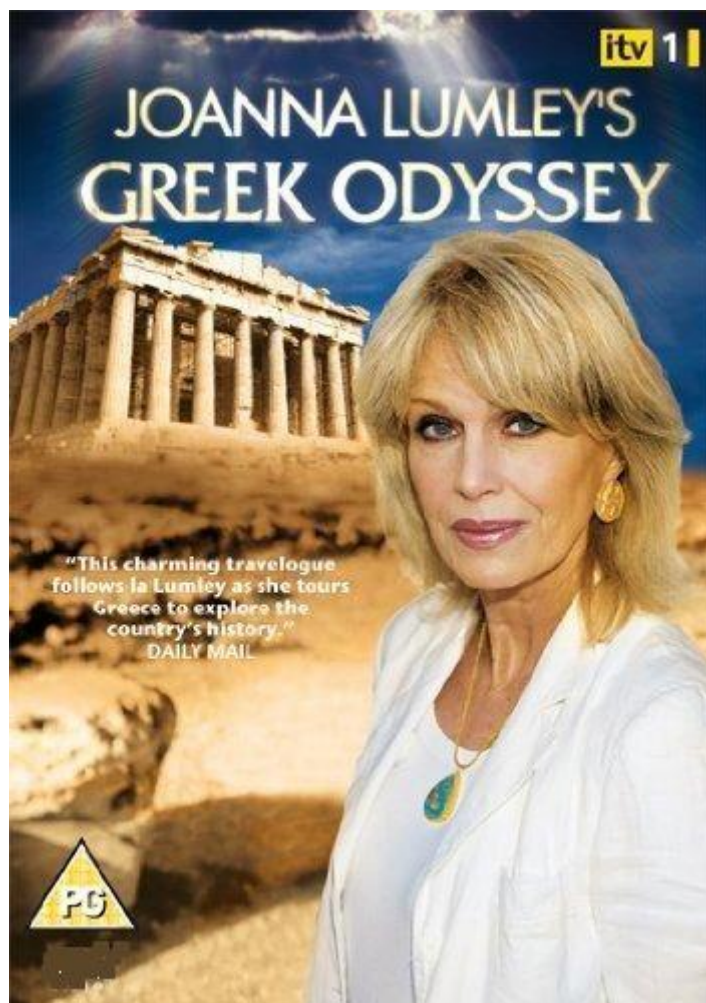


Joanna Lumley's Greek Odyssey



Reviewed by Garry Victor Hill

Presenter and Narrator: Joanna Lumley. Directed by Rob Farquhar & Dominic Ozanne. Produced by Sarah Taylor & Matt Bennett. Executive Producers: Joanna Lumley and Clive Tullah. Music by Debbie Wiseman.

Length: 45 minutes for each of the four episodes. Production Company: Tiger Aspect Productions. Distributed by BBC/ITV 1. Release Dates: October 2011-2012 (British television) DVD release: November 2011. Check for ratings. Rating: 85%.

As different crew members worked in teams, often in only one episode, not all the crew have been credited here.

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Written Without Prejudice.



Joanna Lumley.this woman was born in 1946. Documentary proof exists.

The four part mini-series *Joanna Lumley's Greek Odyssey* has the virtues which usually appear in her documentaries. These include beautiful photography and a deft narration with that voice that soothes, amuses, beguiles, enchants and changes to wit, irony, sadness or compassion exactly as the situation requires. Lumley also knows how to put herself into the picture, sometimes in self-mockery, often in a supporting role. She also knows when to not be in the picture and let the settings and the people tell their stories. Another great virtue is that she steers a fine line between creating one of those sad documentaries which present the dreariness or horrors of the developing world and recreating those vapid all too pretty travelogues of the 1950s and 1960s. The reality she

presents has many moments of happiness and beauty, but they are tempered with sadder stories and a sometimes pensive narration.



A Corfu Beach

Wikipedia

Perhaps her greatest strength is the way her shows give us unexpected and interesting aspects of the lands she visits. With this new, previously unknown knowledge viewers then perceive these lands in new ways. Her odyssey starts in Athens where despite the financial crisis, she finds a nightclub where patrons pay exorbitant prices to throw flowers at each other as a stress relief. The old Greek way of reducing stress by smashing crockery has been outlawed due to injuries. In contrast to the rush and bustle of Athens Lumley visits a mountainside ghost town where the sole resident, an aged woman, lives on a staple diet of nearby weeds. She supplements this by occasional gifts from visiting relatives. She cooks a meal for Lumley, who finds it delicious. Far from being in a tragic situation, the old woman loves living in the village; she once lived in a city for two years and disliked it. And the rest of the village's population? They have migrated to Athens or gone overseas. Greece remains a nation with a phenomenally high rate of migration: as late as the 1980s Melbourne Australia was the world's second largest Greek speaking city.

Thessalonica, Greece's second largest Greek city, gets more screen time than Athens. We are shown the spacious, vibrant, colourful markets and town square and more sadly, the memorial to Thessalonica's many Jewish victims of the holocaust. In the major incident the Jews were rounded up in the town square and forced onto trains which took them directly to northern Europe's

extermination camps. Lumley interviews city officials who had to deal with Greece's then current financial crisis (2011) and surprisingly finds them full of optimism, energy and plans. Amongst the varied people she comes across these characteristics are frequently found. Few who appear are financially rich, but they live rich lives through appreciating what they have. Village wrestlers, retsina makers, fortune tellers and their clients, priests, singers, border guards and soldiers, marathon runners and tour guides all show these characteristics. Could this be because of the way the past, a past that is both full of achievements and surviving foreign conquest, is ubiquitous in Greece? From the Persians onwards Greece has been invaded. Macedonians, Romans, barbarians, Moslems, crusaders, Venetians, Ottomans and Nazis have all brought great troubles and few benefits - and yet Greece always endures. If past troubles are all around, so are the traditions and customs, the landscapes and the benefits, all of which *Joanna Lumley's Greek Odyssey* shows.

In Greece the past permeates life, obviously through architecture. Apart from the usual high rise tenements in the big cities and hotels in tourist hot spots, very little architecture in Greece seems to date from after the Second World War; this factor alone makes the past ubiquitous. However this happens through other ways, not always as expected. Traditions, superstitions, religion, a vivid, very alive folklore and love of narrative, local entertainments and ethnic enclaves left by the tides of history also play their part in keeping the past very much alive. We see Corfu as an outpost for British expatriates as she chats with Corfu's cricket team. The island has an amazing British heritage which the Greek residents have absorbed. Apart from cricket, food and architecture, there are Corfu's brass bands, unchanged since Queen Victoria's time. A statue of her still stands in the town square.

On the south coast of the Peloponnese she charts a boat to go to 'The Gates of Hades' a sea cave from ancient mythology which still exists and remains unexplored due to local superstitions and beliefs – and obviously dangerous currents hurling into the shallow cave. On the island of Patmos Lumley visits the Orthodox church where Saint John supposedly had the vision he recorded in the Book of Revelation. The church is more cave than building, making for an odd appearance, but that only adds to its attraction. She visits a church built during the Ottoman era. The Moslem rulers gave permission for its construction, on condition that it would be built in forty days. Apparently they thought that it could not be done, but they underestimated Greek determination and energy. Today this solid church (which actually looks the size of a cathedral) shows no sign of being a rushed job. It is replete with embossed arches, mosaics, lead lights and all the other usual religious accoutrements.

Until recently Greek Orthodox church services were gender segregated, so Lumley shows us the female section, an upstairs level. Here vivid if stylized life size depictions of female saints decorate the walls.



*A streetscape in Corfu. Photographer: Mark Ryckaert.
Wikipedia/Creative Commons*

When she does show what audiences would expect in a documentary on Greece Lumley does so in pleasingly unexpected ways. At the acropolis the slow, exacting restoration work is explained to the last minute detail: everything new must exactly match what has survived. At Mount Olympus the marathon race up the mountain contrasts with the voice over about resident Greek gods and a

questioning of the dubious reality about the first marathon race. In the ancient open air amphitheatre the marvellous and miraculous acoustics are demonstrated by Nana Mouskouri singing Ave Maria unaccompanied. Her voice comes strong and clear up a steep incline – and for what looks like well over two hundred metres. The nine muses are explained and examples are given, including charming reed music by an idyllic rural creek, where in mythology a muse appeared.



A street scene in Thessalonica. Wikipedia

The tragedies and sadness evident in so much of Greece's past (but not in travelogues) also is frequently dealt with, once again in surprising ways. In the 1950s film *Ill Met By Moonlight* the legendary kidnapping of the Nazi commander of Crete was depicted, but not what the Nazis did in the aftermath. Here an aged survivor who was one of the few civilians to escape the Nazi's retribution on a Cretan village recounts the massacre. Similarly another survivor of the 1920s partition also tells a similar story. Not generally known in the west was the way the modern Greek and Turkish states were established by partition in the early 1920s. Similar to the situation in 1947 when India and Pakistan



*As the photograph above shows, Lumley visited the acropolis during the prolonged restoration.
Both photographs courtesy of Pinterest*



were partitioned, large numbers of people migrated on ethnic and religious lines. In the Greek-Turkish partition this was not always voluntary and while not as violent as in India in 1947, ethnic massacres happened and we are given an eyewitness account. The ethnic cleansing process was incomplete and Lumley visits a small remote Moslem community in northern mainland Greece which ekes out a living by traditional farming. Amazingly the nearby Greek-Turkish border remains fully manned with military contingents and Lumley can only interview Greek soldiers.

The only fault with this series must be that so many things could not fit into four episodes. The twenty first century financial crisis, Greece's mass immigration and the effects of mass tourism get in passing mentions. Minoan civilization, Venetian trade, influence and partial conquest, the reunification of Greece, the civil war of 1944-1949 and Athenians battling pollution do not get a mention.

Lumley concludes with a roll call of Greece's contribution to the world. Democracy, the Olympic Games, the origins of western medicine, drama, sculpture, architecture and law are all recalled. Few nations have given so much.