

TRAVEL

Edited by
Roger Bray

THEY are crawling around in the dark on all fours making animal noises. Among them Bearded Bernie, a Liverpool solicitor, a translator and a girl who cycled here from Barcelona.

The scene: a lovely Greek farmhouse. The aim: to find your partner for the co-listening exercise, hold hands, listen intently to what he says, and then feed him back his words.

Welcome to the Guardian readers' Butlin's. This is Atsitsa, the holistic holiday on the Greek island of Skyros; a sort of spiritual Club Med cum Club 18-70. Wind-surfing and soul-searching in the sun. Hi-De-Hi! gone New Age. (Meditating and hugging are among the spiritual offerings.)

They gave me a room above the taverna, with a noisy generator that made it sound as if I were living in an ice-cream van. I moved to a room with a view and three others. An exercise in communal sleeping, this. Some beds are in the stone and bamboo huts, others in the farmhouse.

To lunch in the garden—a sunny terrace planted with geraniums, oleander, bougainvillea and jasmine. The smell of figs, pine, hibiscus and lemon hangs in the air. "Please don't put toilet paper down the loo," runs one of the announcements during a meal of pulses, pasta, salad, green beans and very red soup.

The cook this week is an

The lentil touch

A holistic holiday antidote to city stress or a brown-rice Butlin's?
CAROLINE PHILLIPS samples sun, sea and soul-searching on Skyros

organic-vegetable grower who trained at the Macrobiotic Society in Bristol, helped by a trainee blues singer who has worked with handicapped children.

The bounding Swede with red sunglasses and colour-coordinated tracksuit laughs—ho! ho! ho!—sitting next to Maddy the potter and aromatherapist who teaches Swedish massage. Nearby a woman breast-feeds her two-year-old.

You wash your own plate. A democratic ethos—this holiday is, after all, an exercise in communal living; its inspiration the ancient Greek philosophy of political and active participation in the community.

When you chop communal veg, it's known as a Workgroup. (You also make your own bed and clean your own hut.) Daily, they hold "dem-

os" groups—for people to chinwag over problems, plans and suggestions—and "ecos" groups, to ask for support and raise feelings, anxieties and pleasures about the holiday.

There are 50-ish sun 'n' soul-searchers, many single, professional women in their mid-thirties. The organisers promise we will feel like an extended family at the end of our stay. It's safe here, you can trust, take risks and allow the child in you to emerge, in the words of the director; a holiday that offers friendship, creativity, self-awareness and a warm community, according to the blurb.

You can rise at dawn to paint your dreams, do t'ai chi or a touch of ashtanga yoga (sort of aerobics-gone-Indian). At hundreds of pounds a week, you



would expect some electricity when you wake up—but we get a torch for the bathroom. Someone suggests giving Metaxa to the wake-up-call cockerel.

Some of the hilltop showers are (purposefully) door-free. The turquoise Aegean beckons—by day, with a deserted island to which you can swim.

Bill—Jesus sandals and white pants—does classes on how to enliven your personal energy. He teaches shiatsu under the fig tree—a very "feely feely" class—in the Apricot Circle. Or how about a touch of Creative Dance with a lady who taught Zen wrestling? Or painting—getting in touch with the creative, right half of your brain, natch? Canoeing? Or a spot of fantasy and self-awareness?

Participants opened up and there was a feeling of hilarity and physical well-being: a friendly, supportive

and optimistic atmosphere among the guests, many from stressful jobs who were opting for alternative self-indulgence and a vacation from the phone.

And why not? After all, the young Achilles got sent here by his mother the sea goddess to escape his destiny.

HOW

THE Skyros Centre (season 5 May-5 October), 1 Fawley Road, London NW6 1SL. For a brochure phone 071 431 0867. Two weeks £385 to £450, full board and tuition. Charter flights to Athens extra, plus bus and ferry or flight to Skyros.