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Solving travelers' ice cube conundrum

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One solitary cube.

Sitting on the shaded veranda outside a Greek taverna, I contemplated the single half-moon of frozen water rattling around in my glass. The tired old joke immediately sprang to mind: Have they lost the recipe? The country's surrounded by water on three sides, I thought, and yet they don't have an extra drop to spare for the freezer? Has global warming taken

such a toll that ice is a precious commodity here?

I know what you're thinking: another snooty American who demands the comforts of home while traveling abroad. I beg to differ. I'm a firm believer in going with the flow while on vacation, of immersing myself in the culture, subscribing to the whole "when in Rome" bit.

Before this trip, I boned up on Greek history, got tips from my brother the classical scholar, and even learned some of the language. And I gladly dove into the culinary pleasures of the Mediterranean country - moussaka, tzaziki and the wonderful salad of cucumbers, tomatoes, onions and feta.

But I do admit to one vice on my foreign jaunts: I like my ice.

OK, so my cube quest isn't the most pressing concern in world travel, but it's certainly not anything new. In his book "America Revisited," detailing his 41/2-month excursion to our country in the late 1800s, British journalist George Augustus Sala called ice "the Alpha and Omega of social life" in the United States.

I've decided to chalk up my fixation as a globally recognized peculiarity, something the natives shake their heads over and chuckle, "Oh, those crazy Americans!"

My first overseas trip was nearly 24 years ago with my husband while I was pregnant with our daughter. The car had been banged up in an accident, and I wanted to use the insurance money to travel (and to let my husband hammer out the dents).

"Let's go to Europe," I pleaded. "One last fling before we become parents."

We enjoyed two pleasant weeks on the Continent (despite swollen ankles), and I had fun being fussed over in several languages.

What I didn't like was the lack of ice. Tepid was the name of the game as far as beverages were concerned. Ick.

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It took another 18 years to get back to Europe, when I accompanied our now college-age daughter (who must have caught the traveling bug from that in-utero jaunt) to Scandinavia. I again resigned myself to the whole room-temperature thing, but to my delight, I discovered that while my drinks didn't have quite the copious amounts of rocks found in stateside restaurants, I had enough to satisfy me. The hotels even had ice machines.

The experience, however, left me sadly unprepared for the next year's trip to Greece. I sensed trouble from the moment we touched down in Athens, when the strong iced coffee I bought at the airport skimmed on the first ingredient. I didn't realize just how desperate the situation was until faced with that forlorn cube on that sunny day in Meteora.

Sure, my canned cola was chilled - a definite step in the right direction - but seriously, one lousy piece of ice?

I mused out loud that the token cube was to pacify nutty Americans who for some perverse reason like to water down their drinks. My mother merely shrugged, shockingly indifferent, while my beloved offspring, as usual, rolled her eyes.

At some point it dawned on me: Maybe I had to ask for ice. I thumbed through my Greek dictionary for the right words.

That night, Mom dragged us to one of those "Greek by Night" dinners, where local dancers break plates, and men willingly mount the stage to cavort with belly dancers and look silly. Bottles of wine and ouzo graced the table, but since none of us drink much alcohol (hard to believe, I know, especially of a college student), I waved down a frazzled waiter.

"Tria Coca-Cola Light key pagos, parakalo," I proudly asked. My reward was three European versions of Diet Coke and three glasses, each with three ice cubes. Hallelujah! A small victory, but a victory nonetheless.

My daughter, the math whiz, in an attempt, I suppose, to pacify her scarily obsessed parent, came up with a theory about the international ice conundrum. The amount of cubes in a drink, she postulated, is inversely proportional to the temperature of the country in which the beverage is served. I made her write out the equation, which looks like this:

$X(\text{ice}) \propto 1/T(\text{temperature})$

I believe she's on to something! My latest research took place earlier this year when she and I went to Egypt. We spent 10 warm days there with nary a cube in sight. I wondered if they had gone the way of the pharaohs. So far, my daughter's batting a thousand with her hypothesis.

The good news is that she now informs me she wants to take the trans-Siberian railroad sometime in the near future. If I go along, one thing seems certain: according to her premise, I should have plenty of ice.

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