

Sylvia's Sanctuary

A home for all creatures
great and small in Kanoni

When I arranged to visit the Silva Project in Kanoni, a non-profit organisation dedicated to preserving the rare Skyrian horse, I was expecting it to be interesting – after all, I was researching it for the benefit of an ISLAND article, so it would have to be! What I wasn't prepared for was to be completely enchanted; let me explain.

The Silva Project is situated on the Kanoni peninsula, just outside Corfu town, in a walled and gated property, which is also the home of Sylvia Dimitriades-Steen, the founder of Silva. The Dimitriades family bought the house in 1954 but it was only twelve years ago that Sylvia moved here permanently from Athens.

What is the Skyrian Horse?

The Skyrian small horse mentioned in old manuscripts as, “Το αρχαιο Ελληνικό Ιππάριον”, existed on many of the Aegean islands for centuries. Since it only survived on Skyros, it is known today as the Skyros small horse. During the winter months, when food and water were plentiful, the horses lived in the southern, mountainous part of the island commonly referred to as the “vouno”. At the onset of summer, they migrated north in search of water and food. Their non-aggressive demeanour enabled farmers to use them for agricultural work, mainly threshing. When modern threshing equipment was introduced on the island in the mid 1960s, this symbiosis came under threat and the survival of the Skyros horse has since been, for the most part, dubious at best. One of the largest threats facing the breed is the prevalence of donkeys on the “vouno” that breed with the Skyrian horses and prevent propagation of the breed. Legend has it that Alexander the Great took Skyrian horses with him when he left Macedonia to conquer the world. Another claims that the magnificent horses depicted in the great friezes of the Parthenon are Skyrians.

On entering the grounds we are greeted by lush vegetation, ancient trees and an air of tranquillity. It soon becomes apparent that Sylvia does not just provide sanctuary to the endangered Skyrian horse; she seemingly opens her home and heart to any creature in need of care and shelter. Our arrival at the estate's 200-year-old crumbling mansion is greeted by a cacophony of barking and deafening shrieks, the later of which, we soon realise, are emanating from the depths of a hanging cage on the veranda; it is a minor bird, thank goodness, and not some peculiar beast about to lunge at us! Sylvia herself, a petite Greek lady who speaks impeccable English, tells us that at the moment she is caring for 17 dogs and, sure enough, they are everywhere – there's even a little lap dog lounging on a bed in the living room! But this is nothing compared to what we see next – an entire room, ex dining room, full to bursting with cages, and in the cages, birds of all types. We are amazed to discover a further two outdoor sheds with a host of feathery occupants and we learn that Sylvia takes in sick and injured birds, nurses them back to health and then releases them into the wild again.

“By the end of the morning, we have fallen head over heels for Sylvia's chaotic yet somehow peaceful corner of Corfu.”

The 900 year-old lemon-scented eucalyptus



The estate's church, where Sylvia and her daughter were both married



here it is used for therapeutic riding and equine assisted therapy for children and adults with mental or physical disabilities. We are told that therapeutic horseback riding brings about remarkable benefits to its riders, such as improvement in flexibility, balance, and muscle strength, through stretching both mind and muscles. For someone who cannot walk, see, or communicate easily, riding a horse allows that person to experience a new sense of freedom. Interestingly, Sylvia herself studied child psychology under the famous Swiss psychologist, Dr. Jean Piaget – see text box on Sylvia below.

Sylvia Dimitriades Steen

Sylvia Dimitriades Steen studied Child Psychology and teaching methodologies for students with special needs at the University of Geneva under Dr. Jean Piaget. She later started *Theotokos*, a non-profit organization for people with special needs, which has since become the largest educational centre for people with special needs in Greece. She continues to serve on its board today. She has worked at training teachers in special education, and has served as a board member of *Melissa*, an organization on Corfu for older children and adults with special needs.

Mrs. Steen has loved animals since she was a child. She is a founding member of Greek Animal Welfare and the Greek Canine Society. She serves as president of the Ark, a group that rehomes stray dogs on Corfu, and collaborates with the Alkyoni bird centre of Paros for the care and rehabilitation of wounded birds.

We witness a children’s riding lesson taking place; a group of cute ponies being led around a paddock, a cheerful young woman, who is apparently a well-known therapeutic instructor from Brazil, instructing the kids to perform various fun exercises while on horseback. We are impressed – this is not what we are led to expect from our laid back, why-do-today-what-can-be-done-tomorrow island.

As Sylvia shows us around the rest of the estate, we learn more; that after Sylvia purchased the land on which to build the equestrian centre, she discovered it was an old kiwi farm and brought it back to fruitful life – the organic kiwis are sold “everywhere” now; that Silva Project and the kiwi farm are run with the help of volunteers from abroad, who live in Sylvia’s house; that her efforts through the Silva Project are constantly being thwarted by the Greek system’s incomprehension of and incompatibility with charities and organizations whose aim is not to make a profit – you can almost see the bureaucrats scratching their heads in puzzlement!

By the end of the morning, we have fallen head over heels for Sylvia’s chaotic yet somehow peaceful corner of Corfu. It isn’t just the happy horses, dogs, birds and cats that seem to be everywhere; this lovely, faded, grand estate feels as old as time and has

At the stables, a short walk away from the main house, we visit the Skyrian horses for the first time. They come in various shades of brown and black with no white markings. We learn that this breed of mountain pony, found on the Greek island of Skyros, is severely endangered and that there are only around 120 of them left on the island. This is what prompted Sylvia 12 years ago to start the Silva Project, which not only provides lodgings for these horses, but has since become the most comprehensive Skyrian horse breeding programme in the world. Unfortunately, no breeding could take place this year due to lack of space, but a new and pretty incredible, by all accounts, equestrian centre is under way, located in Kalafationes, a 20-minute drive south-west of Corfu town. We ask Sylvia about it; she tells us that building work has been delayed by the planning office, and that as a result a whole summer’s worth of work has been wasted; now they will have to try and complete the work in Corfu’s rainy season...

A big part of saving the Skyrian horse for Sylvia is helping it to find a place in modern society, now that agriculture, for which it was used in the past, relies on machinery. The Skyrian’s calm temperament and small size makes it an ideal mount for children as young as two years old, but what really gets our attention is that



The estate’s 1,400 year-old banyan fig tree

Riding lesson



the fairy-tale beauty that only perhaps in a million years could a modern, expensively landscaped garden hope to achieve. Walking along an ancient path with a stunning view of the sea and Mouse Island below us, and a doll-sized, Byzantine church ahead of us in the pine forest, we can whole-heartedly believe Sylvia when she tells us of how often many have asked if the estate is for sale. One can't help but think this place ought to be protected by more than this small, if determined, lady. Surely the vast 1,400 year-old banyan fig tree (*Ficus benghalensis*), whose roots dangle to the ground from above, and the rare 900 year-old lemon-scented eucalyptus (*Corymbia citriodora*), with its elephant skin-like white bark and vast stature, should alone give this estate protected status?

It is under this very Ficus that Sylvia, on visiting the estate by chance when she was 12 and long before her parents purchased the property, vowed she would live and die here, on this magical patch of Corfiot heaven. And living here she is, in a way few live, providing sanctuary to people, creatures and plants alike, fighting to keep the sanctuary itself safe.

For more information on the Silva Project and the new equestrian centre (including how to make a donation and how to adopt a Skyrian horse) visit: www.thesilvaproject.org



Estate security taking it easy



Belladonna Lily growing wild on the Silva estate