

## I'll Never Be Alone Anymore - The Story Of The Skala Eressos Lesbian Community

[00:00:12.240]

When you first see Eressos, what impresses you is the color of the mountains. They have no trees at all. They're full of stones, volcanic stones. It has a color, yellow, yellow brown. And if you look at it against the light, it's so bright that you can't look at it. It's a very Greek village. There's a lot of art around. It's full of nature. There are pomegranates and grapes and apricots and walnuts and almonds growing from all the trees around.

[00:00:52.360]

What was amazing about it is just there were women everywhere. Tons of them. Tons. Just all women everywhere. You walk on the streets, everyone's saying hello to each other. I felt like I was in a lesbian world and we were the majority, not the minority. It felt special. And it was the place where we started accepting ourselves, accepting our identity as a lesbian, accepting the different identities of being lesbian. I wasn't out to my parents and my family in general, but I arrived here and I felt that I'm never going to be alone in my life.

[00:02:09.480]

Eressos is at the end of the island of Lesbos, meaning that it's 100 kilometers from the capital, at that time you had to stay four hours in the bus that was passing from all the villages. And when you were coming out of the bus, you didn't know who you were, who you are and what you want in your life. You just wanted to to to to vomit. I thought, oh, my God, where are we going. Also the fuck, for Europeans to come, you have to take a flight and then another flight and then you get here and then you wait and then you take the bus and then you travel another two hours and a half and all these roads with the turns and mountain up, mountain down.

[00:03:16.960]

And that the fact that it's it's like difficult to approach, it makes it even more special. So I was living in the United States and I traveled Europe with a couple of friends and we were getting so much homophobia. We were all butch dykes and we were coming down towards Greece. We'd heard about Lesbos. I don't know what I heard. It must have been the rumors that everyone here is like Lesbos ! lesbians !. And we made our way here and we heard these English women and they were talking about where they had to go.

[00:03:49.570]

They were like, we have to go to Skala Eressos. That's where we have to go. And we said, Oh, my God, can we come with you? But I remember we came in the car with them and it took hours on this dirt road from one side of the south of the island all the way over to the other side. And the thing is about Eressos is that there are a lot of Greek people here, but you could tell that there were a lot of women here and they were visible and they were obviously dykes.

[00:04:15.580]

They were obviously women together. And it just felt so amazing. Sun, sea, good food and like women galore. It was amazing. I didn't want to come here, but I was single and my heart was broken, I've broken up with my wife of 11 years and I thought, what have I got to lose? And the minute I walked on the island just had a feeling from it. It just felt good. And meeting people, they were very like different to what I knew.

[00:05:02.680]

Like in London, the first thing people want to know is what do you do? It's not about your soul or who you are as a person. And this group of people just took me in with them and they never asked me, what is my profession, what is my age, where am I from? They didn't give a shit. They were free and the island made me feel free. And something went, click this here. So I first came here

because my mother used to come here in the early 80s, I didn't really expect much in the sense that as a young lesbian, you would experience extraordinary things.

[00:05:46.590]

It was more of like, OK, I'm going on vacation with my family. And in the end, it quite surprised me what you found, which was what she said, a community of lesbians being together and sharing things together and the nightlife and whatever, but also a great mixture of different people. The people I know who come here are certainly not your typical, like 50s and 60s women. We have a group that swims every day at half past 10 in the morning, every woman who wants can join us and do a swim to the rock.

[00:06:54.450]

And it's not just the swim, it's a communion there. It's a it's a community. Because if there is a woman who cannot swim, we swim with her. And sometimes there are like 70, 80 women swimming to the rock. It's a very nice atmosphere and very joyful. I have to say, I was terrified of swimming to the rock because it looks very far away and I'm not like a big swimmer, but finally, all these women kept on encouraging me and I went and I made it all the way to the rock.

[00:07:37.070]

And then when we got there, a friend of mine said, OK, and now we go up and we climbed all the way to the top and there was a big Greek flag on the top. And I remember just standing there topless, you know, grabbing this flag pole for dear life and looking out like on this sea and on the village and just thinking I was absolutely on top of the world. I came in Eressos and I remember the first couple of days, I didn't want to go to the beach and the swimming suit was something that would make me totally feel uncomfortable on my body.

[00:08:44.660]

Somehow I didn't know why, but I was always forced to wear it because this is how you go to the beach and suddenly I'm in the middle of nowhere, that I'm the unique one who wears a swimming suit because everybody else is naked around me. And what I consider as normal and acceptable all my life suddenly is just collapse because I saw a completely different reality. There is a lot of discrimination and a lot of body racism. We need to feed the Western stereotypes of beauty.

[00:09:16.670]

Nobody ever told us that we do not need to do that and we're still going to be accepted. I'm a big woman. I always have been discriminated about the size of my body, plus my sexuality later on became a problem when I came in Eressos and I saw the nakedness around me being something as a very, very, very normal thing, which now I understand it is anyway. It's just helped me bit by bit and step by step to understand that it's OK to be anything you want.

[00:09:53.470]

I think what I always tell people is if you come alone, as long as you're not very ridiculously shy, that you cannot even smile at someone else, you will never be alone. You'll be alone as much as you want because everyone is friendly. You can come here, you can party every night. You can drink a lot. You could never go out at night. You could swim every single morning, spend the day on the beach a day reading a day, walking up the mountains and seeing the views.

[00:10:20.620]

You can be by yourself, you can be with other people. This holiday is like anything you want it to be.

[00:10:26.050]

But the difference is there are other women around. Most years I'm out partying and then I'm too hungover to do any activities. I could just about drag myself to volleyball at six o'clock at night. I'm exaggerating.

[00:11:16.570]

Usually I head over to the naked beach on the other side and, you know, there's these like structures. They're made out of bamboo and palm leaves and women are just laying around naked all day talking. And then at night it the whole place transforms and it becomes this like Open-Air Bar, really. I mean, there's all these beach bars and everything's hot and great. Typical night. It really depends on what niceties we're all heading out to the town.

[00:11:53.730]

We're going to have some dinner together to get a few glasses of wine in and then we'll head to wherever the party is. And we're mostly dancing. Not me so much, but our group is dancing. But then we can have a different, completely different night where we are here on the land and we are making barbecue under the stars and we're just chatting in a group and opening up, sharing our lives with each other. So it could be different nights.

[00:12:24.660]

But I've had so many good parties here, like especially the full moon parties on the beach. That is a very special.

[00:13:07.940]

Yeah, you don't have to be like 25 to party, really, you don't, you know, I mean, a good party is everyone's good party. No, I think being queer, you know, and I've been thinking a lot about this as I'm getting older because I don't feel like I'm like someone who's 53 in the role models that I've seen on TV or in films or in popular culture. Let's say I like you know, they're doing things I don't do or they want to do things I don't want to do and they don't ever want to go out to party.

[00:13:41.160]

The truth is, in my life, I now have people close to my own age that I realize, yeah, they want to party as well. Like they might not be able to do it every day, but like every Friday or Saturday or, you know, when something great is going on, they'll get on their finest gear and all that and go out and party.

[00:13:57.390]

The party scene has been quite an interesting experience. All the bars that I went to, a lot of 40 to 50 to 60 age ranges, I've always kind of been the youngest lesbian I feel to be around this place. To me, they've been very inspiring because I've met a lot of people that I connect with, even though there's been age differences. Usually we we would go to L'Etoile or Flamingo and then the whole night, you know, gets a little tipsy and flirt and...

[00:14:33.570]

Yes, feel a little bit younger maybe, i don't know. I don't know if you look at what happens on the island, it's amazing. Amazes me. I think to the older lesbians are the ones dancing longest latest and have so much energy. It's just fun and playful and hyped up. And everyone is feeling powerful and sexy and funny.

[00:15:51.110]

The freedom of flirtation is also very nice. It's constantly around, you don't need to try to do it. It just comes your way. You feel good. You get flattered on a daily basis. My best friends and lovers. Yeah, I met them here.

[00:16:12.290]

I am polyamorous. So I've never been monogamous. I've never had just one lover. I mean, I've been I've had a lot of fun with a lot of women over my life. Yes. I mean, probably close to 200. All the years that I've been here, I had met two women. Well, the first one, as I remember it was a bit funny because she was quite drunk. I wasn't. And so much was very late at night.

[00:16:41.090]

And she asked me to kiss her and I was like, no, because you're drunk. So probably you should go home or whatever. And then she slapped me.

[00:17:03.450]

I was here, it was probably the early 2000s, and I met an Italian woman here and I couldn't speak Italian and she couldn't speak English, she was with her lover. Our eyes locked, you know, across the room. We obviously had some energy. And one day she found me and she said, when I meet you, it was really broken English. I said, OK, eight o'clock I'm at Marianna's. And she came to meet me and I was with someone else.

[00:17:29.610]

And she said, You finish your wine, we go. And we went back to my flat and we just started having sex. And I remember at some point because I'm kinky as well, and I put my hand on her throat, not very... And I said, Oh, sorry, I do SM. And she said, fine, me, me, me too. You know, and we had this really hot sex. And then we went out and her girlfriend came from the cruise and she was like, no problem, Sarah, OK, with, you know, like I understood that everything was OK, Sarah wasn't OK with it and basically didn't speak to me.

[00:18:05.520]

And it's one of the hottest stories of my life, I have to say. I think it's boring. I didn't have sex for eight years. I'm not going after women anymore. I lost my libido with my my period. You know, they left together and I just try to be open, but I'm just not interested. I don't know. I'm just not there. I don't feel it anymore, you know? So other people keep asking me, like, don't you miss it?

[00:18:39.020]

And I say, how do you miss something if you don't want it? You know, it's like if you don't like apples, you don't miss them. Finally, after a long, long time says like this year, I found my partner. We are together more than one year. And every day is like paradise. Like the first moment I have the impression that they found my half. My last like active summer was 2012. I usually try to catch tourists and I always make sure they leave in a week or so.

[00:19:16.130]

So yeah, I hate it when they stick to me. I mean, and i know one week is normally the time I can manage, and then i have too much, so I would always try to find out when they leave. And if it was in two weeks, I would wait a little bit further just to make sure... Always there is a drama, you know, always around is a drama.

[00:19:38.340]

It is not a nice memory but funny memory, one in the morning call me, seven o'clock, please come. Please S.O.S come. I have a problem. They had a big fight. One left the room and the other one stayed all night. They took a scissor and cut everything. When i say everything, the money, the passport, the were the jeans, the T-shirt, was very fine pieces in it in a pile on a bed. And the owner said What do we do now.

[00:20:05.760]

I said You will, don't do anything. Let me you know handle it. I don't really understand now why women decide to split up when on holidays. Eressos is not a place just for a party or for sex or for finding a companion, of course it is, but it's a challenge it's a volcanic landscape and it's the volcano that works underneath. So either you understand it or not, it makes things explode and brings out of you the best and the worst.

[00:20:39.660]

And when you you are not well, you might really face a difficult period because what is hidden comes through to the light. Is it spiritual, definitely. I think every third person here is a healer of some sort, you know, shiatsu, reiki, whatever. It's definitely an incredibly I find it a very spiritually

charged environment. The spiritual side is for me to be able to connect with my real self, not my not the part of me that's been conditioned by politics, my parents life.

[00:21:20.520]

I mean, I don't know if you've spent time in London, but there was a stage where being butch was very out and everyone had to look and dress feminine. It's internalized homophobia. I guess I felt embarrassed to look the way I did because when I arrived from South Africa was very butch and I couldn't seem to get anywhere. So I started to change myself into this look and it looked OK. But then I took it even further. And within my workplace, I realized that the more feminine I look, the more tits I showed, the nicer dresses and heels I wore, the more further I got in my career.

[00:22:04.950]

And I got promoted to managing director of the company. When I was 23, I was fired from a job that I was very high up in, and the shop was really successful under my management. And basically they found a reason to fire me. And I had recently stopped wearing dresses and I had cut my hair really short and they said we tried not to base our decision on her moral or political beliefs, but let's get used to it.

[00:22:35.790]

She's out of here. This is what society's doing to us. And I really lived in this role and I lost myself in this role. And I would still be in that role if I didn't come to Eressos. So that's why this place is so important for me. It brought me back to my real self so I mean, you should see me now in my office with sports shorts and a t shirt. I look rougher than the guys in the office and I feel comfortable.

[00:23:09.190]

Why should we be living a lie? By trying to impress other people, straight people by dressing like them. The women here made me love myself more. They didn't even know that they were doing that. Really was an amazing gift towards me.

[00:23:40.170]

I arrived here and I felt that I'm never going to be alone in my life, up until that point, I thought I was very lonely, probably the only lesbian and I don't know, I knew I liked women. I just could not express what was happening and why it's happening to me. I thought I was the only woman in my city. It's really strange and it was quite painful at the time. So it changed me. I met a lot of people from all over the world, which I would never have the chance to do it.

[00:24:14.130]

Until that time. I didn't know what the lesbian is. Of course, I had read the poems of Sappho and I was feeling very close to Sappho, but I couldn't bring it into reality. You know, I had it in my mind. It was like a fantasy. And then I met in an amazingly beautiful and tender Italian girl who who knew about Sappho, that she was reading the poems of Sappho. And that was a revolution for me.

[00:24:38.820]

This was a revelation like, oh, my God, what is this, Sappho exists. And other women like me exist and other women that they like they like the poetry of Sappho and they love women. And that I remember that I will never forget it because she she asked me, do you love women? I didn't know what to answer. And they were just looking at her because I wasn't sure what I mean. But it was really feeling. Yeah, I will never forget it.

[00:25:08.040]

It was 15 of August, in 1980.

[00:25:23.200]

You know, to be a lesbian at that period, it wasn't the easiest thing in the world. So you were like a monster and they were calling us monsters. Even my mother had this idea for me before she was dead. So being with other women and seeing that we are not monsters and that they are not

monsters, so that that means that I am not a monster and that I can love and I can be loved and I'm a nice person after all.

[00:25:58.850]

There is something very political about this place. It sure is a nice holiday place. Yeah, and that's that's why people come here. But it's really I mean, it's so important for women to have a space like this, you know? I mean, there are tens of thousands of women who've been here who could tell you how important this place was for them to feel better about themselves, to feel part of a community that maybe doesn't exist where they live in a small town.

[00:26:34.570]

The communal living and the way we behave is a political statement here breaking some very patriarchal stereotypes as a political movement agree to disagree is a political movement. It is a political movement to be able to exist in quite a homophobic world around you and still stand on your feet without feeling bad about it. Actually, I first came out to my father and I told him, are you interested about my personal life or not? And he was like, Yeah. And I told him, OK, I just want you to know that I like women and I'm a lesbian.

[00:27:17.560]

And his reaction was like, OK, and how you can be sure about that. And I was like, how can you be sure about that? You're straight. It's no different. In the beginning he was like, OK, how do you know that you like women? I mean, have you ever been with a man or something? I've never been with a man, but I just know that I like it. I mean, have you ever been with a man?

[00:27:37.000]

How do you know that you're straight? No, no, no. I don't like men. Well, me neither. It's the same. We have something in common. To be a lesbian in Greece. I think it's a bit tough because if you're a lesbian, you're first a woman. So in Greece, even though that we consider to be in Europe and to be in the west world, sometimes we're not. I mean, we can be very conservative as a society.

[00:28:06.910]

I know people that they have been kicked out of their houses because of the when they said like they're homosexuals or their parents, they said to them, like especially for gay men, maybe you have to go to a prostitute to be a man and not to be a homosexual man, you know, to be a real man or about lesbian women in more like villages.

[00:28:29.590]

There's like these I don't know the exact wording. I think it could be like a corrective rape to make you correct in a way.

[00:28:40.270]

So like the fathers or the brothers or the uncles or whoever, it really is in a way that you are a lesbian, it tries to force you to be a real woman. So I wouldn't say that to be a lesbian.

[00:28:54.550]

It's very easy in. Well, most are coming here because of some force since 1970, so they you sleep on the beach.

[00:29:18.120]

We came here, the place to go was more primitive. I remember the square, it was almost empty. It was very, very, very, very small in the beginning. The boys, the young men of the village, they thought that it was their opportunity of having sex because they couldn't have sex, of course, with the local women, and they could see us as their only chance of having sex. And very soon they discovered that they couldn't have sex with us and actually that we were having sex between us.

[00:29:54.600]

And that was the, what change the situation. Then the punks started to arrive in 85, 86. There were these women that they were full of tattoos and they had cut their hair with different painted with red and the orange and i don't know. They were drinking a lot and they were talking loud and they were fighting between them. And all of this was very strange for the for the people of the village.

[00:30:24.150]

These people here, they're quite isolated. They were quite isolated in many ways from what's going on in the rest of the world. And we're talking about a place that there are strong traditions. It is religious, and suddenly 700 women are appearing here, which they have the tools, they're naked. They have opinions. They stand on their feet. They answer back to men. When they started seeing women taking off their clothes and they're jumping into the sea in front of the in the in front of the platia of the square and the women kissing each other in the restaurants, they had understood

[00:31:03.630]

It was an invasion, a real invasion.

[00:31:06.030]

Here they were like, oh, you're going to come here, you're going to ruin us. You can make us, you know, our women to be lesbians. So we don't want you here. You have to go away. They were afraid that we were going to influence their daughters and their granddaughters and that we would we were going to turn them into homosexuals the young men were going to the bars and they were fighting with the girls. And sometimes there was the girls that they were creating problems to the men.

[00:31:38.280]

And the more than once, we ended up at the court. I've heard some stories about like throwing stones to the local people because of the woman, like because some local people went to the naked beach to see the women there and the woman didn't accept that. They didn't like that. So you don't want to throw to them, like, OK, this is our space, so go away. Sometimes it was the women that they were beaten up and sometimes they were the men.

[00:32:10.170]

They were beaten up and they wanted to kick us out. Some they had the proposed to put sand in front of us so they would where the beach was so they wouldn't see our shame nude on the beach because we were all nude on the beach. Stay there, making love there, eating and everything that they couldn't stand it. I remember once they had come with the priest and they were like, yeah, the atmosphere became very hostile, let's say.

[00:32:43.370]

In a way, yes, we wanted this place for us, so it was a fight over the place, who will win, who will get the beach, who will get the bar on the platia? On the square. It took time for all of us to adpt and live with each other, but it took an effort to educate and communicate people, you know, I would think that seeing women come year after year, that can change people's idea.

[00:33:17.730]

I think as a society still, if they are under peer pressure, they're going to say oh those lesbians. But the truth is, is that they don't really care. In the beginning, there were no rooms where we could stay and we didn't have money and we didn't want to stay in the rooms.

[00:33:33.300]

But slowly, other people started arriving and some they wanted to stay in the room and they understood that we were not money for the restaurant only, but for the whole economy there are less homophobic because women bring the money.

[00:33:52.140]

It's not because they thought, oh, this is OK to be a homosexual. We're OK with women coming here. No, I think, like, they're OK because you pay them to be OK with this situation, otherwise you will not be OK. Again, I'm here and I'm because I'm living on the land. My neighbors are Alia's Loukas blood, the farmers, and I'm treating them with kindness and respect. And so far, I'm getting that back.

[00:34:23.310]

And I think that's all that we can really do, treat each other respect and maybe change their minds. I don't know. Compared to the first time that I came here, now I think there are less lesbian over here.

[00:35:15.920]

Mostly, it's change that we all are 20 years older than that, so many young women coming after you. And so it became a little bit like an old ladies club. Things have changed that not so many younger women come because they think they can go anywhere in the world and feel this good. They don't really understand how different you feel when you come here. I think all of them, if they came here for one holiday, they would get stuck on it as well.

[00:35:45.590]

Younger lesbian women, they would choose to go somewhere else. And because we think that society is a bit more open now, we can go anywhere else that we want to be and to be open and to be out and to be okay with it. There's not younger women, younger lesbians here. I feel like oftentimes I'm one of the only ones here, which is a shame because the community shouldn't die out. It should keep being carried on. Yeah.

[00:36:10.820]

I mean, I can completely understand why people think that it might just be full of people in their 40s, the 50s and older. Yes, we all talk about that. All of us who are getting older are like younger people. I would like to see Skala full of young lesbians. We need the refreshment in this place. We need new ideas. We need to be in contact with what is happening out in the world, what the young people think now, what they feel, what they want.

[00:36:41.540]

Lesbos defines itself as a lesbian community, but this definition was formed 20, 30 years ago. I think that sexual orientation and approaches to gender are evolving at a rapid, beautiful speed. And I would like to think of this space as a queer space. I mean, it's definitely a women's space. I think calling it a lesbian space narrows the scope more than it has to be narrowed and leaves out some really important members of our community.

[00:37:15.200]

We need a lot of those women to, like, change the world now and and keep our place.

[00:37:23.780]

It could become just a retirement home, could be just over 40s and 50s, tossing around like enjoying their morning swim and then, you know, going to bed at nine o'clock. But I hope not. I'd be really sad to see this place go away. We have to fight for it because if not, we're going to lose it. It's a fucking pity because it's going to be really difficult to build again. Look what we can do when world we live in peace and unity.

[00:37:56.450]

We can all be together in a tiny little village. Everybody's happy and smiling. Everybody's happy, smiling. People are hugging, singing together. This is a political movement to you know in a very simple, everyday life, being here and being able to walk around with your girlfriend hand by hand and kissing her and kissing around and being yourself. It's beautiful. It's a safe, beautiful place to be, I wish for people to come here to understand that no one is alone.

[00:38:38.690]

And it just gives you confidence for this exact reason. You're not alone in the world. We're all here.

[00:39:17.610]

I'll never be alone - the story of the Skala Eressos lesbian community. A podcast written and produced by Cecile Simon, Anais Dupuis and Anais Carayon, interviews by Anais Carayon, editing by Cecile Simon, Anais Dupuis and Soukaina Qabbal, sound designed by Fanny Martin, music by Lucie Antunes, mastering by Jeanne Delplancq. We would like to express our gratitude to the Eressos lesbian community for their heartwarming welcome and adress a special thanks to everyone who accepted to share their stories with us.

[00:39:57.630]

Tzeli, A.J., Michelle, Maria, Myrto, Vassiliki, Sophia, Catriona, Christina, Alexi, Joanna, Gina, , Petra, Isabelle, Alexia and Sam.