

BLUSHING UP ON YOUR GREEK

When a friend ambled into his local Greek police station recently and wished everyone a “kalamari” he brought the whole of the Vamos constabulary to standstill as stunned silence turned to uncontrollable laughter. Of course, had my friend realised his mistake quickly enough, he could have said he was looking for the frying squad or maybe the flying squid.

Trying to use any foreign language has its risks, but unless you take the plunge and open your mouth, you will never remember anything. Blunders and blushes are a vital part of the game.

I have long since given up on trying to preserve my dignity in these matters, having attempted to pay my water bill by marching into the mayor’s office and announcing that I have “the paint” (khromata) instead of “the money” (khrimata). My account instantly went into the red.

A little knowledge, too, is a dangerous thing, especially in the hands of the kamikaze linguist. To form the past tense you put an ‘a’ sound on the end of the verb and move the stress to the previous syllable...sometimes. My attempt to tell a shopkeeper that “I knew” some Greek before I came here, became “I vomited” some Greek... Just a simple “kserasa” instead of “iksera” blew my chance of a discount – and left me feeling sick.

The fun really starts when you start to accept local invitations. Imagine the scene, you are sitting around a large table with all your Greek neighbours celebrating yet another name day, being careful to use the polite “sas” form instead of the more informal “sou” form, when the host announces that they are soon to become grandparents again. So I pipe up, “what would you prefer, a girl or a cucumber”. An easy mistake between “agori” (boy) and “angouri”(a long, green vegetable), but not cool.

But if you are only just starting out, make the most of it, because as you improve it becomes more difficult to convince your Greek hosts that your gaffe was not deliberate. A recent visit to a mountain taverna nearly sparked a one-way vendetta. While we were tucking into a delicious lamb kleftiko, a wizened old lady dressed in black emerged from the kitchen to ask if everything was okay. I wanted to say: “Yes. The views are fantastic and I really like the meal (to yevma).” What I actually said was: “The views are fantastic and I like the beard (ta yenia).” A heavily-whiskered shepherd on the next table alerted me to my mistake with a cold stare, so I did what you should always do in such situations and smiled inately. A simple “nostimo”, meaning delicious, got me off the hook. But that’s what you call a close shave.