

## 'Going Home': Greeks and Cypriots in Australia (2010-2020)<sup>1</sup>

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The Census of 2021 will have some very interesting reading for scholars, although this data will not be publicly accessible until early 2022. Australia's virtual – prohibition on international travel means the traditional exodus of Australians to the Mediterranean summer has not occurred this year. In the last 'normal' travel year – 2019 – Greece recorded 'about 300,000' visitors from Australia, according to Greece's Trade Commissioner in Sydney, Mrs Katia Gkikiza.<sup>2</sup> The Census findings will be the most accurate record of the Australian Hellenic community in a generation

Since European colonisation of the Australian continent began in 1788, migration of Greeks has occurred in four distinct phases: the colonial period 1788-1901; the Federation period (1901-1939); post-World War Two mass migration (1945-1974); and 'the Crisis' period (2010-2020). The fourth and most recent phase is the second largest in terms of numbers, as well as by other criteria such as the education and skills the *neometanastes* brought with them.

The *neometanastes* (new immigrants) are by far the best educated of the four phases of Greek migrants to Australia, typically having completed secondary schooling, with a high proportion holding tertiary qualifications. Just like earlier phases, the economic conditions in Greece, Cyprus and centres of the Diaspora around south-eastern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean were the main drivers of the migration of Greeks to Australia since 2010.

Hellenes who migrated to Australia in this period fall into three categories: Australian-born Australian citizens who spent some years in Greece or Cyprus; Australian citizens born in Greece or Cyprus; and Hellenic or Cypriot citizens born in Greece or Cyprus. Australian migration statistics solely record non-citizens settling in Australia, not citizens 'returning home.' This complicates any study of the *neometanastes*. According to a 2014 study by the *Pronoia* organisation based in Melbourne, an estimated 60 per cent of 'Hellenic migration' to Australia during the 2010s involved dual citizens.<sup>3</sup> Dual citizens

are citizens of Australia as well as of Greece or Cyprus who relocate to one of those countries.

Citing Australian immigration and census data, Harry Field-Theotokatos wrote that by 2017, 'an estimated 11,000 new Greek migrants - including both Greek citizens and Australian citizens of Greek descent - were living in Australia'.<sup>4</sup> His estimate is supported by the following tables of official Australian Bureau of Statistics data.

Table 1: Estimated Cyprus and Greece-born resident populations, as of 30 June, 1996-2020<sup>5</sup>. Please note that approximately three per cent of these persons are non-ethnic Greeks, Muslims born in Cyprus and Greece, as well as Slavomacedonians, Armenians and Roma.

Country	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
Cyprus	23,310	23,300	23,200	23,030	22,810	22,720	22,680	22,620	22,560
Greece	138,080	136,820	135,030	132,900	130,780	128,870	129,040	129,010	128,980

Country	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Cyprus	22,450	22,350	22,050	21,810	22,810	21,350	21,150	20,910	20,660
Greece	129,010	128,980	127,510	125,770	124,170	122,520	121,180	120,480	119,840

Country	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Cyprus	20,410	20,100	19,690	19,400	18,950	18,620	18,310	?	?
Greece	118,270	115,820	113,420	111,450	109,090	106,340	103,710	?	?

Table 2: Net overseas migration from Cyprus and Greece, as at 30 June, 1996-2020<sup>6</sup>

Country	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
Cyprus	-70	0	-40	0	10	10	30	100	140
Greece	10	90	30	-60	80	230	590	1,950	2,160

Country	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Cyprus	120	70	0	20	-20	0	30	?	?
Greece	1,260	470	580	370	50	-140	120	?	?

Almost all *neometanastes* settled in Australia's major urban centres, overwhelmingly Sydney and Melbourne, reflecting historic settlement patterns of Greek migration since World War Two and the general trend for all migrants. Employment was the primary concern in the early days of their lives in Australia, together with housing and education.

Manolis and Anna Mangoulias are examples of the migrant pattern of the 2010s. They arrived in Melbourne from the island of Kalymnos in early 2014. Both are children of Australian citizens who returned home after a period of time in Darwin, capital of the Northern Territory, and a magnet for post-war migration from Kalymnos. The choice of Melbourne was simple: Anna's sister already lived there.

Eleftheria Marinou and her husband, Stratos, left Lesvos for Sydney in October 2013. They had no connections or any family in Australia and little knowledge of English. Without knowing what awaited them, they decided to leave their three children with their grandmother in Mytilene, until they could prepare for their children's arrival.

Stratos had an acquaintance from his village in Sydney who had spoken to his boss and he asked him to go in for a trial straight away. Seven years later, he works for the same company. According to Eleftheria, "Stratos had little knowledge of the language, so at first, he faced some difficulties at work, but he persevered, he never gave up, and now he has a very good position and the respect that he deserves.... For the first three months I didn't work as I was running around to get my student visa so that we could stay in the country. Later I worked in kitchens and today I have my own cleaning business."

The pattern of self-employment, owning a business, within a few years of arrival has been established since the 1890s. Australian Greeks have some of the highest rates of self-employment, home ownership and acquisition of Australian citizenship of any ethnic community in the country.

Another illustrative example is Demetris Fountas, originally from the town of Kandela in the Xeromero area of Aitolokarnania in western Greece. As he related, during a visit to his ancestral town in the (northern) summer of 2013, he met a man who had made his fortune in Melbourne, Dennis Makris (Dionysios Makrygiorgos), a friend of his grandfather's. during the conversation which ensued, Makris invited Fountas to relocate to Melbourne, to make a fresh start.

Fountas closed his business in Athens and, not knowing a word of English, found himself in Melbourne in January 2014. The next day, Fountas was working in Makris' factory. Over the next two years, Fountas worked for the Makris family and drove a taxi in his 'off' hours. He then switched to driving the taxi fulltime, studying English after hours. Overwork led to him collapsing; his then-wife taking him to Sydney for his first holiday in three years: five days in the Harbour City.

Fountas sought to rent a motorcycle to explore Sydney – no luck; all available motorcycles were already booked. This gave him an idea. Jumping online, he placed an advertisement renting motorcycles in Melbourne. Within an hour, he had his first customers!

Upon returning to Melbourne, Fountas rented a ute (utility vehicle) and bought two used motorcycles, using much of his existing savings. The next day, he rented them out for two months. He threw himself into driving the taxi and two weeks later, had made enough to buy two more motorcycles. The new business Fountas named *Moto Sparta Rentals*.<sup>7</sup> A year later, the business had 100 motorcycles and was operating from a store in Fitzroy North in Melbourne's inner northern suburbs. Prior to the covid-19 'lockdowns' of 2020-2021, Moto Sparta Group was worth an estimated AUD\$1.5 million.<sup>8</sup>

Fountas' story is far from unique amongst the *neometanastes*, those who fled the financial crisis which wracked Greece between 2010 and 2019. Like so many Hellenes who came before them, they used their skills and opportunities to build new lives. Unlike Fountas, many chose a branch of the hospitality industry to make their mark.

Social media platforms such as Facebook provide insights into the experiences of 'neometanastes' to Australia since 2010. Reflecting the experiences of previous generations of Greek migrants, the priorities of those who choose to settle revolve around building new lives – developing careers and homes. As a rule, *neometanastes* tend to avoid involvement in community affairs. At least at this point in time, something that will change over time.



One of the largest online groups with over 2,600 members is *E.N.A. - Έλληνες Νεομετανάστες Αυστραλίας 2010+* (E.N.A. – Hellene Neometenastes of Australia 2010+).<sup>9</sup> A private Facebook group, its first Rule, as stated on its public homepage, is that ‘the group is EXCLUSIVELY for *neometanastes* who arrived in Australia after 2010. This was decided based on a vote amongst the members. This is reinforced by Rule 3 - ‘members who nominate friends of theirs for membership who are not *neometanastes* are removed from the group after one warning. Admission to the group demands declaration of the date of the applicants’ arrival in Australia.

Language is clearly an important part of the identity of many *neometanastes*. Rule 6 states that online discussions will be in Greek, using Greek script, or in English. The use of ‘greeklish’ (Greek written in English script) is forbidden. In the group’s own words, ‘Let us keep our language and our orthography alive.’ Similarly, in the words of the *Greek Stage Theatre*, ‘we are a group of people who are struggling to maintain the Hellenic language alive in the Antipodes.’<sup>10</sup>

Political discussions are strictly banned, as are negative criticism and verbal attacks against members or third parties. Also banned are posts dealing with matters deemed to be outside the purpose of the group. Rule 7 declares: ‘Give more than you take to this group. Spam and irrelevant links aren't allowed. Self-promotion is allowed only once.’ This also applies to promotion of public protests. (Rule 9) Violating this rule results in removal from the group.

Rules 8 and 10 address some of the practical concerns of life in Australia. Rule 8 renounces any responsibility for advice or information accessed via the group’s page. Members are advised that questions regarding visas, working rights and related matters should be directed to the professionals. Similarly, separate pages have been set up for real estate posts (buying, selling, renting), as well as for public events.

In the work-focussed environment of Australian society, this leaves little time for involvement in established Australian Greek community organisations, particularly the organisations which identify with one geographic region. Those who do become involved in community affairs tend to prefer participation in cultural organisations, especially theatrical troupes and folkloric dance groups.

In contrast to the established Australian Hellenic theatrical troupes in Sydney and Melbourne, new formations which attract *neometanastes* – such as Akis Kastelloriou’s and Vangelis Houliaras’ Blue Stage Theatre, favour producing plays written in the last few

decades. It premiered on Saturday, October 3, 2015, with the comedy «Οι γαμπροί της συμφοράς» (*The Grooms of Disaster*), at the hall of All Saints Orthodox Church Belmore, in Sydney's inner western suburbs.<sup>11</sup> The script is based on the 1962 Klearhos Konitsiotis film «Οι γαμπροί της Ευτυχίας» (*Eutyhia's Grooms*). After a few successful productions, creative disagreements led to the formation of two separate theatrical groups with similar purposes. Blue Stage Theatre was renamed Greek Stage Theatre and is currently preparing a production dedicated to the late composer and activist Mikis Theodorakis, scheduled to hit the stage in December 2021.

Maria N. Kitra's 2018 «Της μάνας σου ... η σύνταξη» (*Your Mother's Pension*) is the latest production of the Dionysus Theatre Company, formed in 2017.

The longest-established Australian Hellenic theatrical troupe in Sydney – the Hellenic Art Theatre based at the Mantourideion Theatre in the inner western suburb of Marrickville – has an unbroken history stretching back to the 1960s. The Hellenic Art Theatre has also attracted both individual performers and back-stage staff from amongst the *neometanastes*.

The Order of AHEPA New South Wales, an independent branch of the renowned American-based organisation, is an exception. Its panhellenic approach has succeeded in attracting a relatively large number of *neometanastes* as members. Its links with the American AHEPA, best-known in Greece through the A.H.E.P.A. Hospital in Thessaloniki, also attracted them to involvement in this community organisation.

To remain or return is the eternal question of every Hellene migrant since Odysseus left Ithaca. There are two predominant opinions amongst *neometanastes*. Speaking to Melbourne's *Neos Kosmos* newspaper, Eleni Exadaktylou stated: "The last two years since the COVID-19 pandemic hit, have felt like a nightmare." While grateful for the efforts of the Australian authorities, having relocated to Melbourne in 2016, "it is just heartbreaking to see the disappointment on my father's face every time we talk on Zoom and we tell him that we will not be making the trip to Greece." Panagiotis Asimakoulas, 37, and his 29-year-old wife, Areti Koufopoulou, arrived in 2013, relocating from the Peloponnese region. "We miss home. We miss the place where we were born and which has shaped who we are," said Asimakoulas. In Koufopoulou added, "We felt reassured when leaving, that the world is now a small place and Greece is just a plane ride away'.

Educator Marianthi Kosmarikou migrated from Kerkyra (Corfu) to South Australia in 2012. In the 'humble opinion' of the 54-year-old mother of two, "It is this uncertainty

and the not knowing when things will change for us that hurts the most and what we find difficult to wrap our heads around. The pain of missing the ones we love so dearly is real.<sup>12</sup>

Soteria Nika, Katerina Miliou and Sophia Haniotaki are three young *neometanastes* to Australia who returned Greece after a relatively brief stay. Adapting to the radically different way of life is a major factor in the decision to 'complete' the cycle of migration. For some, the covid-19 emergency measures, imposed particularly harshly in Melbourne and Sydney since March 2020, were the deciding factor in returning home.<sup>13</sup>

Katerina Miliou migrated to Adelaide, South Australia, together with her husband Yiannis, in 2021. They later moved to Melbourne, where their daughter was born. After seven years in Australia, and as the economy in Greece began recovering, the family returned to Athens. In her own words. "I did not feel that life in Australia belonged to me, I always felt like a tourist."

Originally from Ierapetra on Crete, Sophia Haniotaki migrated in November 2015. Her father had lived fifteen years (1963-1978) mostly in Hobart, capital of the island-state of Tasmania. After five years in Melbourne, Haniotaki returned to Greece. Family reasons determined Sophia's journey. Losing her father in May 2020 and being unable to return in time, Haniotaki was forced to watch the funeral via video link.

Soteria Nika's family is from Kyllene in Korinth Prefecture of Peloponnesos. Her mother was born and raised in Melbourne, living there until the age of 22 years. Melbourne was therefore the place Soteria migrated to in 2014, living there until her return to Greece in 2020. As was her plan all along, having completed her studies in social work at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT), and worked for a time in the field, Nika set off for home.

Soteria Nika, Katerina Miliou and Sophia Haniotaki all share feelings of gratitude to Australia. They feel that they learnt from their experiences in the Antipodes, and plan to return to visit once he borders re-open.

There is a large group of *neometanasstes* who have found Australia to be a place to call home. They feel happy and content and have no intention to return to Greece. Regardless of what their original plan was, this country won them over so much, that they are not considering returning to Greece or Cyprus, permanently.

In an interview with Melbourne's *Neos Kosmos* media group, Manolis stated: "Before we left, we owned a small hotel, a seafood tavern and two souvlaki restaurants. Kalymnos is beautiful, but beauty does not feed you." The stories of his parents' time in Australia was a key factor for Manolis decision to migrate: "I always wanted to come and live in Australia, and the crisis gave me the reason I was waiting for." Anna is less prosaic. "I don't believe that we chose to come to Australia. The truth is that we were forced to come here due to the conditions and the mistakes of Greek politicians."

Eleftheria Marinou echoes similar sentiments: "I feel that Greece forced us to leave, in a way. We were not given a chance to stand on our feet. I never wanted to leave Greece. I was crying all the way here on the plane. I came as a favour to my husband believing that things would be the same as in Greece and we would return." Fate had other ideas. "Sometimes I am misunderstood. Many newly-arrived migrants from Greece tell me that I have forsaken my country. I love my homeland and no one can change that. That is where I grew up, where I had my first dreams, but I never thought that Greece would force me out. Not Greece, but those who run the country. Here, I feel respected. I am supported and allowed to live without begging. In Greece, I faced so many difficulties trying to feed my children. No one was interested in how I was raising my three children. Greece never gave me the opportunity to raise my children with dignity."

The actual number of Greek migrants to Australia since 2010 is far lower than generally believed. Surprising are the numbers of those who returned to Greece in 2019 and 2020. Once available early in 2022, the data of the Census of Tuesday 10 August 2021 will have some very interesting data for scholars to analyze-

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<sup>1</sup> This essay offers a broad panorama of the experiences of Greeks who migrated to the Great South Land between 2010 and 2020. My selection draws on published sources, government reports, and my personal experiences and interviews. It brings together a collection of personal anecdotes and data from various government agencies.

<sup>2</sup> Penny Zalalas 'Australia becomes one of Greece's top markets for tourism' *Greek City Times* 12 October 2019

<https://greekcitytimes.com/2019/10/12/australia-greeces-top-markets-tourism/>

<sup>3</sup> *Pronia* (formerly Australian Greek Welfare Society) *The Journey of New Greek Migrants to Australia: Opportunities and Challenges*, Melbourne 2014

[https://www.pronia.com.au/site/assets/files/1181/the\\_journey\\_of\\_new\\_greek\\_migrants\\_to\\_australia\\_-\\_english.pdf](https://www.pronia.com.au/site/assets/files/1181/the_journey_of_new_greek_migrants_to_australia_-_english.pdf) Accessed 17 July 2021.

<sup>4</sup> Harry Field-Theotokatos 'New temporariness, old permanency. Emigration of Greek citizens to Australia during the Greek economic crisis (2009-2016)' in *SEESOX Diaspora Working Paper Series*, No. 3: 1-29.

<sup>5</sup> *Migration, Australia: Statistics on Australia's international migration, internal migration (interstate and intrastate), and the population by country of birth*

<https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/people/population/migration-australia/latest-release> Accessed 17 July 2021.

<sup>6</sup> *op cit.*

<sup>7</sup> <https://motosparta.com/>

<sup>8</sup> Δημήτρης Φούντας «Ιστορία ενός Νεοέλληνα» *Νέος Κόσμος* 4 Ιουνίου 2020, σελίδα 13.

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/groups/283369125428601/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/greekstagetheatre/about>

<sup>11</sup> 'Blue Stage Theatre the new theatrical group of Sydney'

<https://www.sbs.com.au/language/english/audio/blue-stage-theatre-the-new-theatrical-group-of-sydney>

<sup>12</sup> Theodora Maios 'We want to go home', plead Greek Australians' *Neos Kosmos* 2 July 2021

<https://neoskosmos.com/en/204149/we-want-to-go-home-plead-greek-australians/> Accessed 17 July 2021.

<sup>13</sup> «Οι Έλληνες της Αυστραλίας που επιστρέφουν στην Ελλάδα» *Νέος Κόσμος* 7 Ιουνίου 2021, σελίδα 3.

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