

unseen



a post-apocalyptic

The abandoned barite mines are a ghostly reminder of the one-time rawness of the Mykonian landscape and the blood, sweat and tears it took to tame it.

wonderland



It all started in 1955, when

Magcobar
a company

based in — Houston, Texas,



← A pair of pelicans, Omega and Alfonso, hailing from Louisiana, were donated to the Mykonos Municipality by Mykobar to help Petros, the island mascot, find a mate. Photo from the A. Pezaris Archive, 1961.

leased a local
barite mine &



← Liberty ships waiting to be loaded with barite, before sailing to New Orleans. Panagiotis Loizos, from Piraeus, manning the dozer. Photo from P. Loizos Archives, 1956.

the sudden activity
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from the nearby islands



← Three cousins with the same name standing in front of the charging station, where miners charged their safety lamps. Photo from the D. Ganotis Archive, 1970.

Dimitra Loizou-Voulgaraki is a lone warrior. Born to a father who loved this island more than anything else in the world, she's possessed by the desire to give something back. Her story is intricately entwined with Mykonos' early years, when tourism was still just a blimp on the horizon and this little stretch of land in the middle of the Aegean was still struggling to feed the people who lived on it. It all started in 1955, when Magnet Cove Barium Corporation, a company based in Houston, Texas, best known as Magcobar, leased a local barite mine, run by a subsidiary called Mykobar. This wasn't the first time the rocky landscape had attracted foreign interest. Starting in the early 1900s, an Italian and then a French company had dug deep for natural resources, but the mines had been defunct for almost half a Century.

The sudden activity attracted workers from the nearby islands of Lemnos and Euboea, as well as Athens & Chalkidiki. Dimitra Loizou-Voulgaraki's father was one of them. Born and bred in Piraeus, he left the port city behind and dropped anchor in Mykonos, where he took a job driving a Jeep, possibly the first specimen of its kind the locals had ever seen. "There weren't a lot of cars around - nor roads for that matter - so professionals drivers were hard to find," says the researcher. "My father was hired to drive the Americans around in a Jeep they had brought from the US and that's how he got his start at Mykobar. He stayed on until the company folded in 1983." But in those 28 years in-between everything changed.

It might be hard to fathom, but the 1950s weren't kind to Mykonos. The locals were struggling to make a living and, despite their welcoming disposition, the tourism industry, which would later prove to be the ultimate goldmine, was still nascent. Barite was the order of the day. "Almost everyone who lived on the island worked for Mykobar in some capacity," remembers Loizou-Voulgaraki. "Sometimes the company would hire entire families!" The Mykobar workforce even included women, and we're not just talking about office staff. Girls worked at sorting facilities, separating barite from gravel, at a workplace clearly dominated by men. "It was almost unheard of at the time," says the researcher, "but walking around with money in your pocket sweetened the deal. The alternative was staying at home, ploughing

and sowing the fields. It was a tough life and this was their one chance to make something of themselves". And that's exactly what they did.

Every man and woman who worked at Mykobar was trained by specialists, gaining technical know-how that would prove extremely useful later on. When the mines dried up and the company had to move on, they realized they weren't simple village folk any more. They had become tradesmen and women, proud of their hard-earned experience. "Some of them leaned into their entrepreneurial side and opened their own businesses, while others became professional drivers, electricians and administrators," says Loizou-Voulgaraki. "It really helped them take advantage of certain opportunities that came their way." It might sound strange, but one could venture so far as to say that Mykobar planted the seeds of change that transformed Mykonos into what it is now.

Naturally, working underground was extremely taxing and it is often difficult to portray this profession in a positive light, which is one of the main reasons why Mykonos' barite mines are almost completely forgotten. "Granted, it was hard work. When the ships had to be loaded with barite, workers would often pull three 8hr shifts back-to-back. The raw material was sent to New Orleans, where it was processed and sold to the Middle East to be used in oil drilling." The pay wasn't exactly lavish but it made all the difference at the end of the month, when the workers had to settle their monthly grocery tab. "They could shop on credit because shopkeepers knew they were good for it. They had a different status."

During the 28 years the Mykobar mines operated, eight people lost their lives, which is a relatively small number in comparison to other mines around the country. Their equipment was better and the relationships between the locals and their American supervisors were heartfelt and based on honesty. Loizou-Voulgaraki herself rode to school on the company bus and always felt a strange kinship with everyone who worked there. Her research was initially spawned by grief, when she lost her beloved father in 2003. It actually took her 10 years to act on this first impulse, but when she did, it was in earnest. "I didn't think this was something worth

salvaging, but when the miners started dying, one by one, I realized an important part of Mykonian history was in danger of dying along with them.” What started out as a tribute to the dearly departed, turned into a huge undertaking. “I had no idea I would be able to gather so much information,” she admits. From newspapers to blueprints, films and entire photographic archives, her perseverance had landed her with enough material to start her own industrial heritage museum. But for now, her goals are much more modest: a coffee table book, an online portal and, perhaps, a documentary. State support hasn’t exactly been forthcoming and the mines have slowly turned into dumping grounds, but Voulgaraki is both irreverent and hopeful. “I’m not willing to throw myself at anyone’s mercy, but I have a strong hunch that everything will work out.” All we can do is wait...



← Remnants from the barite washing facility.



← Abandoned housing near the mines.