



Malathronas in the Tatra Mountains

OBITUARY

John Malathronas obituary, exuberant travel writer and erstwhile music journalist

Greek-born author of Michelin Guides and Rough Guides known for his candid views

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John Malathronas never shrank from speaking his mind. Watching Dire Straits perform as the support act to Talking Heads in January 1978 at the Roundhouse in London, he confidently declared, “They are never going to make it.”

As London critic for the pioneering Greek magazine Pop+Rock, Malathronas introduced his readers to Mick Jagger — who, he observed, never blinked when subjected to flash photography.

His acerbic views proved a sensation, and occasional irritant, in Athens. One Greek journalist said he “choked with rage” when reading eloquent diktats from Malathronas on heavy metal. Pink Floyd fans deluged Pop+Rock with protests after he damned the group’s 1982 film *The Wall*. Forty years after dismissing the Smiths, Malathronas’s verdict was still eliciting hate mail from Greece, dispatched to his north London address.

Fortunately, he revelled in free and frank discussion, whether of politics (he was markedly left-wing), music or travel, a field he subsequently entered as a journalist and editor. He wrote for The Sunday Times magazine, the Daily Mail, The Telegraph, CNN and National Geographic, and his subjects ranged from Brazil to the depths of Asia. Blogging as *The Jolly Traveller*, he reported on a birdwatching jaunt in the Okavango Delta. If asked why he loved birds, he would reply: “They fly, they sing and they dress well — what more do you want?”

Malathronas also expanded coverage for LGBT travellers in the mainstream press. He was never prone to sugarcoat — the briefing sheet on gay travel he wrote in 2014 for The Sunday Times Magazine included tips on handling “occasional” trouble with foreign police such as, “Don’t sign anything you don’t understand”. He advised the LGBT traveller to shun holidays in “much of Africa”, “chunks of southeast Asia”, Russia and several Caribbean islands, given harsh local penalties for gay activity.

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Malathronas never trusted Google while researching the half-dozen Michelin Guides he co-authored or the hefty chunks of Rough Guides he wrote to Greece, France and Europe. Once observing photographs of “shady surroundings” on the web page of a campsite in a region he knew had been ravaged by forest fires, Malathronas drove there to find the site had burnt down. To highlight the fallacy of online reviews, he posted a photograph on his blog revealing dust on top of the cupboard of a hotel with a four-star Trust Pilot rating.

In 2017, he won a travel-writing award for an account of a Mozambican slum that had produced prime ministers and superstars. In an industry of slick generalists, what lent his prose depth was a grasp of cultural nuance deriving from his talent for languages. As well as fluency in German, Greek and English, he spoke excellent Spanish and Brazilian Portuguese, and conversational French and Italian. His command of Hungarian enabled him to win disputes with local taxi-drivers in tussles over fares.

Waspish, warm and prone to “mischief”, Malathronas also wrote three lively, history-laden travelogues on Singapore, South Africa and Brazil. In Rio de Janeiro, he had upset a drag queen by flicking crumbs of Madeira cake over her, disrupting her singing. A food fight ensued, he gleefully noted in *Brazil: Life, Blood, Soul* (2003). The 6ft 4in tall Malathronas was at his happiest when causing a ruckus in a Brazilian nightclub. He sometimes arrived in a T-shirt with a flashing spiral Velcroed into a gap at the top. It was operated via battery from his pocket.



Malathronas never sugarcoated his travel writing

Yannis “John” Malathronas was born in Athens in 1956 to Panayotis, who ran a textile manufacturing company, and Vassiliki (née Varvara), known as Kiki. His parents divorced when he was four, both subsequently remarrying. His love of opera began as a child when a relation smuggled him into unsold seats at the opera house in Athens. As a teenager, to understand opera libretti, he learnt Italian. By then he was proficient in German, first learnt from a childhood nanny. At 16, he passed a Goethe Institut exam which entitles foreign students to study at a German university. His English was fluent thanks to a bilingual schooling at Athens College, the alma mater of several Greek prime ministers, including the present incumbent, Kyriakos Mitsotakis.

Aged 18, he moved to London to take a degree in chemical engineering at Imperial College. After graduating with a first in 1978, he obtained an MSc in chemical engineering, and in 1983 a PhD in computer-aided design. For decades he worked in IT in London, Zurich, Vienna and San Francisco for companies including Reuters, Logica, Glaxo and Credit Suisse.

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Press trips with Malathronas were memorable. On the Frankincense trail in Oman, he enlivened a Jeep drive through the desert with cries of “Where are all the men?” while bemoaning the absence of sabre-rattling Lawrence of Arabia types leaping over the sand dunes.



Malathronas was exuberant on trips but also a private man

He knew where to find gorgeous beaches off the tourist track in Greece or a French museum of 3,000 largely obscene corkscrews, or the Hungarian origin of the word “coach”. In a marked Greek lilt, he relayed outrageous memories to select audiences. Yet beneath the exuberance, he was a private man. After a diagnosis of cancer three years ago, he created a WhatsApp group to alert a few friends of his treatment, but anyone foolish enough to quiz him about his ill health would be shut down with the words, “that’s boring”.

Malathronas, who never married or had children, was buried in Epping Forest to the sound of *Jumpin’ Jack Flash* by the Rolling Stones. “I’m a difficult bugger, I’ve always thought,” he said before his death. “I had no idea until I became ill how much people loved me.”

John Malathronas, travel writer, was born on April 18, 1956. He died of pancreatic cancer on February 6, 2024, aged 67

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