



Mastiha: A Unique Herbal Spirit from Greece

Description

Cover photo from [Skinos Mastiha Official Website](#)

Our Sixth Featured Libation of the World comes from the island of Chios, Greece.



Image from Skinos Mastiha Official Site

What would you say if you had to describe Greeks in just a few words? We would say they are some of the most hospitable people we have come across in all our travels. Tourism is a major industry in Greece, but that doesn't always translate to feeling appreciated and welcomed as a guest. One of the most striking traits in Greece is in most restaurants, especially local places; you will be provided at least one and, maybe, several times a free food or drink at every meal. That was our experience not only on the mainland but also on Mykonos, Santorini, and Crete.

It expresses their appreciation for your patronage, a gift of sorts to say thank you. In our most recent travels in 2021, we were often greeted with a complimentary appetizer. We would then be given a complimentary small carafe of liquor and dessert at the end of the meal as they left the check. These offers of kind hospitality were always welcome and lovely. In all our travels so far, it is unique to Greece.

Our Introduction to Mastiha

During Joelle's first trip to Greece with her sister, the liquor given complimentary at the end of the meal was almost exclusively Mastiha. (Our 2021 trip was a mix of Mastiha and Vinsanto.) We never missed out on trying something new, so we went for it, not even knowing for sure what we were trying. It was quite a shock the first time. Imagine drinking tree bark when you were least expecting it. Technically that is what you are drinking. To our surprise, we quickly came to enjoy it and were disappointed when it wasn't provided at the meal's end.

Mastiha is created with resin from the Mastiha tree that grows on the island of Chios, Greece. The unique climate on the island's southern end is the only place in the world where an aromatic resin of this quality is cultivated. There is quite a story to this unique herbal liquor with its magical qualities. As you look closely, there are Mastiha products everywhere in Greece. From candies, elixirs, cough drops, digestive aids, toothpaste, deodorant, shampoo, gum, sunscreen, skincare, coffee, cereal bars, a culinary herb.....you get it. The Greeks love their Mastiha; in any form, they can get it.

What is Mastiha?



Image from [Skins Mastiha's official site](#)

Mastiha starts as a semi-transparent sap that solidifies in yellowish teardrop blobs. It's native to the southern side island of Chios in Greece. There have been attempts to graft such trees in Italy, Turkey, and northern Chios with no success. It is due to the combination of the volcanic soil of southern Chios,

an exceedingly dry micro-climate, and perfected eugenics over generations where only the best-yielding trees were propagated.

Sold whole or ground, mastiha is used as a flavoring in cooking and as a fragrant, refreshing additive to cosmetics and personal hygiene products. It is also found in paint and varnishes; mastic is added to such products for its oily properties and color.

You may have already had some without realizing it. It is extensively used in Eastern Mediterranean and Arab cuisine in desserts, pastries, pudding, candy, fruit preserves, and to flavor beverages like tea or coffee. Mastiha can be used in both sweet and spicy dishes as a spice. It is popular in meat dishes with lamb, fish, poultry, and goat. It can even be a natural chewing gum (mastic gum). When ground and mixed with sugar or salt, mastiha is excellent for flavoring savory or sugary preparations.

What does it taste like?

Musky and aromatic, mastiha has a distinct and refreshing earthy flavor of wood, fresh trees, and pine. It sounds strange, but trust us, it is terrific. When drinking the Mastiha spirits, that is precisely how you feel, refreshed.

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Image from [Skinos Mastiha Official Site](#)

History

For almost 3.000 years, the power of mastiha has been around. It has spread throughout the world through emperors and adventurers. Mastiha has traveled to Genoa, Istanbul, Athens, and worldwide as a culinary delicacy known for its excellent digestive attributes.

The English word “masticate” comes from the Latin adaptation of the Greek word “to chew,” which is mastichein. Back in the day, before toothpaste, the wealthy would chew mastiha to fight plaque and freshen their breath.

Chios Island



Windmills at Chios Island-Greece Photo from [Skins Official Site](#)

The Island of Chios is the fifth largest of the Greek islands in the northern Aegean Sea and is known for the unique and rare phenomenon of Mastiha cultivation. The local economy has prospered for centuries by cultivating lentisc trees that produce the aromatic “mastiha” resin. Mastiha is a resin retrieved from the mastic evergreen, a shrub of the species *Pistacia lentiscus*. Native to the Greek island of Chios, mastiha has a teardrop shape when solidified, earning the name “drops or tears of Chios.”

Chios is known for its Mastiha, medieval villages, beautiful beaches, and fertile soil. It is a prosperous

island known for its wealth due to its strong economy tied to mastiha. It is about a 35-minute flight from Athens International Airport.

To learn more about Chios Greece, check out [Chios Island's Official Tourism site](#)

What is the Mastiha tree?



Adobe Stock Image

Mastiha trees are known as the “Crying Tree.” They are predominantly only cultivated in one place in the world: the small island of Chios. The unique microclimate is the only one that can produce the aromatic resin needed to make Mastiha spirits. Harvesting takes place only one time per year during

June and July. The process consists of several “prickings,” and it takes several weeks to extract mastiha teardrops. The tree is “crying out” the Mastiha resins that take 10 to 20 days to get solid and collected.

Attaining the resin

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Image from [Skins Mastiha Official Site](#)

About 24 villages in southern Chios Island are known as the mastiha villages. The tree is pruned during the winter months to keep its round shape. This is so the resin can be collected most efficiently. Spring brings back-breaking work that is required to harvest the resin.

The farmworkers prepare “the table” by weeding a round area below the mastic tree and sweeping it. They then spread limestone to create a flat surface where the resin will fall and congeal but not dissolve. They then make shallow incisions starting from the bottom and going to the top; the bottom produces thicker droplets and the top finer ones. About three to four weeks after the incisions are made, they collect the drops from “the table” and pick those remaining on the trunk. If it rains even once, the mastiha resin will be lost.

They gather their resin crop in the fall and clean it by sifting, washing, and removing impurities.

The Mastiha Process



Image from [Skinsos Mastiha Official Site](#)

Once the resin is harvested, Mastiha is carefully transferred in wooden coffins covered with boat textiles to a cool warehouse. The village residents pick out only the highest quality resins and clean them by hand. It is a thoughtful and tedious process.

The distillation process begins when Mastiha is mixed with fine alcohol (quality matters) and is put in bronze tanks – called an alembic, which is then heated by fire. This process results in a delicate extract with a unique aroma.

The next step is the blending, which occurs when fine-quality sugar, alcohol, and mineral water are added to complement the mixture and create a distinctive and balanced clear white Mastiha spirit. The spirits are bottled ideally in high-quality glass bottles and corked with a natural cork.

UNESCO and Protecting the Mastic Trees



Mastic tree garden in Chios island, Greece Adobe Stock Image

Though mastic trees grow all over the Mediterranean, only the variety in the unique microclimate of Chios's southern area produces the special aromatic sap from which the liqueur is made. Mastiha was given the Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) from the EU, and UNESCO recognizes its traditional harvest as a living heritage of humanity. The EU has also recognized mastiha as a traditional herbal medicine for digestive problems.

In August of 2012, disastrous wildfires spread across the island of Chios, scorching over 31,000 acres of land. As a result, more than half of the island's mastic orchards were destroyed. Because it has a protected designation of origin from the EU, the fire not only impacted Chios farmers, who lost almost 60 percent of their crops, but it also seriously impacted the global supply of the mastiha.

Fun Fact

The trade of mastiha took a big hit after 1900 when Thomas Adams mass-produced chewing gum in the United States under the name Chiclets from the resin of the Mexican sapodilla tree and marketed it worldwide.

Cooking with Mastiha



Image from Adobe Stock

Mastiha is used as a spice and has to be mixed with salt or sugar to temper its strength because it is potent and can overwhelm the dish's flavor. If you wish to use mastiha, grind the frozen drops in a mortar and pestle. Measure what you have, and following a 1:10 ratio, mix it with salt or sugar.

Mastiha is usually added in small amounts, as with all-powerful spices. A little goes a long way.

How to enjoy Mastiha



Image From Adobe Stock

Served cold and straight-up as a digestive at the end of a meal is how it is most often served in Greece. It is how we first experienced it, and we prefer it that way to this day.

It also can be used in many different types of cocktails. Check out our wide range of cocktail recipes below.

Where to purchase Mastiha



Masthia spirits have gained much greater popularity in recent years. This is believed to be due to the trend of creating new and unique cocktails. Mastiha is seen more and more in bartending competitions worldwide.

As a result, Mastiha can be easily found in most US liquor stores. However, it is fun to bring back from Greece as it is comparatively inexpensive. We always grab some in the duty-free shops before we board the plane in Greece. A sweet grocery store on the main level at the Athens airport has a great selection of Mastiha liquor and other products. Our favorite place to pick some gifts and snacks for the trip home or a bottle or two to launch our visit.

Places in the US to find Mastiha is [Total Wine](#), or if you don't want to go out and live in a large city, you can get some delivered often within an hour or two by Drizly.com (Drizly is an affiliate link, and we may earn a small commission if you order from them). Even Amazon.com has Mastiha Spirits for sale as well as gum and spice.



Greek loukoumi with delicious Mastic flavor Adobe Stock Image

Our favorite brand of Mastiha spirits is Skinos. It will also be the easiest to find in the US.

If you are interested in purchasing other mastiha products, especially medicinal ones, check out the [Mastiha shop](#). It is fascinating all the products they carry.

May we suggest a few recipes for cocktails?

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Photo from [Skins Mastiha Official Site](#)

Salty Skin

Ingredients

2 ounces Skinos Mastiha
1/2 ounce fresh lemon juice
1/2 ounce of dry white wine
2 ounces of soda water
Pinch of salt

Fill a highball glass with all the ingredients except soda water and then add ice cubes and stir well. Add

soda water and give another stir. Garnish with 2 olives.

Recipe from [Skinos Official Site](#)

Skinos Sour

Ingredients

1 2/3 ounce of Mastiha Spirits
1 tsp of simple syrup
2/3 ounce of fresh lemon juice
A dash of aromatic bitters
2/3 ounce of fresh egg white
Lemon peel for garnish

Shake all the ingredients with ice and strain into an ice-filled old-fashioned glass. If you use egg white, dry shake the egg white to make the foam and then shake with the other ingredients with ice. Garnish with lemon peel.

Recipe from [Skinos Official Site](#)

Mastic Mule

Ingredients

1 1/2 ounces of Vodka
1/2 ounce Mastiha Spirits
1-ounce Herbes de Provence Syrup or Simple syrup infused with herbs
Splash of Hard Cider
Squeeze of Lime
Slice of lime

Pour the first four ingredients over ice in a copper mug, stir, and top with hard cider. Garnish with lime.

Recipe from [Food and Wine.com](#)

Onassis

Ingredients

1/2 ounce Mastiha Spirit
1/2 ounce of Rum
3 ounces Champagne
1/2 Lime
1/2 ounce of simple syrup
5-6 sprigs of fresh mint

Muddle fresh mint, syrup, and lime in a glass. Pour in a shaker with Mastiha, champagne, rum, and ice. Garnish with lime

Recipe from [Food and Wine.com](#)

The Med

Ingredients

2 ounces Skinos Mastiha
1 tsp simple syrup
6 fresh basil leaves
2 Lemon Wedges
Soda Water

Fill a highball glass with Skinos Mastiha Spirit, lemon juice, sugar, basil leaves, and ice cubes, and stir well. Add more ice cubes top up with soda water and give another stir. Garnish with basil sprig.

Recipe from [Skins Official Site](#)

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Photo from [Skinos Mastiha Official Site](#)

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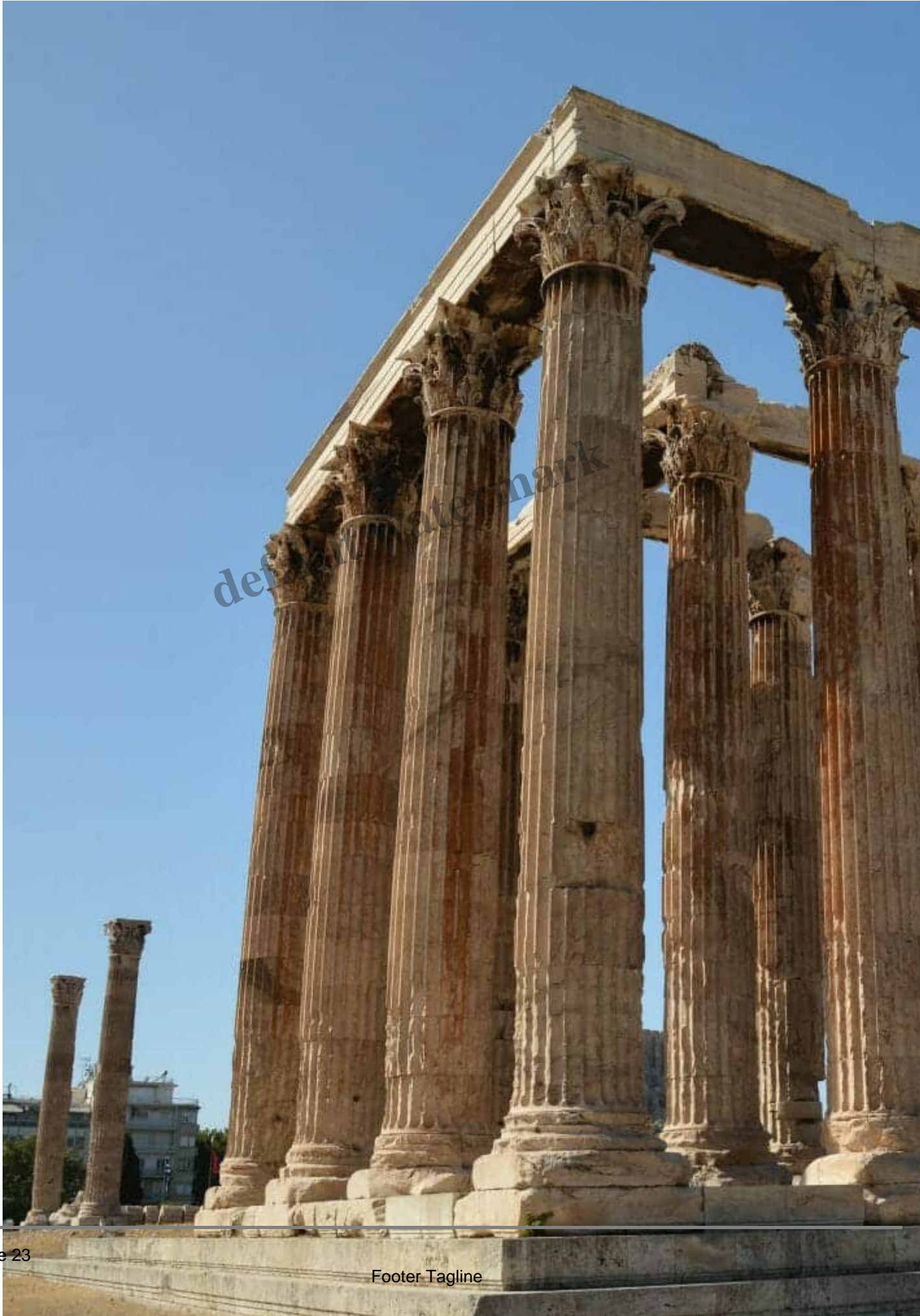
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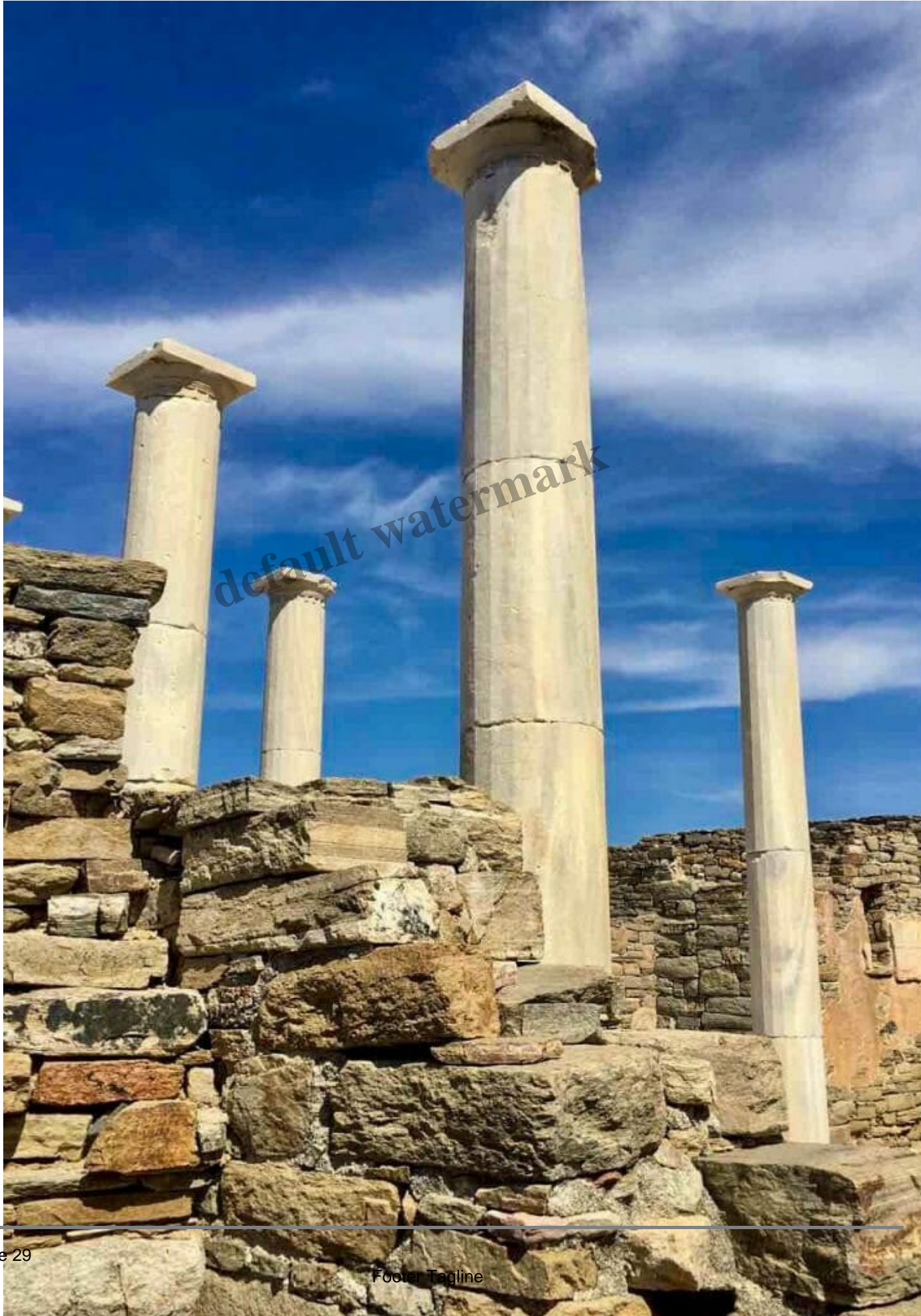




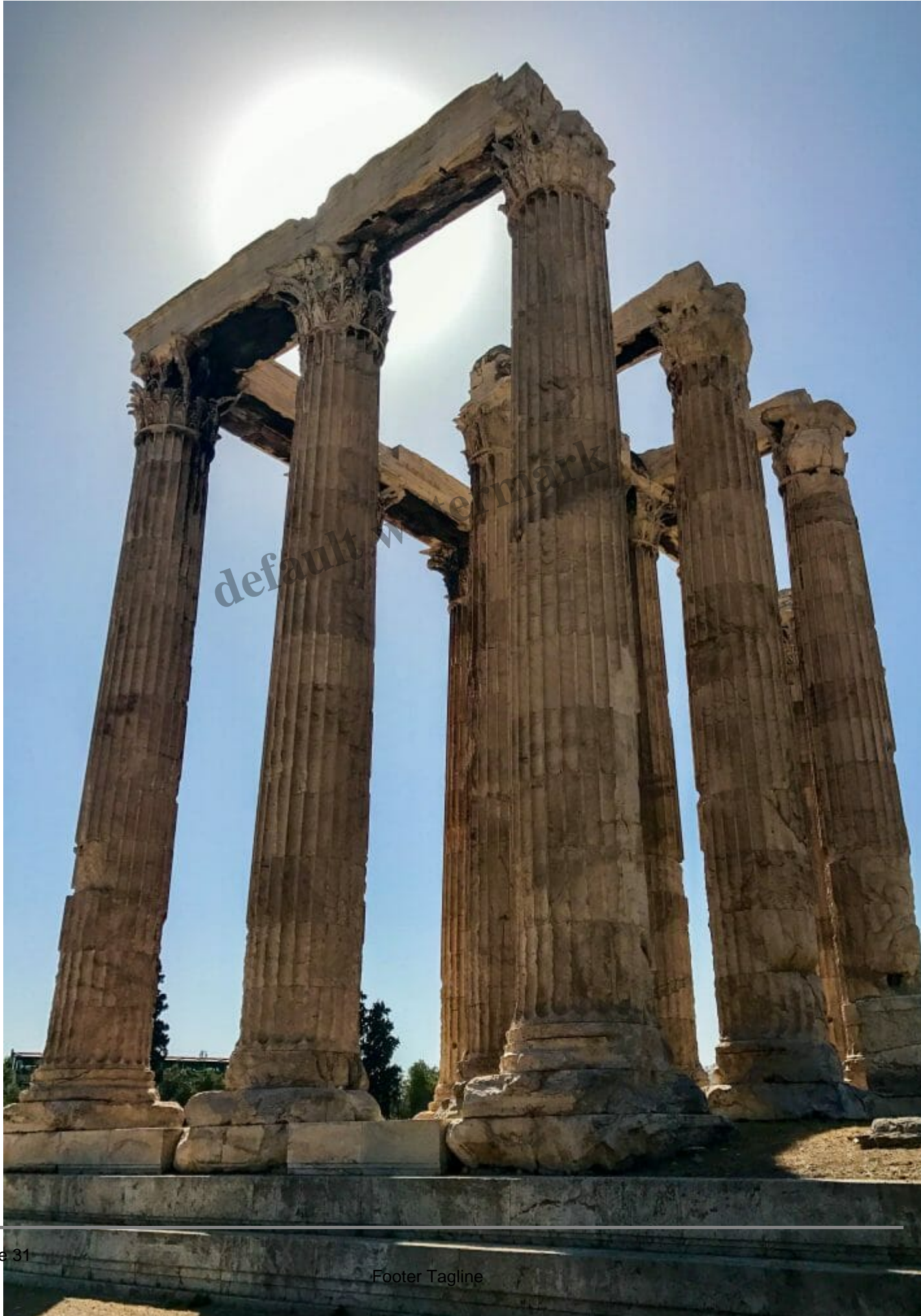
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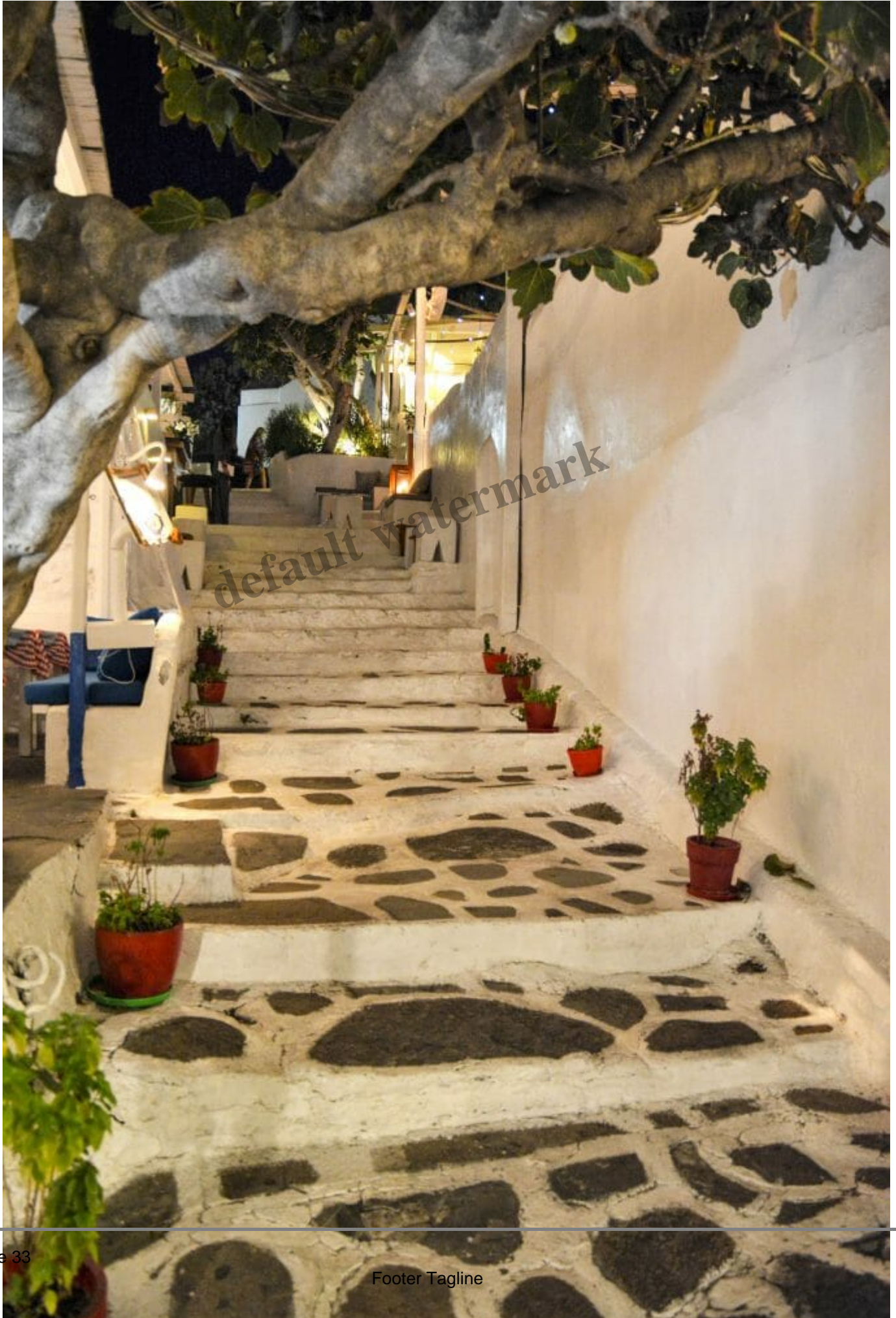
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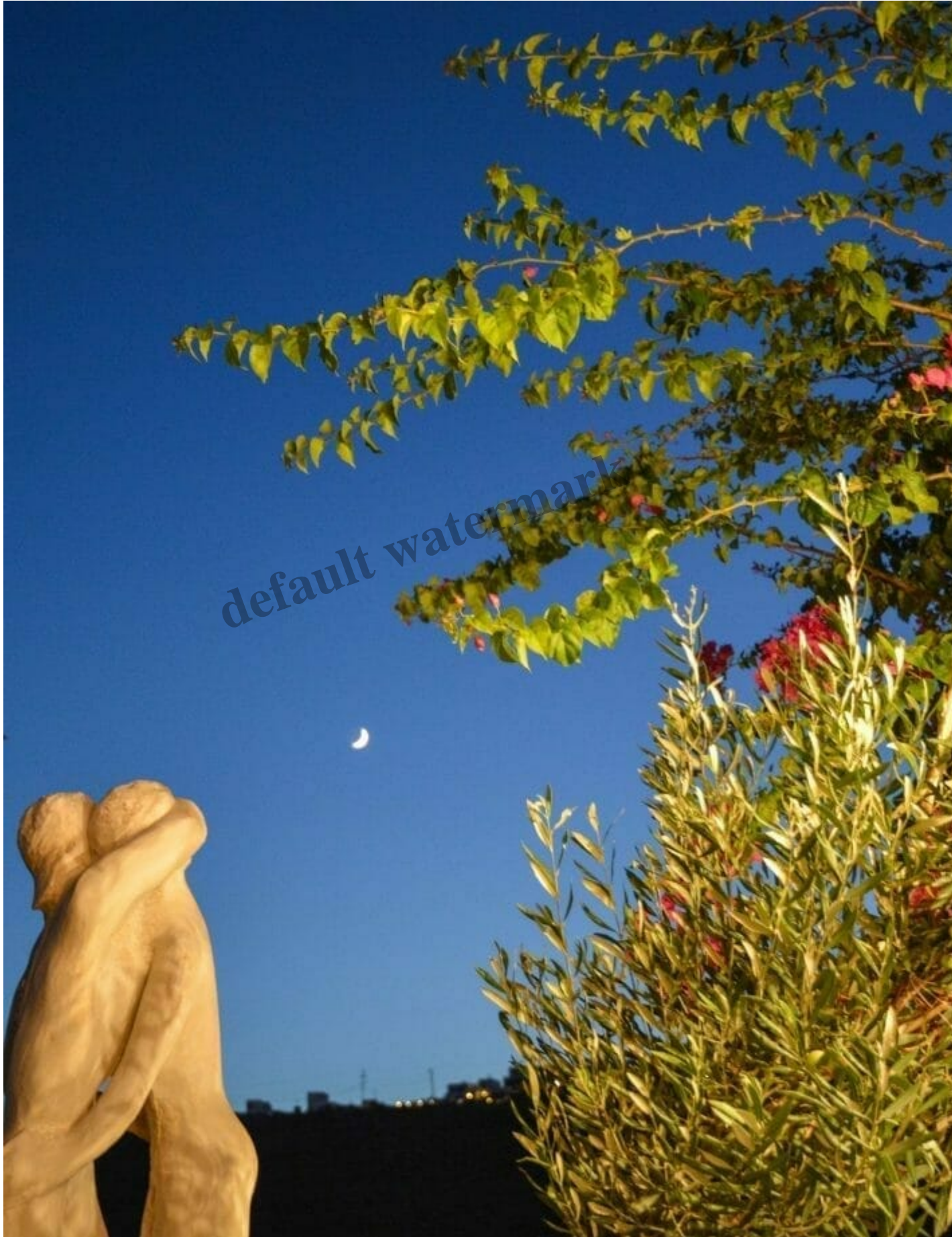
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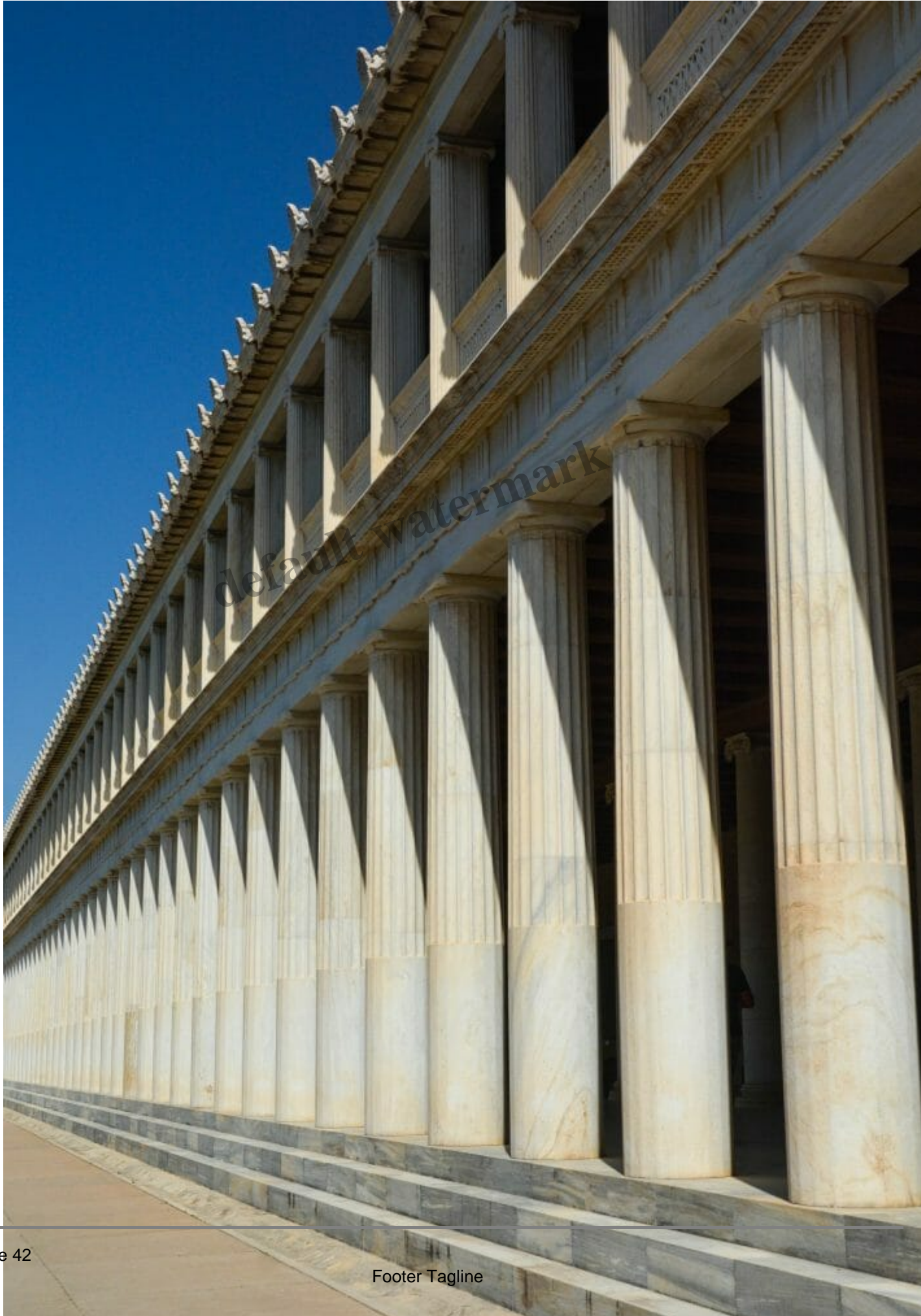




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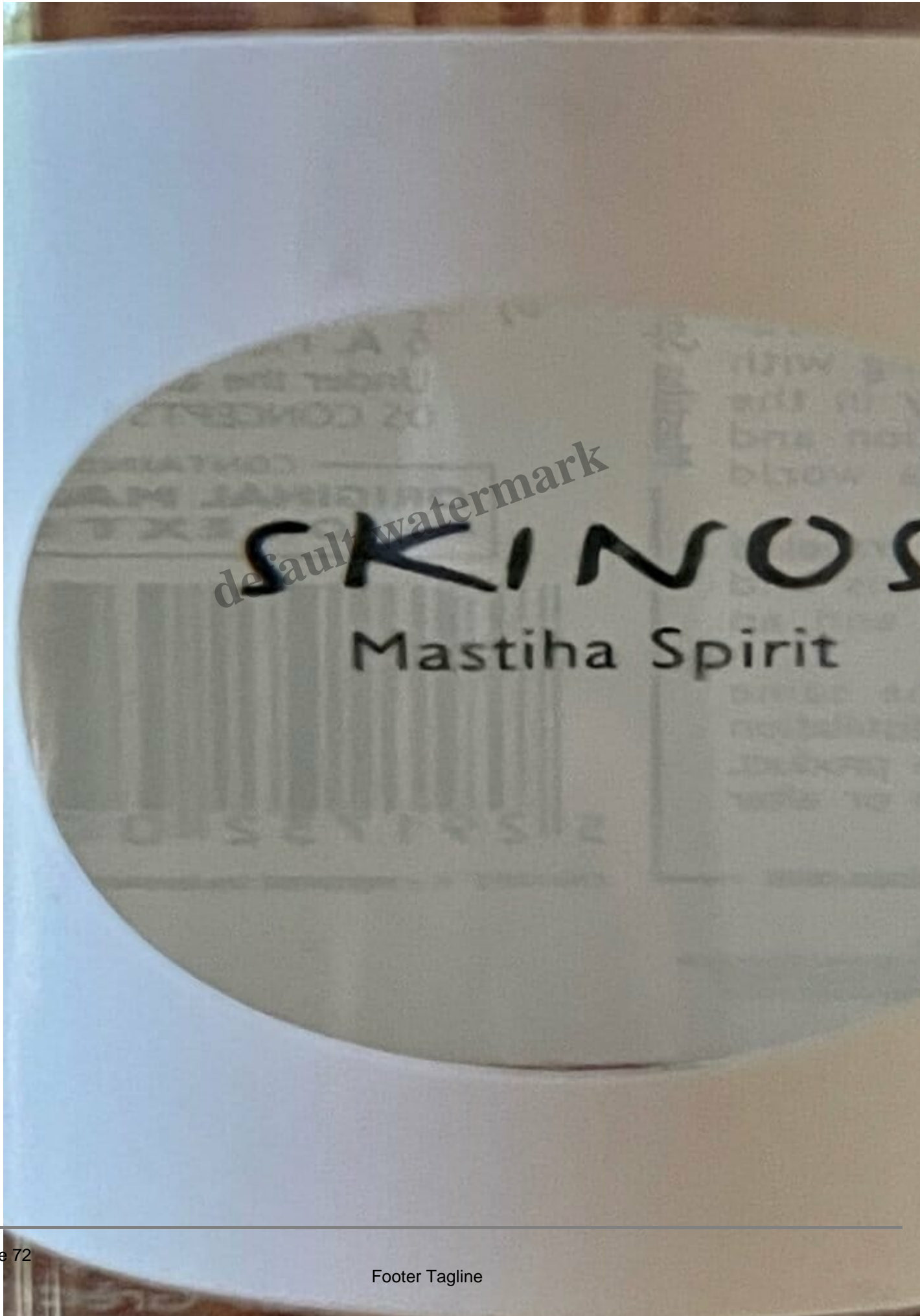








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We always check Expedia and Booking.com to verify prices. At times, one is sold out of rooms while another at the same place has rooms. We also often find some European hotels, especially smaller ones, on Booking.com but not on Expedia. It could be they are a Europe-based company. Try both before booking accommodations.

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[VRBO](#) is now under the Expedia group's ownership, which many were worried about, but it hasn't panned out to be a concern. It is a massive network with access to all lodging forms should issues arise. Joelle has used VRBO for many years with her family and has had no problems with it.

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