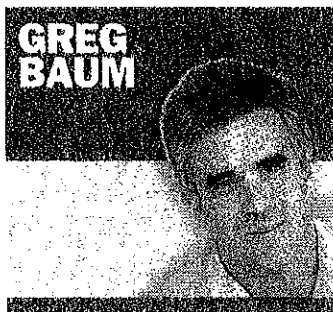


The world's best have a lot to learn, by George

GEOERGE skips a converted fishing boat that ferries tourists around the remote Greek island of Kastellorizo and twice a week to the nearby Turkish town of Kas to visit the farmers' market and the bazaar. George — Yiorgos — is a popular name on the island. One of George's boats is the "St George", and in its cabin are icons devoted to St George. Dominating the square where George lives is the church of St George.

On the plateau above the village is another church of St George. Beneath it, reached by a narrow tunnel, is a dark, candle-lit crypt where the Kastellorizians took their children to hide from the Italians before and during World War Two.

Kastellorizo, styled by *Lonely Planet* as "the rock at the end of Europe" is tiny, starkly beautiful and sparsely populated. Its only settlement clusters around its turquoise, horseshoe-shaped harbour, creating the effect of



an amphitheatre. It is, by the standards of the Greek islands, little visited. It has only one road, linking the settlement to the airstrip, and one taxi.

But it has strong links to Australia. Its deteriorating economy pre-war forced many to leave, and repeated bombing during the war its total abandonment. Many came to Australia, where, though widespread, they maintain a strong sense of community. George's wife, Louise, is from Melbourne. George has been to Melbourne, to the races and the footy.

One morning on his boat, George told me that he liked

footy, but was bemused by one aspect. How was it, he wanted to know, that when a player was injured and a doctor called onto the field, play continued as if oblivious? "It's crazy," he said, making theatrical gestures to match. "Crazy, crazy." But it was also the catalyst for a conversation about the relative merits of the various football codes. Here was sport as Esperanto, a universal language.

George's game is, of course, soccer. On his afternoon off, he dons a Greek national strip and joins other Kastellorizians and soldiers stationed on the island for a pick-up game on a five-a-side pitch.

The game I saw was local, but some of the characters were from all times and everywhere: the one who shouted a lot but didn't do much, the tall, strong one who got in the way of everything, the wispy but skilful kid, the one who was always wronged and the fat one who didn't move much, but was always in the right place and scored nearly all the goals. We

are not so different as we sometimes think, and it may yet be the world's salvation.

Game done, the players left two balls lying on the pitch. "No thieves on the island," said one, noticing my puzzled look. "Just army and police."

That night, I sat with George and others in a smoky waterside taverna to watch the first leg of the Champions League semi-finals. Here again was a kind of unspoken international communion. In the afternoon, the barman had been wearing an AEK Athens shirt, but now his facial expressions and gesticulations said that his heart was with Arsenal. So was mine, both unavailingly. We didn't exchange a word; we didn't need to.

Outside, the fishing boats rocked at their moorings, as they have for centuries. The harbourside promenade and lanes were damp, and overrun by little, bright red lizards who are native to Kastellorizo and come out only when it is about to rain.

The next night, it was the

taverna again, Barcelona and Chelsea. By the time of the return leg, I was back in Melbourne, watching as only we Antipodeans must, in that darkest hour just before dawn. The contrast gave me to think again about the appeal, power and reach of the world game, and the responsibility it carries, not always nobly.

When Chelsea was denied a penalty, Michael Ballack pursued referee Tom Henning Ovrebo down the pitch, throwing his arms about and screaming abuse. Ballack is captain of Germany. Upon losing, other Chelsea players assailed the ref again. Didier Drogba screamed an obscenity into the lens of a television camera. It was reported later that Ovrebo received death threats and had to be smuggled out of London back to his native Norway.

This was in so many ways instructive about soccer. The structure of the game means that too much is contingent on the referee's decisions, which can affect the result more

directly and certainly than in any other sport. Ovrebo had a poor game, and it was decisive.

But that does not excuse the puerile behaviour of the Chelsea players. Nor does it excuse the utterances of manager Guus Hiddink, the once-sainted coach of the Soccerroos, who while admitting that Chelsea had missed chances, allowed for the idea of a UEFA conspiracy against the club. It was inflammatory.

The next day, Drogba and Chelsea apologised, but feebly, saying that the outburst was driven by frustration, as if that was sufficient reason. Really, Drogba and Ballack ought to be dealt long suspensions, but will not be. The trouble is that in soccer, unlike other sports, the players wield all the power, and it means some of them are bullies. The fact that they are immensely well-paid professionals makes it worse, not better. George and his mates conducted themselves with a whole lot more dignity that afternoon in Kastellorizo.