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OF TRAVEL

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Greece

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CENTRAL GREECE



UNESCO WONDERS & MIDLAND MOUNTAINS

Historical sites, dense forests, fast-flowing rivers, gin-clear seas and vibrant villages framed by warm hospitality; Central Greece delivers much more than you bargained for.

From Unesco World Heritage-listed sites and springwater-fed forested mountains to vast valleys and curious geological wonders, there's more to oft-overlooked Central Greece than meets the eye.

Appropriately, this is where Delphi, the naval of the earth, is found. It was antiquity's most important religious centre and has been a symbol of unity for over a thousand years. Both kings and commoners made the pilgrimage to seek the advice of high priestess Pythia. Modern-day faithful continue to trek the Sacred Way and tap into the site's mystical energy.

In nearby Arahova, youth don folk costumes and dance hand-in-hand, paying tribute to their War of Independence ancestors. Amid Meteora's sky-reaching stone pillars crowned by Byzantine monasteries,



pre-revolutionary protagonist Father Eftymios Vlahavas led ferocious battles, evading capture for years. To the west, Messolongi's small but fearless population was no match for occupying forces until the tragic 1826 exodus. Nowhere was the revolutionary motto 'freedom or death' expressed so valiantly.

Despite a turbulent history, the people of Central Greece are uncommonly warm hosts. Time is fluid, the pace of life unhurried. There's always time to sit and share a meze with *tsipouro*, the locals' firewater of choice.

In recent years, younger generations have begun to recognise the natural wealth surrounding them. Most now choose to stay put, striving to safeguard the environment, revive traditions and blaze new paths within the parameters of sustainable tourism.

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THE MAIN AREAS

DELPHI

Centre of the ancient world **p168**

KARPENISI

Endless family fun in nature **p180**

METEORA

Monasteries atop otherworldly stone pillars **p186**

PELION

Villages in forests and beaches **p193**





Meteora, p186

There's no need to be a believer to be wowed by the Byzantine monasteries perched precariously on soaring towers of rock; they're especially photogenic at sunset.



CAR

Driving is the best way to discover Central Greece. A car allows you to reach historical sites, remote mountain villages and far-flung beaches, while keeping your schedule flexible, in case you want to linger longer.



BUS

Don't drive? Greece's extensive, reliable KTEL intercity bus network is your next best option. There are frequent departures from the capital and good local networks. Destinations are relatively well connected but travel times can be long.

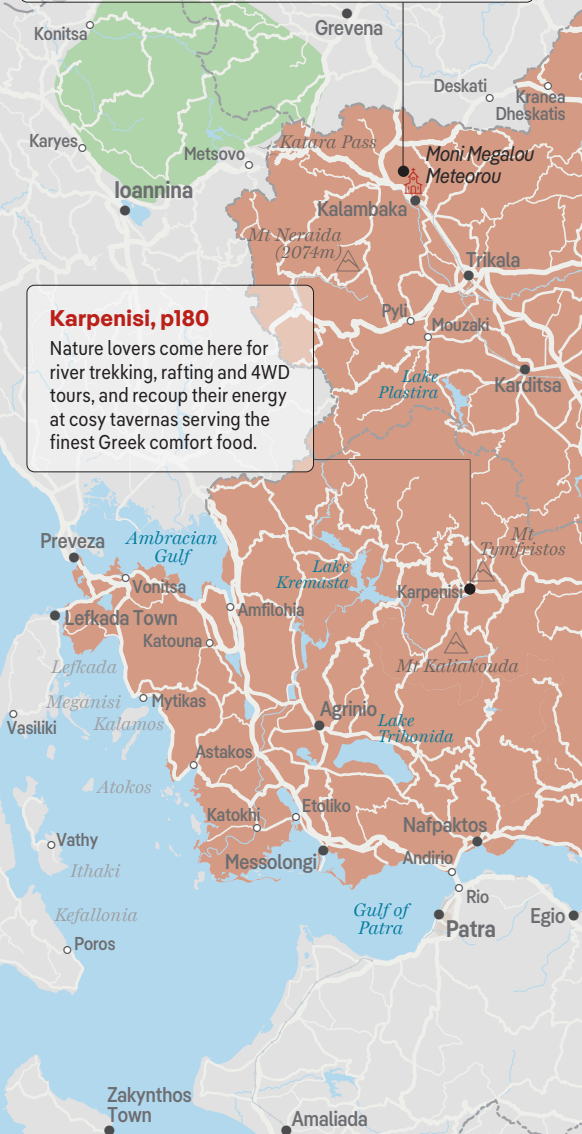


TRAIN

Meteora is easily reached by train from Athens. It's also a fast option for Delphi and Karpensi, though requires a taxi ride from the closest station to your final destination.

Karpensi, p180

Nature lovers come here for river trekking, rafting and 4WD tours, and recoup their energy at cosy tavernas serving the finest Greek comfort food.



Find Your Way

Central Greece is the country's largest region. Its key destinations have played a role in the evolution of Greece as an independent nation, illustrate the breadth of its culture and biodiversity, and reveal the variety of experiences available.

Pelion, p193

Hike or bike between mountain villages concealed within fir, oak and maple forests, but don't miss Aegean-side beaches in summer or skiing in winter.

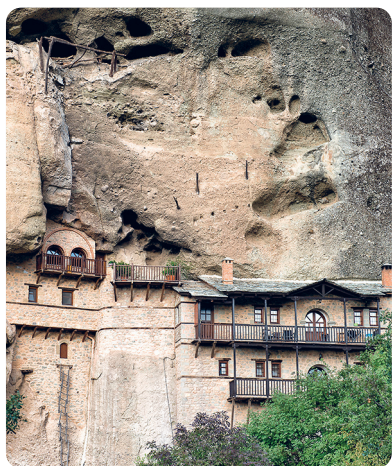


Delphi, p168

Located on Mt Parnassos' southern slopes, the centre of the ancient world plays host to a remarkable archaeological site and a small but intriguing museum.

Plan Your Time

Central Greece is all about taking it slow and easy. Meander through World Heritage sites, follow mountain forest trails, swim in blue-green seas and savour the abundant fruits of this fertile land at friendly tavernas.



RICHARD CAVALLER/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Ypapanti Monastery, Meteora



Seasonal Highlights

Retreat to mountain villages in autumn and winter for hiking, skiing and fireside taverna meals. Explore ancient sites in spring and head to lakes and seas for swimming and watersports in summer.



JANUARY

Hit the ski runs at **Mt Parnassos** by day and Arahova village's flamboyant bars and restaurants by night.



APRIL

Walk amid the well-preserved ruins of the **Archaeological Site of Delphi** as wildflowers carpet the surrounding hillsides.



MAY

Hike in the wilds of northeastern Agrafa along steep forested mountain trails and canoe across **Lake Plastira**.

If Time Is of the Essence

● Make your way to **Meteora** (p186) to see how spirituality intertwines with one of the world's great natural marvels. Book a **hiking tour** (p186) to see how the earliest monks scaled these massive plinths. See the abandoned yet fully restored 14th-century Ypapanti Monastery, where Ottoman forces captured local rebel Efthymios Vlahavas. View 9th-century manuscripts at the **Great Meteoron Monastery** (p186) or some of Meteora's finest frescoes at **Varlaam Monastery** (p186).

● Later, learn how to capture the geological marvel at sunset on a **photo tour** (p189). In the evening, dine on chargrilled steaks from ancient steppe cattle at **Meteoron Panorama** (p188).

An Active Four-Day Weekend

● Schedule an active getaway to **Karpenisi** (p180). Start by exploring the **stone-built villages** (p181) of Megalo Horio, Palio Mikro Horio and heritage-listed Koryshades. Jump in a 4WD for a guided tour around **Mt Helidona** (p185), down to cyan-hued manmade **Lake Kremasta** (p185).

● Reserve a day for river-trekking to **Panda Vrehi** (p182) where springwater creates a rain-like phenomenon. Next, trek through a fir forest and rappel into the **Black Cave** (p182), before taking a swim in nearby waterfalls. For dinner, local specialties like wild boar *stifado* await at **Horiatiko** (p181) in Neo Mikro Horio.

If You Have More Time

● Set off early for **Volos** (p198) and see replicas of Jason's legendary ship *Argo* before joining locals for *tsipouro* at **Mezen** (p199). Next, head north to the mountainous **Pelion peninsula** (p193), the summer playground of the Olympian gods. Swim in crystalline seas at northeast coast beaches like **Mylopotamos** (p196).

● Drive to the nearby village of **Tsagarada** (p194), where a thousand-year-old plane tree towers above Agia Paraskevi Square. Further north, in **Zagora** (p195), pick up spoon sweets from a women's cooperative. And, if you're there in winter, take to the slopes of the sea-facing **Pelion Ski Centre** (p196).



JUNE

Discover some of **Pelion's** finest northeastern coast beaches by kayak and brave a swim in the Kissos waterfalls.



SEPTEMBER

Cheer on classic and contemporary wooden sailboats racing in the **Galaxidi Islands Regatta** off the seaside village of Galaxidi.



OCTOBER

Witness a **re-enactment** of the decisive 1571 Battle of Lepanto in the waters off the historical town of Nafpaktos.



NOVEMBER

Visit **Messolongi's** wetland habitat during peak bird-watching season, which coincides perfectly with technicolour sunsets.

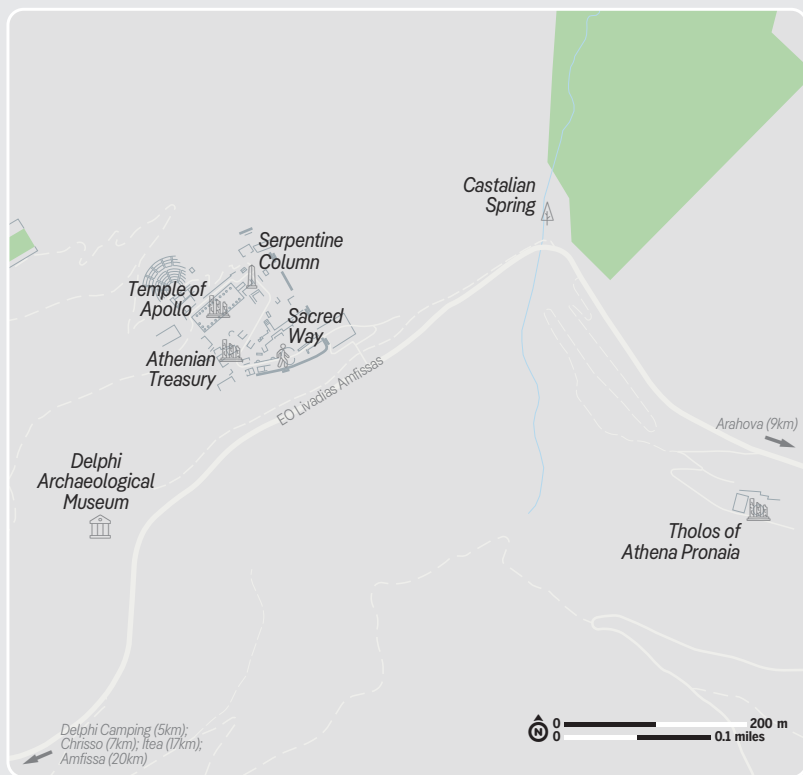
DELPHI

Legend has it that Zeus released two eagles from opposing ends of the earth to locate its centre. They crossed paths above Delphi, on the slopes of Mt Parnassos in the south of modern-day Central Greece. In the 8th century BCE, the cult of Apollo was established here. Leaders and commoners alike from the Mediterranean and Asia Minor made the pilgrimage to the oracle of sacred Delphi to consult a mysterious high priestess. Pythia prophesied on everything from matters of the heart to a city-state's decision to go to war. The sanctuary at Delphi reached its peak between the 6th and 4th centuries BCE, yet its influence was felt right up until Roman times. Today, this Unesco World Heritage-listed site is a must-see. As you ascend the archaeological site, look out across the olive-grove-filled valley and Gulf of Corinth below, close your eyes and tap into Delphi's divine energy.



TOP TIP

April and May are the best months of the year to visit Delphi, while the weather isn't too warm, fellow visitors are somewhat fewer and the surrounding hills are abloom with wildflowers. September and October are also ideal. In summer, theatre, music and dance performances are occasionally held at the ancient site.



PYTHIAN GAMES

Second only in importance to the Olympics were the Pythian Games, staged in Delphi every four years. At the 4th-century BCE Ancient Theatre of Delphi, song and music contests were conducted before a 5000-strong audience.

Crowning the site is the Ancient Stadium of Delphi, where sporting events were held, but not before athletes warmed up at the pool-equipped Gymnasium of Delphi, still in existence. Within the hairpin-shaped stadium, which hosted up to 5000, is a 117.5m-long track.

But before you head up to the stadium, look out across the ruins down to the valley and sea to grasp a sense of the awe that the ancients would have felt. Collectively, Delphi might have represented the achievement of a balanced life in antiquity.



Athenian Treasury

Make the Pilgrimage to Ancient Delphi

A SPIRITUAL CENTRE

Cicero wrote that the oracle at Delphi would never have been so famous and 'so crowded with offerings from peoples and kings of every land' if its prophecies hadn't been time-tested. Today, the ancient site once again draws tens of thousands of modern-day devotees annually.

Like the original pilgrims, start your visit at the circular Classical-era **Tholos of Athena Pronaia**, southeast of the ancient site. Delphi's most-photographed monument dates to 380 BCE; it was here that the faithful offered a sacrifice. Afterwards, they would purify themselves at the nearby **Castalian Spring**, where you can quench your thirst at a fountain. Entering the main site, you'll follow the stone-paved **Sacred Way**, which winds its way uphill through the site. Stepping into the Sanctuary of Apollo, you can see numerous treasuries gifted by nations and city-states in gratitude for receiving Pythia's counsel. Visually, the most impressive is the **Athenian Treasury**, built of fine Parian marble in the late 6th or early 5th century BCE. But the most significant is the **Temple of Apollo**, a 4th-century BCE Doric pavilion where an enormous



WHERE TO STAY IN DELPHI

Amalia

A superbly located midcentury Bondesque hotel featuring spacious rooms and a lounge with unparalleled views. €€

Fedriades

Attractive, good-value three-star hotel with comfortable, family-friendly room options and terrific mountain views. €

Nidimos

A generous breakfast is served in-room at this cosy, clean and comfortable three-star hotel in a central location. €



DELPHI'S BEST GUIDED TOURS

No matter how much you read up on Delphi, you won't get under its skin without the assistance of a state-licensed tourist guide.

Penny Kolomvotsou

Proud of her Delphic roots, Penny's fascination with the ancient site was sparked at a young age. She relays her vast knowledge with enthusiasm and will regale you with Delphic maxims like 'never tire of learning'.

George Malissos

A qualified archaeologist, George possesses a deep understanding of Classical Greece and Delphi's role in the era. He provides compelling detail on museum exhibits you'd otherwise miss.

Percy Jackson–Themed Delphi

Athens-based Greek Mythology Tours arranges guided group and private day tours of Delphi designed for fans of Rick Riordan's *Percy Jackson & the Olympians* book series.



SERGIU FIGURINI/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Relief, Delphi Archaeological Museum

statue of Apollo stood, and invaluable votive offerings were kept. Pythia is thought to have delivered her prophecies, as relayed to her from Apollo, in a chamber beneath. As you survey the temple, remember the Delphic maxims 'know thyself' and 'nothing in excess', which were inscribed on a vestibule within. East of the temple is a replica of the **Serpentine Column**, whose original bronze version commemorated a Greek victory over the Persians in the Battle of Plataea (479 BCE) and today is on display in Istanbul.

Classical Masterpieces at the Delphi Archaeological Museum

AN ANCIENT TREASURE TROVE

Whether you visit the ancient site or the neighbouring museum first, you're sure to be impressed by the valuable collection of exhibits. Importantly, it will help you form a clearer picture of how lavish ancient Delphi must have been and the wealth it attracted.

One of the most noteworthy treasures is a bronze figurine believed to depict Apollo, complete with layered hairstyle, fashioned in the Daedalic sculptural style of the 7th century



WHERE TO EAT IN DELPHI

To Patriko Mas

Game casseroles like venison in tomato and brandy sauce are a speciality at this local favourite. €€

Vakhos

Vegan dishes, including seasonal artichokes and potato stew, count among the slow food highlights here. €

Dion

Classic Hellenic fare like rice-stuffed tomatoes and souvlaki are well executed at this friendly taverna. €

BCE. Named after founder Daedalus, this style was the fore-runner of stone-carved *kouros* statues. Two were uncovered in 1893–94 close to the Athenian Treasury. The idealised muscular forms, dating to the early 6th century BCE, are thought to be those of brothers Kleobis and Biton and feature characteristic braided hair.

Equally striking is the 2.9m-tall *Sphinx of the Naxians* (560 BCE), which sports the face of a woman, the body of a lion and the wings of a bird. Made of white Naxian marble, it was a gift from the people of Naxos and served as an imposing guardian at the Sanctuary of Apollo entrance.

However, the crown jewel is the life-size *Bronze Charioteer* (478–474 BCE), a masterpiece commemorating a Pythian Games chariot victory. You won't be able to take your eyes off his, which are composed of semi-precious stone and glass. Preview selected halls and exhibits in 3D via the Digital Delphi smartphone app.

Trek the Ancient Footpath to Delphi

WHERE PILGRIMS WALKED

To get a sense of what it was like for pilgrims, rich and poor, to make the journey to Delphi, put yourself in their shoes.

Trekking Hellas Delphi, founded by Arahova local Giorgos Korodimos and his French-Greek wife Eleni Prablanc, offers a four-and-a-half-hour, 8km guided hike along the ancient footpath. Departing from the alpine plateau of Livadi, at an altitude of 1200m, you'll trek the southern slopes of Mt Parnassos, passing through varying landscapes.

The route, which forms part of the European E4 trail, twists through a fir tree forest, tracing a river bed rich in bauxite and limestone. Leaning tree trunks give way to a wide-open grassy meadow, where an endemic white crocus flower thrives. Further along, you'll take a break at a rocky spot amid low Mediterranean scrub with views of the town of Itsea below and its bay. Here, your guide breaks out a mini picnic of home-grown tomatoes, local feta, Delphic olives, village bread and clear spirit *tsipouro*.

This is where the ancient *kalderimiai* (cobblestoned path) begins, zigzagging down the mountainside and delivering ever more spectacular views. As you descend toward Delphi, take in the splendour of the ruins from above, ancient olive groves that reach all the way to the sea and Mt Kirra opposite. If you've got energy to spare, you can tour the archaeological site the same day. Suited to those in decent physical condition, this family-friendly tour is available April to November.



BEST CAFE-BARS IN DELPHI

Melopoieio

Choose between lemon pie, blueberry cheesecake, spinach pie and a host of other goodies, all baked in-house at this cheerful cafe.

Phileo

Soak in mountain views on an open-air terrace as you sip clever cocktails crafted with Greek spirits, liqueurs and herbs.

Mr Rose

Talented mixologists pull off unexpected cocktail combinations with flair in this small, fun-loving bar.

Apollo

One of Delphi's oldest cafes, come here for thick Greek yoghurt and homemade baklava with sweeping views.



GETTING AROUND

Delphi is an easy two-and-a-half hour drive from Athens. Alternatively, take the train from Athens to Amfikliia. Delphi is an hour

from there by taxi. KTEL intercity buses run regularly from Athens' Liossion bus terminal to Delphi.

Central Greece in Miniature

This leisurely all-season road trip route illustrates the astonishing variety of landscapes you can expect to encounter in Central Greece. You'll visit an awe-inspiring Unesco World Heritage-listed archaeological site, comely coastal towns, ethereal lagoons and stone-built mountain villages. Departing from Athens, you'll need a good five days to take in the sights. Consider leaving a couple of days' leeway in case you'd like to hang out longer in one location.

1 Delphi

Start at Delphi (p168), the centre of the ancient world for over a thousand years. See the circular Classical-era Tholos of Athena Pronaia then enter the main site to admire monuments such as the Athenian Treasury and Temple of Apollo. Below the ancient stadium, look out over silvery olive groves and the Bay of Itea. Priceless treasures await in the museum (p170).

The Drive: From Delphi, descend the coastal E65 southwest for 34km, taking it slow around the switchbacks, to Galaxidi.

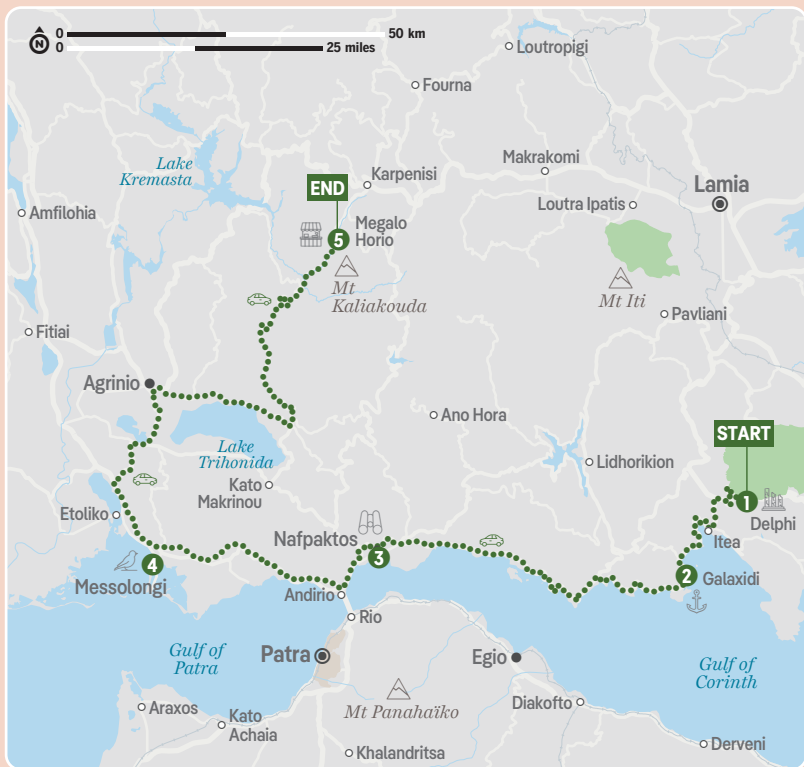
2 Galaxidi

Your next stop is romantic Galaxidi (p175), which feels more like a small island than a mainland coastal village. Restored neo-classical sea captains' mansions huddle on a hillside alongside church domes. Stroll the promenade that wraps around the port, leading to a pine and eucalyptus forest and pebble beaches. Don't miss the nautical museum.

The Drive: Continue along the E65 west for 66km, passing beside endless olive groves, to Nafpaktos. On the way stop for a swim at Sergoula beach.



VAGELIS PIKOULAS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



3 Nafpaktos

In 1571 the historic Battle of Lepanto was fought in the waters off Nafpaktos (p176). Today, this lively coastal town draws day-trippers to its atmospheric Venetian harbour, which is studded with statues and monuments honouring those who fought, among them novelist Miguel de Cervantes. Fortifications rise up the hillside to a clocktower, accessible on foot. Drive up to the Venetian castle for sweeping Gulf of Corinth views.

The Drive: Head west on Ionia Odos along coastal flatlands for 43km to Messolongi.

4 Messolongi

Two serene saltwater lagoons attract more than 290 bird species, including flamingoes and uncommon endemic species. The avian population of Messolongi (p177) enjoys a harmonious coexistence with fishermen

who continue to use traditional techniques to catch fish and seafood served at vintage tavernas. Take a guided tour of the Garden of Heroes and Messolongi History and Art Museum to learn about this small city's tragic history.

The Drive: Head northeast around Lake Trihionida along the E951 for 99km to Megalo Horio.

5 Megalo Horio

Park at the edge of Megalo Horio (p181), which sits on the lower slopes of imposing Mt Kaliakouda, and stroll its paved streets. From the central square, look over the valley and admire traditional stone-built homes. Folk costumes, farm tools and household items are on display at the folklore museum. Pick up homemade chestnut spread, cranberry jam and wild mulberry liqueur from the local agritourism cooperative.



Beyond Delphi

Delphi is the ideal jump-off point for a raft of distinctively different destinations: from vast lagoons to a ski resort.

Closest to Delphi is the ski town of Arahova, which pulses with snowboarders and skiers between December and March but is considerably quieter otherwise.

Heading west, the fishing town of Galaxidi is a beloved weekend destination for Athenians, who gather for lazy, sun-drenched seaside lunches. Its riveting nautical museum is worth the trip alone.

Another attractive port of call within the Gulf of Corinth is the historical town of Nafpaktos, which is especially popular among couples. A Venetian fortress stands tall on the waterfront, while medieval fortifications tower on a hillside above.

Further west, in the Gulf of Patras, fishermen maintain centuries-old traditional methods in Messolongi's lagoons, living in harmony with myriad bird species.



TOP TIP

These destinations are in close proximity and work well for a road trip but make sure you spend a full day – or more – at each one.

Arahova



Greece's Biggest Ski Resort

SKIING AND NIGHTLIFE

Mt Parnassos, whose tallest peak reaches 2457m, is Greece's biggest and best-known ski resort. Its proximity to the capital makes it a popular winter weekend and holiday destination. Base yourself in the cosmopolitan town of Arahova, built amphitheatrically at the foot of the mountain. From Delphi, it's a 12-minute taxi ride or 15-minute KTEL intercity bus journey east.

Sassy bars, chichi all-day restaurants, down-home tavernas and boutiques line the main drag. **Parnassos Ski Centre**, a 40-minute, fir-studded drive north, offers 23 slopes, including black runs, a fun park and equipment rental. Ski and snowboarding lessons are available, while two lodges host eateries and cafes.

In town, scale the landmark clocktower and visit the **Ethnographic Museum**, which not only features traditional hand-crafted textiles but encourages a new-found interest among local youth in loom-weaving. Nearby, a 264-step staircase takes you to the **Church of Agios Georgios** (1676), whose courtyard takes in views across the Kirfi mountain range.

Don't depart without picking up local culinary specialties like *lathouri* (grass pea) and *opsimotiri* cheese.

Celebrate the Feast Day of Ai Giorgi Panigiraki

DANCING IN THE STREETS

All of **Arahova** looks forward to Panigiraki, a moveable annual feast day honouring the town's patron saint, George. With roots in Homeric times, the rousing four-day celebration kicks off on April 23, or after Greek Orthodox Easter, at the Church of Agios Georgios. Inhabitants in folk costume participate in a solemn icon-bearing procession, followed by traditional dancing to live drum and flute music in the streets, sporting events like rock-throwing, and the serving of spit-roasted lamb and wine.

Dive into Maritime History at Galaxidi

A LAND OF SEAFARERS

Compact, cute and just a 35-minute drive southwest of Delphi, couples' favourite **Galaxidi** feels more like an island than an easily walkable mainland coastal village. Stroll the waterfront promenade, where you'll see traditional fishing



BEST TAVERNAS IN ARAHOVA

Kaplanis

Famished skiers gather here for *sarmades* (local dolmades), fried courgette flowers and nourishing cockerel casserole. €€

To Tsoukali

Go with the genial chef-restaurateur's choice of dishes but don't miss fava with smoked eggplant. €€

Agnantio

Savour chargrilled local *formaella* cheese with mushrooms and Dutch oven-baked veal with clocktower views. €€

Dasargyris

Carnivores congregate at this classic spot for herb-encrusted, spit-roasted *kokoretsi* (intestine-wrapped offal) and pork *kontosouvli*. €€

Arhontiko

Star dishes here include cheese pie with honey and slow-cooked ribs with grape molasses glaze. €€



WHERE TO STAY IN ARAHOVA

Afanos

Welcoming guesthouse long preferred by skiers for its central location; has freshly renovated rooms and suites. €€

Iresioni

Fetching stone-built guesthouse with family-friendly accommodation and fireplaces in some rooms. €€

Paeonia

A cheery couple run this sassy boutique pad featuring spotless rooms and a subtly sophisticated cafe-bar. €€



CULINARY HIGHLIGHTS OF GALAXIDI

Ganimede

Chrisoula Papalexi dishes out an epic handcrafted Greek breakfast. Take a seat in the flower-filled garden of her inviting guesthouse and dig into hearty pies, local cheese, apricot chutney, cauliflower piccalilli, jams and more. €€

Bebelis

It feels like Krystallia Koubli and Nikos Theoharis are hosting you in their home. Local specialty *kelemia* (onions stuffed with mince, rice, tomato and herbs) and slow-braised pork shank are classics. Upstairs is a mini folklore 'museum'. €€

Maritsa's

A favourite among Galaxidi's weekend regulars, it may have a modernised appearance and menu, but Maritsa still runs a tight ship, serving fish and seafood portside. Her handmade black and white orzo with mussels, scallops and prawns is flawless. €€

caiques and yachts moored at a tiny port. Take in the scene at a quayside cafe or cool off with a swim at pebbled Kentri beach, then head to the captivating **Nautical & Historical Museum of Galaxidi**. Here you'll comprehend this small but mighty heritage-listed town's role in Greece's seafaring and shipbuilding history through the 18th and 19th centuries, but also the 1821 revolution. Astute staff will guide you through exhibits of ship logbooks, maps, portraits of 19th-century ships and wooden figureheads, many donated by shipowners with Galaxidi roots. Nearby, handsome **neoclassical mansions** where sea captains once resided stand proud; some open to the public on certain days of the year.

Close by is the **Church of Agios Nikolaos**, dedicated to the patron saint of mariners, featuring a finely detailed iconostasis. Follow narrow alleyways northwest to **Hirolakka** district, literally the 'widows' abyss', whose sombre air echoes the pain endured for the men who never returned from sea.

Flour Wars & Classic Sailboats

REGATTA FUN AND GAMES

Each year on Kathara Deftera (Clean Monday), which marks the start of Greek Orthodox Lent within February or March, Galaxidi's youth lets off steam with **Alevromoutzouroma**, raucous flour wars, and everyone is invited to join in the fun.

The **Galaxidi Islands Regatta**, a new three-day event held in September, involves laidback classic and contemporary wooden sailing boat races, guided tours and activities for all ages.

Visit the Venetian Castle at Nafpaktos

A HISTORICAL HARBOUR

At first sight, it's hard to imagine Nafpaktos, a 90-minute drive west of Delphi, is a fortified city. But, look closer, and you'll see its stronghold starts from a **Venetian castle**, reachable by foot or car, which offers commanding views of the Gulf of Corinth. Stone walls thunder down a hillside, embracing Nafpaktos' neighbourhoods, reaching a small but important Venetian harbour. Here, portside cafe-bars beckon; take a seat and revel in the views. Statues and monuments within harbour walls pay tribute to Don Juan de Austria and novelist Miguel de Cervantes, among other notable figures who fought in the momentous Battle of Lepanto in the waters off Nafpaktos in 1571. On the first weekend of October,



WHERE TO STAY IN GALAXIDI

Galaxa Mansion

An elegantly decorated mansion turned hotel in Hirolakka. Breakfast is served in a sea-facing courtyard. €

Nostos

This comely high-ceilinged hotel features romantic, floral-adorned suites in a former sea captain's residence. €

Archontiko Art Hotel

Whimsically themed rooms at this hotel, suited to couples, include one with a traditional wooden boat-shaped bed. €



COOLEST BARS IN NAFAKTOS

Hendrix

Give the noisy harbourfront bars a miss and sample quixotic cocktails at this hip backstreet cafe-bar.

Hawaii Surfbar

Kitesurfers gather at this friendly hangout where mixologists work their magic to rock and funk.

Dr J. Spon

Serving harbour views and cocktails with unexpected ingredients, this fun spot has a dedicated fanbase.



Venetian harbour, Nafpaktos

the event, which saw a European coalition check Ottoman expansion, is re-enacted.

Among other highlights is the 15th-century **Botsaris Tower** which operates as a museum hosting battle-related maps and artworks. A five-minute walk east leads you to the town clocktower erected in 1914.

In summer, take a refreshing dip east of the harbour at pebbled **Psani beach**. To the west, peaceful **Gribovo beach** attracts cyclists to plane-tree-shaded biking paths and locals to a row of cafes. If you're into kitesurfing, the **Nautical Club of Nafpaktos** serves as a handy launchpad into the gulf, where your backdrop includes the Rio-Antirrio bridge. Rental equipment and lessons are available from Wind Circus.

Messolongi's Place in History

GREECE'S FIGHT FOR FREEDOM

Messolongi's role in the Greek War of Independence cannot be understated. Just over two hours' drive west of Delphi, the small western Greek city was the scene of heroic battles but also a valiant yet tragic citizen-led defence in 1826, known as the Exodus of Messolongi. Nowhere was the uprising's motto,



WHERE TO STAY IN NAFAKTOS

Apollon Library Suites

Twelve themed minimalist suites, like Don Quixote, and a breezy courtyard define this neoclassical mansion. €

Pepo's Guesthouse

Characterful rooms feature four-poster beds and floral curtains though nearby bars can prove noisy. €

Amaryllis

Known for its rooftop bar with harbour views, this centrally located hotel's rooms are simple and functional. €

BIRD-WATCHING IN MESSOLONGI

Sissia Roussi, an environmentalist-geologist, shares her lagoon bird tips.

Greater flamingo

Flamingos keep a distance but can be spotted from the town's coastal road.

Glossy ibis

Featuring iridescent green and reddish tones, this rarely spotted visitor tends to be around in spring.

Greater spotted eagle

Classed as vulnerable, adults are dark brown and have broad wings and short tails.

Dalmatian pelican

Not to be confused with the great white pelican, this near-threatened pelican has a dirty white appearance.

Pied avocet

Black and white plumage and a slender upturned bill make this wader easy to spot.

Eurasian curlew

This large, brown-flecked, endemic shorebird has a long, thin bill and winters in mudflats and marshes.



GEORGIOS TSICHULIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Fishing boats, Messolongi

'freedom or death', more courageously expressed. Yet, one of Messolongi's most famous sons isn't even Greek. Lord Byron, in fearlessly supporting his Hellenic brethren, perished here, not in battle but due to illness. A hall at the moving **Messolongi History and Art Museum**, on Markos Botsaris Square, is dedicated to the English poet. State-licensed tourist guide George Apostolakos runs tours of the nearby Garden of Heroes, revealing incisive details on the statues and monuments honouring Greek and philhellene freedom fighters, including Byron.

The Lagoons

FISHERS AND RARE BIRDS

Messolongi's twin saltwater lagoons are a photographer's dream. Sunset on these placid waters may be magical, but be sure to capture this extraordinary landscape at dawn, too. Beyond their surreal beauty, the lagoons, which cover 150 sq



WHERE TO STAY IN MESSOLONGI

Sealake View

These smartly renovated, light-filled apartments deliver a good night's sleep; two offer lagoon views. €

Langi Apartments

The town centre is an easy walk from these two modern, spotless one-bedroom apartments. €

Island Apartments

Rooms here are being updated, but the Tourlida islet location is what sets them apart. €

km, are shared fishing grounds. Commercial fishers grouped into cooperatives employ centuries-old traditional aquaculture methods. The rarest delicacy of all is *avgotaraho* (grey mullet botargo), which dates to Byzantium and, today, is served at restaurants and available from fishmongers.

The fishers share a warm symbiotic relationship with around 290 migratory and endemic bird species that also call the watery world home, some for at least part of the year. Messolongi is one of the Mediterranean's most important wetland habitats for breeding, passage and wintering. October to March are the best months for bird-watching.

Fish with a Local

SLOW AND SUSTAINABLE

Andreas Matzouratos followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather, learning sustainable traditional methods to catch fish in the *ivaria* (enclosures) assigned to Messolongi's fishing cooperatives. He's one of the local fishers who lead boat tours of Kleisova lagoon, organised by ecotourism-focused non-profit **Messolonghi By Locals**. Participants learn about keel-less fishing vessels *stafnokari*, *priari* and *gaita*, and unique fishing techniques. Try your hand at scooping up a fish with a net, filleting it and starting the salt-curing process. Best of all, you'll sample fish grilled at a *pelada*, a wooden fishing hut on stilts in the lagoon. You'll not only contribute toward safeguarding a sustainable form of fishing but provide supplemental income for fishers who say that an overpopulation of cormorants is decimating stocks.

The Salt Pans

MESSOLONGI'S WHITE GOLD

To the north and south of Messolongi, you'll see rows of white hills. Get closer and you'll realise they're mounds of sea salt. Salt-harvesting has long been a vital source of income for the town; the two salt pans operating today have existed since the 14th century. Feathery, crystal-like *afrina* salt (*fleur de sel*) is a highly prized export. Pick up a smoked version from the **Salt Museum**, on Tourlida islet, which runs excellent tours on the history and use of salt and various types available worldwide, plus there's an enchanting collection of salt shakers.

A DREAM IN FISH & SEAFOOD

Upon reading the menu at **Dimitroukas**, a fish taverna operating in central Messolongi since 1975, even first-time Greek patrons will scratch their heads.

Here you'll find cherished local lagoon delicacies like finely sliced, salt-cured *mexinari* (grey mullet) and *ligda* (gilthead seabream). Curious lovers of seafood will want to sample freshly shucked *havara* (bearded horse mussel) and succulent wood-fire-grilled eel.

If you're visiting in September, the prize wild catch is, undoubtedly, male flathead mullet, *petali*-style (butterflied) and chargrilled with *gala* (millet) and intestines intact. The only accompaniment your server will suggest is boiled broccoli, beetroot and zucchini doused with olive oil.

Toast these peculiar yet unforgettable culinary finds with aromatic Trikene ouzo, based on a late 18th-century family recipe and produced in Messolongi since 1901.



GETTING AROUND

KTEL intercity buses reach all of these destinations from Delphi. However, a road trip is the best way to experience this part of Central

Greece. Consider the season you're visiting in and what interests you, and map your route accordingly.

KARPENISI



Mountains crisscrossed with trails, forests laden with fir, plane, chestnut and walnut trees, rivers, gorges, waterfalls and lakes. Karpensisi, the capital of Evrytania prefecture, is a nature lover's dream.

In winter, snow envelops Mt Velouchi and its ski centre, while the bronze, burnt orange and yellow leaves of autumn grace the squares of traditional stone-built villages like Koryshades and Megalo Horio. Spring birdcall serves as a gentle wakeup call and, in summer, the unusual watery phenomenon of Panda Vrehi draws adventure seekers.

Panagia Proussos Monastery, dating to the 9th century, clings to a cliffside within verdant Proussiotis Gorge, where the mountains of Kaliakouda and Helidona meet. Greek War of Independence hero Georgios Karaiskakis used the monastery as his headquarters and his sword, gun and fez are on display at its museum.

Today, a new generation of Karpensiototes have proudly taken up the baton of tradition, keeping customs alive, creating new ones and ensuring tourism remains slow and sustainable.

TOP TIP

Hire a private guide for the day or book a place in a group activity with a local operator. You'll not merely be in safe hands but their expert insight lends context, allowing you to understand exactly what it is you're seeing. Plus, they always have entertaining stories to tell.

Koryshades



HERACLES KRITIKOS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©



Get to Know the Main Villages

A STRING OF SETTLEMENTS

Karpenisi's main villages, scattered east and west of the main road Karpenisiou-Proussou-Kallitheas, are easily reachable. Aim to explore just a few. Base yourself at one and get a feel for laidback rural living, Karpenisi-style.

Start your village-hopping in **Koryshades**, a small listed traditional settlement just south of the town of Karpenisi. Stone-built mansions erected in the 19th and early 20th centuries blend Epirot and Constantinopolitan influences. Some serve as guesthouses, their beautifully restored forms trickling down to the town's plane-tree-shaded, flagstoned square. It feels as if time has stood still.

Next, head south to **Megalo Horio**, one of Karpenisi's largest settlements. At the main square, scan the valley and river below before paying a visit to a folklore museum displaying traditional dress, farm tools and household items. Pause in the courtyard of the Church of Agia Paraskevi, below its bell tower. From there, the lofty heights of **Mt Kaliakouda** splay out before you. Before departing, stop in at the shops selling local specialties.

Your next stop is **Palio Mikro Horio**, on Mt Helidona, which suffered a landslide in 1963 that claimed the lives of 13 and



BEST TAVERNAS IN KARPENISI

Agios Athanasios

Soft jazz accompanies juicy pork chops and garlicky eggplant, setting this otherwise traditional taverna apart. €

Spiti tou Psara

Butter-fried trout is always the plat du jour at this classic family-run riverside joint. €€

Horiatiko

Sit by the fireplace and sample the house specialties, wild boar stifado and hogget casserole. €€

Stin Poli

Unexpectedly chic and imaginative, dishes include nettle *hilopites* (pasta) in tomato sauce with basil. €€

Mesostrati

Ask what *magirefta* (baked dishes and casseroles) are available and you won't be disappointed. €



WHERE TO STAY IN KARPENISI

Mythica Chalet

Snuggle by the fire and soak up fir-lined mountain views at this fabulously decorated Canadian log cabin. €€€

Anerada Inn

Choose between romantic suites and a garden house at this fairytale-like English country-style hotel. €€

Oihalia Guesthouse

Escape the madding crowds at this attractive traditional guesthouse in a far-flung village. €€

BEST ADVENTURES IN KARPENISI

Panagiotis Hormovas, a local activity guide, shares his recommendations for the best small-group adventures in Karpenisi.

Trek to a Unique Waterfall

Trek through Krikeliotis River to Panda Vrehi Gorge, where springwater flows from Mt Kaliakouda, creating a phenomenon mimicking rain. If you dare, plunge your head under the freezing water.

Roar Down a River

Raft along the Tavropos River, suited to those with minimal experience, or tackle the tougher Trikeriotis.

Rappel Down a Cave

Hike through a fir forest and rappel into the so-called Black Cave, before cooling off under waterfalls.

Canyon in a Striking Gorge

Rappel your way down the dramatic walls of Vothonas Gorge and take a dip in Karpenisiotis River.



PAUL SHAW/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Mt Kaliakouda (p181)

destroyed most houses. The village wasn't wiped off the map though. Homes that do remain are well maintained, and its history and folklore museum testifies to the little (*mikro*) village's major contribution to wartime efforts. On the square, quench your thirst at a sextet of springwater fountains. Many residents resettled further down the mountain, establishing **Neo Mikro Horio**, which means 'new small village', where some good tavernas can be found.

Live the Slow Life at Fidakia

SMALL-TOWN VIBES

Beyond its big-name villages, Karpenisi has a smattering of lovely small towns worth the detour or longer drive. One you should seek out is **Fidakia**, a sweet little secluded village perched high above Lake Kremasta. Cars aren't permitted so leave your vehicle in the parking area and walk along the cobblestoned streets, past studiously maintained grey stone houses surrounded by blooming flowers and vines. While you're there, pop into Fidakia's only taverna, opposite the main square, where cheerful Greek-American Christos Leris bakes *zimaropita*, a doughless pie made with zucchini and local soft cheese *tsalafouti*, among other local treats. From there, make your way to the lake lookout point at the village's edge.

Evora Suites

Make yourself at home at this stylish accommodation featuring hot tubs, river views and traditional breakfast. €€€

Escapade Luxury Residences

Ceiling-to-floor windows reveal wide open mountain views at these spacious ultra-modern minimalist suites. €€€

Old Inn

Slumber in four-poster, hand-carved timber beds at this stone-built guesthouse that's especially cosy in winter. €€

Hit the Slopes on Mt Tymfristos

FAMILY-FRIENDLY SKIING AND UNTRACKED POWDER

Velouchi Ski Centre is situated on Mt Tymfristos (colloquially known as Velouchi) at an altitude of between 1815m and 2045m, an 18-minute drive north of capital Karpenisi. Newbie and experienced skiers can choose between 16 open, undulating slopes, including free ride pistes and black run Hercules where races are held. There is a snowboard park, five lifts, a conveyer belt and kids' carousel.

Hit Velouchi's northern slopes for powdery ski mountaineering amid fir forest. Night skiing on weekends is a highlight, when two runs are illuminated and Ice Bar serves steaming soup and hosts parties. An alpine lake lies a short walk west of the under-the-radar resort but beware of sheepdogs. Gear rental is available and there's a ski-snowboard school and chalet. If a night on Velouchi sounds appealing, a mountain refuge stay can be arranged.

Kids Adore Karpenisi

HORSERIDING AND FUN SCIENCE

Little ones get a kick out of Karpenisi as there's plenty for them to see and do. Nothing lights up a child's eyes like the sight of a horse. When Konstantinos Kontopanos opened **Saloon Park** near Koryshades in 1999 as an American-style ranch, you could go horse riding and grab coffee inside a Finnish log chalet. Since expanding the facility, his two sons are gradually taking over the reins. Kids can ascend a climbing wall, ride a miniature train or paddle a canoe.

Horse riding, of course, remains a popular activity. Youngsters ride Austrian Haflinger horses within the park, while adults follow an hour-long route in the foothills of Mt Koniskos, along Karpenisioties River and under a stone arched bridge. Meanwhile, the whole family can enjoy pancakes, including one version with local mortadella and soft cheese *klototiri*, on a plane-shaded outdoor deck. Saloon Park operates daily.

A five-minute drive south takes you to **Newton Park**, an open-air educational theme park featuring a wide range of games, activities and exhibits involving maths and physics. Kids can get to grips with the Pythagorean theorem and Newton's laws of motion, while an Archimedes' claw exhibit shows them how they can easily lift a 100kg weight. There's also a playground and an animal farm. Neighbouring guest-house **Ninemia Stay & Play** makes for a handy base. Check opening days and hours in advance.

WHAT TO BRING HOME FROM KARPENISI

Cleopatra Kitsiou, co-owner of Mythica Chalet, shares her tips on delicacies to pack.

Greek-Style Prosciutto

Traditional cold cut producer Stremenos' revival of Ancient Greek *akrokolion*, believed to pre-date modern prosciutto.

Smoked Trout

Smoked and marinated rainbow trout from Fresko's enthusiastic female team.

Chestnut Spread

Karpenisi's chestnuts are highly prized.

Hilopites

Pair this pasta, made with semolina, eggs and milk, with cold-weather dishes like cockerel casserole.

Wild Mulberry Liqueur

This delicately flavoured drink is relatively rare so grab a bottle if you find it.

Trahana

Add feta, milk and butter to this winter soup staple, constituting wheat flour and goat or sheep's milk.



GETTING AROUND

Karpenisi is best explored by car. There are parking areas at villages, some of which fill up fast in summer, on weekends and during

holidays. Take special care when it rains and ask for local advice on routes as there's a danger of falling rocks in certain areas.



Beyond Karpenisi

Lake Kremasta, Greece's largest artificial lake, stretches out before you, its surreal cyan hue making it hard to believe it's real.

Lake Kremasta covers 81 sq km and forms a natural boundary between the prefectures of Evrytania and Etoloakarnania, linked by Episkopi bridge. Looking at the lake's neon aqua waters flowing beside rolling hills and around islets, it's hard to believe it's made by human hands. By the time Greece's largest artificial lake was completed in 1966, in order to produce hydroelectric power, 20 villages had been sunk, along with an 8th-century Byzantine church. Inhabitants were forced to resettle in nearby villages and towns, or migrate, but some didn't give up without a fight.

Linking the rivers Trikeriotis, Tavropos, Acheloos and Agraftotis, Lake Kremasta is home to more than 200 bird species but also seldom-seen wolves, wildcats and roe deer, among other wildlife.

Lake Kremasta Karpenisi
Episkopi Bridge Agia Vlacherna
Aspropyrgos

TOP TIP

Explore the lake in a canoe or kayak with a local operator to get a feel for its fjord-like waterscape.

Episkopi bridge



REMNANTS OF HISTORY UNDERWATER

Throughout Lake Kremasta, there are remnants of outlying villages and historical sites that were literally wiped off the map. But you need an expert local eye to track them down. Panagiotis Makris runs motorboat tours year-round, weather permitting.

One of the most interesting artefacts is an arched stone bridge named Manolis after the man who erected it in 1659 over the Agrafiotis River. Believed to be the oldest of its kind in Evrytania, it disappeared from view during damming. Depending on whether it's rained recently, you may or may not see it. Sometimes, Panagiotis is able to pass under it. Equally fascinating is the medieval Castle of Carlo I Tocco, whose remains sit atop Ai Nikolas islet but also submerged underwater.

Use this QR code to book a 4WD tour.



YIANNIS CHEIDTS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Lake Kremasta

A 4WD Lake Tour

VIEWS FROM ON HIGH

Local activity operator F-Zein Active offers an exhilarating three-hour 4WD tour around the oak- and maple-clad slopes of **Mt Helidona** to **Lake Kremasta**. Leave it to a knowledgeable guide to navigate 100km worth of steep cliffside asphalt and dirt roads so you can immerse yourself in the dramatic landscapes.

You'll pass remote villages like **Aspropyrgos**, whose roadside taps spout ice-cold springwater. If you're lucky, you might take a detour to tiny **Helidona** village to partake in one of its summer *panigyria* (feast days) held on its stone-paved single-*kafeneio* (coffee house) square. In September, locals laud the annual wine harvest where you can taste a first-rate red produced with unusual varietal *Skylopnichtis*, which young vintners are quietly reviving. The Dionysian revelry occasionally run for 24 hours straight.

Further west, cool off in the Krikeliotis River at **Agia Vlaherna**, the closest to a sandy beach in these parts, surrounded by soaring rippled rockfaces and Kermes oak trees.

At nearby **Episkopi bridge**, you'll stop to take photos and get closer to the lake, which is home to a wide variety of bird species including common buzzards, short-toed snake eagles and Lanner falcons but also water snakes, badgers and ferrets. Heading east, you'll reach **Tsagalarona lookout** which offers incomparable lake views, and spend some time at Fidakia village (p182) before circling back to Karpenisi.



GETTING AROUND

Drive in daylight hours and rely on local knowledge rather than Google Maps or Waze to move around more remote areas, beyond

asphalt roads. Phone signal can be weak or nonexistent in parts.

METEORA



Meteora's otherworldly sandstone pillars rise vertically from the vast Thessaly plain, east of the Pindus mountain range. It's hard to imagine how this geological marvel, whose name means 'to be suspended in the air', came about some 11 million years ago. Earthquakes, wind and rain gradually sculpted a mass of rocks, sand and sediment previously underwater.

It's even harder to comprehend how monasteries were built atop these precipitous cliffs, seemingly carved out of the rock-face. Free-climbing, cave-dwelling ascetics were the first to make Meteora home in the 11th century. Deemed a holy place, the first Orthodox monastic communities formed in the 12th century. Wooden ladders were later replaced by windlass-operated nets, until stairs were carved out in the 1920s. At its peak, Unesco-listed Meteora hosted 24 monasteries. Today, six remain active and open to visitors. There's no need to be a believer to marvel at the astounding landscapes and Byzantine treasures within.

TOP TIP

Meteora's monasteries are houses of worship. To enter them, visitors are required to cover their shoulders and legs. Men must wear sleeved shirts and trousers. Women should wear a dress or skirt that covers their knees, or tie a shawl around their waist. Shawls are available for purchase at most monasteries.

HIKING METEORA

Local destination experts Visit Meteora lead excellent hiking tours, among other activities, that allow you to view Meteora from another angle, literally.

Follow your guide along forested trails in the foothills of the striking monoliths up to viewpoints where you can look out over the Thessaly plain and across to the imposing Pindus mountain range. Your tour concludes with a visit to Great Meteoron Monastery or Varlaam Monastery.

Use this QR code to book your Meteora hiking tour.



One of Greece's Most Revered Monasteries

ATOP THE HIGHEST PEAK

All of Meteora's monasteries, large or small, are impressive in their own way. If you have a full day, it's possible to see the exterior of all six and visit two to four of them. Check opening days and hours and be prepared to scale between 140 and 300 steps to reach all but one monastery.

Moni Megalou Meteorou (Great Meteoron Monastery) is one of Greece's oldest and most revered monasteries. In 1340, St Athanasios clambered to the top of the highest rock and described a feeling of *meteoron*, or levitation. There, he founded the monastery. Its *katholikon* (main church) features well-maintained frescoes and a gold-leaf-gilded wooden iconostasis. View precious 9th-century manuscripts and rare Byzantine icons in the monastery's ecclesiastical museum and a well-preserved mid-16th-century kitchen.

Fine Frescoes and Monastic Life

A PRICELESS COLLECTION

East of Great Meteoron Monastery is **Moni Varlaam** (Varlaam Monastery), which takes its name from a monk who built cells and a church on a steep rock 551m high in the mid-14th century. Following his death, the monastery was abandoned for 200 years until two brothers, both monks from an affluent family, came to its rescue in 1518 and rebuilt it. In 1548,

**HIGHLIGHTS**

1 Moni Megalou Meteorou

SIGHTS
2 Adhrahti Rock Formation

3 Hellenic Culture Museum

4 Meteora Geological Formation Museum

5 Meteora Natural History and Mushroom Museum

6 Moni Agias Triadas

7 Moni Agiou Nikolaou Anapafsa

8 Moni Agiou Stefanou

9 Moni Roussanou

10 Moni Varlaam

ACTIVITIES, COURSES & TOURS
11 Kalambaka Library

iconographer Frangos Katelanos painted the frescoes in the Athonite-style **Church of Agion Pandon**, considered among Meteora's finest. A compelling **museum** details the monastery's history and monastic life, and exhibits clerical vestments and opulent pastoral rods. Head to its overhanging tower to see a windlass and rope beside a lift.

**WHERE TO STAY NEAR METEORA****Doupiani House**

Breakfast in a carefully tended garden with uninterrupted Meteora views at a welcoming family-run Kastraki hotel. €€

Meteora Heaven and Earth

With monastic elements, these unique contemporary suites in Kalambaka and Kastraki have a fireplace or hot tub. €€

Archontiko Mesohori

Genial hosts run this 19th-century stone-built mansion in the shadow of the rocks in Kastraki's old quarter. €€

FEAST DAY CLIMBS

Konstantina Tsiami is based in Kalambaka. She's the co-founder of Meteora Photo Tour and an avid mountain bike racer.

@konstantina_tsiami

In April when we celebrate the feast day of St George, local singles use a mere rope to scale a vertiginous cliff face near Kastraki to a small cave. This is where the deserted 14th-century Agios Georgios Mandilas hermitage is located.

Continuing a custom believed to date to Ottoman occupation, they hang colourful headscarves (*mandila* means scarf), visible from a distance, and dance and sing folk songs by the cliff's edge. Traditionally, *mandilarades* braved this feat hoping to attract a worthy spouse. These days, it's more for fun.

Scarves that have graced the site over the past year are retrieved and gifted to loved ones as good luck charms. We keep them in our homes, handbags and cars.

Exquisite Cretan School Icon Paintings

UNCOMMON SUBJECTS

Established on a perpendicular peak, reaching 419m at its highest point, in the late 14th century, **Moni Agiou Nikolaou Anapafsa** (Agios Nikolaos Anapafsas Monastery) is the first monastery one encounters on the ascent from Kastraki to Meteora. A multi-level structure houses a tiny 14th-century church, a 16th-century *katholikon* (principal church), the monk's cells and a refectory. In 1527, Theophanes the Cretan, a monk who founded the Cretan School style of icon painting, created the exquisite frescoes seen in the main church. Don't miss the atypical work depicting Adam in paradise naming animals including an elephant, lion and bear.

Meteora's Two Nunneries

CONVENTS THAT ARE STILL OCCUPIED TODAY

In the 12th century, hermits inhabited cliffs above modern-day Kalambaka, where **Moni Agiou Stefanou** (St Stephen Monastery) was later built, at a height of 528m. Today it's one of Meteora's two nunneries. St Stephen encompasses two chapels, one dating to 1545 and its Athonite-style *katholikon* to 1798. You're unlikely to happen upon monks elsewhere but here you'll see nuns at a store selling marmalade, pasta, essential oils and other items produced onsite. Linked by a bridge, it's Meteora's most accessible monastery.

Heading east, you'll find **Moni Roussanou** (Roussanou Monastery), which is dedicated to St Barbara and covers the entire surface of a 484m-tall narrow rock. Sts Joseph and Maximos of Epirus risked life and limb to build a *katholikon* in 1529, which features prized examples of post-Byzantine frescoes painted by iconographer Tzortzis. In 1988, the monastery was converted to a nunnery and today hosts 15 nuns.

Mountain Views for Your Eyes Only

A 007 FILM SET, ALMOST

Built on a towering plinth measuring 535m in height, **Moni Agias Triadas** (Agia Triada Monastery) is believed to have been erected in 1488. As you enter, you'll find a small chapel carved into the rock. A *katholikon* (1475) dedicated to the Holy Trinity features impressive frescoes painted in 1741. From its southwest corner, you can look out across the Thessaly plain,



WHERE TO EAT NEAR METEORA

Meteoron Panorama

Incomparable Kalambaka-side Meteora views coupled with black pork and steaks from ancient steppe cattle. €€

Gousios

Worth the 15-minute drive west of Kalambaka for tender wood-fire-grilled lamb chops derived from rare Kalaritiko sheep. €€

Efrosino

Family-run Kastraki taverna serving up moussaka, oven-baked pies and vegan-friendly dishes with a smile. €



BEST ADVENTURES IN METEORA

Hiking to Hermit Caves

Follow in the footsteps of the earliest monks on a tour of cave hermitages and chapels.

Mountain Biking

Get your mountain bike fix on oak forest trails, across rockfaces and through a verdant valley.

Mountain Climbing

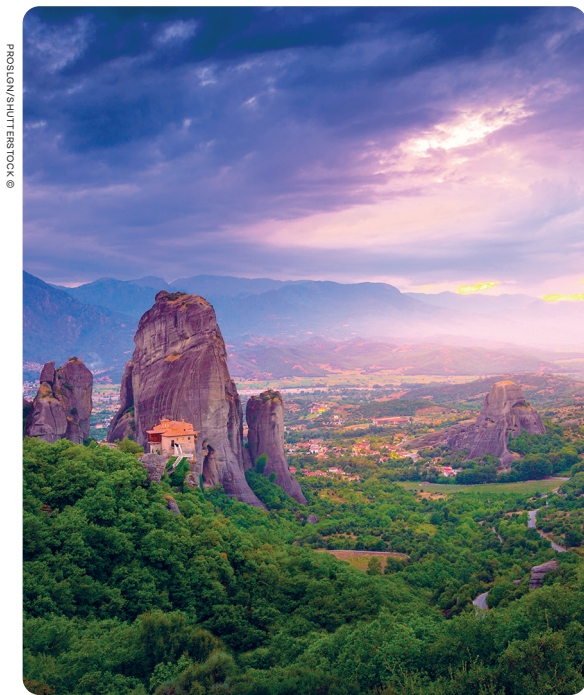
Navigate adventurous climbing routes, some of which are particularly challenging, with local experts.

Great Saint Via Ferrata

Scramble along a narrow cliffside path hewn by monks to the Great Saint rock towers.

Paragliding

Soar above Meteora's majestic peaks on a tandem or motorised paragliding flight.



Moni Roussanou

Mt Koziakas, Pindus mountain range and several monasteries. Agia Triada is also known for its role in the 1981 James Bond film *For Your Eyes Only*, except that filming never took place onsite.irate monks forced the production to build a replica of the monastery nearby and hung out washing in an attempt to ruin the shot.

Meteora Photo Tour

CAPTURE THE COLUMNS

While you may not be permitted to photograph inside the monasteries' sacred spaces, there's ample opportunity to frame Meteora's one-of-a-kind beauty in other ways. Here, fancy social media filters are unnecessary.

Photographer Christos Karagelis and Konstantina Tsiami, the dynamic duo behind **Meteora Photo Tour**, know all the



WINERIES WORTH VISITING NEAR METEORA

Tsilili

This family-run winery near prehistoric Theopetra Cave produces an award-winning red from native grape limniona.

Meteoro

The Megarchi-based Tsinas family might be new to wine-making but their cabernet sauvignon-syrah is fantastic.

Liakou

Sample fruity Asproparis, produced with indigenous varietal PGI malagouzia, at this winery in Gavros.



BEST CAFES & BARS NEAR METEORA

Feel the Rocks

Sip on signature cocktails like Hippocrates spritz with Meteora views at this cool all-day cafe-resto-bar in Kalambaka.

Qastiro

An elegant wine bar that also serves quality coffee in Kastraki's atmospheric old quarter.

Qahuwv

Mastic-laced hot chocolate and sour cherry tea are on the menu at this stylish spot in Kalambaka.

Dal Inizio

Take a seat at cool polished timber tables and sample the finest espresso in Kalambaka.

Franklin

Where locals catch up for a long, slow *cappuccino freddo* and people-watching in central Kalambaka.

out-of-the-way spots to capture the colossal columns and monasteries in their best light. On their engaging sunrise and sunset photo tours, they'll usher you to a series of locations, often people-free, from panoramic viewpoints to the base of concealed cliffside sketes. Not only will they provide pointers on settings and angles, but offer insider historical detail. Tours cater to anyone with an interest in photography, even if you prefer to shoot only with your phone.

Choose Your Base for Visiting Meteora

MUSEUMS, TRUFFLES AND BOOKS

Stay in the small, somewhat plain city of Kalambaka or nearby traditional village of Kastraki and delve further into what Meteora has to offer.

In **Kalambaka**, the **Meteora Natural History and Mushroom Museum** presents about 350 animal species, including the endangered Egyptian vulture, and around 250 mushrooms types. Between March and October, the museum arranges truffle-hunting expeditions that conclude with a chef preparing a truffle-infused dish.

Nearby is the family-friendly **Hellenic Culture Museum**, which hosts a sizeable collection of Greek school books, an Aesop's fables hall and images of Meteora shot by Swiss photographer Fred Boissonnas in the early 1900s.

Head northwest to the innovative **Kalambaka Library**, founded by Greek-American Diana Demoulas Merriam to encourage local children to love books. Friendly staff offer guided tours of the facility, including a fine collection of Hispanic literature.

In **Kastraki**, take a walk in the picturesque old quarter of Mesohori, whose humble stuccoed manors are painted in terracotta and mustard yellow. From there you'll see the thin Adrahti rock formation rising up from the ground seemingly in defiance of massive neighbouring plinths.

On the village's main square, visit the **Meteora Geological Formation Museum**, housed in an attractive, pale-pink listed building that previously served as the local school. The compact museum, free to enter, reveals in easily comprehensible detail the mystery behind how the pillars were formed.



GETTING AROUND

A well-maintained road links the monasteries; however, parking areas fill up quickly so, if you're driving, start your day early. Your best option to move around Meteora is via guided

tour, while KTEL Trikala provides a public bus service between Kalambaka and the monasteries.

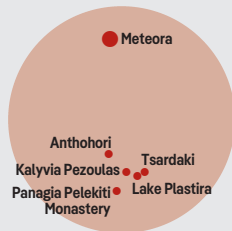


Beyond Meteora

South of Meteora, dramatic fir-covered mountains, tiny villages and the blue-green waters of Lake Plastira await in remote northeastern Agrafa.

Forming the south of the Pindus mountain range, Agrafa was initially home to the Ancient Greek Dolopes tribe. In the Middle Ages, Slavs, Albanians and Vlachs arrived but this remote part of Central Greece, whose name literally means 'unwritten', is best known for its rebels who rose up against Ottoman rule.

Agrafa has two personalities: a mild side and a wild side. In northeastern Agrafa, steep hills burst with fir, walnut and cedar trees that rise up to alpine peaks and meadows. And yet, this is the softer, more accessible side. Hiking trails track through gorges to hamlets like Anthohori and its waterfalls while beguiling artificial Lake Plastira spreads out below, offering activities ranging from kayaking to horse riding.



TOP TIP

Strike up a conversation with seniors sitting at the village *kafeneion*. They may speak limited English but they're very sociable and welcome a little friendly banter.

Lake Plastira dam (p192)



A STONE-BUILT LABOUR OF LOVE

Wherever you walk around **Montanema**, a sustainability-minded retreat high up in northeastern Agrafa's lush Anthohori Gorge, the sound of flowing water instantly soothes. It's the same digestion-enhancing, hair-softening mountain water guests drink and shower with.

Christos Athanasiadis, an avid hiker, gave up a business in Athens to create, together with friend Dimitris Panagopoulos, his dream 'village' with ceaseless *meraki* (passion).

At an altitude of 1000m, Montanema encompasses 34 intimate stone-built villas, a farm, gardens, orchards, an atmospheric bar and spa. Antiques, upcycled items and art abound. Almost everything is handmade, from breakfast *batzina* pie to bodywash.

Christos' team includes Dinos Volotopoulos, who shares insider knowledge as he leads mushroom hunts, hikes and 4WD tours exploring pristine woods, waterfalls and stone bridges.

Outdoor Adventures on Lake Plastira

WATERSPORTS AND CHURCH FRESCOS

Just over an hour's drive south of Kalambaka are the placid waters of artificial **Lake Plastira**, surrounded by oak and spruce forest. Small settlements like Kalyvia Pezoulas are dotted along its western banks, where activity operators provide canoes, waterbikes and standup paddleboards for hire. Go for a mountain bike ride around the lake or simply cool off with a swim and picnic by the water.

From there, head southwest to **Moni Panagia Pelekiti** (Virgin Mary hewn in rock), a monastery chiselled into a 1400m-high rockface in the 16th century. There, uber-cool father Ioannis offers sage counsel as he points out details in Cretan School frescoes and discusses the next mountain trail he intends to tackle with his Brittany dogs.

Continuing south, ascend the rough gravel road, best suited to 4WD, to the **Lake Plastira Observatory** to capture panoramic lake views.

Next, continue south along the peripheral road and pause at the **Lake Plastira dam**. Cross the bridge and on the eastern side, pick up homestyle spoon sweets and preserves, like sugar-free local spoon sweet pumpkin *retzeli*, oak honey and other seldom-found delights, sold at roadside kiosks.

Traditional Tavernas Worth the Trek

FLAVOURS FROM THE FARM

Lunch with views of grazing sheep at **Tsardaki**, where Babis Tsilikas and his wife Stavroula Korobila serve updated rural fare like slow-braised chickpeas with eggplant and spicy lentils with leek and village sausage. At **Floresi**, Anthohori village's sole taverna, Eleni Bairami plucks plump tomatoes from her garden and prepares a mean *tiganopsomo* (cheese pie) within minutes. Ask if she has *provatina* (mutton) chops, which Thessalians consider tastier than lamb.



GETTING AROUND

Hire a car to move around, ideally a 4WD. Don't rely on Google Maps but map your route in advance, follow road signs and ask locals for

advice. Drive slowly and watch for free-roaming animals, including cattle and horses, crossing or merely standing in the middle of the road.

PELION



According to mythology, the Olympian gods summered in the fertile mountainous peninsula of Pelion, named after Achilles' father, King Peleus. Situated in Thessaly, this was also the home of the half-man, half-horse creatures known as the centaurs.

During Greece's Ottoman occupation, Pelion's remoteness afforded its residents relative freedom. By the late 18th century, its communities were flourishing, thanks in particular to silk exports. Craftsmen from Epirus introduced an architectural style combining stone and timber that became synonymous with Pelion and is, today, safeguarded by law.

Pelion is surprisingly diverse: from the jungle-like northeast and its dazzling Aegean beaches to the northwest's gentler slopes, down to the calm, golden Pagasitikos Gulf waters of the south. Mountain springs water fir, plane, chestnut, oak and beech trees, along with apple orchards, olive groves and myriad herbs. Every season here is truly special. Immerse yourself in the lush greenery, traditional villages and hearty farm-to-fork fare.

TOP TIP

Slow travel is where it's at here. Depending on the length of your stay and the time of year, focus on one part of the peninsula, for instance, the northeast in summer or the northwest in autumn. Even then, hand-pick a few villages and attractions and take your sweet time.

Wander Village Streets of Northwest Pelion

SPRINGS AND COMFORT FOOD

Driving from Volos, **Portaria** is the first main village in northwest Pelion you'll encounter. Walk the well-marked Centaurs' Trail, stony in parts, which follows a creek uphill, crisscrossed with wooden bridges, through a plane tree forest. At the top, quench your thirst with springwater from the mother of all fountains, **Mana Vrisi**. Descend via a circular route that passes beside impressive late-19th-century manor houses. At the sprawling central square, take a seat at **Kritsa** restaurant below an 800-year-old plane tree for local comfort food like *trahana* (cracked wheat) soup with sausage and sauteed wild greens with egg. Nearby **Karaikos Farm** hosts cooking lessons and, in October, the annual Pelion Gastronomy Festival.

Next, head north to the neighbouring listed, pedestrian-only traditional settlement of **Makrinita**. Stroll the *kaldereimia*, cobblestoned paths originally designed for donkeys and horses, and admire well-preserved Epirot-style mansions, many of which have been turned into guesthouses. Sweeping views of Volos and the Pagasitikos Gulf from the main square explain why the town is considered 'Pelion's balcony'. Pause at the small yet impressive **Church of Agios Ioannis Prodromos**, built in 1806. Beside it is a hollow plane tree large



RIGHT: ALEXANDROS MICHALIDIS/SHUTTERSTOCK ©

enough to hold a gaggle of giggling youngsters. A stairway leads up to the **Byzantine Museum of Makrinitza** where you can peruse treasures, including a 13th-century marble icon from the convent around which the town evolved.

Waterfall Swims & Sea Kayaking

BEACHES AND JUNGLE-LIKE FORESTS IN NORTHEAST PELION

Long roads snake their way from Volos up to northeast Pelion's villages. Two routes, one inland and the other coastal, lead to remote **Tsagarada** village, which is spread between four small districts, each named after the church on their central



WHERE TO STAY IN PORTARIA AND MAKRINITSA

Archontiko Melanthi

This fairytale-like mansion in Makrinitza delivers warm hospitality and views of the Pagasitikos Gulf. €€

Kritsa Gastronomy Hotel

Rooms are simple, but it's worth staying at this centrally situated Portaria B&B for the epic breakfast alone. €

Archontiko Naoumidi

Antique furnishings and embroidered sheets adorn this elegant 1893 neoclassical mansion in Portaria. €

squares and originally linked only by stone-paved *kaldierimia* (trails). Marvel at a towering thousand-year-old plane tree on **Agia Paraskevi's** square. In **Agii Taxiarches**, the homonymously named church dates to 1746. A lone artisan is believed to have hand-carved its wooden iconostasis, rich in detail and theological symbolism, including a twin-tailed mermaid. Northwest of Agios Stefanos are the **Kissos Waterfalls**, which are swimmable in summer yet still frigid. Descend waterfalls concealed within dense beech forest on a half-day hike with local experts **Bike or Hike**.

Zagora is another handy base for exploring the north-east. Pelion's largest village has long relied on apple cultivation, including its aromatic Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) firiki, rather than tourism, with exports representing almost a third of output. On **Agios Georgios** square, satisfy your sweet tooth with baklava and other delights at the cafe run by the Zagora Women's Agritourism Cooperative (see below). A short drive downhill takes you to the coastal settlement of Horefto. From there, activity operator Pelion Scout runs family-friendly sea-kayak tours and a beach-hopping boat tour encompassing Damouhari, where scenes from *Mamma Mia!* were filmed.

Local Delicacies Made with Love

A SWEET STOPOVER

Sparkling eyes, big smiles and sweet aromas greet you as you enter the **Esperides Vyzitsa Women's Agritourism Cooperative**. The ladies behind this successful venture, located on the main road passing through Vyzitsa village, can be found stirring big boiling pots of seasonal, locally sourced fruit, like figs, cherries and Pelion's own firiki apple, and simultaneously cracking jokes. Its 10 members are aged 25 to 70, and their chief goal is to preserve traditional recipes handed down from mother to daughter. You'll want to stock up on mouth-watering goodies like their sought-after tomato chutney, elderberry jam and *tsitsiravla* (pickled wild pistachio shoots), a meze staple peculiar to Volos and Pelion.

A Forgotten Butcher Shop

REMNANTS OF A PAST ERA

Most travellers are drawn to **Agia Paraskevi** in Tsagarada to see its mammoth thousand-year-old plane tree. Few, however, realise that below the neighbourhood's main square, there are remnants of a butcher shop dating to 1890.



WHERE TO STAY IN TSAGARADA AND ZAGORA

Amanita Guesthouse

Gracious hosts Filaretos and Marianna offer an inimitable local food experience at their Tsagarada guesthouse. €€€

Archontiko Stamou

Savour breakfast in a serene courtyard at this handsome 1863 mansion-turned-guesthouse in Zagora. €€

Hotel Maistra

Lounge amid manicured gardens and soak up Aegean views at this smart boutique hotel in Tsagarada. €€

FREE-FLOWING FOUNTAINS

Throughout Pelion you'll see *vrises*, also known as *krines*, stone fountains flowing with mountain springwater. Most were hand-built in the 19th century, while some date further back, and provided residents and livestock with easy access to water.

This is where the village women would wash clothes and share news but also where marriages were arranged and differences resolved. You'll find hundreds in village squares, outside churches, along cobbled thoroughfares and on roadsides. According to tradition, sipping water from the elaborately sculpted marble fountain erected in 1809 on Makrinita village's main square grants longevity.



Fountain, Makrinita



BEST BEACHES IN PELION

Mylopotamos

Capture a natural stone arch at sunrise and enjoy a crowd-free dip in calm emerald waters.

Agii Saranda

Arrive early to nab a spot on this broad sandy beach blessed with cerulean seas.

Fakistra

Turquoise waters lap a tiny crescent of pebbles at the base of a sheer cliff.

Kalamaki

Unapologetic wildness and rocky 'thrones' hewn by the elements make this a locals' favourite.

Potistika

Dramatic rock formations and a wide swathe of coarse sand characterise this natural Aegean beauty.

See where the animals were slaughtered, dissected, washed in mountain springwater flowing through a slim canal, and hung on hooks to be sold.

The 'Upside-Down Plane Tree'

A SHADY STORY

In Tsagarada's **Agia Kyriaki** district, seek out its well-hidden square. There, a tall plane tree offers welcome shade on hot summer days. Take a closer look and see if you can notice what's different about it. Legend has it that, some two centuries ago, a gunsmith planted a branch upside down. As a result, the tree's branches appear to bend downwards.

Cross-Country Skiing through Forests

SNOW AND SEA VIEWS

Skiing or snowboarding with sea views? It's possible in Pelion. Situated 1471m above sea level in Agriolefkes, the **Pelion Ski Centre** operates from around late December to late March. On a clear day, you can see both the Aegean Sea and Pagasitikos Gulf as you make your descent. There are five ski lifts and six runs catering to varying levels of experience, including a 5km-long cross-country piste that passes through beech, poplar and chestnut forests. On the day you plan to visit, check the ski centre's Facebook page or snowreport.gr to see if it's open.

Tour Springwater-Fed West-Central Pelion Villages

EPIROT MANSIONS AND FOLKTALES

A string of leafy villages, where springwater flows generously, stretches amid gentle mountain terrain across Central Pelion. Start at **Agios Georgios Nilias**, a well-kept, quiet outpost drenched in beech, cherry and wild chestnut trees 35 minutes' drive southeast of Volos. Here, oral storytelling traditions remain alive and well; the village hosts a mythology and folktale festival in August.

In **Pinakates**, lose yourself in pebbled alleyways and inspect slate-roofed mansions, some abandoned and smothered in ivy. A 500-year-old plane tree dominates the one-taverna square, whose highlights include a marble fountain with Doric columns.

Next is **Vyzitsa**, a living testament to Pelion's architectural tradition, where restored Epirot-style mansions blend



WHERE TO EAT IN TSAGARADA

Aggelika

Sample masterfully grilled fresh fish like *gofari* (bluefish) and seasonal *vlista* (greens) above Mylopotamos beach. €€

Itamos

Be daring and try traditional fare like *boubari* (intestine-wrapped liver) at this Agii Taxiarches restaurant. €€

Anapodo Platani

Open in summer, this wine bar in Agia Kyriaki blends Mediterranean and Eastern and highlights Greek vintners. €€

WHY I LOVE PELION



Helen Iatrou,
Lonely Planet writer.
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For me, Pelion is a near-perfect microcosm of Greece: soaring mountains, olive-grove-filled plains and aquamarine seas. From swimming at dawn on beaches like Mylopotamos to hiking through dense forests and skiing with sea views, I adore Pelion year-round.

Beyond its natural beauty, I'm grateful that its singular architectural heritage and slow-food culinary traditions have been preserved. But Pelion would be nothing without its warmhearted people. Spending time in its villages, drinking from springwater fountains and watching kids run free restores my faith in humanity.

Meanwhile, quirky Volos, whose age-old sociocultural *tsipouradhiko* ritual represents the epitome of spontaneity, is nearby.



Pinakates

harmoniously with their natural environment. Imposing from the outside, the stately structures date to the 18th and 19th centuries. A one-metre-thick, stone-built ground floor with a low, narrow front doorway to dissuade invaders leads up to two floors, the top featuring an enclosed balcony known as the *hayiati*. Many have been converted into guesthouses in accordance with strict guidelines.

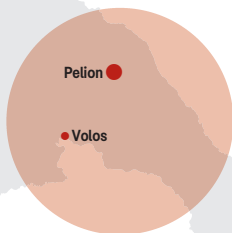
Your last stop is **Milies**, whose shady central square offers Pagasitikos Gulf views and roadsides are dotted with Greek strawberry trees. Trace the village's history at the Milies Museum and study unusual frescoes at the 18th-century Church of Agii Taxiarches, one of which symbolises the circle of life. Don't miss out on welcoming Moutzouris (Sooty), the historical steam train that transports daytrippers from Ano Lechonia to Milies' little station at weekends. And, if swimming with horses sounds like fun, get in touch with the Ippikos Fisiolatricos Omilos Mileon (IFOM).



GETTING AROUND

Driving in Pelion can be challenging. Mountain roads are mostly winding, which means travel time between destinations is often significant. Take special care when passing through the centre of some villages, where roads become

particularly narrow. Public parking areas exist in some villages but fill up quickly in summer and at weekends. Cobblestoned paths (*kalderimia*) can be hilly and, when wet, might be slippery, so hiking shoes are a good idea.



Pelion ●

● Volos

Beyond Pelion

On the way to Pelion, make a leisurely pit stop in the university town of Volos, known for its spirited *tsipouradhika*.

TOP TIP

Volos is full of surprises. Lose yourself in its backstreets and you're bound to stumble upon ancient ruins, interesting street-art murals and varied architectural styles. The city's youth enjoy practising their English so don't hesitate to seek their insight.

Home to one of Greece's key ports, Volos lies within a natural harbour in the Pagasitikos Gulf, with the Pelion peninsula rising up to the east. Once an industrial powerhouse, this playful university town is a curious mix of neoclassical and art-nouveau architecture, repurposed factories and archaic ruins.

Just west of Volos is the ancient site of Dimini, which archaeologists have, more recently, linked with Iolkos of antiquity, from which Jason and his Argonauts set sail for the Golden Fleece. Check out a painstakingly built wooden replica of the legendary ship *Argo* on Volos' waterfront promenade but also a smaller stainless-steel version on the Dimarchiou roundabout. There are also some worthwhile museums and a colourful late-19th-century railway station designed by Evaristo De Chirico.

Railway station, Volos





Tsipouro

The Fine Art of the Tsipouradhiko

A SOCIOCULTURAL INSTITUTION

At first glance, **Volos** may not seem appealing. But beyond its bustling port and nondescript apartment buildings, you'll discover its role as the fierce national vanguard of the *tsipouradhiko* – a sociocultural gastronomic tradition spanning more than a century.

More a bar than a restaurant, a *tsipouradhiko* is a place where *tsipouro* is paired with *meze*. *Tsipouro* is a clear EU-designated geographical indication spirit distilled from grape residue. Some researchers trace the origins of the drink, whose alcohol content can top 45 degrees, to Crete in 500 BCE. During the height of the Ottoman Empire, the Thessalian area of Tynnavos was a prime producer of *tsipouro*, then considered the poor man's tipple.

But it was Greek refugees forced to flee Asia Minor in 1922 who were responsible for refining the *tsipouradhiko* ritual. Fish and seafood, plucked fresh from the gulf, were introduced as *tsipouromeze* staples, enhancing the humble tomato, cucumber and olive customarily served.

Dockworkers would gather at *tsipouradhika* to wind down and share their woes before heading home for lunch. Not only did this reinforce their sense of social belonging, it also served as cheap and cheerful therapy.

Today, the *tsipouradhiko* is a passionately guarded institution open to all. Each day, around 1pm, you'll see students, professionals and retirees rubbing shoulders at Volos' 200-plus atmospheric *tsipouradhika*, concentrated mostly in Nea Ionia and Palia, raising a toast to friendship and life's simple pleasures.



BEST TSIPOURADHIKA IN VOLOS

Demiris

Shellfish, such as hard-to-find sea fig, is king, along with fried sea anemone, a local delicacy.

Kavouras

As old-school as it gets, highlights include lemon-doused monkfish liver and sundried horse mackerel.

Mezen

Chef Grigoris Helmis pioneered Volos' new generation *tsipouradhika*, continuing with avant-garde flair and respect for tradition.

To Filaraki

Book ahead for expertly chargrilled fish and seafood served with fava, potato salad and sauteed mushrooms.

Nikos-Gianna

Locals gather for grilled white trevally, fried skate with garlic dip and cuttlefish baked with ink intact.



GETTING AROUND

Driving is the best way to travel between Volos and Pelion. If you don't drive, KTEL intercity buses operate regularly between

the city and numerous villages on the peninsula. Volos is easy to navigate on foot or by bicycle.