

# Greece, Untamed

**Picturesque villages, Alpine landscapes, taverns and adventure unknown even to the regions' inhabitants ♦ Why Delphi is the Center of the World ♦ How dancing can mean a death sentence for a woman ♦ The home of blue-eyed Greeks of Romanian descent**

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Even those who have visited Greece more than once may not have been fortunate enough to become familiar with its un-traveled side – the wild side, featuring gushing Alpine rivers and small, quaint villages, which produce wonderful wines and cheeses. This is not a journey to the archeological sites of Classical Greece, but to the “untamed Greece”, parts of which are unknown even to its own residents.

This trip, organized by the Geographic Society, began in Athens. Riding in Jeeps, heading northwest, we headed for Delphi. The road to Delphi cuts through the vast valleys below the Parnassus and Helicon mountains. On the way you encounter the first small towns and villages such as Thiva (Thebes), a small, ancient agricultural town which also has marble quarries; Distomo, a village visited by wine connoisseurs interested in tasting its fine local red wine; Desfina, a small shepherds' town, from which a winding road leads to Delphi, each turn revealing increasingly more beautiful and breathtaking pristine landscapes.

Antikyra, nestled in the Corinthian bay, offers a view of dozens of tiny islands and coves, appearing like a string of dragon's teeth. East of Delphi is Arahova, known for its unique brand of excellent cheese, as well as the hand-crafted carpets and carpentry made by its residents.

A dirt road leads from Arahova to Kalanya – a tiny village which can't even be found on the map of the area – through a magical forest of miniature fir trees. The village consists of 5-6 houses and a small church. During the winter the entire village is covered in snow, its residents migrating to urban centers, as do the inhabitants of many other mountainous villages once the heavy snow begins to fall, returning in the spring.



Country folk

One of the few homes in Kalanya is owned by a fascinating, captivating man by the name of Damianos Vasiliadis, the agent who looked after the logistics of our trip. Formerly the head of the Greek Alpine Society, Damianos, aka Diamond, is a philosopher educated in Germany who until recently was involved in the Socialist party governing Greece. He is a seasoned traveler intimately familiar with each and every trail throughout the Greek countryside. Damianos graciously welcomed us into his home, offering us classical Greek delights: an authentic, refreshing Greek salad, succulent grilled lamb, *hortopita* (delicious savory pies made of phyllo dough and filled with

spinach and cheese), *tiropita* (a triangular feta cheese pie), *yaurti me meli* (yoghurt with honey), and deliciously fragrant mountain tea.

### Delphi's Message of Peace

The road to the archaeological site at Delphi offers a view of the Gulf of Itea (part of the larger Corinthian gulf) and its breathtaking coastline, home to some 1,000,000 olive trees, growing in a large, dense olive grove.



Traveling along these countryside roads one finds abundant proof of the deep religious faith held by the Greek people, and of their deep attachment to those who have passed on. A multitude of private memorial monuments dot the roadsides, marking the spots where relatives have died. These are square boxes mounted on poles, containing the likeness of the saint the family feels particularly close to, as well as a candle and a bottle of olive oil. Each and every Sunday a member of the family arrives on site to say a prayer and light a candle. Yet another phenomenon attesting to the special significance that death carries among the residents of rural Greece is the fact that women who have lost their husbands or sons wear black clothing for the rest of their lives. The countryside villages are full of women wearing black, a testament to their loss.



The Athenian Treasury at Delphi

According to Greek mythology, Zeus, King of the Gods, sent two eagles from the two ends of the earth in order to determine the exact point that is the center of the world. The eagles met at Delphi, and so it was perceived by the ancient Greeks as *Omphalos* – the "navel" of the world. Delphi is also the site of the Temple of Apollo, where the Delphic Oracle – the most important oracle in the classic Greek world – is said to have resided. The oracle was consulted by kings arriving from across the country to receive prophecies, and delivered a pan-Hellenic message of peace, unity and freedom. Several kings, such as the King of

Athens, built treasuries in Delphi to store the gifts brought to the oracle and to commemorate their victories.

At the center of the archeological site is the theatre, which in ancient times fulfilled a psychological role: while watching the plays that were staged prior to the delivery of the oracle's prophecy, the spectators, representatives of the various kingdoms, would achieve catharsis through their identification with the protagonist of the play, and with its moral. Following the delivery of the prophecy the kings were, therefore, more amenable to peaceful compromises. The peace accords achieved in Delphi between representatives of the various states were carved into the supporting wall of the Temple of Apollo for posterity, where they can be seen to this very day.

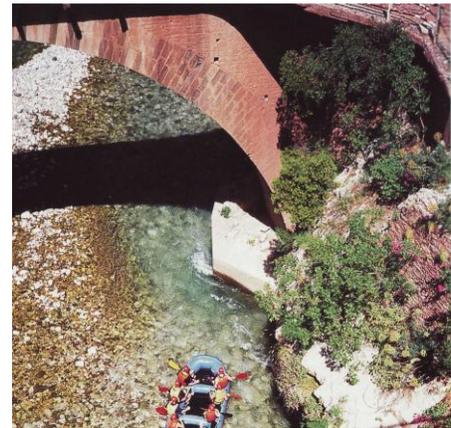
The panoramic view from the ancient theatre at Delphi and the Temple of Allplo is spectacular; one can easily imagine the deep effect this place had on pilgrims arriving from afar, climbing to the top of this high mountain to hear the oracle seal their fate.

As we left Delphi our jeeps finally began displaying their unique abilities. West of Delphi is the octopus-shaped Lake Mornos, from which we proceeded along mountainous roads, relentlessly shaking our vehicles. Traveling through isolated and deserted villages, we arrived at Ano Hora – “The Upper Village.” Later in the day we crossed the gushing Evinas River through the water, keeping to the exact directions received during our briefing with the Geographic Society, and benefiting from their intimate knowledge of these untamed areas. Here our capacity to demonstrate our driving skills through rough terrain was truly put to the test, as the water reached the doors of the jeeps, which rattled as they rode through the rocks and boulders.

### **Skiing, Rappelling, Rafting and Rembetiko**

Karpenissi, a town located at the foot of Mount Timfristos, hosts the many skiers flocking the ski hill at its summit during the snowy winter months. It is not a particularly tourist town, but it offers a variety of attractions: rafting, snapling, bicycle trips, horseback riding, hiking paths and small-plane rides.

The Evrytania region is an untravelled, untamed region, and is therefore more adventurous. Its mountains are as high as 2,300 meters and even higher, with two large rivers (the Karpenisiotis and the Trikeriotis) running through it, which at their meeting point create the incredible Trikeriotis Canyon. This gorge is the departure point for rafting down the Trikeriotis River. Ours was the last rafting trip of the season, as the river waters are not deep enough during the summer months. Rafters more seasoned than myself will, of course, consider this a piece of cake, but for me it was truly an adventure; the rubber boats sailed down the gushing river at dizzying speed, rising and crashing into the foaming rapids, giant rocks surrounding us on either side. Next we rappelled down narrow crevices and streaming waterfalls, surrounded all the while by the incredibly lush, green, mountainous view.



Rafting down the Trikeriotis River

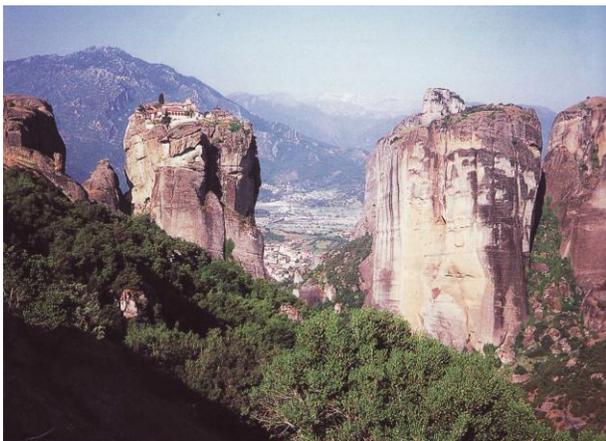
The road north proceeded through small, picturesque villages, until we reached Megalochorio – a village whose red-roofed homes are built exclusively of slate, which is abundant in the area. Following a hearty meal, consisting of river fish, we continued to the remote Monastery of Proussos, built on a cliff high above the Krikello River. During WWII this was a place of refuge for Greek guerilla soldiers hiding from the Nazis. The interior of the monastery is devorated with wall paintings and frescos. It holds deep religious meaning for the Greek people, as it contains an icon of the Virgin Mary, referred to here as Proussiotissa, which locals believe has special healing powers. Every Sunday a long line of worshipers winds down from the entrance gate to the compound. They advance to the monastery on their knees, and once inside kiss the icon of the Virgin Mary and sip the sacred river water.

Visiting a typical Karpenissi tavern we were introduced to Rembetiko music and music dance. Rembetiko arrived from Asia Minor and developed in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Many Rembetika songs are intended for dancing; each type of dance has its own distinct song, with its own title. The rembetiko is danced by an individual or by a group of people, and was developed by the *rebetes* – the downtrodden commoners who were deported from Turkey to Greece in 1923. The rebetes were anti-establishment individuals pushed outside the social order, creating their own culture. Rembetiko songs are usually plaintive, full of grief, lost love and yearning for the Old Country: Asia Minor. The rebetes wore special costumes: a belt full of pocket knives and a shirt missing its left sleeve. It was customary that when a rebetes gets up to dance it was forbidden for anyone to join him in order not to disrespect him. Women were strictly forbidden to participate – with the exception of prostitutes. Any woman challenging this unwritten law faced the punished of death. Rebetes culture has lost its original meaning and qualities; the aristocrats of Athens, in their attempt to “find their roots,” flock to exclusive Rembetiko clubs enforcing a strict suit & tie dress code. Instead of the original two players these clubs feature an entire orchestra of well-trained and well-rehearsed musicians. You can still experience the original flavor of rembetiko in those small, remote villages, which are both geographically and conceptually far from the big cities.

### **Monks Among the Cliffs**

The road leading north-west leads to the town of Kalambaka and the cliffs of Meteora. We crossed the Tavropos River – one of the largest rivers in the Evrytania region – right over the gigantic valley it created. The road continued through Alpine desert landscape to the mountains of Agrafa, rising to 2,300 meters and higher. There are observation posts throughout these mountains, offering breathtaking views far into the distance. The road cutting through the mountains winds through enormous cliffs and deep valleys, and is paved right at the edge of the mountainsides. We felt as though we were the first to travel it. We proceeded to the Thessalia Valley, Greece’s main source of wheat.

The spectacular Meteora cliffs rise to incredible heights within an expansive valley. They have attracted monks of the Greek Orthodox Church who searched for a way to return to the true spiritual essence of Christianity. Adjacent to several of the monasteries built in the area are caves



Meteora

in which some monks lived in complete isolation, devoting themselves to worship. On occasion they joined their brothers in the monastery for *Laura* – a study and prayer group. You can visit these monasteries and experience the monks’ lifestyle, maintained to this day. The Agios Stephanos (St. Stephen) Monastery, for example, founded in the 14<sup>th</sup> century (all the monasteries in the area were built between the 14<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries), is inhabited by nuns only. Once impossible to visit, as it stands on an isolated cliff, it is now accessible to visitors via a bridge.

The Megalo Meteoro (Metamorphosis) Monastery was built onto (and into) the imposing cliff it inhabits in complete congruence. Its monks do not leave the monastery, receiving provisions through a cable car leading to and fro. Inside the monastery, founded circa 1340, is a beautiful church, decorated with magnificent wall paintings and frescos depicting the Transfiguration of Christ in the Holy Land, as well as numerous other saints. The skulls of the holy founders of Megalo Meteoro are meticulously preserved in the narthex above their tombs. These are of great importance to the monastery, as it is believed that their very presence imparts a spirit of holiness.



Megalo Meteoro Monastery

### **Turquoise Pools, Folk Art and Authentic Souvlaki**

From Meteora – a stunningly spectacular example of perfect harmony between humankind and nature – a beautiful mountainous road leads north to Metsovo. This is a far more tourist-friendly village than the ones we’d visited earlier, and features various kinds of locally produced goods and folk art: delicious cheeses and wines, colourful carpets and textiles, intricate woodcarvings and carpentry. The residents are mostly Wallachs – blue-eyed Greeks of Romanian descent who arrived in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The shops are located in the *platea* – the village center. Each village in the area is built around the largest plane tree (*Platanus* in Greek) in the vicinity, from which the term referring to the center of the village is derived.

Metsovo offers the opportunity to taste authentic Greek souvlaki – the best to be had – as well as other dishes unique to the area, such as a delicious bean soup and a succulent meat stew. The quaint homes are built of local slate combined with elaborate, stylized wooden balconies. We continued due north to the villages of the Zagorohoria region (literally: land behind the mountains). En route we crossed a lovely turquoise-coloured pool on the Vodiomatis River, finally arriving at Monodendri, the village we retired to for the night, whose summit overlooks the vast Vikos Gorge, and which is the most popular starting point for the Vikos Gorge hike.

Our last day in Greece was devoted to a tour of the beautiful Megalo Papingo – one of the prettiest mountain villages in the area – with homes built of slate and limestone, cobbled lanes, little squares and stunning scenery. Leaving the village we encountered the view of the majestic Gamila Massif. Hidden in a massive canyon is yet another enchanting monastery, well worth the effort required to reach it.

Nearing the end of our journey, we continued westward to Ioannina, the largest city and capital of the Epiros region, close to the Albanian border. From here we flew back the 445 km to Athens – a mere 50 minute flight – whereas our jeep trip had lasted a week... This is the perfect trip for the more adventurous types among you who, rather than choosing the standard Greek island vacation, prefer the exhilaration of hiking, rafting and rappelling through magnificent, untamed landscapes.