

Greece

Forget Crete and Corfu – it's time to discover the real charm of Greece

Evia? Syvota? The Mani Peninsula? Chris Leadbeater reveals the less familiar corners of a country we think we know well

Few European destinations are more recognisable than Greece – particularly in the white heat of summer, when the Mediterranean sun smiles on the land of Zeus, Poseidon and Aphrodite. Its rays bounce off the honeyed pillars of the Parthenon, skip across the surface of the Aegean, wrap around the windmills of Mykonos, and dance on the seafloor in Crete, Rhodes, Skiatos and Kos. It is a picture both familiar and inviting, and we enjoy it in large numbers on a regular basis, with some

three million Britons visiting Greece each year. But what of the less familiar side of Greece – the Greece beyond the sands of Shipwreck Beach on Zakynthos, beyond the view of the waves from Santorini's epic cliff-tops? Few people would claim that our travel familiarity breeds contempt – and in a country that ranks as the 11th biggest in western Europe, there is a Greece that stands aloof from postcards and social-media feeds. And this may be the year in which to discover it.

The 10 "lesser lights" suggested here

are not wholly unknown, of course. But they are definitely under-appreciated, under-visited and, in some cases, significantly off the beaten track. Equally, they come with all those special traits that tend to define a Greek holiday – the moody mountain range, the waterside taverna, the path through the pine forest, the unfussy hotel with the sunlit terrace, the little cove where the tide tiptoes to the shore.

In fact, the only thing these 10 places may lack is other tourists in large numbers. Familiarity? It's hugely overrated.



GORGE YOURSELF IN THE NORTH-WEST

Epirus, in the far north-western corner of Greece, has crept into the travelling consciousness in the past decade. This is partly because tour operators have learnt to make more of the convenient positioning of Preveza Airport, the arrival point for Lefkada, which actually sits on the mainland; and partly because Parga, an endlessly pretty former fishing village, 40 miles to the north, offers sunshine escapes of excellent value.

But the wider region often goes unexplored – which is a shame, as there is a great deal to see. Syvota, a further 15 miles up the coast, is a lovely small town where tavernas adorn the waterfront and Gallikos Molos Beach winks at the Ionian Sea. Ioannina, the regional capital, offers just the right amount of urban interruption, its old town fortifications remembering Byzantine and Ottoman rulers past. Most striking of all is Vikos Gorge, cutting a 20-mile dash through the Pindus Mountains at a scale almost a mile deep in places, up to a mile and a half wide in others – that the Grand Canyon would appreciate.

Olympic Holidays (020 8492 6868; olympicholidays.com) is offering a seven-night stay at the Saluator Villas & Spa – a four-star boutique hideaway on the hillside above Parga – flying from Manchester to Preveza on May 7, from £745 per person.

SECOND HELPINGS ON EVIA

It is no great revelation to say that Crete is Greece's biggest island. The second biggest is more of a mystery. Rhodes? Lesbos? Naxos? No, no and no. The silver medal goes to Evia, an outcrop so vague of identity that it has two names (it is also called Evboia) – and so indistinct of geography that, at the narrowest point, only the 130ft (40m) of the Euripus Strait separates it from the mainland. Look carefully at the map, however, and you will see it; a giant 110 miles long and up to 31 miles wide, pushing into the Aegean 40 miles north of Athens. The location makes it a popular summer playground for holiday-makers from the capital, but its forested terrain and long coast can play the same role for overseas tourists.

If you mainly want the beach, the seaside town of Amarnythos, on Evia's south flank, may beckon. Last Minute (020 8396 1221; lastminute.com) offers a seven-night stay at the four-star Porto Evia Mare Boutique Hotel, flying from Gatwick to Athens on August 12, from £614 per person. If you prefer to wander in detail, Exodus Travels (020 3131 7557; exodus.co.uk) offers a Mountains & Villages of Evia escorted tour that might suit. The eight-day itinerary takes in the ruins of ancient Styra (mentioned by Homer in the *Iliad*) and tackles the wooded trails of Mount Ochi (4,587ft/1,398m). Fifteen departures are scheduled for this year, costing from £1,549 per person with flights

TRAILS AND TALES ON THE PELION

The all but symmetrical "N-shape" of the Pagasetic Gulf is partially created by the Pelion, which stretches north-west to south-east as an outer barrier, separating this sheltered bay from the open Aegean. In truth, the 60-mile-long hook of land is as much a mountain as a peninsula, coming to a head where its highest summit, Pourianos Stavros, worries the sky at 5,328ft (1,624m). Home to 24 villages of varying altitude but scant difference in size, it is a place for summer strolling and literary echoes – its tree-lined slopes crop up in the works of Shakespeare and Herman Melville, as well as in the annals of Greek mythology.

Macs Adventure (0141 530 5452; macsadventure.com) offers the Secrets of the Pelion Peninsula from £695 per person (flights extra). The self-guided hiking adventure covers 39 miles in eight days, following old mule trails from village to village and inn to inn.

INTO THE DARKNESS IN KALAVRYTA

It is a tribute to the colossal size of the Peloponnese that a drive from Areopoli, almost at its southern tip, to Diakopto, on its north coast, is a matter of 170 miles and four hours. Head for this end of the peninsula and you are in dif-

ferent but similar territory. This is another province, Achaea – although the Panachaiko mountains still crowd the horizon.

Diakopto is the start of something wonderful: the antique rack railway, crafted by Italian engineers between 1885 and 1895, rises 2,461ft (750m) over the course of 14 miles and traces the Youstraikos Gorge on its way to Kalavryta. The upper terminus is a town cast in permanent shadow as of December 1943 – when German soldiers murdered 693 of its residents in one morning of inhumanity. But it tells its tale bravely. A memorial marks the tragedy. And there are happier sights, too. The Agia Lavra monastery, destroyed by the invaders, has since been reconstructed – and not without a sense of déjà vu. Tenth century in origin, it has been burned down four times (in 1585, 1715 and 1826, as well as 1943). Each time it has risen from the ashes, a jewel on the top of Mount Aroania. Explore (01252 240 493; explore.co.uk) offers London to Rome and Athens by Train, an 11-day group adventure which includes the Kalavryta railway. Five departures are still available for 2023, costing from £2,965 per person (including a flight home from Greece).

SIX APPEAL IN THESSALY

The city break is a staple of the Greek holiday landscape – if we are talking weekends in Athens, peering at the Par-

▲ Relax and take in the views from the Euphoris Retreat in Mystras
▲ Small talk: Areopoli is one of the larger towns on the Mani Peninsula, but its population is little more than 1,000



then. The genre is discussed far less in relation to Thessaly, the region that provides one of the central pieces of the mainland jigsaw. Here is a largely agricultural area, where life moves without urgency in fields and olive groves. However, it is also home to a pair of medium-sized cities – local capital Larissa, and seafaring Volos.

It is the latter that makes the better case to be an outside-bet destination. While Volos is Greece's sixth biggest city and a busy port, its location on the Pagasetic Gulf makes for proximity to lovely beaches (Paralia Karnagio and Paralia Agios Stefanos are within easy driving distance). There is history, too. The remnants of Demetrias – a settlement founded in the third century BC – wait on the south-west side of the centre, its amphitheatre still glorious; Volos's Archaeological Museum (efamagvolos.culture.gr) dissects the same era. And there is a direct flight – easyJet soars in from Gatwick, between June and September.

Return flights, heading out on July 1 and back on July 5, cost from £251 (0330 551 5165; easyjet.com). A four-night mini-break in the same window at the Domotel Xenia Volos (0330 2109 2700; domotel.gr/xenia-volos) – a four-star spa hotel and an ideal base camp, right at the waterside – costs an additional £263 per person.

MANI MILES IN THE SOUTHERN PELOPONNESE

The Peloponnese is enormous. At 8,320 square miles, it accounts for roughly 16 per cent of the entire Greek landmass (50,949 square miles), Ionian and Aegean islands included.

Little wonder, then, that some parts of it are better known than others. There is certainly an air of the undiscovered to the Mani Peninsula – the middle of the three "fingers" that dangle down from the landmass here, gesturing vaguely towards Kythira and Crete. Indeed, until relatively recently, the beaten track was a wholly unknown concept on this mountainous promontory. The road south from Kalamata to Areopoli is a modern innovation – providing easy access to villages which could once be reached only by boat.

In some ways, Areopoli is an emblem of the region. Despite being one of the

Mani Peninsula's bigger towns, it boasts a population of little more than 1,000 – while its port, Limeni, barely grazes the shallows of the Messenian Gulf. In other ways, even this meagre head count seems out of kilter with a place where the Caves of Diros – dripping with stalactites at the water's edge – are much more representative in their solitude and silence.

Headwater (01606 218 851; headwater.com) offers Walking in the Outer Mani from £1,154 per person (including flights) – an eight-day self-guided hiking holiday, available between April and October, which traces the Mani shoreline for 50 miles.

DELVE INTO THE LOST MAGIC OF MYSTRAS

The Peloponnese is awash with A-list slivers of Greek heritage: the remnants of ancient Corinth and Olympia; the astonishing amphitheatre at Epidaurus. However, it has relative secrets too and Mystras is one of them. Stuck to a lower slope of Mount Taygetos, in the south-east of the great peninsula, it wears its story in monasteries and churches, staunch walls and fractured fortifications – each of them clinging doggedly to a mighty gradient.

Unlike its fellow historic landmarks, however, Mystras is not ancient. Founded in the mid-13th century, it rose to be a significant Ottoman citadel – although its importance did not endure long enough to avoid later confusion. Abandoned in the 19th century, it became mislabelled as the ghost of Sparta – the definitively ancient Greek city whose own, less substantial, ruins lie about four miles to the east. In truth, even in the busiest months you will rarely have to share either of these sites with crowds of other visitors, but this absence of tourists is of no relevance to the beauty of an area where many have wandered over centuries. The Euphoris Retreat (euphoriaretreat.com) makes use of Mystras in its fitness routines, organising high-paced morning hikes through its streets. A five-day fitness programme costs from £2,772 per person, including flights to Kalamata from Gatwick, through Wellbeing Escapes (020 3735 7555; wellbeingescapes.com).

PINK FLAMINGOS IN CENTRAL MACEDONIA

Had you visited the area a little under a century ago, you would not have seen much; just a swathe of marshland, fed by the currents of the River Strymonas, so riddled with mosquitoes that it had a malaria problem. But everything changed in 1932, with the construction of the dam. True, this means that, despite its name, Lake Kerkira – which sits 60 miles north of Thessaloniki, in Central Macedonia – is actually a reservoir but its semi-artificiality is of no concern to the many migratory birds that use it as a deluxe hotel on



▲ The beach at Parga is relatively well known but the wider Epirus region goes largely unexplored



A Catch it while you can: a traditional fishing village at Trikeri on the Pelion Peninsula

6th-century walls encapsulate the city's frontier position - the border is just three miles away. *Andante Travels* (01722 671 081; andantetravels.co.uk) offers a regular escorted tour of the region, Greece & Turkey. The Via Egnatia II, which takes 10 days over its odyssey from Thessaloniki to Istanbul, pausing at the above-mentioned hotspots. Two editions of the trip are planned this year (June 1; October 18), from £4,055 per person, including flights

SEE THE END OF THE WORLD ON PATMOS

It is not its lack of fame that makes Patmos a niche holiday destination, but its relative inaccessibility. You cannot fly to the most northerly Dodecanese island, and any journey there from the UK demands a ferry (usually from Kos, via Kalymnos and Leros). But it is a trip worth making, all the same. If the name Patmos is familiar, it is because it is the end of the world. Or, at least, a vantage point on it. It was here, in the first century AD, that St John supposedly wrote the Bible's fiery climax, the Book of Revelation. How much stock you place in the authenticity of the sanctuary where he purportedly put pen to parchment (now part of a small church) will depend on your religious convictions. But if the 'Cave of the Apocalypse' doesn't move you, the surrounding scenery will. Patmos rises to a summit in its hilltop capital Chora, and slips down to the water at Skala, a tiny port which - in its sheltered shallows and seafood tavernas - is as lovely as any in Greece. A seven-night holiday at the three-star Skala Hotel, flying from Manchester on June 10, costs from £955 per person (including ferries), through Sunvil (020 8568 4498; sunvil.co.uk)

HEAD EAST INTO EVROS

If there is an area of the Greek landscape particularly neglected by holiday-makers, it is the eastern fringes, where the mainland concludes its journey to the border with Turkey. This - further east than Thessaloniki, than Halkidiki, than Mount Athos - is Eastern Macedonia and Thrace, and ultimately, the sub-region of Evros, where Alexandropolis hugs the shoreline as the last major Greek city. So low is the area's tourism profile that 'discoveries' abound at almost every corner: the ruins of Amphipolis, where Athens and Sparta fought a battle in 422 BC; Kavala, as important a port now as when the Roman road Via Egnatia first passed through it; Xanthi, a small city at the foot of the Rhodope Mountains, which sings of Byzantine and Ottoman times; Didymoteicho, whose still-sturdy

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their seasonal journeys between northern Europe and Africa. Depending on the time of year, you will spot pelicans, cormorants, shrikes and flamingos - particularly flamingos, which cover the water in patches; floating

islands of pink. Perhaps they are enchanted by the scenery as any human visitor. The ridgeline of the Belasica mountains, above, denotes the point where Greece collides with both North Macedonia and Bulgaria.

Naturetrek (01962 733 051; naturetrek.co.uk) offers a five-day bird-watching trip - *Lake Kerkini in Autumn* - scheduled for November 2-6. It costs from £1,395 per person, including flights

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