

# *Ancient Greece with Eldertreks*

## *Part One: Athens, the Peloponnese and the Mainland*

There is no shortage of ruins in Greece - The country's long and eventful history has seen to that. Eldertreks' *Ancient Greece* itinerary has intrigued me as it includes visits to important archaeological sites as well as to less-trodden corners of the country. When the itinerary was offered during a sale about two years ago, I thought the perfect time to revisit this part of the world.

This is my third time to this lovely country. I first visited with friends Hanna, Carol and Bette in 1990; the second time on OAT's Northern Greece trip in 2016. But I hadn't done much in Southern Greece, especially the Peloponnese (large area/island next to the mainland).

Being my seventh trip with Eldertreks, a Canadian company, I especially like their format -- longer itineraries, we travel close to the ground, excellent tour leaders and local guides and the program is all-inclusive (no options). All that you are responsible for is the tip to the main guide. The only spending money needed is for an occasional iced cappuccino (trip favorite) and incidentals.

The good news is that except for Athens, Olympia and Mykonos, the itinerary concentrates on lesser visited places. Who do you know who has visited the Mani Peninsula? - No one! What about the holy island of Tinos? Never heard of it? Neither have most foreign tourists!

From Athens we travel to the Peloponnese, then north and back to the mainland followed by the islands of Tinos and Mykonos.



As you might have read in an earlier vignette, I loved being on the Galileo and visiting several islands of the Cyclades group. Conveniently, the last day of the ship's itinerary is the first day of the Eldertreks trip. Good planning!

When I return to the Phillippos Hotel in Athens, I am not so lucky (remember that beautiful view from my balcony my first two nights in Athens?). I am assigned a teeny standard room, with a smaller bathroom than on the ship. Its saving grace is that it has a small balcony, which turns out to be excellent for drying laundry. Its view is of the building across the street.

Promptly at 6pm, six travelers assemble in the lobby and meet Christos, our leader for the next 17 days. He is a well experienced guide and has led this itinerary several times. A kind,

gentle soul, he gets things done with quiet dispatch. One woman forgot a raincoat, another needs a walking stick and I need plastic ends for my pointed walking sticks which are not allowed at archaeological sites. The next day, he goes from one to the other taking care of each of us in turn. Nothing is a problem.

My fellow travelers are from New Zealand, Canada and the US. Very soon we meld into a little family, knowing each others interests, stories and quirks.

And we luck out with our bus too! With just six of us and Christos, what I feared most was being squished into a van the entire 17 days. We have a nine-passenger Mercedes van the first day for city touring in Athens and the drive to Cape Sounion and yes, we are packed-in. Christos makes a call and later tells us we have different transportation starting tomorrow.



So how about a 20 passenger 2018 Mercedes Sprinter Limo Bus with leather seats, big windows, good a/c, reading lights, wi-fi and USB ports to re-charge our devices! The configuration is 2-1 and with just six of us everyone gets their own row! Also let me mention Illias, our Sean Connery look-alike, and excellent driver.

I must applaud Eldertreks, the local tour company and Christos for the upgraded and comfortable transportation and for running the trip with only six participants.

The next day we leave Athens for Mani - a gorgeous, unspoiled, almost secret part of the country. Its sweet little villages, full of turn-of-the-century stone houses, are tucked away in the hills. Traditionally there are no buildings higher than the local church. Their counterpoint are lovely seaside villages set in coves where we often dine. It is evident that most times, we seem to be the only non-Greeks traveling on this peninsula.



Our main event in Mani is the Byzantine city of Mystras, (a UNESCO site) and considered the best preserved example of 13th to 15th century medieval walled town architecture. It is chock-full of churches and monasteries in various stages of restoration. We are lucky to have George Terezakis as our local guide who explicates every little thing and even sings to us in a church so we can appreciate the acoustics.

Remains of the 14th century Agia Sofia church.

I especially enjoy visiting the main church (referred to as the Cathedral) with its well-preserved frescoes and its attached convent. Just a few nuns remain and they have a small shop where they sell their embroideries and also religious icons. It is not a question of needing anything. You buy to support these women who have dedicated their lives to the church and this site.

There are only six nuns left caring for the Cathedral. Soon there will be only 5 and then four, until .....



Unfortunately it is the ancient stones of Mystras that do me in.

I now realize my knees are worse than I thought. I'm OK (slow but steady) on even, flat surfaces but this morning walking the sharp, uneven rocks of Mystras followed by more of the same in the abandoned village of Vathia the next day, is way hard on my knees - they cried out at every cobblestone, rock and uneven surface. Darn!

This itinerary includes hikes in this steep and rocky terrain. I'm not doing them. Christos plans "urban trekking" (walking around on my own, exploring cute towns and villages) for me, or I don't mind waiting for the others while nursing an iced cappuccino. So, on occasion, I am on a "Plan B." It works out well.

No -- you cannot climb the tower!

Christos is really good at assessing my capabilities and counsels me about climbs and terrain that are difficult. My favorite "Plan B" was when the group hiked in Meteora and I was dropped off for urban trekking and cappuccino drinking in the lovely town of Kalampaka.





# *Highlights*

## *The Food - or How I Ate My Way thru Greece*

Several of us commented that this could be a foodie tour of Greece. The cuisine relies on olive oil, grains, fish, seafood and fresh fruits and vegetables. The food is sociable and for lunches and dinners, Christos orders a selection of dishes for us to share - thank goodness we are all considerate about using serving utensils! Then each of us can order an entree from the menu. And now, one of the surprising facts about Greece ... portions are enormous! I've always thought this was a US trait -- but these are immense! After three days of this, we plead with Christos to just order dishes for us to share and this turns out to be more than enough.

(An aside: on the flight home, when I was served a very generous slice of passion fruit cheesecake, I had a mad desire to cut it up in small pieces to share with the people around me!)

My favorites are salads, calamari, octopus, spinach pie and one 3kg (10 lb) grilled fish that we enjoy at a seaside restaurant. This balances out with others who dislike some of these but they were always welcome my share of sardines or the different encantations of goat cheese.



Yum, Yum, Yum: Greek Salad, Calamari and Baklava turn out to be my favorite food groups

## *The Scenery*

Greece is stunningly beautiful. Less than an hour out of Athens, we are on country roads enjoying extraordinary views. I easily spot evidence of old terraces, an occasional aqueduct and ancient ruins with their jumble of rocks just off the side of the road.

There is a decent amount of mountain driving on the Peloponnese and roads are lined with orange, lemon and pomegranate orchards as well as groves and groves of gnarled olive trees. There are over 130,000,000+ olive trees in the country -- olives are serious business here.

We are all quiet during the drives, just taking in the spectacular scenery.

## *The Sights*

Our itinerary includes the major ancient UNESCO sights of the Acropolis, Delphi, Olympia and Delos. Our local guides are excellent:

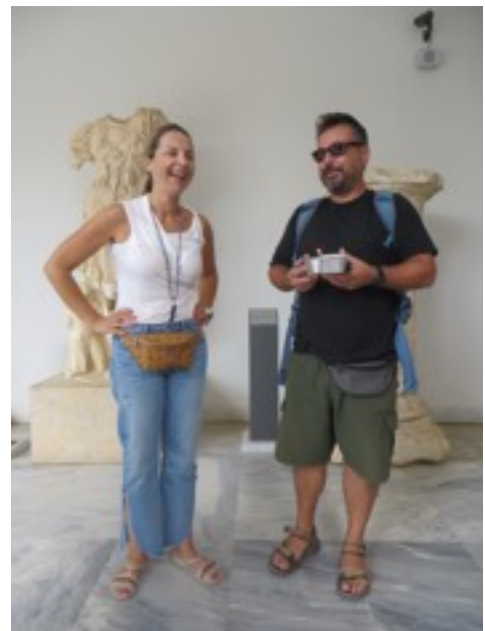
Maria Kikivaraki turns out to be our Alpha and Omega as she guides us our first morning in Athens which is devoted to the Acropolis; and also on our last day thru the National Archaeological Museum. What a change from 1990 when Bette, Carol and I ambled over the steep and uneven stone steps to the Acropolis summit and once there, had it pretty much to ourselves! Now gorgeous, wide, gleaming white marble steps carry us to the top, along with thousands others. It is wall-to-wall people, mostly from cruise ships, and it is difficult to frame a photo without someone in it. Restoration is still not complete with piles of tumbled pillars and rocks laying all around. I wonder if restoration will ever be finished.



We need to think creatively to imagine milleniums ago when the buildings were new and the golden statue of Athena was the main focus of the bright white and gleaming Parthenon, complete with its frieze (now in the British Museum and known as the Elgin Marbles).

Niki Vlachou introduced us to Olympia. As we walked from place to place, we occasionally sat on old stones in a shady spot as she helped us to understand the site. She even plucked a branch of laurel leaves to fashion a winners diadem for us to wear in our photos.

It is Niki's birthday and Christos makes sure she has a cake and a gift as the rest of her family has returned to Athens for her children start school.





Penny Kolomvotsu guides us in Delphi. We first go thru the museum with its collection of statues, pottery, gold pieces and artifacts found at the site. Then walk up, up, up to the site itself.

Like Niki, Penny has numerous paintings, drawings and photographs to help us visualize the site. I often say that if you don't have a guide at an archaeological site, you are just looking at a pile of rocks.

They each are thorough, walking us from place to place explaining history and significance along with illustrations from their iPads or pictures from books. Finally suggesting other areas to visit - perhaps a theater, a stadium, etc. then giving us free time to enjoy the site on our own.

In between all this, Christos does hotel area orientations, guides at minor historic sites, handles the behind-the-scenes work that keeps our tour running smoothly and us well-fed and happy.

### *Some Nice Surprises*



Meteora - it is so nice to return to a place I have visited before. Meteora is known for its six complexes of Eastern Orthodox monasteries perched high atop mammoth raw-umber-crayola-color rocks. It is very clear the monks clearly did not want to be disturbed in those early days as even today, it is somewhat difficult to get here. We visit the 14th century Monastery of Great Meteoron, the largest and oldest of the six and climbing all those stone steps is worth it to see the chapel's 16th century frescoes, the museum's collection of inculnabulum and jeweled icons and to just to wander around this holy place.





The monastery has one of the richest collections of pre-1500's manuscripts. Many are on display in its museum.



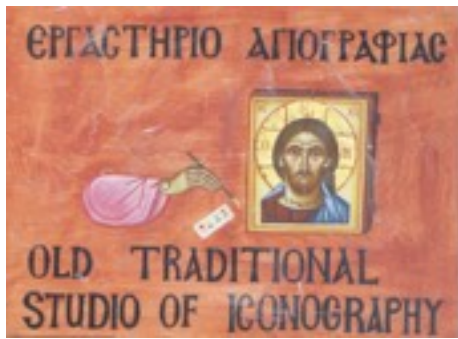
Every little corner has something interesting to look at and captivates your attention. This hidden shrine sits behind the chapel.



Don't ask!

Monks sell lotions and potions that cure every ailment in the monastery gift shop.





While in the area, we visit Dimitrios Moulas, a icon painter who is carrying on the family tradition. His icons are gorgeous. His studio is his family's ancestral home at the foot of Meteora's rocks.

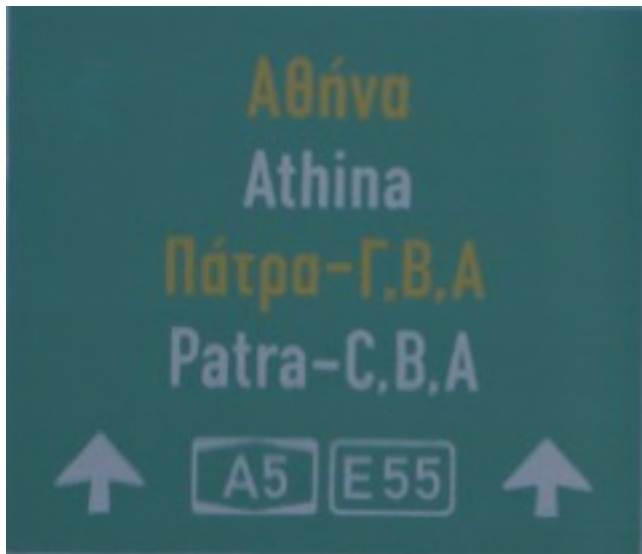


Local herbologist Yiannis Dimitreas is an expert on the wild herbs that grow in the mountains around the small town of Kardamyli. I read about him in a Rick Steves book and Christos helped me locate him. Yiannis forages and sells wild herbs for culinary and medicinal use from a store at his home. When he told me that Rick Steves buys his salt (made from seawater foam and known as artisan salt in some circles), I had to buy some too.

The Rio-Antirio Bridge which along with the bridge at Corinth, connects the Peloponnese to the mainland. It has yet to be paid for so it is a whopping 42 euro (\$49.50) fee just for our little bus to cross it! A car pays 13.50 euro (\$15.75) It is a beautiful, elegant design and one of the world's longest multi-span cable bridges.







And finally, all roads lead to Athens. No matter where in the country you are, the distance and direction to Athens is prominently signposted.



Drink of the trip - Iced Cappuccino!

And the way to order is: “un-cappuccino-freddo-medio” (Iced cappuccino with just a bit of sugar). It is generally served with something “extra” - often cookies or a bottle of water.

This is Part One of the Eldertreks trip summary, Part Two covers the islands of Tinos and Mykonos.

September, 2018