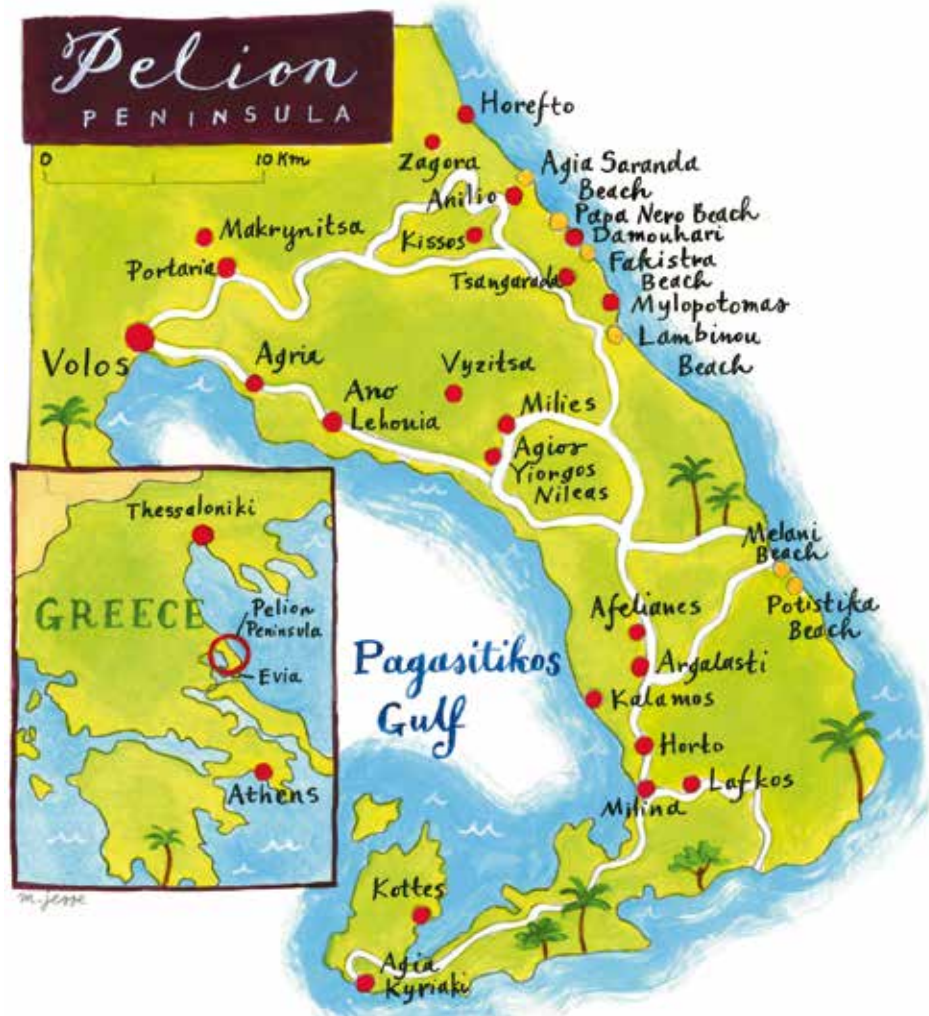


# ODYSSEY TO UNSPOILT GREECE

There are sleepy seaside villages linked by donkey tracks, landscapes unchanged for millennia, rustic tavernas and smart guesthouses in restored mansions, and some of the most spectacular beaches in Greece. This isn't a myth, this is the Pelion peninsula.

**Rachel Howard** explores.  
Photographs by **Jenny Zarins**





## MIDWAY

between Athens and Thessaloniki, the Pelion peninsula is like a sliver of some other, lush country latched onto the eastern side of the Greek mainland. Its backbone is a mountainous ridge of forested peaks speckled with the silvery scales of slate roofs; on either side translucent coves have been carved out of the cliffs. To the south, the peninsula curls into the Pagasitikos Gulf, a glassy expanse of sea almost landlocked by the port of Volos and the island of Evia. Here, the low-slung hills and shallow bays are a calm counterpoint to the dramatic ravines and cliffhanger villages of the northern heights.

A monastic retreat and a stronghold of resistance during the Turkish occupation (from the 15th to the 19th century), Pelion still feels remote – except, that is, from mid-July to late August, when Greeks descend in numbers on what are among the most spectacular beaches in the country. Few foreigners go to the region, most of them German campers and British ramblers. The peninsula is only 95km long, but its tortuous roads make for slow driving, and the infrequent signposts (which sometimes call the area ‘Pilion’) for tricky navigation. It can be quicker to walk along the *kalderimia*, cobbled donkey tracks that connect many villages and beaches. These ancient, fairy-tale footpaths are overgrown with wild flowers and criss-crossed by streams and waterfalls. On slopes cloaked in

chestnut and beech and in orchards fragrant with figs, apples and pears, little seems to have changed since the centaurs galloped through.

Half-man and half-horse, these mythical animals subsisted on raw meat and wine. Pelion offers more varied fare today, from hearty sausage stew in rustic tavernas to sun-dried octopus in seaside *ouzeri*. Nightlife is pretty much non-existent, but every village square has at least one *kafenion*, where grizzled punters knock back rounds of the ferocious local tippie, *tsipouro* (like ouzo but without the aniseed). Each little bottle comes with a selection of mezze, made from whatever is in season.

Simple village life is a big part of Pelion’s charm. Strict building restrictions have saved the region from the architectural eyesores that blight so much of Greece. Of the two dozen villages, Tsangarada, Milies, Kissos and Lafkos are the best preserved. Their architecture is generally austere, the thick stone walls and tiny, barred windows a defence against fierce winters and foreign interlopers. But several 18th-century mansions in mountain villages have been converted into upmarket guesthouses. Fitted with fine antiques and fireplaces, these *arhondika* are designed for winter as well as summer, and they are more stylish and snug than the generally rather basic beachside hotels.

## THE NORTH-EAST

THE VILLAGES ABOVE VOLOS, such as Makrynitsa and Portaria, are pretty but packed with day-trippers, especially at weekends. Deeper into the hills is a constellation of traditional villages that provide a scenic base for exploring both north and south Pelion. There are awesome views of wooded slopes sweeping down to the gulf from **Agios Yiorgos Nileas**; and the village has several guesthouses including a newcomer, Anovolios, which is a cluster

### WALKING IN PELION

Jill Sleeman organises independent walks based at The Old Silk Store, her homespun B&B in Mouressi (00 30 24260 49086; [www.pelionet.gr/mulberrytravel](http://www.pelionet.gr/mulberrytravel)). Inntravel (01653 617906; [www.inntravel.co.uk](http://www.inntravel.co.uk)) offers a seven-night walk from £888 B&B, including flights, transfers and some meals. If you go it alone, pick up the unwieldy but essential 1:50,000 Pelion map ➤

Right, the attic room with stained-glass windows at the restored Santikos Mansion in Vyzitsa. Opposite, traditional mode of transport in the village



MAP: MARIKO JESSE

of stone-built suites with ritzy interiors (fluffy bathrobes, king-size beds, gadgets). A more tranquil, low-key alternative is Arhondiko Ioannides, which has a lovely flagstone terrace with a pool and six breezy bedrooms with frescoed ceilings.

Nearby **Vyzitsa**, once desolate, has morphed into a hotel hub thanks to a restoration project funded by the Greek Tourist Board. The swankiest place to stay is Santikos Mansion, revamped in 2003 in contemporary country style. It has opulent drapes, fancy bathrooms, and an attic with stained-glass windows where you can breakfast on home-made pastries, farm-fresh eggs and seriously good coffee. For more privacy, The Old Stonehouse is a simple, secluded villa surrounded by landscaped gardens.

Vyzitsa has surprisingly little entertainment apart from a couple of mediocre tavernas. After dark the action spills over to the next village, **Milies**, which has a pretty square and several reputable restaurants. At the Salkimi Taverna, the meaty treats with a Turkish twist include *salkimi* itself (baked veal, aubergines and courgettes in brandied béchamel) and *hounkiar beyendi* (beef stew with aubergine caviar). For dessert, go to Anna, Na Ena Milo for lemon praline mousse and Greek coffee served in a traditional copper pot. Decked with vintage advertisements, this cute coffee shop is good for people-watching; the Korbas bakery, on the edge of town, is the place to stock up on olive and onion focaccia, spinach pie and home-made preserves. Milies is also the terminus for the steam train that chugs up from Ano Lehonía at weekends: a 90-minute rollercoaster ride across plunging gorges, it makes a great day trip for children.

### AGIOS YIORGOS NILEAS

Anovolios (00 30 24280 8689813; [www.anovolios.gr](http://www.anovolios.gr)). Doubles from €95. **Arhondiko Ioannides** (00 30 24280 94071). Doubles from €100



➤ published by Road. **Walks in Pilion** by Lance Chilton (£7.50; from [www.marengowalks.com](http://www.marengowalks.com)) has detailed trails around Tsangarada; **The Mountains of Greece** by Michael Cullen and Tim Salmon (Cicerone Press, £9.99) has some routes for hardcore trekkers

Left, vineyards in the Pelion heartland. Above, simple village life in Kissos on the east coast. Opposite, seafront dining in the village of Agria, near the Pelion port of Volos

### VYZITSA

**Santikos Mansion** (00 30 24230 86765; [www.yougreece.gr](http://www.yougreece.gr)). Doubles from €90. **The Old Stone House** (bookable through Filoxenia, 01653 617959; [www.filoxenia.co.uk](http://www.filoxenia.co.uk)). Sleeps 2–6; from £559 per person per week based on two sharing, including return flights with British Airways from Gatwick to Thessaloniki and car hire for seven days; £450 for four sharing, £414 for six

### MILIES

**Salkimi Taverna** (00 30 24230 86010; [www.salkimi.com](http://www.salkimi.com)). About €30 for two without wine. Open midday–1am year round. **Anna, Na Ena Milo** (00 30 24230 86889). Open 9am–midnight. Closed Tues/Thurs. **Korbas bakery** (00 30 24230 86219); open 7am–8pm year round. The **Ano Lehonía train** departs at 11.30am and returns from Milies at 4.30pm, Sat/Sun. Check times on 00 30 24210 24056 or at [www.pilion.net/railway](http://www.pilion.net/railway)

## PELION'S HEARTLAND

TO THE NORTH, THE FORESTS get denser, the canyons steeper and the air cooler. Poking out from among the plane trees is the large village of **Tsangarada**, linked by a well-preserved *kalderimi* to the car-free coastal hamlet of **Damouhari**. The crumbling Venetian castle in the latter stands above a couple of waterfront tavernas and the Kleopatra Miramare café-bar, where impromptu concerts are staged. The new, open-plan Damouhari

Suites have wooden floors, picture windows and big canopied beds. They're directly above the Palia Damouhari restaurant, a source of delicious, smoky aubergine pâté, grilled fish and roast vegetables close to the pebble beach.

In Tsangarada itself, the eclectic menu at Evoxia (smoked eel, caramelised onion tart, smoked chicken with quince chutney) relies upon the finest ingredients sourced from all over Greece. On the wooden decks of the Dipnosofistes wine bar, you can drink vintage Greek wines to an accompaniment

**The coastline towards the southernmost tip of Pelion, near the fishing village of Agia Kyriaki**

of jazzy music and vertiginous views. Pelion 1P, a grand country house in the traditional style (pale wood interiors, iron beds dressed with embroidered linens), shares the same sensational vantage point.

Within trekking distance of Tsangarada is a series of dramatic beaches: the twin coves of Mylopotomas (go early: they are shaded by mid-afternoon), the fine white sands of Papa Nero and Agia Saranda, the mile-long Horefto (its far end favoured by nudists) and little Laminou, with a lovely café dangling above the bay. Fakistra, north of Mylopotomas, is accessible



“On the southern peninsula the low-slung hills and shallow bays are a calm counterpoint to the dramatic ravines and cliffhanger villages of the northern heights”

only via a treacherous footpath, but has a waterfall spilling down its cliff. On Papa Nero beach, the Orea Ammoudia restaurant is prettiest by moonlight, aglow with paper lanterns. It serves Greek classics such as stuffed tomatoes, moussaka and fish stew.

Just off the road running above the east coast from Tsangarada is **Kissos**, whose main attraction is the woodcarvings in the 17th-century church of Agia Marina. But it's also worth making a detour to taste the crumbly pies and stuffed cabbage leaves at Ta Pende F. Brimming with flowers, this family-run taverna hasn't changed much since 1935. Back on the main road, **Anilio** is north-west of Kissos; its Aniliotika co-operative offers preservative-free preserves and a mean *baklava*.

Further on is **Zagora**, the apple capital of Greece and a bustling market town whose Byzantine churches, marble fountains and well-worn *kafenias* merit investigation. At the bottom of the village is the stylish Pelion 2E villa, newly restored by an Athenian interior designer. It has a pool and uninterrupted views to the sands of Horefto, 10 minutes' drive downhill. Not many foreigners make it to the quiet, sandy bays beyond Horefto, and even fewer chance upon Plymari taverna on Analipsi beach, where everything from the garden-grown salad to the spinach pie is home-made.

#### DAMOUHARI

**Kleopatra Miramare** (00 30 24260 49840). Open 9am–1am, mid-April to mid-Oct. **Damouhari Suites** (available through Simply Travel, 0870 1664979; www.simplytravel.co.uk). From £485 for seven nights, including flight and car hire. **Palia Damouhari** (00 30 24260 49175). Open 9am–1am, 1 May to early Oct. About €40 for two without wine

#### TSANGARADA

**Evoxia** (00 30 24260 49135). Open 6pm–midnight daily, June–Sept; noon–midnight in winter, except Tues/Weds. About €60 for two without wine. **Dipnosofistis** (00 30 24260 49825). Open daily July–Sept for lunch and dinner, open at weekends and holidays the rest of the year. About €40 for two without wine. **Pelion 1P** (bookable through Five Star



#### GETTING TO PELION

Greek Easter Sunday falls on 23 April this year, a date that also marks the beginning of the season and the opening of many restaurants and tavernas. **British Airways** (0870 850 9850; www.ba.com) flies direct to Athens from £149 and to Thessaloniki from £120 return in April. **Olympic Airlines** ➤

Greece, 020 8422 4885; www.fivestargreece.com). Sleeps 10; price on request

#### KISSOS/ANILIO/ZAGORA

**Ta Pende F**, Kissos (00 30 24260 31266). Open noon–midnight, year round. About €30 for two without wine. **Aniliotika**, Anilio (00 30 24260 31329). Open 8am–8pm, year round. **Pelion 2E**, Zagora (see Pelion 1P, above). Sleeps eight; price on request

#### THE BEACHES

**Orea Ammoudia**, Papa Nero beach (00 30 24260 31219). Open noon–midnight, mid-April to 10 Oct. About €30 for two without wine. **Plymari**, Analipsi beach (mobile phone only: 00 30 6977 706151). Open 8am–5pm, 7pm–2am, April to end Sept. Closed Oct; open winter at weekends. About €30 for two without wine

#### THE SOUTH-EASTERN BEACHES

HEADING SOUTH, ALL ROADS lead to Argalasti, a lively town with a large square lined with cafés. East of Argalasti are two stunning beaches: fashionable **Potistika**, fringed by rocks; and Melani, a two-kilometre stretch of golden sand dotted with dreadlocked beach bums. Above Potistika, Climax beach bar attracts a cool crowd for everything from bikini brunches to full-moon parties. The food is French/Mediterranean, with excellent seafood salads and simple pastas, and

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Left, nightlife in Milina and, above, local boys on the village jetty. Opposite, the beach of Potistika, where the cool crowd goes