

Weekend

travel

Greece

Solitary and stunning: Greece's Peloponnese

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The hard-to-reach peninsula will become easily accessible this summer thanks to new direct flights from the UK, says **Lydia Bell**

I have long been a worshipper of the solitary pleasures of the Peloponnese. Culturally sacred, sublimely beautiful, underpopulated and lacking in mass tourism, its pull cannot be overstated. Our culture and myths are bed-rocked on the stories of its bewitching towns, mountains and valleys, which have haunted our collective imagination: Arcadia, Laconia, Sparta, and Corinth. Its ancient sites are Greece's best: the utterly preserved theatre at Epidaurus; lushly idyllic Olympia; Agamemnon's Mycenae; the beautiful mongrel — Ottoman, Frankish and Venetian by turns — of Nafplio, and the heavenly Byzantine enclaves of Monemvasia and Mystras.

The key to its unspoilt loveliness is that the Peloponnese has been a backwater for two centuries, its population in decline thanks to emigration, especially after the devastations of the Second World War and the civil war. Tourists make a predictable beeline for the islands while Athenians think of the Peloponnese as the conservative peasant of Greece.

But it is actually Greece at its most gorgeous, with forested mountains, gorges and valleys, peaks dusted with snow, pastures of olive groves and orange orchards, lonely beaches and endless cornflower blue skies. The problem is that to get there has always required a marathon schlep from Athens — the critical mass of ranges means it can take a long time to get anywhere.

But this summer, easyJet starts flying into Kalamata twice a week, opening up the Southern Peloponnese either as a destination in its own right or with the possibility of using Athens and Kalamata at either end of a stunning road trip.

And more good news — there are already some pretty stylish properties in which to stay, including the Kinsterna Hotel & Spa, on the southeastern extreme of the Peloponnese, Vatika. The 27-room property is converted from a home that melds Byzantine, Ottoman and Venetian

influence in its vaulted ceilings and brickwork. The current owner, a Greek engineer, was so enamoured with the ruin that he raised it from the dead, studying the 1821 Document of Sale so he could replicate the numbers of Athinolia olive trees in the glory days.

We haven't just come for the hotel, though — we have come to see Monemvasia, the Byzantine rock citadel 4km away. Perched on an imposing hunk of rock that separated from the mainland during an earthquake in the 4th century, it is a labyrinthine cluster of cobbled streets

“Most houses remain romantically derelict, populated by daisies”

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Tower houses in Vatheia in the Peloponnese. Below, the rock of Monemvasia



with tiny cafés and shops. They say it gets busy in summer, but on this late April morning, beyond the main drag we walk the lanes alone.

Monemvasia had its golden age in the 13th century when it was populated by Byzantine families who grew fat on estates inland and pirating. It didn't fall to the Turks until 1540, later than the rest of the area, and over the centuries it has become all but empty. The last resident left the upper town in 1911, while the lower town, which once had 40 churches and more than 800 houses, is now home to just eight people.

While some houses have been restored, and guesthouses, cafés and shops enliven the rock, the high cost of restoration means that most houses remain romantically derelict, populated by shoulder-high daisies, velvety poppies and pink clouds of valerian. We walk to the portello, a small gate in the sea wall, where you can swim off the rocks.

Then it is off on the short drive to Neapoli for the ferry to the island of Elafonisos. They say it gets busy with Athenians in the peak of summer but we are one of three cars going across. We peel off on one of two paved roads on the island, going east to Simos, a vast double bay of pale sand where navy-blue waves segue to cobalt and pale turquoise. There is only one taverna here and it has collapsed in on itself. “I think it's closed,” my friend says.

An elemental emptiness pervades the rocks, dunes, sky and sea. Later, on the seafront, there's a row of largely empty fish tavernas. We push open the door to an ouzeria and find a group of rowdy old men eating fish and potato, and smoking. We order *kolokythakia tiganita* (fried courgette), *tiropyta* (cheese pie), *horta* (wilted greens), and *gavros marinatos* (marinated anchovies) while the obligatory cat slinks around our legs.

But if we thought Elafonisis was empty and Monemvasia almost uninhabited, the imposing tower villages on Mani — Vatheia, Nomia and Kitta — seem



completely desolate, gone to seed and wild flowers. The Mani has precious little in common with the rest of the country, either in architecture or landscape. There is none of Greece's natural softness: the plunging, barren hillsides are fig-leaved by carpets of spring anemones, crocuses and cyclamen but retain what Patrick Leigh Fermor, the travel writer who called this place home, described as “the abomination of desolation”.

The deeper south you go down the Mani's finger, the more the villages reject the cosiness of the Greek village aesthetic. There is a bleak stony austerity to them. The spine of Mount Taiyetos continues south in the Sangiás, dividing the sliver of peninsula.

The Mani was intransigent, rebellious, cut-off, wild, impossible and bloodthirsty. It rejected Christianity until the 9th century, and foxed the Turks during the War of Independence. It was ruled by tribalism and blood feuds from the 14th century onwards, which culminated in smashing the tower houses of opposing clans, so the forts rose higher in height, their window pinpricks in a prison.

It is bathed in solitude.

To celebrate the pagan soul of the Mani, we visit the magnificently named Mani Oracle of Poseidon and Gate to Hades, on the Mani's tip. The tumbledown temple on a rocky outcrop overlooks a small blue bay, its hills carpeted with wildflowers. I find it hard to take Hades seriously in this restful place, but in winter it must be godforsaken.

Heading north, out of the peninsula, we make the dramatic journey around hairpin bends to traverse Mount Taiyetos en route to Mystras. It's a hard journey, but we must see the isolated mountain ruin that was once the focus of a last flash of Byzantine cultural brilliance before the empire fell to the Turks in 1460.

A fortress, built in 1249 by the Frankish principate, sits at the peak. Below it, ruined monasteries, palaces, houses and churches cascade. This was a densely populated city. This afternoon, I am the last straggler on the site. A tiny community of nuns resides at the monastery of Pantanassa, their presence alerted to me by a retinue of cats slumbering amid the potted geraniums. But I see not a soul and when solitary tourist pops out of a church door, I jump out of my skin. A smile and a nod of the head and we part company. I plough down the hill, winding my way through paths banked with valerian, lost in the sounds of nature: the merry chirrup of birds, the tom-tom of dog bells in the valley, the distant bark of dogs and the rowdy hum of bees, a spoilt Byzantine princess of my own dominion.

Need to know

Lydia Bell was a guest of Original Travel (020-7978 7333, originaltravel.co.uk), which offers seven nights combining the Kinsterna and Kyrimai, from £075pp, including return flights to Kalamata and car hire

Where to stay on the Peloponnese

Kinsterna Hotel & Spa, Vatika, Messinia
This beautifully restored hotel is perfectly charming. The pebblework and fireplaces retain the building's Byzantine, Ottoman and Venetian integrity. The spa is cossetting and the gourmet restaurant serves Kinsterna's own produce (fruit, vegetables, bread, wines and olive oil) and local fish and lamb. Don't miss the *goglos* — gnocchi-style rolled pasta — and the mastic desserts. **Details Rooms from €180 B&B (kinsterna.hotel.gr)**

Kyrimai Hotel, Gerolimenas, Mani
The Kyrimai family's atmospheric 22-room hotel occupies the old trade hub of the Mani, an assemblage of stone warehouses that went up in 1870 comprising stairwells, arches and inner courtyards. It sits at the end of the harbour's curl in Gerolimenas, where the sea laps its foundations, and some bedrooms seem to float on the water. Intriguing memorabilia on display charts the development of trade in Greece during the 19th and 20th centuries. The menu was created by Yiannis Baxevasis, an Athenian Michelin-starred chef who celebrates local food with a twist. Try the Kritharoto pasta with fresh mushrooms, “fava” with octopus Bolognese. **Details Rooms from €260 B&B, (kyrimai.gr)**

The Romanos, Costa Navarino, Messinia
Part of a wider multi-resort complex, the Romanos, below, is a super-stylish 321 room suite-and-villa temple to contemporary swishness on Messinia's southwest peninsula, adored by families and lovers of bells and whistles. Infinity pools

harmonise with the blue Ionian and there are lush gardens, five restaurants and bars serving Mediterranean fare, an award-winning kids club, a great spa with olive-oil treatments and golf course. **Details Rooms from €200 B&B (costanavarino.com)**

Amanzo'e, Porto Heli
A super-exclusive enclave of just 38 ultra-minimalist pavilions, Amanzo'e is an Adrian Zecha-mediated introduction to Greece for aficionados of the powerful brand. The most impressive thing is the view, a panoramic of the Argo Saronic Gulf. The restaurants promote local producers of food and wine, and there is an excellent beach club, a white-marbled spa and a wealth of day visits, from the islands of Hydra and Spetses to the sites at Nafplio, Mycenae and Epidaurus. **Details Rooms from €800 B&B plus taxes (aman.com)**