

A SHORT WALK IN GREECE

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Holidays in Greece conjure up images of island beaches and tours of archaeological sites. Greece, however, has another side, a chain of mountains known as the Pindos which stretch from the Oracle of Delphi in the south to the Albanian border. These mountains are easily accessible for the walker, rich in wildlife with splendid scenery and the bonus of a hill culture long since gone from the hills of home. Add cheap summer charter flights and an excellent network of internal bus services, and Greece rapidly becomes an ideal walking destination. In the autumn of 1989 Ken and I abandoned plans to go to Ireland, on the basis that it was both too wet, and too expensive, despite the size of the Irish Government's subsidies to Aer Lingus.

You can walk all the way from Delphi. I gather it takes about a month. We chose to walk in the far north, from the town of Ioannina to the highest point in the Pindos, Mount Smolikas, near the Albanian border. This section starts with a descent into the Vikos Gorge, 1000m deep with steep limestone walls. They say it is more splendid than the Samarian Gorge and it is certainly less popular. It is a full day's walk and a tough start to the holiday, the climb out seeming much farther than the morning's descent. The Papingo villages, both large and small, are worth the effort, with pleasant tavernas serving the about-to-become familiar fare of Greek salad, chips, fried egg or chops. The local Vlach culture was very much in evidence, with the traditional black costume contrasting with the white-washed village houses.

From Papingo the route climbs towards a col offering the finest sunset of the holiday. Two peaks can be climbed from here, the rocky summit of Astraka (2436m) or the moon-like ridge of Gamila. We spent a day on the col, climbed Astraka and were entertained in the evening by the domestic in-fighting of a Greek climbing party occupying the hut near our campsite. From here we turned towards a tributary of the River Vikos, crossing a ridge prior to descending towards the village of Tselepovo. It was September, and the scarcity of water necessitated frequent returns to the more lush valley floors. On one occasion, while trying to find our way, we were guided by one of Greece's familiar sights – a party of hunters with a bag of beautiful, if somewhat lifeless, birds. We had paused to admire a wall creeper. Ken put his binoculars away. The hunters left us at the crest of a ridge, which was a pity because our photocopied 1942 British Army survey map failed to show the cliffs on the slopes below. We found a way down eventually and were rewarded by close views of crested tits, a pleasant reminder of our native woods at home, and an impressive collection of wild flowers which were certainly not familiar.

Tselepovo village was a sleepy spot. We were, however, soon approached by a local entrepreneur, Alexi, with the offer of a room. He was mentioned

in our guidebook and clearly proud of the fact. We asked for a traditional Greek dinner; we ate egg and chips again. Jam purchased for the following day was clearly labelled 'Booker Cash and Carry', a rather bizarre reminder of home. In Tselepovo we finally established what we had suspected for some time, Greek bread was incapable of destruction. The following morning we cheated and caught a bus, on time as usual, to Vrissohori; the bus pausing on the way to allow passengers to have a roadside cuppa. From there we circled beneath the steep, tree-clad slopes of Gamila and descended through aromatic pine forests to cross the River Aoos. A kingfisher flew by. Behind us a bulldozer tore down the forest to make way for a new road. It was an odd feeling.

We soon reached Palioselli, a village with few tourist facilities but a playground that doubled as a campsite. We climbed from there and camped some distance above the village, looking back over the country we had crossed. The following morning we climbed to the summit of Smolikas (2647m) passing Dragon Lake, so called from its population of crested newts. Much of Greece was visible from the summit. The locals had warned us of bears. Our brief encounter with a Greek sheepdog convinced us that bears were probably the least dangerous of the two. The village of Samarina, destroyed by the Germans was not far ahead, but we were running short of time and turned. We passed the dog again on the descent. It did not improve on further acquaintance. We returned to Palioselli and from there took a bus to the coast. We have now been to Ireland – it was more expensive and it certainly rained. We will probably return to Greece.

For those interested, "The Mountains of Greece", by Tim Salmon is essential reading. A sense of humour is advantageous and days should be planned to take into account the inevitability of getting lost at least once, unless the Greek attitude to maps has become more enlightened. The Vikos Gorge is not advised until June. Water in late summer is a problem, although with care there is no need to go short. We camped, but a route could certainly be planned using village accommodation, which will, no doubt, become more plentiful as trekking gains in popularity. Some knowledge of the Greek language is helpful, as is German. English is not widely spoken. Greece is certainly a rewarding destination, but do watch out for the dogs.

