

Saturday 25 February 2017
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50 GREAT OCEAN CRUISES

Our expert pick

- ◆ Mediterranean ◆ Caribbean
- ◆ Canary Islands ◆ Asia



8-page special

Nirvana nights Starstruck in Ladakh

Lucy Hawking is
dazzled by this magical
Himalayan outpost
page 8

Thailand The complete package

A former backpacker
discovers the joys of
an all-inclusive getaway
page 26



TRIED
TESTED
RATED
RECOMMENDED

TRAVEL



GREECE



Striking gold in Northern Greece

Mark Easton discovers the cultural, natural and gastronomic treasures of Halkidiki as he explores a region that is beginning to appear on the radar of British tourists



Mark Easton

Suggest Northern Greece as a holiday destination and a fog of bafflement will descend across the furrowed brow of many a British traveller. Somewhat like food and vegetarian sausages, Northern Greece is a contradiction in terms – a touristic oxymoron.

We know what a Greek holiday means: a pretty island harbour lined with whitewashed tavernas – and most definitely in the south. If we wanted “northern”, we’d go to Manchester. Or possibly Murramah.

But such certainties may need to be diluted to the column marked “Greek myths”. These days, I submit, Northern Greece makes perfect sense for British travellers in search of a bit more than a sunsoaker and a carafe of the local retina.

Classicists and proto-gen disagree about the origins of Halkidiki, the three-fingered claw reaching down into the Aegean. To the former, this is the scene of a battle between earthy giants and Olympian gods, a game of rock-throwing that ended badly for the big guys. To the latter, it is the product of a volcanic embrace between the geotectonic units of the Varis-Axis Zone and the Serbo-Macedonian Massif. Take your pick.

Either way, the result is a landscape as dramatic as an Aeschylus play, rugged red mountains plunging down to sandy coves, heavy with



The wild, rugged coastline, right, that typifies the region; the fourth century Roman Church of Agios Georgios in Thessaloniki, left

the scent of pine and flowering gorse. The beaches are said to be the best on the Med. The Germans discovered them decades ago but have recently been joining for the best spots with Russians and Ukrainians. The Brits, belatedly, are realising a direct flight

Only rarely have I been heard to gasp in a museum

to Thessaloniki can deliver you to this overlooked corner of Europe in the time it might take for a rush-hour train to judder from Dorking to Heathrow.

Thessaloniki is to the Balkans what Istanbul is to Asia Minor – an ancient and modern city sparkling with great museums and night-life that still echoes to the chants of rival civilisations. The Rotunda tells the tale. Erected at the beginning of the fourth century as a Roman temple, it was adapted as an early Christian church

and decorated with glorious Byzantine mosaics before 16th-century Ottomans turned it into a mosque, complete with a minaret constructed from recycled lumps of church. In 1912, Orthodox Christians took it back, dedicating its six metre-thick walls and magnificent arches to dragon-slayer St George. It stands as a memorial to the battles of identity and ideas that have shaped this area, a cultural mash-up that should be on the bucket list of every adventurer who enters the mighty city walls.

The locals call the region Macedonia and barely conceal their fury that the name has been appropriated by a former Yugoslav republic and an Italian fruit salad. Tempers can run short in the Balkans and it doesn't pay to debate the matter.

Instead, after taking one's fill of beautiful Thessaloniki, one might head west across the fertile plains of the Alahios delta, through peach and cherry orchards, past cotton and tobacco fields to Argaei, the ancient capital of the Macedonians – now a small town called Vergina.

There are very few locations

Essentials	Getting there	Staying there	Porto Sant, from	Olivia from
<p>Getting there</p> <p>✈ easyJet (easyjet.com) offers direct flights from London to Thessaloniki from £90 return.</p> <p>✈ Ryanair (ryanair.com) offers one-bed suites at Ilios Oliva from £147 (£134) per room per night.</p> <p>✈ Suni Resort (0800 940 6800; suniresort.gr) in</p>	<p>0800 111 0131; (iliosresorts.com) offers one-bed suites at Ilios Oliva from £147 (£134) per room per night.</p> <p>✈ Suni Resort (0800 940 6800; suniresort.gr) in</p>	<p>Porto Sant, from £48 per room per night.</p> <p>✈ Classic Collection Holidays (0600 294 8223; classic-collection.co.uk) offers seven nights at Ilios</p>	<p>Olivia from £945 per person in April. Prices based on two adults sharing, all-inclusive, return flights from London Gatwick to Thessaloniki and transfers.</p>	<p>£945 per person in April. Prices based on two adults sharing, all-inclusive, return flights from London Gatwick to Thessaloniki and transfers.</p>

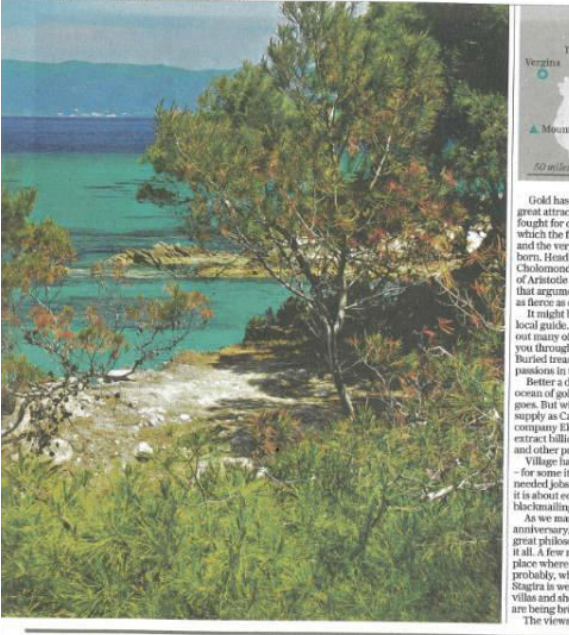
when I have been heard to gasp in a museum. But in the Stygian gloom of a subterranean exhibition beneath a reconstructed tumulus in Vergina, my breath was quite taken away. “What did you see?” you may ask. It is quite a tale. The story starts when King Philip II of Macedonia was stabbed to death by one of his bodyguards at his daughter's wedding in 336 BC. (Some suspect his son Alexander the Great may have been involved.) The king was cremated and his remains placed in a gold larnax inside a stone-tomb buried beneath a Great Tomb.

Despite the best efforts of centuries of grave robbers, three he stayed until 1977, when the epide of famed Greek archaeologist Manolis Andronikos tapped against the roof of the underground burial chamber. The ancient structure remains exactly where it was, reinterred after excavation.

along with other royal tombs discovered on the site. But in glass cases just a few feet away are exhibited simply wonderful objects found inside – gold, silver and ivory artefacts in almost perfect condition. The most impressive to me was not the golden chest containing Philip's bones, nor the dazzling golden diadem that belonged to his pregnant wife, buried with him, but the gold wreath found on Philip's head. Equidistantly and delicately wrought in the form of 333 oak leaves and 68 acorns, it is a piece of jewellery so stunning I would travel to Northern Greece just to see it.



The Daily Telegraph Saturday 25 February 2017



GREECE



Gold has long been this region's great attraction. Foreign invaders fought for control of the mines from which the first gold coinage was minted and the very concept of money was born. Heat over oak-crowned Mount Choloromonda, towards the birthplace of Aristotle at Stagira, and you discover that arguments over Greek gold are still as fierce as ever.

It might be judicious to go with a local guide. Protesters have painted out many of the road signs that lead you through magical fairy-tale forests. Buried treasure has excited strong passions in the mountains.

Better a drop of wisdom than an ocean of gold, as the Greek proverb goes. But when counsel appears in short supply as Canadian-owned mining company Eldorado Gold looks to extract billions of euros' worth of gold and other precious metals.

Village has turned against village for some it is about desperately needed jobs and investment. For others it is about eco-crime and foreigners blackmailing the Greek state.

As we mark the UN's official Aristotle anniversary, one wonders what the great philosopher would have made of it all. A few miles from the mines is the place where he was born and, quite probably, where he was laid to rest. Stagira is well worth a visit – some villas and shops from the ancient town are being brilliantly restored.

The views of the sparkling Aegean

Aristotle, below, was born at Stagira; King Philip II's gold wealth in Vergina, below left



from the town's ancient stoa, a place where Aristotle almost certainly did some top-notch pondering, can barely have changed in 2,400 years.

If sitting there today, he might well have railed over how the bickering over the gold mines is a symptom of a country trying to recover its self-respect amid the pain of austerity and the ignominy of foreign bail-outs. They are a people in search of a saviour and some think they have found him in Kassandra, the most westerly of Halkidiki's three fingers.

Hotel owner Dr Andreas Andreadis has been described as “the man who saved Greece”. He took over the private Greek tourism confederation in 2010 and introduced measures that coincided with a 42 per cent increase in tourist income even as the country's GDP and dropped 25 per cent.

“I do not want to be the Minister, nor the government,” he told me from his office overlooking Sani resort, the 1,000-acre luxury tourist development he started 30 years ago with a business partner. “But if we do not jump-start the situation, nothing will happen.”

When faced with embarrassment in the realities

and reputation departments, it must have been tempting for Greece's hoteliers to have returned to the mass-market strategy of the Seventies: cheap beer, oily chips and a lizard in the bed. Instead, they have put quality before quantity, attracting international investors who recognise that the tourism fundamentals haven't really changed since Aristotle.

“I see the last couple of years as a very expensive psychotherapy for the Greek people,” Dr Andreadis said. “The good thing is we now have a more realistic government and an opposition that is very much more pro-business in nature.”

His own baby, Sani, has grown up and become a family of successful luxury beach resorts. Just around the bay is Sani's little brother, Ilios (the male form of Iliad). It is an award-winning all-inclusive with 300 villas and Michelin-starred chefs. Each, in its own way, offers a glimpse of a calls aspirational European lifestyle – Mediterranean cuisines and fine wines for the discerning traveller and, beyond the gates of the resorts, a wealth of natural and cultural attractions that connect us with the ancient world.

Whether he solves Greece even the good doctor questions – but his greatest achievement is in starting to convince sceptical Brits that the mainland of Northern Greece is not a contradiction in terms. Like morning cloud on Mount Olympus, the fog is lifting from furrowed British brows.

Mark Easton is the Home Editor for BBC News.

Essentials

Getting there

● easyJet (easyjet.com) offers direct flights from London to Thessaloniki from £96 return.

Staying there

● Ikos Resorts

(0808 111 0131; ikosresorts.com) offers one-bed suites at Ikos Olivia from €147 (£124) per room per night.
● Sani Resort (0800 949 6809; saniresort.gr) in

Porto Sani, from €148 per room per night.
● Classic Collection Holidays (0800 294 9323; classic-collection.co.uk) offers seven nights at Ikos

Olivia from £845 per person in April. Price based on two adults sharing, all-inclusive, return flights from London Gatwick to Thessaloniki and transfers.

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