

Greece 2014

Hints and suggestions

These are just a few thoughts, if members of the group are interested in a guide book (though I am more than happy to fulfil something of that function) I can recommend the latest Blue Guide - Greece the Mainland ISBN 1 - 905131 - 10 -0.

As a helpful introduction to the classical world which will give an overarching view of the historical background to many of the sites we will be visiting, I can recommend *The Classical World* by Robin Lane Fox in Penguin ISBN 978-14-102141-6. Lane Fox was the classical adviser on Oliver Stone's bio of Alexander the Great but we will not hold that indiscretion against him. It is a series of cameos of the ancient world written for the non-specialist which operates both as a loosely connected history but also as snapshots of particular periods or people.

I would have recommended Peter Levi's translation of Pausanias *Guide to Greece* (Penguin - Harmondsworth) which is still in print except that one disgruntled reader noted that it was very bad reprint from the technical point of view and looking at the current edition I have to agree (the book is blurred and the images distorted) and if you want to read Pausanias (a 2nd century CE traveller in Greece who saw all the monuments before they were destroyed) look for a second hand edition of the 1979 print.

Day 1 Igoumenitsa to Delphi

There are several sites of interest on the way but if we want to reach Delphi by late afternoon to explore the site in the evening when it is at its coolest and also free from coach trips, then it won't be possible to take in all of them, but one or two of them are quite practicable.

Leave Igoumenitsa on the south coast road in the direction of Preveza [Πρεβεζα] on E55. This goes inland at first but joins the coast at Loutsa [Λουτσα]. Just north of Loutsa on a left turn is the first site of interest.

Nekromanteion of Ephura - [Νεκρομαντεῖον Εφύρας] (Optional)

This is a right turn from the main road, it is signposted, and the road goes under the main road and continues straight on into the village. At a crossroads straight on up the hill and at the top the site should be evident. It is generally believed to be an oracle of the dead, the river Acheron, one of the traditional rivers of the underworld flows near by. There appears to be evidence in the form of internal pulleys etc that the priests practiced some form of deception to persuade people that they were in contact with the spirits of the dead. A more prosaic interpretation suggests it was a fortified farm house but the site with an impressive underground chamber is crowned by a small 18th century Orthodox Church which the archaeologists were unable to remove. Rejoin the main road south.

Continue south towards Preveza. The next site of interest is the town of Kassope which is set in a stunning site with a magnificent view of the Ionian Gulf.

Kassope [Κασσωπη] (Optional)

Leave the main road on a left turn - should be signposted Arta [Αρτα] - at the village of Archangelos [Αρχαγγελος] turn left and take the road into the hills. This should also lead to the Monastery of Zalongo.

The entrance to Kassope is on a corner of the road, park on the road side. Follow the path through the woods to the site; this is a good example of a little Greek town of the Hellenistic period with two theatres, fortifications, town buildings and homes of the period and also a Macedonian tomb. It was abandoned when Augustus founded Nikopolis.

This is a highly atmospheric site with beautiful views. You can also see from the site the rather odd statues of local women who in the early 19th century jumped to their deaths with their children rather than face the ravishes of Ali Pasha; the statues are on a cliff near the Zalongo Monastery but are best viewed from Kassope. Return to main road and continue south.

The third site of interest is that of Nicopolis which is on the road to Preveza and again will be signposted and will involve a left turn off the main road.

Nicopolis [Νικοπολις] (Optional)

This town was founded by Augustus to commemorate the battle of Actium in 31 BCE which gave him virtual control of the ancient world. The Ara Augusti (Altar of Augustus), which Augustus built to commemorate the victory over Cleopatra and Antony, is being excavated and restored.

The site is very large and includes the remains of a Roman theatre and stadium near the Ara Augusti, various Christian basilicas and some very imposing walls built by the emperor Justinian in the 6th century CE. If people are interested I suggest a detour to look at the remains from the bike, but probably not worth otherwise stopping.

Continue south and take the underground tunnel (toll) on the outskirts of Preveza which takes one beneath the Ionian Gulf towards Vonitsa [Βονιτσα] - E952 - and from there onto Amphilochia [Αμφιλοχια]. At Amphilochia rejoin the main road south from Arta - E951 - and continue onto Agrinio [Αγρινιο]. At Agrinio the road carries on south past Mesolongi [Μεσολογγι] which is where Byron died during the Greek War of Independence.

The town contains a park with statues of the heroes of Greek Independence but I must confess that it is a rather depressing town and not really worth the detour. Carry on the main road past Antirrio [Αντιρριο] which gives access to the stunning bridge over the Gulf of Corinth, and follow the signs for Naupaktos [Ναυπακτος].

Take the Naupaktos bypass, there is not much to see in Naupaktos apart from the exquisite little harbour, which will be marked Delphi [Δελφοι].

Continue on this magnificent coastal road bypassing Galaxidi [Γαλαξιδι] and on to Itea [Ιτεα]. At this point you will see abandoned hulks of ships out at sea and the road can be treacherous especially in rain as ore is mined nearby and the red dust can make the road slippery. At Itea turn inland for Amphissa [Αμφισσα] and in a little while you will take a right turn to Delphi up the road which contains some spectacular hairpins which demand due caution as you may meet coaches coming down. Enter Delphi to the hotel.

I suggest an evening visit to the site and museum. The temperature will be cooler; the site is quite strenuous and the day trippers will have vanished away. Delphi is one of the most evocative sites of ancient

Greece. The walk begins with the Roman forum then continues up the sacred way past a profusion of monuments including the restored Athenian Treasury, the stoa of the Athenians, built to commemorate the battle of Marathon, past the entrance to the temple complex. The temple dates from the 4th century BCE and was the third to be erected on the site. The path continues past the theatre up to the stadion which is at the very top of the site - the path gives magnificent views of the whole site and of the valley.

From the site you can walk down to the Marmaria past the Castalian spring - the name Marmaria is not ancient but of much later date and refers to the "marble" buildings discovered on the site - this part of Delphi contains several treasuries, a gymnasium and the Tholos - a 4th century BCE building whose purpose is obscure but one of the most evocative ruins of Delphi.

Day 2 Delphi to Athens

Some may wish to visit the museum in the morning, it is quite compact but contains some magnificent exhibits including the bronze Charioteer one of the best ancient bronze statues.

Leave Delphi by the road to Arachova [Αραχόβα] and carry on until the right turn to Diastomo [Διαστόμο]., scene of an appalling atrocity during the 2nd World War. At Diastomo the road should be signposted - left turn - to Hosios Loukas [Οσίου Λουκάς]. The road passes through attractive scenery to the monastery of Hosios Loukas.

Hosios Loukas - [Οσίου Λουκάς]

This monastery contains some of the best Byzantine mosaics in Greece - the only comparable site is the monastery of Dafni near Athens which was damaged by an earthquake in the 1990's and is still not generally open to the public nor are photographs allowed there till the restoration is complete.

So as an example of the beauty of Greek mosaics of the Byzantine period, I recommend these churches. The site was developed in the 10th - 11th centuries to commemorate a local hermit, Holy Luke, not the evangelist Luke - that would be Hagios Loukas. Some say the site was first founded by the emperor Romanus II in 961 in gratitude for a prophecy by the hermit Luke that a Romanus would recapture Crete.

The site is still a monastery so decorum in dress is required i.e. no shorts, sleeveless dresses etc. The walls are decorated with many Greek Orthodox Saints and the antechapel contains scenes from the events of Holy Week and Easter Day. The mosaic over the main door depicts Christ holding the gospel of John open at the words "I am the light of the world" (John 8: 12). Hosios Loukas is buried in the crypt.

From Hosios Loukas return the same way via Diastomo to the main road.

Continue via Leivadeia [Λειβαδεια] to Thiva [Θηβα]. This was the site of ancient Thebes but there is nothing of great interest that is easily accessible - modern Thebes is as dreary as its past was glorious. Continue on the road to Athens [Αθηνα].

Reach the hotel and an attractive excursion (after booking in) would be to continue along the coast to the temple at Sounion. This is a dramatic temple to Poseidon which sits on the raised promontory at the southernmost tip of Attica. The pillars and base blocks have been inscribed with many names, including that of Byron. The coast ride is delightful, good road, sweeping bends - I suggest don't leave it too late before sunset as the coaches may well arrive around then.

Day 3 Athens

The sites in Athens are so spectacular that I would encourage everyone to see them; driving in Athens is fairly hair-raising. Most Greek drivers seem to know by telepathy when the lights will change and assume everyone else will! Getting parking for a group might be difficult and expensive.

A more practical way would be to take the tram from the hotel to Theseion station [Θησειον] and all the main sites are all within walking distance and indeed the best way to see them; the Roman forum, the Tower of the four winds, the theatre of Dionysius, the Odeon of Herodes Atticus, the Acropolis itself with the Parthenon, the Erectheum, the Propylea, the Agora, the Cerameikos, - this is one of the burial grounds of ancient Athens with plaster casts of the funeral monuments in situ; it is rarely visited by tourists and is one of the gems of ancient Athens, an oasis of tranquillity - as well as containing some of the remaining parts of the Themistocelan walls.

Then back to take the path for the Pnyx, the Acropolis Museum, the monument of Philopappus with wonderful views of the acropolis, the Temple of Olympian Zeus.

It sounds a lot but is easily managed within a day as well as including a leisurely lunch at one of the tavernas of the Plaka. Some may prefer to do the morning walk and then explore the Plaka, or else take the Metro to the National Archaeological Museum to see the priceless treasures it contains. If you have only a short time I can advise on what rooms to see.

Take the tram back to the hotel and there would still be time to bike out to Sounion

Day 4 Athens to Nafplion[Ναυπλιον]

The distance is about 90 miles including some motorway but there is plenty to see along the way and a choice will be inevitable.

Once on the motorway the first place of interest is Eleusis /Elefsis [Ελευσις]. (Optional and this will depend on the opening hours of Mycenae) This was a site dedicated to the worship of Demeter, goddess of agriculture and her daughter Persephone who was abducted to Hades by Pluto and through eating six pomegranate seeds was destined to spend winter in Hades - hence the contrast between summer and winter. Their cult was celebrated with mystic rites which the initiated were forbidden to reveal on threat of death.

The hall in which these rites were celebrated was the gift of Hadrian replacing earlier buildings, if you fancy this take the exit for Eleusis/Elefsis [Ελευσις]. The road will fork, take the right fork marked Thivon [Θηβων] this will become Ir. Polilitechniou [Ηρ. Πολυτεχνιου]. When this becomes Hiera Hodos [Ιερα Οδος] turn right into Pagkalou [Παγκαλου] and the site should be marked. (The lack of earlier signs is a sad indication of how some of the most important sites are ignored by the tourist trade and/or the Greeks.) Make your way back to the motorway and continue onto Corinth.

On the way to Corinth you will cross the Corinth canal and it is worthwhile parking up the bike at many of the shops / restaurants and walking back across the bridge to marvel at the engineering skill - Nero was the first to try to cut a canal and there are still traces of his efforts.

Ancient Corinth is certainly worth a visit from its 6th century BCE temple of Apollo which dominates the site to the remains of the Roman town and its fountains - this will give a better impression than most of what an ancient town might have looked like. There is a good museum with some interesting statues. You can also see the platform - bema - βῆμα – which served in the judicial processes of ancient Corinth and in front of which the apostle Paul was arraigned before Gallio the governor in 52 - 53 CE. (It was of course to Corinth that Paul wrote two of his letters and he spent some time in the city.)

Nemea[Νεμεα]

Nemea is the site of one of the four important games of Ancient Greece, the others are Olympia, Delphi and Isthmia (of which the remains are very scanty). It is an interesting site with a good museum and worth a detour if you are interested in the ancient games. There is an impressive stadion only recently excavated.

Mycenae[Μυκηναί]

Mycenae is one of the greatest sites of ancient Greece - it is the setting of the culture celebrated in the Homeric poems, the Iliad and the Odyssey, and the reputed kingdom of Agamemnon, who was murdered by his wife Clytemnestra, and then she by her son, Orestes.

It is not to be missed for the Lion Gate and the tholoi (beehive) tombs with their massive stonework. The Treasury of Atreus is the most impressive as well as being the best preserved. Inside Mycenae you can also see the two grave circles where Schliemann excavated the gold treasure which is now one of the glories of the Athens National Archaeological museum.

Schliemann whose technique of excavation would have modern archaeologists in despair, on discovering the gold mask, telegraphed the King of Greece - I have looked on the face of Agamemnon. Wrong, I fear on all counts, Agamemnon if he had been a historical figure would have lived circa 1200BCE and the grave circles date 1600 - 1500 BCE.

Day 5 Nafplion

There is a wealth to do in Nafplion; a visit to the ancient theatre of Epidavros /Epidaurus [Επιδαυρος] with the shrine of Asklepios and some fascinating ancient buildings; the theatre is remarkable for its acoustics which have to be heard to be believed. Leave Nafplion on the road for

Asine [Ασινη] and Tolo [Τολο] - as this is a major tourist site it should be marked Ancient Epidaurus [Αρχαία Επιδαυρος].

The last time I visited the theatre at Epidaurus some of the buildings on the site were being restored and hopefully this will make more sense of a site which is evocative but can seem a bit of a jumble.

The best beaches are Asine and Tolo, which is rather more touristy whilst Asine has the advantage of the spectacular ancient walls of Asine. The other site which is only a shortish drive out of Nafplion back on the Argos road is Tiryns [Τίρυνθα].

This was probably the port to Mycenae, the coastline has shifted, and contains some astounding masonry known as Cyclopean on account of its size and is well worth a visit. Some may wish to visit Mycenae from here if they have not done it the day before.

In Nafplion, the main attraction is the Palamedis, the ancient fortress which was occupied by the Venetians and the Turks. It can be accessed by bike from the rear of the fortress but the alternative way is to climb the vertiginous series of steps, nearly a thousand they claim, with wonderful views of the harbour and the surrounding countryside. This is probably best done in the cool of the evening or with an ample supply of water.

Day 6 Nafplion to Olympia

Today we drive to Olympia. There are several possible routes:

(1) - Return to Argos and leave on the south road to Lerna (unfortunately the site is not open on a Monday). At Lerna turn inland to Tripoli [Τριπολι]. From here north to Mili, Levidi etc and continue on this road via Langhadia to Olympia; the major part of this road is very slow and torturous but the scenery especially around Langhadia is fantastic and it is very hilly.

(2) - Go to Argos and then north to pick up the Tripoli - Corinth motorway. This would give the opportunity to visit Corinth and/or Mycenae if not done so earlier. Continue on the junction to Patras [Πατρα] and take the Patras bypass and on down the coast to Pyrgos [Πύργος] and then inland to Olympia. This is fast but is not always the most interesting road.

(2b) As for (2) but leave the Patras road at the turning to Kalavrita [Καλαβρούτα], this takes one through some fantastic mountain scenery to Kalavrita the scene of an appalling German atrocity in the 2nd World war and one of the most evil places I have visited. Then head south to Aroania and then Kleitoria and then Kaluvia where you take the road south to Vlacherna (direction Tripoli) . At Vlacherna join the road to Langhadia and Olympia. This is probably quite a taxing drive and best done with out any stops, say at Corinth etc. although a stop at Kalavrita would be possible.

(3) Another possibility might be to go south from Tripoli to Megalopolis, remains of the biggest theatre in Greece. Then wend north to Olympia via Karitaina and Andritsaina but this could equally be done as an excursion from Olympia and is the least viable of the routes.

Day 7 Olympia

A visit to the site of Olympia and the museum is a must. The site of Olympia, though not so dramatic as Delphi, has its own charm and the museum is probably the best outside Athens.

The site of Olympia contains two important temples - that of Hera, the earliest on the site, and the temple of Olympian Zeus. This latter contained the statute of Zeus which was considered one of the wonders of the ancient world and was sculpted by Pheidias who also worked on the Parthenon temple.

Close to the temple is the workshop of Pheidias where the German school who excavated Olympia discovered mouldings used in the making of the statute as well the cup which was used by Pheidias himself - this is also in the museum. The temple of Zeus was destroyed by an earthquake in the early 6th century CE and the columns still lie where they fell. We will also see the stadion, reputedly laid out by Heracles, the mythical founder of the games, and longer than any other Greek stadion as Herakles feet were bigger than those of ordinary mortals.

Also worthy of note are the Roman buildings at the edge of the site built for the visit of Nero in 65CE; the Leonidaion, an elaborate guest house given to the festival in the 4th century BCE by Leonidas, son of Leontas of Naxos. This information is garnered from an inscription on the doorway; later it became the official dwelling of the Roman governor of Achaia.

There is an elegant palaestra (wrestling ground) and a monument built by Philip, the father of Alexander the Great. In the museum you will see the sculptures from the Temple of Zeus, the metopes (sculptured panels on the outside of the temple) depict the labours of Heracles and the pediments two legends - the race between Pelops (who gave his name to the Peloponnese) and Oinomaos and the Rape of the Lapith women.

Also worthy of note is the helmet dedicated by Miltiades, the victor of Marathon, the drinking cup with εἰμι Φειδίου - I am Pheidias' - inscribed on the bottom; the winged Victory of Paionios, erected about 420BCE on a triangular pillar (still in situ in the ruins of Olympia) as a gift from the Messenians of Naupaktos, probably to commemorate their part in the defeat of the Spartans at Sphacteria. This is one of my favourite Greek statues as much for the skill of the artist in depicting the billowing drapery of the Goddess of Victory.

Also in the museum is the so-called Hermes of Praxiteles; the statue depicts Hermes, the messenger of the Gods, carrying the infant Bacchus or Dionysius (to escape the wrath of Hera, the wife of Zeus). The statue is attributed to Praxiteles, one of the great sculptors of 4th century BCE Greece, on the authority of Pausanias who wrote a guidebook to Greece in the 2nd century CE. Sadly the statue in the museum is not the original - despite the endeavours of the guides to convince one otherwise; most reputable authorities argue that it is a Hellenistic or Roman copy of the original - for some the sandals are of the wrong period for Praxiteles; for others the relative crudity of the work on the baby point to a copyist rather than a sculptor of the capability of Praxiteles.

I suggest a visit in the morning and then lunch in the village - some of the tavernas do a mean Greek omelette and then back to the hotel to enjoy the pool and a bit of relaxation; Olympia is probably the best place to do this and prepare ourselves for the return journey.

Day 8 Olympia Excursion

An excursion which would occupy the morning and still leave the afternoon free for more pool side fun would be to leave Olympia via Krestena and then take the road south along the coast.

At Kata Samiko, on the southern outskirts of the village you will see a sign on the left (not a very large one) - Ancient acropolis

[Αρχαία Ακρόπολις]. Turn off the road onto a slip road that climbs the hill and park the bike where the tar macadam runs out and walk up the hill following the path until you come to the ruins of ancient Samiko. The walls are superb and in a very good state of preservation; this site is ignored by virtually every tourist and yet is one of the most evocative I know with superb views of the coast.

Return to the main road and continue south until at Tholo you will see a sign for Vasses [Βασσες] - the temple of Apollo Epikourios [Απόλλω Επικουριος]. This will take you past Figaleia [Φιγαλεία] to the temple of Apollo, this is one of the best preserved Greek temples set in wild and desolate countryside. Fortunately or unfortunately it is covered in a protective shroud - why? Since the Parthenon is more at risk from Attic smog than this temple in remote Arcadia. The shroud deprives the building of one of its greatest charms - its blending into the scenery. It is still worth seeing. The guide books imply that the road is untarmacaded, it isn't here is a new road which I drove in 2008 and I do not do rough!. From Vasses take the road to Andritsina and back to Olympia.

Day 9 Olympia to Igoumenitsa

Back to Igoumenitsa via Patras and the toll bridge, reverse of the route on day 1. As we don't have to be at the boat until 23.30, there is a fascinating Frankish castle at Chlemoutsi - it will be signposted to Kyllini from the main road.

Also interesting are the remains of ancient Elis which actually ran the festival of Olympia, and the athletes trained there before walking to Olympia. To visit this involves a detour from the main Pirgos - Patras road; turn left where you would turn right for Loutra Kyllinis (and the castle of Chlemoutsi), the road should indicate Roupaki and Sosti and is unlikely to be marked for Ancient Elis - Αρχαία Ελις.

It might also be possible to explore Naupaktos which is not far from the bridge (see Day 1). Nikopolis might also be a possibility on this return as it only involves driving around to see the site. The other sites, described earlier on Day 1, will close at 15.00.