

Rural Life in Northern Greece

Itinerary

September 9 – 21, 2006

Itinerary overview:

In the course of 12 days we will visit three of the four Northern prefectures of Greece: Macedonia, Epiros, and Thessaly. We will spend very little time in urban areas, moving quickly into the countryside. The first four days of touring will allow us to get acclimated to Greece before setting off on a three-day walk in the remote Zagoria region. Located deep in the northwest corner of the Pindos Mountains, the largest mountain range in Greece, Zagoria means, "land behind the mountains". Specifically, we will walk in the Vikos-Aoos National Park, encompassing the Vikos Gorge and in the Timfi mountains. After this first walk we will tour and rest for two days, taking in some highlights of Epirot culture and making our way to Thessaly, where we begin a three day walk on the magnificent Mt. Olympus.

What follows is a detailed itinerary presenting our plans to date for specific activities each day. There is probably more planned than we will be able to fit into 12 days, and we will be flexible en route to take advantage of serendipitous opportunities. So, while the places we will visit are fixed, there will certainly be some changes in the specific activities/order of events as we work with the many people with whom we are collaborating the trip to finalize details.

Day 1 - Arrival in Athens: Welcome Dinner in Plaka

Saturday, September 9

Arrive at Athens Airport and take taxi to hotel. Overnight in first class hotel. If you arrive early enough and wish to visit the Acropolis and/or the Plaka, it will be an easy walk from the hotel. Welcome dinner in a taverna in the historic Plaka district.

Day 2 - Athens to Macedonia: Thessaloniki to Naoussa.

Sunday, September 10

Transfer to the airport for early morning flight to Thessaloniki, the second largest city in Greece, which is the capital of the province of Macedonia, and the cultural capital of Northern Greece. Tour of the American Farm School, a 101-year-old institution with deep connections to rural villages all over Greece and the Balkans. Visit will include tour of the farm and school, lunch, and a discussion of current issues in rural Greece. Afternoon touring in Thessaloniki, including Byzantine Museum, White Tower, old city walls, and St. Sofia and St. Demetrios churches. Late afternoon drive to Naoussa (approx 1½ hours drive), a bountiful region of fruit and wine production.

Dinner in selected taverna and overnight in a hotel nearby the beautiful St Nicholas Park.

Day 3 - Macedonia: Antiquities and Eco-tourism

Monday, September 11

Morning visit to Vergina, tomb of Phillip the 2nd – father of Alexander the Great. Dramatic underground museum preserving the tombs, displaying stunning gold and other artifacts, all of fairly recent discovery. Lunch (included) if possible at the picturesque Dalamaras Family Winery in Naoussa. The oldest son, the fourth generation vintner in the family business, is a recent graduate of the American Farm School and the family is involved in the developing eco-tourism in the region. Continue drive west with stopover in Edessa, a beautifully situated cliff-top town overlooking a large waterfall cascading down a dramatic ravine. Continue drive to Nymphaio for dinner and overnight in a beautifully restored mountain village that is cited as a model of eco-tourism. Overnight at traditional guest houses .

Day 4 - Macedonia to Epirus: Mountain Villages of Nymphaio and Micro Papingo

Tuesday, September 12

Tour of Nymphaio's ARCTOS Bear Sanctuary. The ARCTOS project has eliminated the "dancing bear" in Greece and campaigns to protect Europe's largest brown bear population through habitat protection, educational programs and international cooperation. Drive via Dispilo to the remarkable Zagoria region in Epirus prefecture. Picnic lunch en route; stop in Siatista – a mountain town. The Zagoria region comprises 43 traditional mountain villages famous for their intact stone architecture and rugged mountain landscapes. Our four-day stay in the Zagoria begins with an overnight in picturesque Micro Papingo, at the foot of Mt. Astraka and perched above the Vikos Gorge. Program by World Wildlife Fund of Greece staff on natural history and culture of Zagoria and their work to preserve and promote the region. Dinner with local specialties and local characters at Dias Inn, the favored taverna of walkers.

Day 5 – Zagori Walk: Ascent into the Timfi Range of the Pindos

Wednesday, September 13

The first day's walk is a slow steady 3.5 hour ascent (950 m climb) with fine views across the N.W. portions of the Pindos mountains. The large stone Astraka Hut (1,950 m), perched on a high ridge under Mt. Gamalia (2,497 m), sleeps up to 45 people in small dormitory-style rooms with bunk beds and lots of warm blankets and offers cold showers (see <http://www.pindostrek.net/content/view/14/37/> and <http://www.astrakaref.com/>). Simple, filling meals are available, as are shots of tsiporo, the local distilled "raki." Optional hike from Refuge to Dracolimni, an alpine lake, and back to Refuge. We will carry pack lunches. Dinner and overnight in Astraka Refuge. Possible WWF visit to a mountain Stanni, or sheep station, to observe traditional methods of trans-humic milk and cheese production.

Alternative program: bus tour and shorter hikes:

Scenic drive in Zagoria, with views from distinctive arched stone bridges. Continue to Bourazani Environmental Park near the Albanian borders with over 850 animals including deer, wild sheep, boars, wild goats and a collection of 3500 wild plants. Lunch in the area (not included). Return to Mikro Papingo in the late afternoon for dinner and overnight in the hotel.

Day 6,- Zagoria Walk: Alpine heights from mountain hut to village inn

Thursday, September 14

A full day of walking (7-8 hrs) through sublime high country, through Alpine meadows, along the edge of a gorge, over mountain ridges and past a spectacular "pot-holes" (a sort of vertical cave) and other caves. This is a chance to observe the vestiges of high mountain pastoral life in the Balkans, as we pass beside abandoned Sarakatsani sheep stations, most of which are abandoned. We will carry a pack lunch. Dinner and overnight in a village selected by WWF for its intact village way of life. Time permitting, visit church of Agios Nicolaou in Tsepelovo to see well preserved 17th century frescoes. After dinner we will meet with WWF folks and local people and hear their stories.

Alternative program for bus tour and shorter hikes with guide:

Begin with drive to Kipi, site of famed 3-arch bridge. Visit Kipi Folk Art Museum and the village of Koukouli. Lunch on your own (not included). Afternoon in Koukouli, one of the most populous villages in the region. Short walk up Vradeto Steps to admire dramatic vistas over the Vikos Gorge. On to Tsepelovo, or other village in the area selected by the WWF, where we meet the rest of the group for dinner and overnight.

Day 7 – Zagoria Walk: Spectacular Vikos Gorge

Friday, September 15

The fabulous Vikos Gorge (at nearly 1,000 m said to be the deepest in Europe) is the centerpiece of this day of rugged descents and exhilarating ascents.

Inspired by panoramic views over the Gorge from the Agia Paraskevi Monastery in the village of Monodhendri, we then hike from the village of Vikos down into the gorge along a steep rocky path to the Voidomatis River. At the bottom, the remarkable Voidomatis Spring gushes forth, its cold clear waters joining with the River, more than doubling its volume. The hike up to Mikro Papingo wends its way upward through oak forests and across meadows opening onto splendid views of the Gorge. (6 hours total walking). We will carry a pack lunch. Dinner and overnight in Micro Papingo. Participate in after-dinner focus group discussion on agro/eco-tourism with WWF staff.

Alternative program for bus tour/shorter hikes with guide:

After Monodhendri/Agia Paraskevi Monestary, and Vikos village, we'll drive through the Aristi village to Voidomatis river and short hike along the river bed, one of the most scenic area of the river. Return to Papingos to explore the area and lunch on your own (not included). Afternoon free.

Dinner and overnight in Micro Papingo.

Day 8, Central Epiros: Ionnina and Metsovo

Saturday, September 16

Drive to the lakeside city of Ionnina, the capital of Epirus and the location of University of Ionnina. Visit the folk art museum within the fortified old city and take a boat ride for lunch (included) on the island of Ionnina lake. Afternoon program at University of Ionnina's Center for the Study of Hellenic Language and Culture on the history and current social and economic situation in Epirus. Drive to traditional Vlach village of Metsovo. With its well preserved stone architecture, local philanthropies and industries, and many shops and cultural attractions, this is one model of a village trying to preserve its core identity while expanding its strong touristic appeal. Dinner featuring local specialties; will include an optional cooking lesson in making Metsovo style pitas.

Day 9, Metsovo to Meteora: Epiros to Thessaly

Sunday, September 17

Tour of the almost too quaint Metsovo, where some villagers still wear their traditional costumes. We will visit the restored old Tositsa Mansion, converted into a folk art museum featuring traditional paneled rooms, rugs, costumes and Epirot crafts. Choose among visits to cheese making cooperative, Agios Nicolou monastery with its fabulous 16th century frescoes, shopping for local handicrafts, and wandering the village. After lunch on your own (not included) drive to Kalambaka, in the Prefecture of Thessaly, for an afternoon visit to the famous monasteries of Meteora, which means "suspended in the air". Dating from the 14th century, these 24 monestaries are perched on top of fantastic geological formations that are remnants of river sediments that flowed into an ancient sea. Dinner and overnight in Kalambaka.

Day 10: Meteora to Litochoro: Beginning the ascent of Mt. Olympus

Monday, September 18

Drive through Trikala, Larissa and the Tempi Valley to the mountaineering town of Litochoro, situated at the base of Mt. Olympus and a few miles from the Aegean sea. Lunch included in Litochoro. Drive to Prionia (1,100 m.) and commence 3.5 – 4 hour walk to Refuge A, Spilio Agapito (2,100 m). At 2,917 m., Mt. Olympus is the highest peak in Greece and legendary home of the Greek god. Located on the border of the Prefectures of Thessaly and Macedonia, the Olympus National Park has a rich flora and was declared a "Biosphere Reserve" by UNESCO in 1983. Dinner and overnight in the Refuge. Accommodations similar to those at Astrakas Refuge, but a much larger lodge.

Alternative program for bus touring/shorter hikes with guide:

Drive with the hikers to Prionia. One hour hike in the area and return by bus to the hotel at the seaside. Dinner and overnight. in a seaside hotel in Agios Nicholas, near Litochoro.

Day 11 - Mt. Olympus: Ascent to home of the gods

Tuesday, September 19

Steep climb to summit area and ascend one or more peaks (c. 4 hours up), and return to Refuge A, Spilio Agapitos (another 3.5 hours) for a second night in Refuge. We will pack a lunch and spend some time in the peaks region, where one can choose among a number of routes and peaks. On descent we may encounter a resident herd of Chamiox. Dinner and overnight at the Refuge.

Alternative program for bus touring/shorter hikes with guide:

Drive to the archeological park of Dion, to visit the most important sanctuary of the Macedonians, the town, the Theater, the baths, temples and admire the wonderful floor mosaics, from the 4th and 3rd century B.C. Continue to the traditional settlement of Paleos Agios Panteleimon for a stroll around the village with magnificent view over the sea for lunch break on your own. Early afternoon visit the medieval imposing castle of Platamon and return to the hotel for dinner and overnight in the seaside hotel.

Day 12, From Olympian Heights: Descent from Olympus and rest day at the sea

Wednesday, September 20

3-hour walk from Refuge A to bus at Prionia. Check into hotel, take a shower and have lunch near Agios Nicholas. Rest day and overnight at Agios Nicholas near Litochoro. Farewell dinner with Greek music.

Alternative program for bus touring/shorter hikes with guide:

Hike on the slopes of Mount Olympus and then drive to the Enipeas Canyon of for a walk along the gorge. Join the rest of the group for the lunch (included) at Agios Nicholas.

Day 13 – Return to Athens

Thursday, September 21

Morning departure for return trip to Athens by coach with breaks along the way, lunch not included. Short stop at Thermopylai, the famous battlefield. Upon arrival in Athens, short orientation tour of the city. Dinner in selected taverna in the Plaka area. Overnight in a hotel near the Acropolis (Hotel Heriodon or similar).

Day 14 – Athens to USA

Friday, September 22

Transfer on your own to Athens International airport for return flight to the US.

Pricing

Price per person : **\$3145** (based on 15-20 participants)

Rate is based on the exchange rate of one euro= \$ 1.25. In case of a decrease of value of the U.S. dollar there will be a currency supplement collected at the time of the final payment. Price also subject to any fuel supplement.

Small group surcharge for 10-14 participants not to exceed \$ 550 per person.

Single supplement: \$ 595 (single rooms not available in the refuges)

The arrangements include:

- Lodgings in twin bedded rooms with private shower/WC, air conditioning in selected hotels, in Athens 4-star hotels, in other cities in selected traditional guest houses or hotels. In the refuges (4 nights) lodgings are in bunk beds of 8, with cold showers. For the alternative hikers, lodgings are secured in traditional guest houses or hotels.
- Daily breakfast
- All dinners daily as per itinerary
- All lunches during the hikes (Only for the hikers on the three day trips in Zagoria and Mt. Olympus). 5 lunches for all participants.
- Air conditioned comfortable coach for all transportation and transfers
- Flight ticket from Athens to Thessaloniki
- English speaking licensed local guide during the whole tour.
- Mountain guide for the hikes in Olympos and Pindos (6 days)
- Admission fees to the sites and museums foreseen in the itinerary
- Extra events and lectures foreseen in the itinerary

Optional 3-Day Extension Tour

Day 14, Friday, September 22 – Athens

Guided visit on foot to the Acropolis and Agora; walking in the old town of Plaka. Lunch on your own. Afternoon free. Dinner on your own in Plaka with traditional Greek specialties and live music. Overnight in hotel near the Acropolis (Hotel Herodion or similar).

Day 15, Saturday, September 23 – Pireaus -Aigina

Morning departure from hotel with private coach to Pireaus port to board ferry for the island of Aigina (1 ½ hr. ride) for a guided visit of the Temple of Aphaia, with scenic views of the Aegean sea. Return to the picturesque port of Aigina for lunch in traditional taverna. Stroll around the narrow streets of the port and treat yourself to some pistachios, grown on the island. Return with afternoon ferry to Pireaus. Overnight in hotel near the Acropolis.

Day 16, Sunday, September 24 – Athens –Delphi (optional)

Either enjoy a free day in Athens or join a day trip to Delphi. Drive through Levadia and Arachova, to reach the famous site of Delphi, with its Oracle and the sanctuary of Apollo. Visit the Delphi museum, with many archaeological treasures, including the famous bronze statue of the Charioteer. Return in Athens late afternoon for overnight in hotel near the Acropolis.

Day 17, Monday, September 25 – Athens –US

After breakfast, transfer by taxi to the airport (on your own) for return flight to the US.

Extension Pricing

Price per person (based on min 7 participants): **\$ 440**

Price is based on the exchange rate of one euro = \$ 1.25; currency supplement will be collected if the exchange rate changes significantly.

Single supplement \$ 255

Includes

- Three overnights in the Hotel Herodion or similar 4-star hotel
- Daily breakfast
- Private guided tours of the Acropolis and the island of Egina with minibus and local ferry boat
- All admission fees

Price does not include any meals except for breakfast.