WALKING WITH THE GODS

BY TERESA SCALZO | PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOHN NOLTNER
I'M ABOUT TO DIE. I'm not sure if this makes me scared or sad, but I do know this: One misstep and I will plunge hundreds of feet to my death. It's a more dramatic fate than I would have imagined for myself just a few weeks ago. But back then the most dangerous part of my day was the 50-mile commute on 35W between my home in Minneapolis and the Carleton campus.

Today, however, I'm negotiating a scree-covered ledge, about six feet wide, in the Vikos Gorge in northern Greece. It is day 5 of a 12-day Carleton Alumni Adventures trip to northern Greece organized and led by Carleton librarian and Greek American Sam Demas and his partner, Laurel Bradley, who is the College Art Gallery director and curator.

Sam and Laurel planned the trip around their love of hiking and rural Greece. We spend most of our time in the decidedly nontouristy province of Epiros, with brief forays into Macedonia and Thessaly. The trip is divided into six days of walking in the Greek mountains and six days of exploring rural village life.

I couldn't have chosen a better group of people with whom to spend what appear now to be my final days on earth. The aptly surnamed Richard Angell ’62, a child psychologist from Aurora, Oregon, and his wife, Kris Angell ’65, are the most experienced hikers on the trip. Richard is the first one to see that I’m having trouble on the ledge. Suddenly, he is next to me. “What do you need?” he asks.

“Get in front of me,” I say.
“Talk or don’t talk?”
“Talk!”

And so, by staring intently at Richard’s hiking boots, distracted by his chatter, and resolutely not looking over the edge, I get around the side of the mountain safely.

Later that day, I notice that Richard has stopped ahead to let other hikers pass him. I take this as a bad sign. Sure enough, we have to cross another narrow ledge. I’m more prepared this time. But I’m awfully glad he’s there.

The rest of the trip is a good deal less traumatic for me, but no less exhilarating. We complete three hikes: Mount Astraka, Vikos Gorge, and, finally, Mount Olympus.

In between hikes, we spend our days studying the culture of northern Greece and discussing, with a variety of scholars, World Wildlife Federation staff members, and others, whether ecotourism can help save the region’s struggling economy. Everyone in our group is open to whatever comes our way, and it is by embracing “come what may” that we enjoy our most memorable experiences. The images on the following pages show just a few of them. See more at http://go.carleton.edu/greece.

<< OH MY GODS! IT'S MOUNT OLYMPUS
After two hours of climbing on Mount Olympus, we reach Skala peak at 9,400 feet. Our plan was to split into two groups: the more experienced climbers heading to Mytikas (the highest peak at 9,575 feet) and the rest of us opting for Skolio (only 20 feet shorter, but a lot less treacherous). But after watching a group of German climbers scrambling on all fours up Mytikas, we head together to Skolio.
Pictured are Karla Van Drunen Littooy ’81 on the left and Voice editor Teresa Scalzo on the right.

^ MIKRO PAPINGO
Following a hearty breakfast of fresh bread, butter, honey, and locally made feta and yogurt, our group suits up, boots up, and climbs up 3,000 feet to the peak of Mount Astraka in the Pindus mountain range. Our group (from left): Norm Hanson ’61, Jane Hanson ’61, Fred Littooy, Karla Van Drunen Littooy ’81, Greek guide, Kris Smith Angell ’65, Richard Angell ’62, Voice editor Teresa Scalzo, guide Gabriele Miatkowski, David Bradley (Laurel’s brother), Carleton librarian and trip organizer Sam Demas, Carleton Art Gallery curator and co organizer Laurel Bradley, Greek tour planner Dimitri Cocconis.
A LAKE AND A LEGEND

Five hours of climbing to Astraka isn’t enough for everyone, so a smaller group of us opt to hike 600 feet down a steep hill, over rocky terrain, and back up 300 feet to Drakolimni, a beautiful glacier carved lake on the edge of Aoos Gorge at Vikos Aoos National Park. Some people hike to the mountain’s edge to gaze down into the canyon, more than 3,000 feet below us. The rest of us sit safely on the banks of the lake while our guide, Kostas, tells us a Greek folktale.

THE ASTRAKA REFUGE

Although these mountain lodgings or refuges are sometimes called huts, they’re much larger than the word suggests. In the refuge at the base of the Astraka peak in the Pindus Mountains, the largest mountain range in Greece, the Carleton group splits into two rooms of four bunks each. “Everyone be honest,” says Kris Angell ’65. “Snorers in one room, nonsnorers next door.” Before mandatory lights out at 10 p.m., we sit in the cozy dining room, talking by the light of a headlamp.
Eight hours of things you don’t see every day. We begin our descent into Vikos Gorge at Vikos Aoos National Park. At about 3,000 feet, it may be the world’s deepest gorge in proportion to its width. The scenery is amazing: rock formations, meadows, springs, a shepherd moving his sheep from one pass to another. When we come upon a sheep herd guarded only by a trio of ferocious looking dogs, our Greek guides warn us to move quickly, not to make eye contact with the dogs, and to carry a big rock. We also traverse a couple of narrow, scree covered ledges and, inexplicably to me, stop on one of them to eat the simple bread, tomatoes, and cucumber lunch we have carried from the hut. We arrive finally in the charming town of Mikro Papingo, where we gather in the village square under the ever present plane tree (“the hearth of the village,” says Sam Demas) for a cold beer and shots of tsipero, a fiery local distilled drink that is almost pure alcohol. Greek custom frowns on drinking without eating, so the taverna’s proprietor brings a large platter of bread, cheese, olives, and cold potatoes.

THE VIKOS GORGE

Carleton librarian and Greek American Sam Demas organized this trip around his love of Greece and walking, focusing our itinerary on the mountain landscapes and village life of rural northern Greece. With his companion Laurel Bradley (Carleton Art Gallery curator), Sam introduced us to a region of Greece—the province of Epiros—that is relatively unknown to tourists.
GIVE US THIS DAY

We enjoy a typical evening meal of Greek salad, olives, cheese, meat, and potatoes in the courtyard of our quaint hotel in Mikro Papingo.

WINERY IN NAOUSA

Following a visit to the tomb of Philip II of Macedonia, Alexander the Great’s father, we drive to Naousa, a wine region in northern Greece, to tour the picturesque Dalamaras family winery. Our hosts serve us roast lamb with all the Greek accompaniments, and we sample the vineyard’s offerings.

WEB EXTRA

TRAVELING WITH CARLETON ALUMNI AND FACULTY MEMBERS IS A SURE WAY TO HAVE AN EXTRAORDINARY EXPERIENCE. LEARN MORE ABOUT THE CARLETON ALUMNI ADVENTURES PROGRAM AT http://go.carleton.edu/4.
The first monasteries at Metéora, which means “suspended in air,” were established in the 14th century, but after the heyday of monastic life during the 15th and 16th centuries, the community began to deteriorate. Of the 24 monasteries that were built, only 5 are inhabited today. We tour a few of them, and a highlight is the Monastery of St. Barbara, where the nuns serve us coffee and cookies. We talk with them about their secluded and simple lives of worship until they are called to evening vespers by one of their order beating on a wooden drum.

METSOVO >> Billed as “one of Greece’s most picturesque and traditional” towns, the village of Metsovo in central Epiros is a favorite stop. The hotel proprietors give us a cooking lesson the afternoon we arrive. After we eat the delicious spinach and feta pittas (pies) we have helped make, we explore the town, which is struggling to maintain its traditions while appealing to modern tourism. The next morning our group attends services at the church of Ayia Paraskevi, where in the Greek Orthodox tradition the men and women sit separately. After mass, worshippers gather in the church square to socialize.
Nymphaio is said to be the most beautiful village in northern Greece, and we believe it. During civil war in the 1940s, soldiers burned Nymphaio’s church to the ground; eight villagers perished trying to save it. A former resident, who is now a successful banker in London, donated a substantial sum to rebuild the church. Local craftsmen re-created the elegant silver altarpieces from the remnants of items damaged in the fire. “The story of the church and the courage and character of its members is a microcosm of Nymphaio’s history,” says Karla Van Drunen Littooy ’81. The chandeliers in the photo are Baccarat crystal.

“Part of the fun of this trip was the group’s willingness to find things around every corner: an unplanned meeting with the priest at Nymphaio, the tour of the weaving school in Monodhendri, coffee with the nuns at St. Barbara. We weren’t experiencing Greek culture through a glass cage,” says Norm Hanson ’61 (pictured at left) of Sedona, Arizona, who was traveling with his wife, Jane Hanson ’61. “I’ll go home with a lot to learn, and I consider that the mark of a good trip,” says Richard Angell ’62 (right).
GETTING THE SHOTS
Photographer John Noltner, who has taken many beautiful photographs for the Voice and other Carleton publications over the past 10 years, accompanied the alumni group to Greece. He chose a unique approach to photographing the experience, which he explains at http://go.carleton.edu/noltner.

WORTH EVERY STEP

We have been climbing under clear blue skies, but as we reach Skolio, gray clouds roll in over Mytikas. We hear thunder and decide Zeus is either welcoming us to Olympus or, more likely, telling us to get the heck out of there. Our descent is pleasant—more thunder, but no rain. A small herd of curious chamois (little mountain goats) follow us. Back at the refuge, we celebrate our accomplishment with brandy and hot chocolate.

GREEK GOD, ER, GUIDE >>
Our guide, Sakis, leads us back down Mount Olympus to Prionia. Our arrival in Prionia signals the end of the climbing portion of the trip, and we are all disappointed to pack away our boots and poles. But Sam and Laurel have arranged for us to spend a night on the shore of the Aegean Sea in the resort town of Agios Nicholas. Following a lavish dinner under the stars, we are entertained by traditional Greek musicians and dancers, who coax most of the Carleton travelers out on the dance floor.