

PILION

Pilion is a mountain about half way up the eastern coast of the Greek mainland. It is, in effect, the southernmost extension of Mt Olympus as it declines towards the sea, curling in a final hook like a scorpion's tail around the mouth of the Gulf of Volos. Looking at the imposing architecture of its villages you would say that it must once have enjoyed considerable prosperity. It did, but it was not an economy that could withstand the pressures of 20th-century capitalism. For 50 years and more Pilion has languished, depopulated and forgotten. Ironically, it is the advent of tourism that has proved its salvation. Not mass tourism, but the tourism of weekenders, second-home buyers, and returning émigrés with enough money to restore the ancestral home.

The villages hereabouts are all about 500 metres above sea level. Some, like Tsangaradha and Zagora, are surprisingly large, spread widely over the wooded slopes in different quarters, or *makhaladhes*, connected by the old cobbled mule paths known by the Turkish name of *kalderimi*. Many of these survive, veritable works of art, winding their way among the golden bracken and the dappled shade of chestnuts. They were, until not long ago, the only roads on Pilion and many make delightful walks. One of the most spectacular is the steep *skala* or stair leading down to the little harbour of Damoukhorí.

At the centre of each village lies a wide, paved square dominated by one or more colossal plane trees and the village church. At Pouri, where the road ends, the square juts like a crow's-nest high on the hillside above a huge expanse of sea with the islands of the Sporades in the distance. Behind it is a model Pilion church, roofed in grey stone with an exo-narthex – a kind of pillared porch – across one end and along one side. The inside is frescoed; an elaborately carved wooden *templon*, set with painted icons, screens the sanctuary from public gaze. Neighbouring Zagora also has a magnificent square and a church guarded by venerable cypresses, which I was not able to enter – a frequent problem with Greek churches nowadays. I did, however, get into the church at Kissos, which has by far the finest frescoes and *templon* on this side of Pilion.

The lower slopes of Pilion, towards the sea, are terraced with groves of olives and fruit trees. There are some exquisite beaches along the shore: a long white strand at the rather ghastly Ayios Ioannis, Pilion's only resort, and at Khorefto below Zagora; a shingle beach at Damoukhourí; and delightful coves at Milopotamos, Lambinou and Fakistra.

To see the finest of the Pilion houses, the grand stone *archontika*, semi-fortified, with jutting wooden upper stories, you need to go to the villages on the Volos side of the mountain: Makrinitza, Vizitsa, Pinakates. Pinakates is the most poignant because so many of the houses are still half-ruined, their windows and rafters gaping at the sky. Vizitsa is over-restored and Makrinitza is spectacular and touristy – although you do not have to wander far from the

beaten track to have the place to yourself, especially when any wandering involves a steep climb. One of the old brown cafes on the square still boasts a wall painting by the marvelous turn-of-the-century primitive painter, Theofilos, who specialized in uplifting nationalist themes of rebellion against the Turks.

Another large and beautifully sited village is Milies, although, thanks to a brutal Nazi reprisal raid in 1943, little remains of the original architecture beyond the sumptuous interior of the church of Ayii Taxiarkhes on the square. Just below the square, with its dazzling view of the Gulf of Volos and the ranks of blue mountains receding southwards to Mt Parnassos and beyond, is the terminus of a lovely little railway line, now functioning only at weekends and holidays, which runs down to Volos and the sea. It also makes a popular walking route, although I prefer to go down to Kala Nera and then walk back up the almost perfect *kalderimi* to Milies.

Of all the walks I did the loveliest was the *kalderimi* from Xourikhti/Tsangaradha to Milies. It is the old mule road that linked Volos to the east coast through the woods. It takes about three hours, and the way is marked by splodges of red paint.

Volos itself is worth a visit, for its waterfront and, most especially, its pretty pine-shaded Athanasakion museum, with its collection of unique painted gravestones from the third century BC depicting everyday scenes with the kind of naturalistic portraiture usually associated with the Fayoum portraits of Egypt. They come from the still walled and many-towered Hellenistic site of Dhimitriadha on a hill just across the bay from Volos.

Pilion has more surprises in store. The long, hooked peninsula that encloses the Gulf of Volos may be much more Greek in appearance than the cool, well-watered, leafy beauty of the mountain, but it, too, was a surprise. With its quiet, uncrowded, undeveloped air, it reminded me of the Greece of 30 years ago, with scarcely a concrete hotel or villa in sight. I drove on down the coast to Milina, strung out in a sleepy line along the shore, the water clear as glass, the occasional sail – English, as it happened – out on the bay, the café tables largely empty under the tamarisks. The road wound along the shore, past olive trees and scrub and numerous coves where I scrambled down to swim.

I drove as far as the little port of Ayia Kiriaki facing across the mouth of the gulf to the hazy hills of Evia. A light breeze had begun to ruffle the dazzle of the sea, scrawling its cryptic marks across the darkening water. In the boatyard, fishing caiques glistened with fresh blue and orange paint. Along the curving shore, each house stood surrounded, like an apron, by its personal jetty. Bougainvillea overhung the narrow lane that ran behind.

I had a coffee in the general shop, its shelves and furnishings handmade and hand-painted in the bright sea-blue of the Greek flag. An elderly fisherman asked for a lift. His fingers were

thick and his nails worn down. He was pleased because today he had caught a *sinagridha* (dentex), six-thousand- drachmas-worth. “But there aren’t any fish any more. They have hoovered them all up with illegal gear. You have to be a real artist to catch decent fish today,” he said, feeling on his worn index finger the weight of an imaginary line hanging dozens of fathoms into the deep. But he had fulfilled his chief financial obligations, marrying, that is, providing a dowry for, his two daughters. “There is only me. It is over now,” he added, with the matter-of-fact fatalism of the pre-capitalist Greeks. A Greece we will not see again.