

Peloponnese

Πελοπόννησος



The Peloponnese (pel-o-pon-ih-sos) is the stuff that legends are made of. Numerous myths were born and borne out here – it is where many a Greek god or hero strutted their stuff (and aired their bodies). Today this region is far from a fable. It boasts historical sites, with classical temples, Mycenaean palaces, Byzantine cities, and Frankish and Venetian fortresses. You can rub shoulders with the ghost of Agamemnon at Mycenae, mighty redoubt of a once great civilisation, or flex your muscles at ancient Olympia, spiritual home of the Olympics. You can cite Oedipus in the Theatre of Epidavros or be entranced by Mystras, where the Byzantine civilisation died in the 14th century. Greece's first capital, Nafplio, is today a cosmopolitan and romantic city; captivating, too, is the Venetian stronghold of Monemvasia.

The region's natural playground truly mesmerises, with lofty, snowcapped mountains, lush gorges, valleys of citrus groves and vineyards, cypress trees, streams and sun-specked beaches. Spring is the perfect time for DIY explorations. Hike in the wildflower-covered mountains of Arkadia, or in the rugged Mani, which bristle with fortified tower houses. Summer is a beach bum's delight: the beaches of Messinia are among Greece's finest. Winter brings snow to the higher ground and a chance to launch yourself down Mt Helmos on skis.

For centuries Greeks have fought hard against invaders of their Peloponnese paradise; today foreigners are far from repelled (ask the permanent influx of Brits). *Filoxenia* (hospitality) is as strong here as anywhere in the country. The locals claim to have the best of everything to give. And that's no myth.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Historical Havens** Meandering through the stunning streets of Nafplio (p180) and Monemvasia (p200)
- **Ancient Wonders** Marvelling at the sanctuary of Ancient Olympia (p220) – birthplace of the Olympic Games
- **Wild Wanderings** Walking in the remote and rugged Mani (p204)
- **Mountain Hideaways** Discovering secrets in the charming mountain-top villages of Dimitsana (p191), Stemnitsa (p191), Karitena (p190) and Andritsena (p223)
- **Magic Moments** Wandering through the magical Mystras (p197), a World Heritage-listed site
- **Real Mythical Moments** Exploring the citadels of Mycenae (p177), Tiryns (p185) and the theatre of Epidavros (p186)



■ POPULATION: 1 MILLION

■ AREA: 21,439 SQ KM

History

Since ancient times the Peloponnese has played a major role in Greek history. When the Minoan civilisation declined after 1450 BC, the focus of power in the ancient Aegean world moved from Crete to the hill-fortress palaces of Mycenae and Tiryns in the Peloponnese. As elsewhere in Greece, the 400 years following the Dorian conquests in the 12th century BC are known as the dark age. When the region emerged from darkness in the 7th century BC, Athens' arch rival, Sparta, had surpassed Mycenae as the most powerful city in the Peloponnese. The period of peace and prosperity under Roman rule (146 BC to around AD 250) was shattered by a series of invasions by Goths, Avars and Slavs.

The Byzantines were slow to make inroads into the Peloponnese, only becoming firmly established during the 9th century. In 1204, after the fall of Constantinople to the crusaders, the Frankish crusader chiefs William de Champlitte and Geoffrey de Villehardouin divided the region into 12 fiefs, which they parcelled out to various barons of France, Flanders and Burgundy. These fiefs were overseen by de Villehardouin, the self-appointed Prince of Morea, as the region was called in medieval times, perhaps because mulberry trees grow so well in the area (*mouria* means mulberry tree).

The Byzantines gradually won back the Morea and, although the empire as a whole was now in terminal decline, a glorious renaissance took place in the area, centred on Mystras (see p197), which became the region's seat of government.

The Morea fell to the Turks in 1460 and hundreds of years of power struggles between the Turks and Venetians followed. The Venetians had long coveted the Morea and succeeded in establishing profitable trading ports at Methoni, Pylos, Koroni and Monemvasia.

The Greek War of Independence supposedly began in the Peloponnese, when Bishop Germanos of Patra raised the flag of revolt near Kalavryta on 25 March 1821. The Egyptian army, under the leadership of Ibrahim Pasha, brutally restored Turkish rule in 1825.

In 1827 the Triple Alliance of Great Britain, France and Russia, moved by Greek suffering and the activities of philhellenes (Byron's death in 1824 was particularly influential), came to the rescue of the Greeks by destroying the

Egyptian-Turkish fleet at the Battle of Navarino, ending Turkish domination of the area.

The Peloponnese became part of the independent state of Greece, and Nafplio in Argolis became the first national capital. Kapodistrias, Greece's first president, was assassinated on the steps of Nafplio's Church of St Spyridon in October 1831, and the new king, Otho, moved the capital to Athens in 1834.

Like the rest of Greece, the Peloponnese suffered badly during WWII; part of this history is vividly and tragically illustrated in the mountain town of Kalavryta, where all males aged over 15 were massacred (see p168).

The civil war (1944–49) brought widespread destruction and, in the 1950s, many villagers migrated to Athens, Australia, Canada, South Africa and the USA.

ACHAÏA ΑΧΑÏΑ

Overseas visitors are slowly discovering the delights of Achaïa. The spectacular region hides a string of coastal resorts, some high and ski-able mountain country (reached via a fantastic rack-and-pinion railway, when functioning) and a burgeoning capital: the bustling and surprisingly cosmopolitan city of Patra.

Achaïa owes its name to the Achaeans, an Indo-European branch of migrants who settled on mainland Greece and established what is more commonly known as the Mycenaean civilisation. When the Dorians arrived, the Achaeans were pushed into this northwestern corner of the Peloponnese, displacing the original Ionians.

Legend has it that the Achaeans founded 12 cities, which later developed into the powerful Achaean Federation that survived until Roman times. Principal among these cities were the ports of Patra and Egio.

PATRA ΠΑΤΡΑ pop 167,600

The largest city in the Peloponnese and Achaïa's capital, Patra is named after King Patreas, who ruled Achaïa around 1100 BC. Despite an eventful 3000 years of history, Patra is not considered the most compelling destination in the Peloponnese; most travellers pass straight through, boarding or disembarking from boats that sail between here, Italy and the Ionian Islands.

Yet those who do stay a night or two will find a cosmopolitan city with a vibrant café and clubbing scene (helped by the presence of Patra's 40,000 university students), plus a busy arts and culture community.

Patra is not beautiful – the cityscape is dominated by bland 1950s concrete tenements that squat between the few surviving 19th-century neoclassical buildings – but behind the scruffy port, Patra scrubs up better these days.

The city has attractive plazas and architectural landmarks, such as the Apollon Theatre and, nearby, the impressive, shiny Rio–Andirio suspension bridge, linking the city with western continental Greece.

Orientation

Rebuilt with wide, arcaded streets and large squares after its destruction by the Turks during the War of Independence, Patra has a simple modern grid system. The waterfront is known as Iroön Polytechniou at the north end, Othonos Amalias in the middle and Akti Dimeon to the south. Customs is at the Iroön Polytechniou end and the main bus and train stations are on Othonos Amalias. Most of the agencies selling ferry tickets are on Iroön Polytechniou and Othonos Amalias. The main roads run parallel to the waterfront. The main pedestrian thoroughfare is Agiou Nikolaou and the principle square is Plateia Georgiou.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Newstand (☎ 2610 273 092; Agiou Andreou 77) A small selection of novels, as well as international newspapers and magazines.

EMERGENCY

First Aid Centre (☎ 2610 277 386; cnr Karolou & Agiou Dionysiou; ☎ 8am–8pm)

Port Police (☎ 2610 341 002; Iroön Polytechniou; ☎ 24hr) At the end of the waterfront.
Tourist police (☎ 2610 695191; 4th fl, Gounari 52 & Ypsilandou; ☎ 7am–9pm)

INTERNET ACCESS

You can internet hop around Gerokostopoulou and Karaïskaki.

Netp@rk (Gerokostopoulou 36a; per hr €2; ☎ 24hr)
Netrino Internet Cafe (Karaïskaki 133; per hr €3; ☎ 24hr)

INTERNET RESOURCES

www.infocenterpatras.gr An excellent website for information on the city.

LAUNDRY

Skafi Laundrette (☎ 2610 620 119; Zaïmi 49; per load €7.50; ☎ 9am–2.30pm Mon–Sat, 5.30–8.30pm Tue, Thu & Fri) Will wash and dry a load.

LEFT LUGGAGE

Train Station (☎ 6am–2am) Charges €3.20 per item per day, or €1.60 per item if you have a train ticket, so buy your ticket before you drop off your bags. (Note: if you have Interail and/or Eurail card, storage is free.)

MONEY

National Bank of Greece (Plateia Trion Symahon; ☎ 8am–2.30pm Mon–Thu, 8am–2pm Fri) Opposite the train station.

POST

Post office (cnr Zaïmi & Mezonos; ☎ 7.30am–8pm Mon–Fri, 7.30am–2pm Sat & Sun)

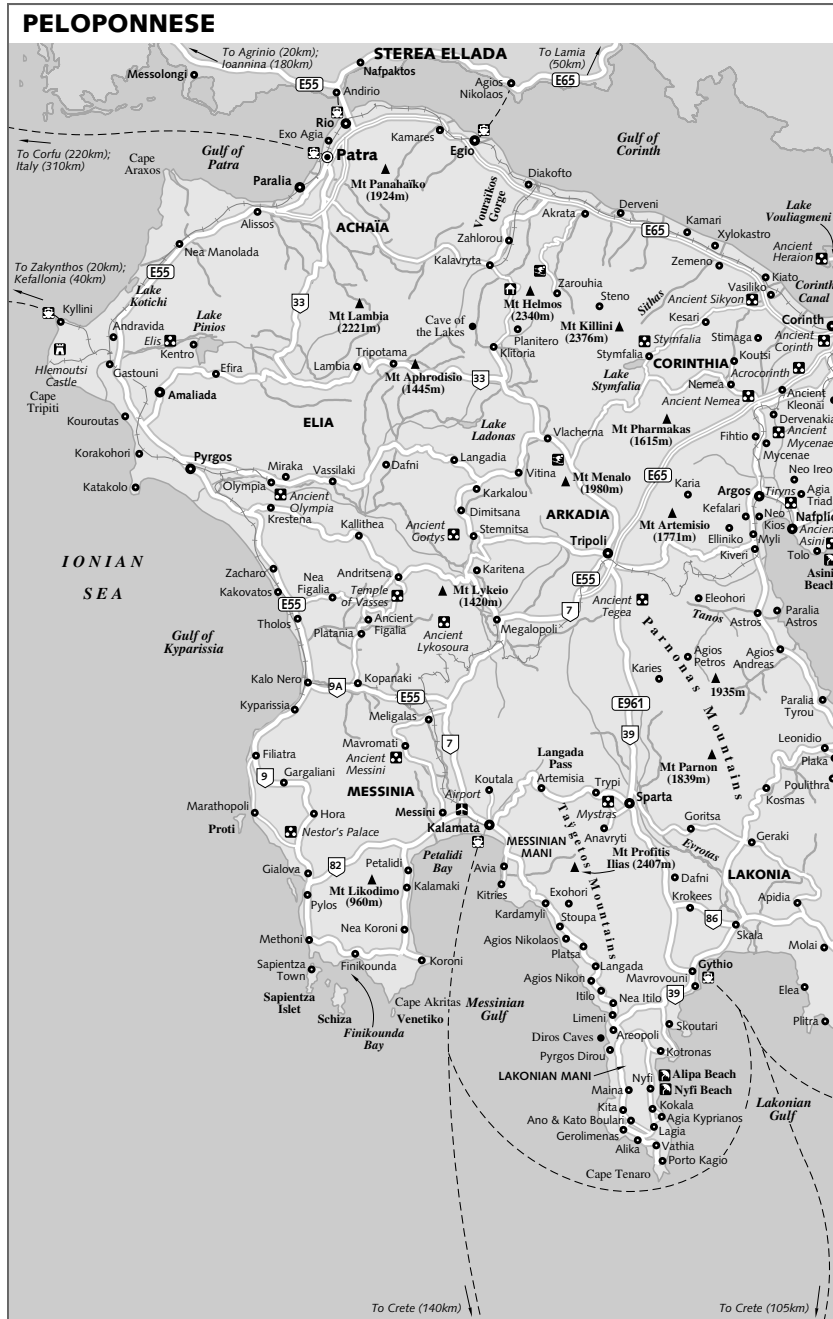
TOURIST INFORMATION

Info Center (☎ 2610 461 740/1; www.infocenterpatras.gr; Othonos Amalias 6; ☎ 8am–10pm) This is the best-organised information office in Greece, run by the city of Patra (rather than the EOT; Greek National Tourist Organisation). It's stocked with maps and brochures on local

GAUGING THE RAILWAY: TRAIN LINES IN THE PELOPONNESE

At the time of research the train lines in the Peloponnese were being upgraded from a narrow to standard gauge. Normally, there are two main routes: Athens to Kalamata (via the centre – Corinth and Tripoli, with another line from Argos to Nafplio) and Athens to Kalamata (via the west coast – Patra and Pyrgos, with another line from Patra to Olympia). At the time of publication services to Corinth and Tripoli (and Argos and Nafplio) were suspended; these lines were still being worked on. In many cases bus replacement services were operating, but we suggest that it is more convenient to use the KTEL buses in these instances.

Meanwhile, a new train, the *proastiako*, was operating between Corinth and Athens (and Athens airport). It will eventually link Athens to Xylokastro in the Peloponnese.



points of interest plus information on everything, including transport and hotels. The delightful English-speaking staff is eager to please. There's even free 20-minute internet access and free bike rental.

Sights & Activities

KASTRO

The city's wonderful old **Kastro** (fortress; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Tue-Sun) stands on the site of the acropolis of ancient Patrai. The Romans were the first to build a fort here around AD 550, but the present structure is of Frankish origin, remodelled many times over the centuries by the Byzantines, Venetians and Turks. It was in use as a defensive position until WWII.

Set in an attractive pencil-pined park, it is reached by climbing the 190-plus steps at the end of Agiou Nikolaou. Great views of the Ionian Islands of Zakynthos and Kefallonia are the reward.

Festivals & Events

The city's commitment to cultural events is strong; in 2006 Patra was the **European Capital of Culture** and hosted an extensive range of cultural activities encompassing theatre, dance, music, art and other events.

Patra's citizens party hard during the annual **Patra Carnival**. The programme begins in mid-January, and features a host of minor events leading up to a wild weekend of costume parades, colourful floats and celebrations in late February or early March. The event draws big crowds, so hotel reservations are essential if you want to stay overnight. For more details, check www.carnivalpatras.gr.

Sleeping

A shortage of decent cheap accommodation in Patra is one of the reasons few travellers stick around town (there is a run-down YHA youth hostel, but it's not recommended). Stretching yourself to a slightly higher budget pays dividends with a few plush choices.

BUDGET

Spyros Rooms (☎ 2610 427 278; www.patrasrooms.gr; Tofalou 2; s/d €30/40; 🚻) At the western end of the port and handy to the ferries are these clean and basic rooms with TV.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Mediterranée (☎ 2610 279 602; mediterran@otenet.gr; Agiou Nikolaou 18; s/d €50/70) This place looks like

it's seen a little too much of Patra's nightlife itself – despite the plush lobby, the rooms are on the verge of being a little worn and the bathrooms are in a cupboard. But it's pleasant and good value nonetheless and very central. Breakfast costs €5.

Olympic Star Hotel (☎ 2610 622 939; www.olympicstar.gr; Agiou Nikolaou 46; s/d incl breakfast €60/90; ♿ ♿) A shining star indeed; Patra needed a place like this. The hotel has had a funky new overhaul and its contemporary rooms feature hydro showers and internet access. Reduced prices without breakfast.

TOP END

Hotel Byzantino (☎ 2610 243 000; www.byzantino-hotel.gr; Riga Fereou 106; s/d/junior ste incl breakfast

€95/125/145; ♿ ♿ ♿) The Byzantino shows up the town's standard concrete monoliths. This graceful and restored neoclassical building features good rooms with large iron beds, wooden floors and period furniture. Satellite TV and other trimmings make it popular among local businesspeople, so book ahead.

Primarolia Art Hotel (☎ 2610 624 900; www.art-hotel.gr; Othonos Amalias 33; s €99, d €129-157, incl breakfast; ♿ ♿) Follow your mood: you can flutter in the butterfly room, 'veg out' in the mushroom room or dream of travel in the map room. This stylish place oozes individuality, with sleeping spaces ranging from the bold, contemporary and minimalist to the florid, romantic and baroque. All have TV with international

BUSHFIRES

In August and September 2007, severe bushfires raged through parts of the Peloponnese, tragically killing over 60 people, destroying vast areas of olive groves and forest, and burning several villages. The main regions affected were Arkadia, Lakonia, the Mani and Elia. At the time of writing, the cause of the disaster was still unclear; the most conspiratorial theory points to arson by property developers intent on clearing land for development. Other theories attribute the blaze to shepherds, who regularly use fire to expand grazing areas, or to cigarette butts, a common hazard. Determined locals declared that it would be business as usual in no time. But some sites (particularly restaurants), such as those around Floka (near Olympia), may have been affected by the fires; check their status before making a trip. Visiting the region, however, is the best way to support the locals who've been affected by this tragedy.

channels, fax, minibar and safe. Prices vary according to the view (city or harbour).

Eating

To do *frappé* (iced coffee) with the best of 'em, head along Agiou Nikolaou. For good eating options head east to Trion Navarhon.

Europa Centre (☎ 2610 437 006; Othonos Amalias 10; mains €4-8; ♿) 7am-midnight) This convenient, cafeteria-style place is close to the international ferry dock and a good place to hang out en route. The helpful staff serves standard but filling fare. There's free (short-term) luggage storage, TV, internet and pinball machines.

Mythos (☎ 2610 329 984; cnr Trion Navarhon & Riga Fereou; mains €7-12; ♿) dinner) Even the waiter tells you this romantic place has a woman's touch: flowers, petunias and shrubs create a beautiful oasis outside, Mediterranean antiques, lamps and other surprises adorn the inside (thanks to the female owner-decorator). And that's before you've even reached her essence – try the *mythos* pie (containing chicken, feta and fresh vegetables; €7.50) and chocolate soufflé (€4).

Ichthyoskala (☎ 2610 333 778; fish per kg €40-50) This unpretentious place offers few trimmings, save for a lemon wedge or two. But that's all you need to enhance fresh fish eaten al fresco. It's about 1km from central Patra.

For self-caterers, **Dia Discount supermarket** (Agiou Andreou 29) is ideally located for travellers planning to buy provisions and keep moving.

Drinking

It may be a scruffy, traffic-snarled port by day, but around sunset Patra transforms into a cosmopolitan, sharp-dressing, buzzy, café-lined city. Sit, see and be seen at any one of the dozens of places along Agiou Nikolaou, the

wide pedestrianised street leading to the port. Radinou is a short, lively, narrow alley packed with bars that open late into the night (some with DJs) and quickly fill with the younger student crowd.

Getting There & Away

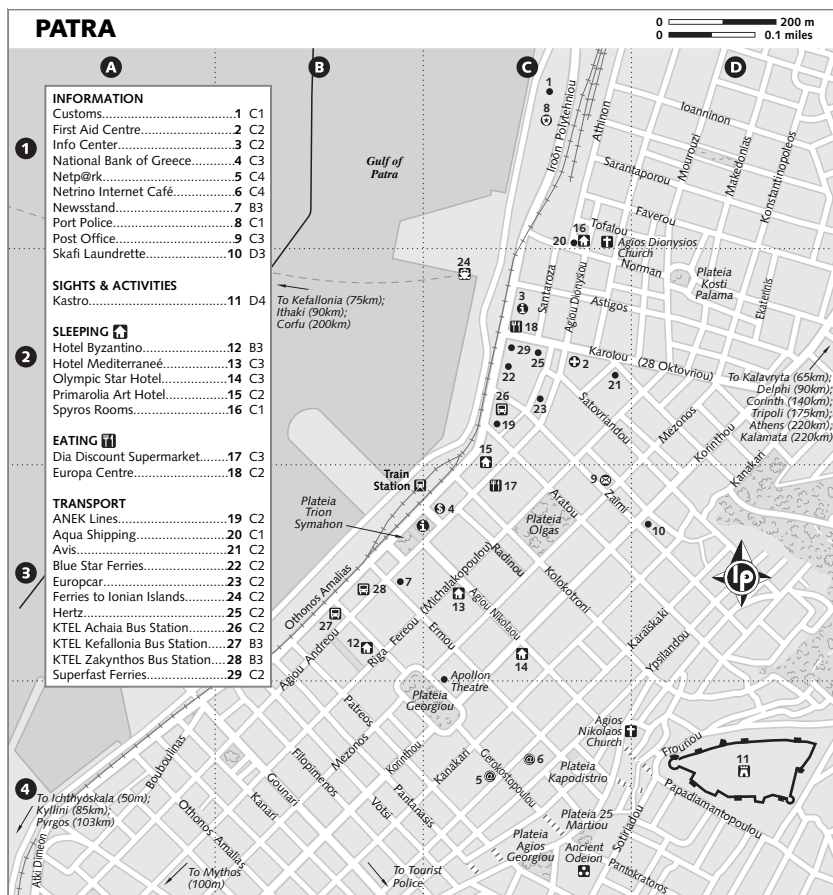
Many first-time visitors to Greece assume the best way to get from Patra to Athens is by bus. The bus is faster than the train, but it's more expensive and drops you off a long way from the centre of Athens at Terminal A on Kifissou. This is a real hassle if you're arriving in Athens after midnight, when there are no connecting buses to the city centre, leaving newcomers at the mercy of the notorious Terminal A taxi drivers.

The train takes you close to the city centre, with easy connections to the metro system. If you arrive after midnight, you're within easy walking distance of good accommodation.

BUS

The main **KTEL Achaia bus station** (☎ 2610 623 886; Othonos Amalias) has buses to Athens (€16.20, three hours, every half-hour) via Corinth (€10.80, 1½ hours); Pyrgos (€8.40, two hours, 10 daily); Ioannina (€19.70, 4½ hours, at least two daily); Kalavryta (€6.80, two hours, at least two daily); Kalamata (€19.30, four hours, two daily); Tripoli (€16, 3½ hours, daily) and Thessaloniki (€37.90, seven hours, four daily).

Buses to the Ionian Islands of Lefkada (€13.80, two weekly, three hours) and Kefalonia leave from the **KTEL Kefallonia bus station** (☎ 2610 274 938; cnr Othonos Amalias & Gerokostopoulou). Services to Kefalonia travel by ferry to Poros (€14.40, three hours) and continue by road to Argostoli (€18, one hour). Also



departing from here are buses (☎ 2610 623 888) to Amfissa (for Delphi; €11.60, two daily Monday to Saturday, one on Sunday, three hours). Several daily buses to Zakynthos (including ferry; €30, 3½ hours, two on weekends) leave from the **KTEL Zakynthos bus station** (☎ 2610 220 129; Othonos Amalias 48). Conveniently, they also travel via the port of Kyllini (€6.50, 1¼ hours). Note: the schedules change regularly.

FERRY

Domestic

Daily ferries to Kefallonia (€14.50, 2½ hours) and Ithaki (€14.50, 3¾ hours) are operated by **Strintzis Ferries** (☎ 2610 240 000). The ticket office is just inside the port, at Gate 2 behind the train station. Fares to Corfu (six to 7½ hours) cost €33 with **ANEK Lines** (☎ 2610 226 053; www.aneke.gr; Othonos Amalias 25) and **Minoan Lines** (☎ 2610 426 000; www.minoan.gr; Iroön Polytechniou 5), which is just opposite the port's Gate 7.

International

Patra is Greece's main port for ferry services to Italy. All departures to Italy leave at midnight. (Be sure to check as this schedule changes.) A highly recommended English-speaking one-stop company is **Aqua Shipping** (☎ 2610 421 500; Athinon 2-4). It's an agent for Hellenic Seaways but sells tickets for all lines (note: as will most agencies.)

The route to Brindisi (€52, 15 hours, daily) is operated by Endeavour Lines (Hellenic Mediterranean Lines). Ancona is another popular destination; **Superfast Ferries** (☎ 2610 622 500; Othonos Amalias 12) does the trip direct in 19 hours for €74, or 21 hours via Igoumenitsa. **Minoan Lines** (☎ 2610 455 622; Iroön Polytechniou 5) runs two services to Ancona (€74, 21½ hours), one via Igoumenitsa. **ANEK Lines** (☎ 2610 226 053; www.aneke.gr; Othonos Amalias 25) also has regular services to Ancona (€70, 20 hours).

Superfast (☎ 2610 622 500; Othonos Amalias 12) in conjunction with Blue Star Ferries and Agoudimos has daily services to Bari (around €57, 15½ hours).

Minoan Lines also has boats to Venice (€79, 29 hours, four times weekly), calling at Corfu and Igoumenitsa. ANEK Lines has boats to Venice (€53, 34½ hours) daily except Tuesday, also calling at Corfu and Igoumenitsa.

Most of these ferries stop at Igoumenitsa and Corfu. Note: under no circumstances are you permitted a free stopover on Corfu.

TRAIN

There are at least seven trains daily from Patra to Corinth; five are normal trains (€3.20, 2½ hours) and two are Intercity (express) services (€6.40, 2½ hours). All trains between Patra and Corinth stop at Diakofto (Intercity €5, 45 minutes; normal trains €2.80, one hour).

There are also several daily services to Pyrgos (express/normal €5.40/2.80, 1½ to three hours). For Olympia, change trains at Pyrgos. There are regular daily services to Kyparissia (express/normal €7.50/4.70, three hours) and Kalamata (express/normal €9.70/5, five hours).

Getting Around

Local buses leave from Plateia Georgiou.

Recommended car-rental outlets:

Avis (☎ 2610 275 547; 28 Oktovriou 16)

Europcar (☎ 2610 621 360; Agiou Andreou 6)

Hertz (☎ 2610 220 990; Karolou 2)

DIAKOFTO ΔΙΑΚΟΦΤΟ

pop 2290

Diakofto (dih-ah-kof-to), 55km east of Patra and 80km northwest of Corinth, is a serene village, tucked between steep mountains and the sea, amid lemon and olive groves. Until recently the main reason for visiting was to board the unique rack-and-pinion train service up the Vouraikos Gorge as far as Kalavryta. This service is currently suspended (see boxed text, opposite) but if you must stay along the coast for a night, this is a tranquil spot to do so. There is a small **beach** on the western side of town.

Orientation & Information

Diakofto's layout is simple. The train station is in the middle of the village. To reach the waterfront and beach, cross the railway track and walk down the road for 1km.

There is no EOT (Greek National Tourist Organisation) or tourist police. The National Bank of Greece and the **post office** (☎ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri) are on the main street that leads inland from the station.

Sleeping

Hotel Lemonies (☎ 26910 41229/820; fax 26910 43710; s/d €30/40; ☎ ☎) The best option in Diakofto, with kind owners and basic but spacious and comfortable rooms – with fridge and TV. It's 500m north of the train station on the road leading to the beach. Breakfast is €5.

Hotel Chris-Paul (☎ 26910 41715/855; www.chris-paul-hotel.gr; s/d/tr €35/65/78; ☎ ☎ ☎) A modernish and slightly impersonal hotel near the train station, with a bar and restaurant. Most rooms have balconies overlooking the garden. Breakfast is €5.

Eating

Costas (☎ 26910 43228; mains €5-8; ☎ lunch & dinner) This popular taverna/*psistaria* (restaurant serving grilled food), up from the National Bank and on the right of the main street, is a good eating choice. The friendly Greek-Australian owners offer taverna-style dishes alongside the usual grilled meats. They are known for their dolmadhes (vine leaves stuffed with rice and sometimes meat; €6.50).

Opposite the train station, **Elvar Supermarket** (☎ 26910 43361) is one of a few shops that provides walkers with picnic supplies.

Getting There & Away

BUS

There's not much point in catching a bus to/from Diakofto – the trains are much more convenient. Patra–Athens buses bypass the village on New National Rd.

TRAIN

Diakofto is on the main Corinth–Patra line; there are frequent trains in both directions (express/normal €6.40/3.20).

The **Diakofto–Kalavryta Railway** (☎ 26910 43228) is currently suspended due to ongoing track work (see boxed text, below).

ZANLOROU ΖΑΧΛΩΡΟΥ

pop 50

The picturesque and unspoilt settlement of Zanolrou, the halfway stop on the Diakofto–Kalavryta train line, straddles both sides of

the river and the railway line. Many people take the train to this point and walk back to Diakofto.

Sights

MONI MEGALOU SPILEOU

MONH ΜΕΓΑΛΟΥ ΣΠΗΛΑΙΟΥ

A steep path leads up from Zanolrou to the **Moni Megalou Spileou** (Monastery of the Great Cavern; admission free). The original monastery was destroyed in 1934 when gunpowder stored during the War of Independence exploded. The new monastery houses illuminated gospels and relics, and the miraculous icon of the Virgin Mary, which, like numerous icons in Greece, is said to have been painted by St Luke. It was supposedly discovered in the nearby cavern by St Theodore and St Simeon in 362. The 3km walk takes about an hour.

Sleeping & Eating

Taverna Oneira (☎ 26920 23772; www.villa-oneiro.gr; apt €60-80, villa €120-140) For a more upmarket line, and on the hill behind the platform, try this taverna, which has eight plush new 'villas' aside its taverna and older apartments nearby.

The two budget sleeping options, **Hotel Romantzo** (☎ 26920 22758; s/d/tr €25/30/40) and **Zanolrou** (☎ 26920 22789; www.zanolrou.gr; s/d/tr €25/30/40), are right on the platform, but you won't be chuffed by their standards – sooty at best. However, the '3rd-class' room prices are attractive.

Getting There & Away

When running, the Diakofto–Kalavryta trains stop at Zanolrou. You can drive to Zanolrou on a dirt road leading off the Diakofto–Kalavryta road. The turn-off is 7.5km north of Kalavryta.

DIAKOFTO–KALAVRYTA RAILWAY

When operating, the unique train running along the railway from Diakofto to Kalavryta is an unmissable journey. It was closed at the time of research; check on its status. This unforgettable ride heads through the dramatic **Vouraikos Gorge**. It climbs over 700m in 22.5km, using a rack-and-pinion (cog) system for traction on the steep sections, effectively clamping itself to a notched girder. Built by an Italian company between 1885 and 1895, the railway was a remarkable feat of engineering for its time.

The line switches back and forth across the gorge and eventually disappears into a long curving tunnel. It emerges clinging to a narrow ledge by the river. South of the charming village of Zanolrou, the line follows the river beneath a leafy canopy of plane trees, before meandering through open country for the final run to Kalavryta.

KALAVRYTA ΚΑΛΑΒΡΥΤΑ

pop 1747

Perched at 756m above sea level, Kalavryta (kah-lah-vrih-tah) is a delightful resort town offering fresh mountain air, gushing springs and a tree-shaded plaza.

There is something of a miniboom going on here as Kalavryta evolves into a resort town for wealthy Athenians, who arrive in numbers on weekends and during the winter ski season.

Two relatively recent historical events have assured the town of Kalavryta a place in the hearts of all Greeks.

First, despite plenty of evidence that fighting had already begun elsewhere, the official version of the War of Independence states that the revolt against the Turks began here on 25 March 1821, when Bishop Germanos of Patra raised the Greek flag at Moni Agias Lavras, 6km from Kalavryta.

Second, on 13 December 1943, in one of the worst atrocities of WWII, the Nazis set fire to the town and massacred all its male inhabitants over the age of 15, as punishment for resistance activity. The total number killed in the region was 1436. The hands of the old cathedral clock stand eternally at 2.34, the time the massacre began. The event is solemnly and movingly recorded in the old schoolhouse, now a museum dedicated to the memory of those killed.

Orientation & Information

When the train is running, most visitors arrive at the train station on the northern edge of town, opposite the museum. To the right of the museum is Syngrou, a pedestrian precinct. After one block, it becomes 25 Martiou. To the left of the museum is Konstantinou.

The central square, Plateia Kalavrytou, is between these two streets, two blocks up from the train station. The bus station is on Kapota. From Syngrou, turn right at Hotel Maria onto Kapota, cross Ethnikis Antistassis and you'll see the buses parked outside at the bottom of the hill.

There is no tourist office. The websites www.kalavryta.gr and www.kalavryta-ski.gr have good local information.

National Bank of Greece (25 Martiou) Just before Plateia Kalavrytou.

Post office (☎ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri) Behind Plateia Kalavrytou.

Sights

MUSEUM OF THE KALAVRYTA HOLOCAUST

This extraordinary **museum** (☎ 26920 23646; 25 Martiou; admission free; ☎ 10am-2pm Tue-Sun) should be a compulsory first stop for all visitors to this village. It is a most powerful tribute to the memory of the 1436 men and boys slaughtered by the German army in the region during WWII. It's a dignified, understated, yet extremely evocative account of the struggle between the occupying forces and partisan fighters in the area, and the events running up to the massacre; an atrocity partly put in motion by the partisans' execution of a group of German prisoners.

Whatever you do, don't pass by the continuous-loop videos dotted throughout the exhibition. These are the accounts of villagers who survived as children, after being locked with their mothers in the schoolhouse (the museum building), apparently to be burned alive, only to escape; they were left to bury the dead. The wall covered with pictures of the dead Kalavryta villagers is an especially striking memorial.

MARTYRS' MONUMENT

A huge white cross on a cypress-covered hillside just east of town marks the site of the 1943 massacre. Beneath this imposing monument is a poignant little shrine to the victims. It is signposted off Konstantinou.

Sleeping

More plush lodges are cropping up outside the village; the village itself has few hotel options. Peak period here is the ski season (November to April), when reservations are essential. Bookings are also required on weekends throughout the year, when Athenians come to enjoy the cool mountain air. Prices are slashed by as much as 50% at other times.

There are no budget hotels, but there are several domatia (cheap accommodation option) on the streets behind the train station.

Hotel Kynaitha (☎ 26920 22609; www.kynaitha.gr; Ethnikis Andistasis 11; s/d/tr incl breakfast €80/95/115; ☎) Modern and comfortable with attractively furnished rooms boasting amenities like minibar, safe, hairdryer and TV, plus large beds, gleaming white bathrooms and posh toiletries.

Hotel Filoxenia (☎ 26920 22422; www.hotelifloxi.gr; Ethnikis Andistasis 10; s/d/tr incl breakfast €92/121/150; ☎) Kind of like an old-fashioned ski lodge – old, brown and a bit daggy, but com-

fortable and friendly. Rooms have a minibar, safe, hairdryer, TV and balcony.

Hotel Helmos (☎ 26920 29222; info@hotelhelmos.gr; Plateia Eleftherias 1; s/d/tr €100/150/200; ☎) The newest, plushiest and snobbiest kid on the block, with all the creature comforts in plush and contemporary surrounds. Prices are slashed on weekdays and in low season. Wi-fi is available.

Eating

Most places to eat are on 25 Martiou. Even out of ski season Kalavryta is one of the weekend places for Athenians. It has an abundance of trendy bars and cafés, most clustered close to the train station, and some offering snack food.

Ellinikon (☎ 26920 23502; snacks €1-3) A terrific bakery near the petrol station on the road out of town towards Patra and Klitoria, this has ideal picnic fare: wonderful bread, minipizzas and dozens of types of sweet pastries.

Gri Gri Café (25 Martiou; snacks €1.50-3) Opposite the museum and a good (less fashion-conscious) family-run spot. Recommended for its sweet or savoury homemade snacks, such as cheese pie, baklava and tasty *crèmes* (sweet, set custard).

Taverna Elatos (☎ 26922 22541; Plateia Kalavrytou; mains €5-9) Set just back from the square with a modest terrace for alfresco dining, this attractive place has hearty traditional taverna staples.

Getting There & Around

At the time of research, the rack-and-pinion train to Diakofto via Zahlorou was closed due to ongoing track work. Check in Diakofto to see whether it is running.

There are buses to Patra (€6.80, two hours, five daily), Athens (€14.40, three hours, at least one daily) and Klitoria.

Most of the attractions are out of town, so it's very handy to have your own transport.

Kalavryta's **taxi rank** (☎ 26920 22127) is in front of the train station.

AROUND KALAVRYTA

Moni Agias Lavras Μονή Αγίας Λαύρας

The original 10th-century **monastery** (☎ 10am-1pm & 4-5pm summer only) was burnt by the Nazis. The new monastery has a small museum where the banner standard is displayed along with other monastic memorabilia. Buses heading south from Kalavryta to Klitoria can drop

you a short walk from the monastery, or take a taxi (one way €5).

Cave of the Lakes Σπήλαιο των Λιμνών

The remarkable **Cave of the Lakes** (☎ 26920 31001; www.kastriacave.gr; adult/child €8/4; ☎ 9am-6.30pm May-Aug, 9.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6.30pm Sat & Sun rest of year) lies 16.5km south of Kalavryta near the village of Kastria. The cave features in Greek mythology and is mentioned in the writings of the ancient traveller Pausanias, but its whereabouts remained unknown in modern times until 1964, when locals noticed water pouring from the roof of a smaller, lower cave after heavy rain and decided to investigate. They found themselves in a large bat-filled cavern at the start of a winding 2km-long cave carved out by a subterranean river.

The cavern is now reached by an artificial entrance, which is the starting point for a 500m boardwalk that snakes up the riverbed. You must go with a guide (Greek speaking) on the 35-minute tour. The ornate stalactites are mere sideshows alongside the lakes themselves. The lakes are a series of 13 stone basins formed by mineral deposits over the millennia. In summer the waters dry up to reveal a curious lacework of walls, some up to 3m high.

Getting to the cave is difficult without your own transport. A taxi from Kalavryta costs about €20 return.

Trout Farms & Restaurants

A pleasant afternoon's eating can be had in the tiny village of Planitero, about 20km south of Kalavryta (6km north of the village of Klitoria), where half a dozen trout restaurants and several trout farms line the banks of the tree-lined River Aroanios. Several have outdoor seating areas built out over the river.

You can't really go wrong choosing a restaurant. They offer similar fare at similar prices. Just cruise the bank until you find one that suits you.

The turn-off to Planitero is signposted to the left about 4km short of Klitoria. Recommended for its pretty indoor and garden setting (if nothing else) is **O Planiteros** (☎ 26920 32055; trout €6-8), which is before the village, on the left-hand side. The trout farm adjoins the restaurant and the owners have comfortable rooms (☎ 26920 32055; per person €30) nearby.

MYTHOLOGY MADE PELOPONNEASY

If you are interested in treading the real landscape of Greek mythology, the Peloponnese is home to a great many of its fabled places.

It takes some getting used to seeing so many road signs to places of legend, such as Mycenae, Tiryns and Nestor's Palace; homes to Homer's heroes and villains in the *Iliad*, and places of real historical as well as mythological interest.

If you want to find the entrance to the Underworld, try exploring along the River Styx in northeastern Arkadia, known to modern Greeks as the River Mavroneri. Or perhaps you'd prefer to gaze upon the egg from which Aphrodite hatched, just off a magnificent spot on the remote island of Kythira (p224).

Even the territory itself is named after a mythical figure – Pelops – who, according to legend, became king of Elia after sneakily defeating the previous king Oimanoas in a chariot race (by nobbling his chariot wheels) and to whom subsequent rulers from the area were desperate to prove a blood line.

Gods and demigods sported here, too, including Pan, who sexually harassed nymphs in bucolic Arkadia, and Hercules, who worked as a kind of supernatural pest controller, ridding the country around Argos of the many-headed Hydra and strangling the fearsome Nemean Lion at Nemea. According to the ancient Greek writer Plutarch, even Zeus himself celebrated here, after beating his father Cronos at wrestling, by holding the first ever Olympics at Ancient Olympia.

Exohiko Kentro Piges (☎ 26920 32027/1660; trout €6) has a good reputation for fast, friendly service. You can enjoy your trout fried or grilled and accompanied by a healthy salad. It also serves delicious *saganaki* (fried cheese) made from local sheep's milk cheese (*kefalotyri*).

Activities

SKIING

With 12 runs and seven lifts (one chair-lift), the **ski centre** (☎ 26920 24451; www.kalavrita-ski.gr; ☞ 9am-4pm Dec-Apr), elevation 1700m to 2340m, is 14km east of Kalavryta on Mt Helmos (2340m). It has a cafeteria and first-aid centre but no overnight accommodation. Several outlets in Kalavryta rent skis; try **Ski Time Center** (☎ 2692 022 030; Agiou Alexiou).

There is no public transport to the ski centre from Kalavryta. A taxi costs about €20 return. The season lasts from December to April, snow permitting.

RAFTING & KAYAKING

Eco Action (☎ 21033 17866, 6978996950) offers a choice of rafting or kayaking (both €45 to €50) on the Ladonas River (20km south of Klitoria). It also runs 4WD, walking, canyoning and mountain-biking excursions. Its riverside base camp is signposted off the Vlacherna–Lambia road.

CORINTHIA KOPINΘIA

Corinthia has disappointingly little to show for all its rich and tumultuous history (something it owes largely to its strategic position adjoining the Isthmus of Corinth). Throughout time several empires have wrestled for dominance over the Peloponnese here; the Romans constructed a vast wall across the isthmus, many centuries later the Turks overran it and pretty much everyone else has attempted to carve a canal across it (like most large-scale civil engineering projects the schedule slipped a little bit behind: about 2600 years, in fact).

The Corinthia region was once dominated by the mighty, ancient city of Corinth. This site has had much work done of late and makes a fascinating visit. Several minor sites in the pretty hinterland west of Corinth are worth a detour if you have time and your own transport.

CORINTH KOPINΘIS

pop 29,787

Modern Corinth (*ko-rin-thoss*), located 6km west of the Corinth Canal, is the administrative capital of Corinthia prefecture. The town was built here after the old town was destroyed by an earthquake in 1858. The new town was wrecked by another, equally

violent and damaging, earthquake in 1928 and badly damaged again in 1981.

The rather dull, modern town is dominated by cold concrete edifices, built to withstand future earthquakes. But it has a pleasant harbour, a thriving stretch of café-lined beachfront and helpful, friendly locals. Unless you're stuck here for transport reasons, it's not an especially compelling destination to hang around.

Orientation & Information

Corinth is laid out on a grid of wide streets stretching back from the waterfront. Social activity clusters in the café-lined pedestrian Piliarinou, and the nearby Kalamia Beach, 1km west of the port. At the time of research major works were disrupting the (formerly) social square by the harbour, Plateia El Venizelou. Administrative activity is around Plateia Kentriki, 200m inland on Ethnikis Andistasis.

There is no EOT in Corinth.

National Bank of Greece (Ethnikis Andistasis) Has ATM. **Police** (☎ 27410 81100) In the same building as the tourist police.

Post office (Adimantou 33; ☞ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri) **Stretto Internet Café** (☎ 27410 25570; Piliarinou 70; per hr €3; ☞ 8.30am-10.30pm Mon-Sat) **Tourist police** (☎ 27410 23282; Ermou 51, Plateia Kentriki; ☞ 8am-2pm)

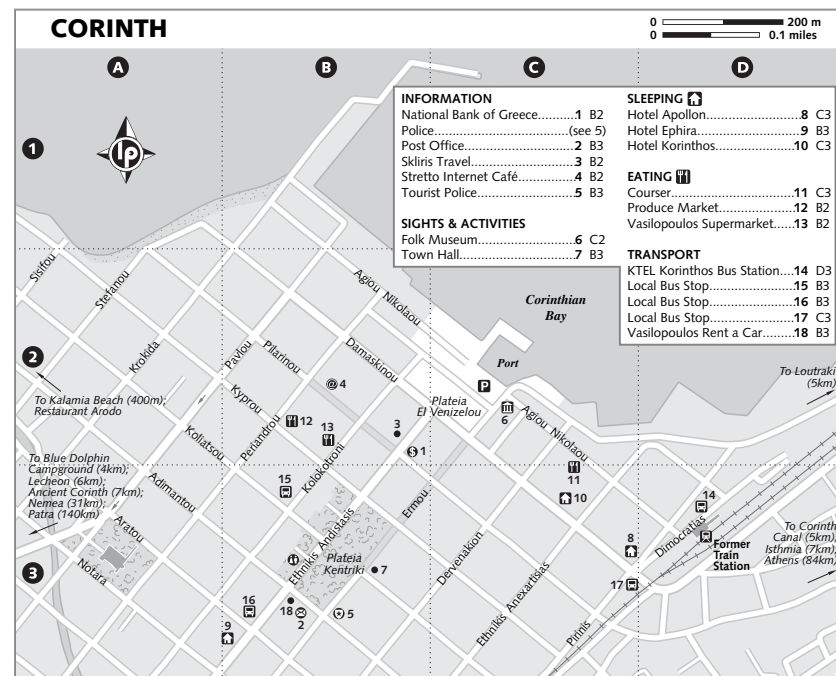
Sights & Activities

To the south of the wharf, the **Folk Museum** (☎ 27410 25352; Ermou 1; admission €1.50; ☞ 8.30am-2.30pm Tue-Sun) focuses on bridal and festive costumes from the past three centuries from the islands and the mainland. There is also metalwork, embroidery, gold and silver objects, and carvings, both secular and ecclesiastical.

If you're spending time in town, it's worth heading for **Kalamia Beach**, an attractive strip of sand fronted by a fashionable and thriving row of cafés and restaurants, 1km due west of the port.

Tours

Skliris Travel (☎ 27410 20050; skliris1@otenet.gr; Ethnikis Andistasis 8) offers visitors around six tours per week through the Corinth Canal (p174) for €17.



Sleeping

BUDGET

Blue Dolphin Campground (☎ 27410 25766/7; skoupos@otenet.gr; camp sites per adult/tent €6.50/5; ☹ Apr-Oct; 📍) About 4km west of town beyond the ruins of the ancient port of Lecheon is this well-organised camping ground. It has its own stretch of Gulf of Corinth pebble beach. Buses from Corinth to Lecheon can drop you there.

Hotel Apollon (☎ 27410 22587; hotapol@otenet.gr; Pirinis 18; s/d €40/50; 🏠) This recently renovated place is the town's current best by a gulf. The smallish rooms are decked out in contemporary wooden panelling and with other trimmings, including TV and double-glazed windows. It's diagonally opposite a stylish bakery. Breakfast costs €6.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Korinthos (☎ 27410 26701/2/3; www.korinthos-hotel.gr; Damaskinou 26; s/d/tr €50/59/65; 🏠) In general, it's like the rest of Corinth – it has definitely seen better days. The dated rooms have balconies and those at the back have views over the Gulf of Corinth. But management is friendly and there's also a roof garden.

Hotel Ephira (☎ 27410 22434/4021; www.ephirahotel.gr; Ethnikis Andistasis 52; s/d/tr €50/60/65; 🏠) This may be Corinth's smartest hotel – the locals recommend it as such. Indeed, it's comfortably furnished, but hides a few blemishes. The more spacious suites on the 6th floor are a notch more upmarket. Breakfast costs €5.

Eating

There are limited dining options in town. Good cafés line Pilarinou.

Courser (☎ 27410 73553; Agiou Nikolaou 19; mains €7.50-12; 🍴 lunch & dinner) Chinese restaurant favourites to eat in or take away, close to the bus and train stations. The outside dining area overlooking the water and back gardens is a bonus.

Restaurant Arodo (☎ 27410 71500; mains €8-16; 🍴 lunch & dinner) This restaurant has model ships inside and views of real ones in the Gulf beyond. In line with all things marine, fish dishes are the catch here. The premises' caged canaries are a little brighter than the service, but you'll not much care once you're kicking back on the comfy chairs indoors or on the shrub-lined deck outside.

For self-caterers, **Vasilopoulos supermarket** (☎ 27410 85281; Kolokotroni 8; 🕒 8am-9pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm Sat) is the best of the supermarkets around

town. The **Produce Market** (cnr Kyprou & Periadrou) is the main market for fruit and veg, meat, cheese and other foods.

Entertainment

You'll find most of the evening action in the cafés along Kalamia Beach, which is also a good place to sunbathe or sip a drink during the day. The cafés along Pilarinou are popular with younger locals.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Buses to Athens (€7, 1½ hours) leave every 45 minutes from the **KTEL Korinthos bus station** (☎ 27410 75424; Dimokratias 4). This is also the departure point for buses to Ancient Corinth (€1.20, 20 minutes, hourly), Lecheon (€1.20, 15 minutes, half-hourly) and Nemea (€4.10, one hour, six daily). You can also catch these buses from the corner of Kolokotroni and Koliatisou.

Buses to Isthmia (€1.20, 15 minutes, four daily) and Loutraki (€1.20, 20 minutes) depart from the local bus stops on either Damaskinou and Pirinus or Aratou and Andistasis.

All buses to other regions in the Peloponnese can be caught from the new KTEL bus station on the Peloponnese side of the Corinth Canal (see boxed text, below). To get there from Corinth, catch one of the frequent local buses to Loutraki.

CAR

There are several car-rental outlets around the city centre, including **Vasilopoulos Rent a Car** (☎ 27410 25573; Adimantou 39).

TRAIN

Seven trains daily head along the north coast to Diakofto (€2.10, 1½ hours) and Patra (€3.20).

NEW KTEL BUS STATION: GATEWAY TO THE PELOPONNESE

There is a recently opened KTEL bus station located on the new national highway on the Peloponnese side of the Corinth Canal. This is the spot to change for buses south to the rest of the Peloponnese. At the time of research no formal schedules were available – but all buses from Athens heading to the Peloponnese stop here. For a rough idea of times, add 1½ hours for buses departing from Athens.

Six trains run daily to Pyrgos. For Olympia you must change to the local train at Patra.

At the time of research the inland line to Tripoli was under repair and replacement buses were in service. Alternatively, take the KTEL buses from the Corinth Canal (see boxed text, opposite)

A handy new train service (the *proastiako*) runs between Corinth and Athens airport (€8, one hour, eight daily).

ANCIENT CORINTH & ACROCORINTH

ΑΡΧΑΙΑ ΚΟΡΙΝΘΟΣ & ΑΚΡΟΚΟΡΙΝΘΟΣ

Ancient Corinth was an affluent and powerful city during its first golden age, when Greek merchants made a mint from their control of trade on both sides of the isthmus and, centuries later, when the Romans rebuilt it anew (but only after first trashing the place in revenge for resisting its rule a few decades earlier). Earthquakes and centuries of pillage left little standing of Ancient Corinth, except for remnants of once grand buildings, located 7km southwest of the modern city. Thanks to recent improvements to the site, including excellent new paths, on-site descriptions and a lovely site museum (which is divided into classical and Roman periods), this wondrous ancient city has come beautifully to life and makes a fascinating visit.

Surrounding the site is the village of Ancient Corinth. Towering 575m above is the Acrocorinth, a massive and much more physically imposing limestone outcrop. It commands dramatic views across the surrounding valleys and hills and is well worth perusing if you have time. Stout shoes are a sensible precaution on the uneven ground.

Most visitors come on whirlwind guided tours from Athens, but there's enough here to warrant an overnight stay. With a choice of restaurants and tavernas, it's also a better alternative to staying in modern Corinth.

History

During the 6th century BC Corinth was one of ancient Greece's richest cities, thanks to its strategic position on the Isthmus of Corinth. Its twin ports, one on the Aegean Sea (Kenchreai, near Kechries) and one on the Ionian Sea (Lecheon) enabled it to trade throughout the Mediterranean. It survived the Peloponnesian Wars and flourished under

Macedonian rule, but it was sacked by the Roman consul Mummius in 146 BC for rebelling against Roman rule. In 44 BC Julius Caesar began rebuilding the city and it again became a prosperous port.

During Roman times, when Corinthians weren't clinching business deals, they were paying homage to the goddess of love, Aphrodite, in a temple dedicated to her (which meant partying with the temple's sacred prostitutes, both male and female). St Paul, perturbed by the Corinthians' wicked ways, spent 18 mostly fruitless months preaching here.

Sights

ANCIENT CORINTH

The **ruins** (☎ 27410 31207; site & museum adult/concession €6/3; 🕒 8am-7.30pm Apr-Oct, 8am-5pm Nov-Mar) lie right in the centre of the modern village.

The remains are mostly from Roman times. An exception is the prominent 5th-century-BC Doric **Temple of Apollo**. To the south of this temple is a huge **agora** (forum) bounded on its southern side by the foundations of a **stoa**. This was built to accommodate the bigwigs summoned here in 337 BC by Philip II to sign oaths of allegiance to Macedonia. In the middle of the central row of shops is a **bema**, a marble podium from which Roman officials addressed the people.

At the eastern end of the forum are the remains of the **Julian Basilica**. To the north is the **Lower Peirene fountain** – the Upper Peirene fountain is on Acrocorinth. According to mythology, Peirene wept so much when her son Kenchrias was killed by Artemis that the gods, rather than let all the precious water go to waste, turned her into a fountain. In reality, it's a natural spring that has been used since ancient times and still supplies old Corinth with water. The water tanks are concealed in a fountain house with a six-arched façade. The remains of frescoes can be seen through the arches.

West of the fountain, steps lead to the **Lecheon road**, once the main thoroughfare to the port of Lecheon. On the east side of the road is the **Peribolos of Apollo**, a courtyard flanked by Ionic columns, some of which have been restored. Nearby is a **public latrine**, where some seats remain. The site's **museum** contains fine Greek and Roman statues, mosaics, figurines, reliefs and friezes. Opposite the site entrance is the **ancient theatre**, which you can view from the road.

ACROCORINTH

The sheer bulk of limestone known as **Acrocorinth** (admission free; ☎ 8am-3pm) was one of the finest natural fortifications in ancient Greece and it remains an impressive ruin to this day, commanding wonderful views over the surrounding region.

The original fortress was built in ancient times, but it has been modified many times over the years by a string of invaders. The ruins are a medley of imposing Roman, Byzantine, Frankish, Venetian and Turkish ramparts, harbouring remains of Byzantine chapels, Turkish houses and mosques.

On the higher of Acrocorinth's two summits is the **Temple of Aphrodite** where the sacred courtesans (exactly how these differed from the less holy variety isn't clear), who so raised the ire of St Paul, catered to the desires of the insatiable Corinthians. Little remains of the temple, but the views are tremendous.

It's a bit of a (do-able) hike to the fortress and there's no bus. If you're lucky, you can grab a lift or take a village taxi.

Sleeping & Eating

There are several places in the village advertising rooms to rent.

Rooms to Rent Tasos (☎ 27410 31225; s/d/tr €30/40/50; 🍷) In the village centre, on the road into town from Corinth, and above Taverna O Tasos are these basic, but clean and convenient, rooms. Tasos, the elderly owner, loves a chat.

Marinos Rooms (☎ 27410 31209; fax 27410 31994; s/d incl breakfast €37/45; 🍷) The 1980s-style glass façade glosses over any flaws, but it has clean rooms and a pretty and shady garden. Also operates an on-site taverna in summer, and gets booked out in June with archaeology students.

Taverna Dionysos (☎ 27410 31579; mains €7-13) This is the pick of the tavernas in town, as much for its more upmarket décor as for its freshly cooked fare. In high season, however, it brings out the more familiar Greek favourites.

CORINTH CANAL ΔΙΩΡΥΤΑ ΤΗΣ ΚΟΡΙΝΘΟΥ

The concept of cutting a canal through the Isthmus of Corinth to link the Ionian and Aegean Seas was first proposed by Periander, tyrant of Ancient Corinth at the end of the 7th century BC. The magnitude of the task

defeated him, so he opted instead to build a paved slipway, or *diolkos*, across which sailors dragged small ships on rollers, a method used until the 13th century.

In the intervening years many leaders, including Alexander the Great and Caligula, toyed with the canal idea, but it was Nero who actually began digging in AD 67. In true megalomaniac fashion, he struck the first blow himself, using a golden pickaxe. He then left it to 6000 Jewish prisoners to do the hard work. The project was soon halted by invasions by the Gauls. It was not until the 19th century (1883-93) that a French engineering company completed the canal.

The Corinth Canal, cut through solid rock, is over 6km long and 23m wide. The vertical sides rise 90m above the water. The canal did much to elevate Piraeus' status as a major Mediterranean port. It's an impressive sight, particularly when a ship is passing through. Corinth-based Skliris Travel (p171) offers cruises through the canal.

Getting There & Away

The easiest way to get to the canal is by Loutraki bus from modern Corinth to the canal bridge. Any bus or train between Corinth and Athens will pass over the bridge.

ISTHμία/KYRAS VRYSI ΙΣΘΜΙΑ/ΚΥΡΑΣ ΒΡΥΣΗ

Near modern Isthmia and 8km east of Corinth at the southeastern end of the Corinth Canal is the present-day village of Kyras Vrysi. It was formerly the site of the biennial Isthmian Games – one of four events that made up the Panhellenic Games circuit along with the games at Delphi, Nemea and Olympia.

The first recorded games at Isthmia were staged in 582 BC, organised by the city of Corinth in honour of Poseidon, god of the sea, who had long been associated with the site. Corinth continued to host the games until its destruction by Rome in 146 BC.

The **Isthmia Museum and (archaeological) site** (☎ 27410 37244; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Tue-Sun) are located in Kyras Vrysi. The site and museum were closed for renovation at the time of research (scheduled to open 2008). As well as the previously uncovered remains – the **Sanctuary of Poseidon**, a defensive wall, and a Roman **theatre** – archaeologists have since uncovered a **Roman bath** and an early **stadium**.

THE WINE ROAD

The Nemea region, in the rolling hills southwest of Corinth, is one of Greece's premier wine-producing areas, famous for its full-bodied reds, produced from the local *agioritiko* grape. Look out also for wine made from *roditis*, a local variety of white grape.

Nemea has been known for its fine wines since Mycenaean times, when nearby Phlius supplied the wine for the royal court at Mycenae. Until recent times production took place behind closed doors, but growers are waking up to the tourist potential of winery tours and tastings and are marketing their wine region. About half a dozen wineries provide tastings for visitors (usually free). They include **Skouras** (☎ 27510 23688; www.skouraswines; ☎ 9am-3pm) northwest of Argos, **Ktima Palivou** (☎ 27460 24190; www.palivos.gr; ☎ 9am-4pm) in Ancient Nemea (with a good selection of Cabernet Sauvignon) and **Lafkioti** (☎ 27460 31244; www.lafkiotis.gr; ☎ 9am-4pm) in Ancient Kleonai, 3km east of Ancient Nemea.

North of Nemea and further up into some pretty hill country you'll find **Gaia Wines** (☎ 21080 55642/3 27460 22057; www.gaia-wines.gr; Koutsi; ☎ tastings 9am-4pm), which produces unfiltered wines ranging from inexpensive *vins de pays* to pricier Appellation d'Origine Contrôlée (AOC) varieties.

A bit further along the road is the dramatically located **Domaine Helios** (☎ 27460 20360; www.semeliwines.com), which produces various varieties of reds, whites and a rosé. Tours and tastings can be arranged by appointment.

To learn more about Greek wines, visit Dimitris Karonis at his wine shop in Nafplio (see p185).

The fortifications here formed part of the Hexamillion, a defensive wall built across the Isthmus of Corinth by the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius II in the first half of the 5th century, to protect the Peloponnese against invasion by the Huns. It was called the Hexamillion because of its length – six Roman miles (7500m). The remains of the wall can be seen beneath the Athens-Corinth toll road, 6km southeast of Corinth. Roadworks here uncovered about 150m of wall, together with a small fort and several defensive towers. The site is signposted off the 'old' Corinth-Athens road. It's not enclosed, and there's no admission charge.

Old National Rd to Athens crosses the canal at Isthmia by a submersible bridge, which is lowered to allow ships to pass over it.

Getting There & Away

To get to Kyras Vrysi, take the buses to Isthmia from Corinth (€1.50, 15 minutes, five daily).

ANCIENT NEMEA ΑΡΧΑΙΑ ΝΕΜΕΑ

Lying on the northeastern edge of modern Nemea, **Ancient Nemea** (☎ 27460 22739; site, museum & stadium adult/concession €4/2; ☎ museum 8am-7.30pm May-Oct, 8am-3pm Nov-Apr, closed Mon morning) is 31km southwest of Corinth. According to mythology, it was around here that Hercules carried out the first of his labours – the slaying of the

lion that had been sent by Hera to destroy Nemea. The lion became the constellation Leo (each of the 12 labours is related to a sign of the zodiac).

Like Olympia, Nemea was not a city but a sanctuary and venue for the biennial Nemean Games, held in honour of Zeus. These games were hosted by the nearby city of Kleonai, and they became one of the great Panhellenic festivals. Three original columns of the 4th-century-BC Doric **Temple of Zeus** survive, and have been joined by two more columns reassembled by an American team. Other ruins include a bathhouse and hostelry. The site's **museum** has a model of the site and explanations in English.

The **stadium** (☎ 27460 22739; stadium only adult/concession €2/1; ☎ 8.30am-3pm) is 500m back along the road, and was once connected to the sanctuary by a sacred road. The athletes' starting line is still in place, together with the distance markers. Look out for ancient graffiti in the tunnel used by athletes to enter the stadium.

Getting There & Away

Buses from Corinth (€4.10, one hour, six daily) will stop outside the site on the way to modern Nemea, a busy agricultural service town about 4km northwest of the site. There are also buses to Nemea from Argos (€2.50, 40 minutes, three weekly on Monday, Thursday and Saturday).

ARGOLIS ΑΡΓΟΛΙΔΑ

The Argolis Peninsula, which separates the Saronic and Argolic Gulfs, is a veritable treasure trove for archaeology buffs, history lovers and those after a fascinating frolic. The town of Argos, from which the region takes its name, is thought to be the longest continually inhabited town in Greece. Argolis was the seat of power of the Mycenaean Empire that ruled Greece from 1600 to 1200 BC. Its citadels, Mycenae and Tiryns, are two of the region's major attractions, along with the famous Theatre of Epidavros. The delightful old Venetian town of Naflpio makes a perfect base from which to explore.

ARGOS ΑΡΓΟΣ

pop 24,239

Argos is the oldest continuously inhabited town in Greece (stretching back an astonishing 6000 years). Today most vestiges of its past glory lie buried beneath the existing modern town. Argos is overshadowed by its nearest neighbour, Naflpio, which makes a much more appealing base to explore the region; Argos itself is mainly used by visitors as a transport hub for buses.

However, it's an extremely pleasant, genuine and busy town; it's worth stopping for a quick look at the town's museum, as well as the ruins and fortress out of town. There are worse places to be stranded if you do end up here a night.

Orientation & Information

Argos' showpiece and focal point is its grand central square, Plateia Agiou Petrou, with its Art Nouveau street lights, citrus and palm trees, and the impressive Church of Agios Petros. Beyond, Argos deteriorates into a fairly typical working town.

The main bus station is just south of the central square on Kapodistriou, while the train station is on the southeastern edge of town by the road to Naflpio.

An Alpha Bank is on the central square. There is no tourist office or tourist police.

Café Net (☎ 27510 22833; 28 Oktovriou 4; per hr €3) Travellers can check email here.

Police (☎ 100) If you need them, this is the regular police.

Post office (✉ 7.30am–2pm Mon–Fri) Clearly signposted on Kapodistriou, southeast of the central square.

Sights

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

Even if you're only passing through Argos, try to pause long enough to visit the **Archaeological Museum of Argos** (☎ 27510 68819; adult/concession €2/1; ☎ 8.30am–3pm Tue–Sun), on the edge of the central square. The collection includes some outstanding and complete Roman mosaics and sculptures, and bronze objects from the Mycenaean tombs. Highlights include the statuette of a goddess, the mosaic of the four seasons in the courtyard, a suit of 8th-century-BC bronze armour, and some fine Neolithic, Mycenaean and Geometric pottery; including some outstanding Argive grey and brown vases dating back to before 1600 BC.

ROMAN RUINS & FORTRESS OF LARISSA

There are rather abandoned **Roman ruins** (admission free; ☎ 8.30am–3pm) on both sides of Tripolis. To get there from the central square, head south along Danaou for about 500m and then turn right onto Theatrou, which joins Tripolis opposite the star attraction: the enormous **theatre**, which could seat up to 20,000 people (more than at Epidavros). It dates from classical times but was greatly modified by the Romans. Nearby are the remains of a 1st-century AD **odeion** (indoor theatre) and **Roman baths**.

It is a 45-minute hard slog by footpath from the theatre up to the **Fortress of Larissa**, which is a conglomeration of Byzantine, Frankish, Venetian and Turkish architecture, standing on the foundations of the city's principal ancient citadel. There is also a road to the top of the fortress, signposted from the centre of town.

Sleeping

Hotel Apollon (☎ 27510 68065; Papaflessa 13; s/d/tr €25/35/50; ☎) The best budget choice, tucked away on a quiet side street behind the central square. Although basic, the rooms come with TV.

Hotel Morfeas (☎ 27510 68317; www.hotel-morfeas.gr; cnr Plateia Agiou Petrou & Danaou 2; s €40, d €50–70, incl breakfast; ☎) This is smart and modern with little toiletries and other trimmings, especially for business visitors.

Hotel Mycenae (☎ 27510 68332; fax 27510 68754; Plateia Agiou Petrou 10; s/d/apt incl breakfast €30/50/85; ☎) Situated on the central square, the 1970s-style Hotel Mycenae has large, comfortable rooms

and a four-bed 'apartment'. A few hooks are missing here and there off the organza curtains, but this hotel is well placed for a reasonable stay.

Eating

Restaurant Aigli (☎ 27510 67266; Plateia Agiou Petrou 6; mains €5–9) A reasonable mezzedhes (appetisers) selection and familiar taverna dishes accompany pizzas and burgers on the extensive menu at this well-located restaurant. With outdoor seating opposite the church in the central square, this is perfect for people-watching.

There are several supermarkets around the town centre or try to catch the Wednesday or Saturday market on Tsokiri.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Just south of the central square, **KTEL Argolis** (☎ 27510 67324; Kapodistriou 8) has bus services to Naflpio (€1.20, 30 minutes, half-hourly), Mycenae (€1.20, 30 minutes, four daily) and Nemea (€2.50, one hour, three weekly on Monday, Thursday and Saturday).

There are also hourly bus services to Athens between 5.30am and 11pm (€10.20, two hours, six daily), via Corinth (€4, 50 minutes), and to Tripoli (€4, one hour, four daily except Sunday).

Services south to Astros (€2.60, one hour) and Leonidio (€6.70, 2¼ hours) are operated by KTEL Arkadia from **Kafeneio Christos Klisaris** (☎ 27510 23162; Theatrou 40). There are three services a day on this route.

TRAIN

At the time of research, the Kalamata–Corinth railway line was closed due to track work (see boxed text, p161).

MYCENAE ΜΥΚΗΝΕΣ

pop 450

The modern village of Mycenae (mih-kee-nes), 12km north of Argos and just east of the main Argos–Corinth road, is geared towards the hordes of package tourists that visit Ancient Mycenae and has little to recommend it other than its proximity to the ancient site, 2km to the north. There is accommodation along its main road. There's no bank, but the mobile post office at the ancient site has a currency service (summer only).

Sights

ANCIENT MYCENAE

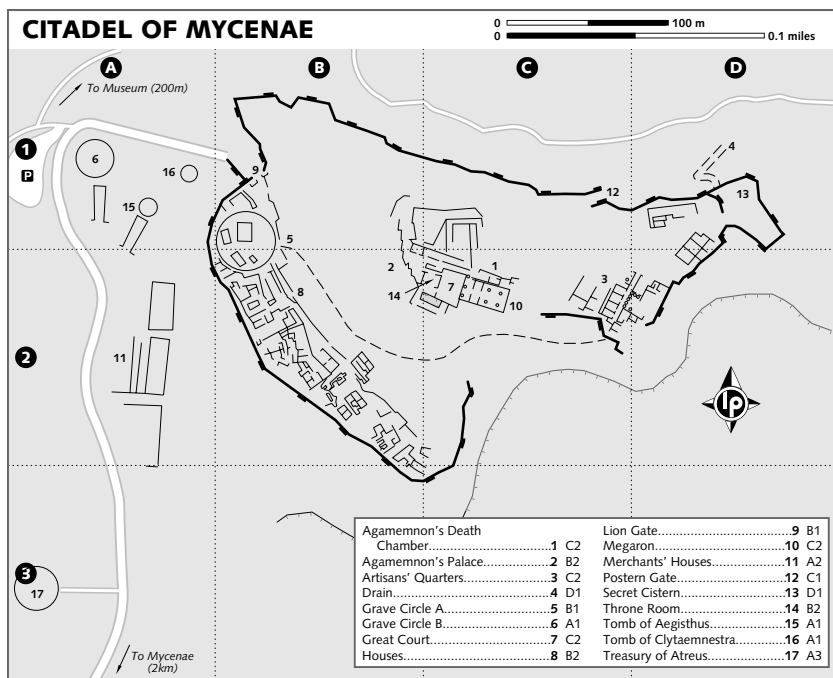
In the barren foothills of Mt Agios Ilias (750m) and Mt Zara (600m) stand the sombre and mighty ruins of **Ancient Mycenae** (☎ 27510 76585; Citadel, Treasury of Atreus & museum €8; ☎ site 8am–7.30pm summer, 8.30am–3pm winter). For 400 years (1600–1200 BC) this vestige of a kingdom was the most powerful in Greece, holding sway over the Argolid (the modern-day prefecture of Argolis) and influencing the other Mycenaean kingdoms.

History & Mythology

World Heritage-listed Mycenae is synonymous with the names Homer and Schliemann. In the 9th century BC Homer told in his epic poems, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, of 'well-built Mycenae, rich in gold'. These poems were, until the 19th century, regarded as no more than gripping and beautiful legends. But in the 1870s the amateur archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann (1822–90), despite derision from professional archaeologists, struck gold, first at Troy then at Mycenae (although, owing to doubts about the provenance of some of his information and even allegations that he falsified some finds to fit his theories, his reputation has since suffered).

In Mycenae, myth and history are inextricably linked. According to Homer, the city of Mycenae was founded by Perseus, the son of Danae and Zeus. Perseus' greatest heroic deed was the killing of the hideous snake-haired Medusa, whose looks literally petrified the beholder. Eventually, the dynasty of Perseus was overthrown by Pelops, a son of Tantalus. The Mycenaean Royal House of Atreus was probably descended from Pelops, although myth and history are so intertwined, and the genealogical line so complex, that no-one really knows. Whatever the bloodlines, by Agamemnon's time the House of Atreus was the most powerful of the Achaeans (Homer's name for the Greeks). It eventually came to a sticky end, fulfilling the curse that had been cast because of Pelops' misdeeds.

The historical facts are that Mycenae was first settled by Neolithic people in the 6th millennium BC. Between 2100 and 1900 BC, during the Old Bronze Age, Greece was invaded by people of Indo-European stock who had crossed Anatolia via Troy to Greece. The invaders brought an advanced culture to then-primitive Mycenae and other mainland



settlements. This new civilisation is now referred to as the Mycenaean, named after its most powerful kingdom. The other kingdoms included Pylos, Tiryns, Corinth and Argos, all in the Peloponnese. Evidence of Mycenaean civilisation has also been found at Thiva (Thebes) and Athens.

The city of Mycenae consisted of a fortified citadel and surrounding settlement. Due to the sheer size of the citadel walls (13m high and 7m thick), formed by stone blocks weighing six tonnes in places, the ancient Greeks believed they must have been built by a Cyclops, one of the giants described in the *Odyssey*.

Archaeological evidence indicates that the palaces of the Mycenaean kingdoms declined some time around 1200 BC and the palace itself was set ablaze in about 1100 BC. Whether the destruction was the work of outsiders or due to internal division between the various Mycenaean kingdoms remains unresolved.

Exploring the Site

Before exploring the site, it's a good idea to head to the impressive **museum** (admission incl site fee of €8; ☎ noon-7.30pm Mon, 8am-7.30pm Tue-Fri, 8am-

7.30pm Sat & Sun). It has good English explanations and contains numerous impressive finds from the digs, including pottery, weaponry and jewellery. On display are the important early clay tablets inscribed in Linear B, an early form of written language first unearthed in Knossos and a sign of the kingdom's wealth and power – not to mention the highly organised nature of its administration.

The lavish gold jewellery exhibits on display, including the gold funeral mask once thought to have been that of Agamemnon, are in fact copies (the originals can be found at the National Archaeological Museum in Athens, see p120).

Entry to the **Citadel of Mycenae** is through the dramatic **Lion Gate**, solidly constructed of massive stone blocks, over which rear two large lionesses. This motif is believed to have been the insignia of the Royal House of Atreus.

Inside the citadel, you will find **Grave Circle A** on the right as you enter. This was the royal cemetery and contained six grave shafts. Five shafts were excavated by Schliemann between 1874 and 1876, uncovering the famous and magnificent gold treasures, including a well-

preserved gold death mask. Fervently, he sent a telegram to the Greek king stating, 'I have gazed upon the face of Agamemnon'. The mask turned out to be that of an unknown king who had died some 300 years before Agamemnon.

To the south of Grave Circle A are the remains of a group of houses. In one was discovered the famous **Warrior Vase**, regarded by Schliemann as one of his greatest discoveries because it offered a glimpse of what Mycenae's legendary warriors looked like.

The main path leads up to **Agamemnon's Palace**, centred on the **Great Court**. The rooms to the north were the private royal apartments. One of these rooms is believed to be the chamber in which Agamemnon was murdered. Access to the **throne room**, west of the Great Court, would originally have been via a large staircase. On the southeastern side of the palace is the **megaron** (reception hall).

On the northern boundary of the citadel is the **Postern Gate** through which, it is said, Orestes escaped after murdering his mother. In the far northeastern corner of the citadel is the **secret cistern**, which can be explored by torchlight, but take care – the steps are slippery.

Until the late 15th century BC the Mycenaeans put their royal dead into shaft graves. They then devised a new form of burial – the **tholos** tomb, shaped like a beehive. The approach road to modern Mycenae passes to the right of the best preserved of these, the **Treasury of Atreus**, or tomb of Agamemnon. A 40m-long passage leads to this immense

beehive-shaped chamber. It is built with stone blocks that get steadily smaller as the structure tapers to its central point. Further along the road on the right is **Grave Circle B**, and nearby are the **tholos tombs** of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Atreus (☎ 27510 76221; atreus1@otenet.gr; camp sites per adult/tent €6/3.50; ☎ Apr-Oct; P) A well-equipped, shady camping ground on the edge of town on the main road from Fihitio. The friendly owner, Pandelis, speaks English.

Hotel Klitemnistra (☎ 27510 76451; www.klitemnistrahotel.gr; s/d/tr incl breakfast €35/40/40; ☎) This place has half a dozen clean, comfortable rooms, some with great balconies overlooking pretty rolling hills. Wi-fi access is available. The friendly Australian-Greek owners can suggest walks in the area. Book ahead in summer.

Any of the town tavernas serve a standard grill (mains €6 to €10), although you may have to compete with tourist groups en-masse.

Getting There & Away

Three daily buses head to Mycenae from Nafplio (€2.15, one hour) and Argos (€1.35, 30 minutes). The buses stop in the village and at the ancient site.

Other services, such as Athens-Nafplio, advertise a stop at Mycenae but actually go no closer than the village of Fihitio on the main road, leaving you 3km from the village.

AGAMEMNON AFFAIRS

Agamemnon is one of the principal characters in the *Iliad* and crops up regularly in Greek legend. He was the son of Atreus and the king of Mycenae and was later the commander-in-chief of the Greeks during the Trojan war. He and his brother, Menelaus, both married the daughters of the King of Sparta, Clytemnestra and Helen.

According to legend, Paris, the son of the Trojan King, stole away Helen; this was the catalyst for the Trojan War when Agamemnon called on his country's princes to unite in a war of revenge. Around this time the goddess of hunting, Artemis, also sought revenge from Agamemnon and stalled the departing war ships with adverse winds. To make peace with Artemis, Agamemnon was forced to offer his daughter, Iphigenia, as a sacrifice. When Artemis then set the seas right again, the ships sailed from Aulis for Troy and the 10-year siege of Troy began. During the last year of war Agamemnon had a jealous quarrel with Achilles over the attentions of a captive female. Finally, Agamemnon returned to Argolis victorious with his war spoils, which included Cassandra, the Trojan princess. His victory was shortlived; on his return home he was murdered by his wife and her lover, Aegisthus.

Years later Agamemnon's daughter, Electra, and her brother, Orestes, avenged their father's death by murdering Aegisthus and Clytemnestra.

NAFLIO ΝΑΪΠΛΙΟ

pop 13,822

The secret is out about Nafplio, one of Greece's prettiest and most romantic towns. It occupies a knockout location – on a small port beneath the towering bulk of the Palamidi fortress – and is graced with attractive narrow streets, elegant Venetian houses, neo-classical mansions with flower-bedecked balconies, and interesting museums. Overseas visitors have caught on to why weekend Athenians love this lively, upwardly mobile place that is jammed with quayside cafés, posh boutiques and many comfortable hotels and guesthouses.

The town, 12km southeast of Argos on the Argolic Gulf, was the first capital of

Greece after Independence and has been a major port since the Bronze Age. So strategic was its position that it had three fortresses – the massive principal fortress of Palamidi, the smaller Akronafplia and the diminutive Bourtzi on an islet west of the old town.

Removed from the spotlight as capital of Greece after Kapodistrias' assassination (by the Maniot chieftains Konstantinos and Georgos Mavromihalis), the town of Nafplio is regaining attention as a trendy resort (it does get somewhat overcrowded in high season and holidays). With good bus connections and services, the town is an ideal base from which to explore many nearby ancient sites.

Orientation

The old town occupies a narrow promontory with the Akronafplia fortress on the southern side and the promenades of Bouboulinas and Akti Miaouli on the north side.

The principal streets of the old town are Amalias, Vasileos Konstantinou, Staikopoulou and Kapodistriou. The old town's central square is Plateia Syntagmatos, at the western end of Vasileos Konstantinou.

The bus station can be found on Syngrou, which is the street separating the old town from the new.

The main street of the new town, known to locals by the name Neapolis, is 25 Martiou, which is an easterly continuation of Staikopoulou.



Information

BOOKSHOPS

Odyssey (☎ 27520 23430; Plateia Syntagmatos) Stocks international newspapers, maps, and a small selection of novels in English, French and German.

EMERGENCY

Hospital (☎ 27520 98100; cnr Asklipeio & Kolokotroni)

Tourist police (☎ 27520 98728; Eleftheriou 2)

INTERNET ACCESS

Echorama (☎ 27520 26050; Staikopoulou 31; per hr €3; ☎ 10am-9pm) A CD shop in the heart of the old town with a few internet terminals and fast connections.

Internet Café Dadis (☎ 27520 29688; Asklipeio 15; per hr €3; ☎ 9am-midnight) A hike out of town but more high-tech and with later opening hours. Also serves drinks, including a selection of 165 whiskeys (it's aiming for 200).

LAUNDRY

Bubbles (☎ 27520 29260; Asklipeio 61; per load up to 5kg €9; ☎ 8am-9pm) At the western edge of town next to the army barracks.

MONEY

All the major banks have branches in town. The following banks listed here have ATMs. **Alpha Bank** (Amalias) At the western end of the street. **National Bank of Greece** (Plateia Syntagmatos)

POST

Post office (cnr Syngrou & Sidiras Merarhias; ☎ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri)

TOURIST INFORMATION

Municipal Tourist Office (☎ 27520 24444; 25 Martiou 4; ☎ 9am-1pm & 4-8pm) Not the strongest aspect of the town's services.

Staikos Tours (☎ 27520 27950; www.staikotravel.gr; Bouboulinas 50) A helpful source, as well as an efficient service for all travel services.

Sights & Activities

PALAMIDI FORTRESS

This vast and spectacular **citadel** (☎ 27520 28036; adult/concession €4/2; ☎ 8am-7pm summer, 8am-3pm winter) stands on a 216m-high outcrop of rock with excellent views down onto the sea and surrounding land. It was built by the Venetians between 1711 and 1714, and is regarded as a masterpiece of military architecture. Within its walls stands a series of independent bastions, strategically located across the hill. The most important, and best preserved, is the western **Agios Andreas Bastion**, which stands at the top

INFORMATION		SLEEPING		Epi Skinis.....36 C2	
Alpha Bank.....1 B3	Aetoma.....17 C3	Marinopoulos.....37 C2			
Echorama.....2 C3	Amphitryon Hotel.....18 A3	Mezedopoleio O Noulis.....38 C3			
Hospital.....3 F3	Dimitris Bekas.....19 B3	O Pseiras.....39 F4			
Internet Café Dadis.....4 F2	Hotel Amfitriti.....20 B3	Omorfi Poli.....40 B2			
Municipal Tourist Office.....5 D3	Hotel Byron.....21 B3	Taverna Paleo Arhontiko.....41 B3			
National Bank of Greece.....6 B3	Hotel Economou.....22 F1	To Omorfo Tavernaki.....42 B2			
Odyssey.....7 B3	Hotel Epidaurus.....23 B3				
Staikos Tours.....8 C2	Hotel Grande Bretagne.....24 B2				
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		DRINKING		Lathos.....43 B3	
Akronafplia Fortress.....9 A4	Hotel Iliion.....25 B3				
Archaeological Museum.....10 B3	Hotel Latini.....26 B2				
Church of Agios Spyridon.....11 B3	Hotel Nafsimedon.....27 D3				
National Gallery–Alexandros Soutzos Museum.....12 E3	Hotel Rex.....28 D2				
Palamidi Fortress.....13 D4	Kyveli Suites.....29 B2				
Peloponnese Folklore Foundation Museum.....14 C2	Nafplia Palace.....30 A3				
Plateia Poliko.....15 A3	Pension Marianna.....31 C3				
Nosokomiou.....16 C3	Pension Nikolaos.....32 A3				
War Museum.....16 C3	EATING		SHOPPING		
	Amimoni Restaurant.....(see 30)				
	Antica Gelateria di Roma.....33 B2				
	Arapakos.....34 B2				
	Atlantik.....35 D2				
TRANSPORT		Avis.....48 C2			
		Boats to Bourtzi.....49 B2			
		Euro Moto Rent.....50 D2			
		KTEL Argolis Bus Station.....51 C3			
		Staikos Tours.....(see 8)			
		Taxi Rank.....52 C3			

of the steps from town. It was the home of the garrison commander, and it is named after the tiny church in the interior courtyard. There are wonderful views over the Akronafplia and the old town from the bastion walls.

The **Miltiades Bastion**, to the northeast, is the largest of the bastions. It was used as a prison for condemned criminals from 1840 to 1920. War of Independence hero Theodore Kolokotronis spent several years here after being condemned for treason.

There are two main approaches to the fortress. You can go via the road (taxis cost about €6 to €7 one way) or the energetic can tackle the seemingly endless steps that begin southeast of the bus station. The exact number of steps is an issue of much conjecture. Locals claim that there are 999 steps, which has prompted many travellers to conduct independent counts. Most report a considerably lower figure; locals respond that the 999 steps are to the Church of Agios Andreas. Whatever the number, climb early and take water.

AKRONAFPLIA FORTRESS

Rising above the old part of town, the **Akronafplia fortress** is the oldest of Nafplio's three castles, although there's much less to see here than at the other two forts. The lower sections of the walls date back to the Bronze Age. Until the arrival of the Venetians, the town was restricted to within its walls. The Turks called it *İç Kale* (meaning 'inner castle'). It was used as a political prison from 1936 to 1956.

There's a lift up to the fortress from **Plateia Poliko Nosokomiou** at the western edge of town – look for the flags at the entrance of the tunnel leading to the lift. It heads up to a flash hotel complex (see Nafplia Palace, p184) from where you can access the fortress. The old gateway to the fortress, crowned with a fine Venetian lion emblem, is at the top of Potamianou, the stepped street that heads uphill off Plateia Agios Spiridonos.

BOURTZI

The island fortress of Bourtzi lies about 600m west of the town's port. Most of the existing structure was built by the Venetians. Boats to the island leave from the northeastern end of Akti Miaouli. The trip costs €4 return per person.

MUSEUMS

Nafplio's award-winning **Peloponnese Folklore Foundation Museum** (27520 28947; Vasileos Alexandrou 1; adult/concession €4/2; 9am–3pm Tue–Sun) is a beautifully displayed collection of folk costumes and household items from Nafplio's former times.

National Gallery – Alexandros Soutzos Museum (Sidiras Merarhias 23; adult/concession €3/1.50, admission free Mon; 10am–3pm & 5–8pm Wed–Mon, 10am–2pm Sun) Housed in a stunningly restored neoclassical building, this beautiful new gallery – an arm of the Athens National Gallery – displays works on the 1821 Greek War of Independence, including paintings of Greek painters Vryzakis and Tsokos, considered the most

important painters of the postwar years. The paintings, a few sculptures and artefacts are divided according to themes: battles, dying heroes, victorious sea battles, consequences of war in everyday life and ideology of the Free State.

The **war museum** (Amalias 22; admission free; 9am–2pm Tue–Sun) traces Greece's military history from the War of Independence onwards through a collection of photographs, paintings, uniforms and assorted weaponry.

At the time of research the **Archaeological Museum** was closed for renovation, but you'll no doubt view its lovely building on Plateia Syntagmatos.

BEACHES

Arvanitia Beach is a small pebble beach just 10 minutes' walk south of town, tucked beside the Akronafplia fortress.

If you're feeling energetic, you can follow a path east around the coast for about an hour to sandy **Karathona Beach**, at the far side of the Palamidi fortress. The walk is extremely pretty, as would be the beach if it weren't for the litter.

Walking Tour

At the time of research the town's Cultural Organisation was testing a new initiative – a recorded walking tour of the town. The walks and accompanying map and commentary – in English and other languages – are fascinating. The high-tech sound device allows you to plug in any number of the 50 or so sites, as desired. These are available at information booths on Plateia Filellinon or in front of the Town Hall. The walks are currently free, although fee introductions are being planned; in any case, you must leave your passport as a deposit. Check www.nafpliotour.gr for details.

Festivals & Events

Nafplio hosts a **classical music festival** (www.nafplionfestival.gr) at some stage between late May and July featuring Greek and international performers. The venues used during this festival include the Palamidi fortress and Bourtzi.

The town is also a good base for visits to Epidaurus for performances (to a changing programme) at the famous theatre during the **Hellenic Festival** in July and August (for details, see p187).

Sleeping BUDGET

The old town is the most interesting place to be, although budget accommodation is limited.

Camping Lido (27520 59396; camp sites per adult/tent €7/6) This well-organised camping ground, located at Tolo, 11km from Nafplio, receives rave reviews from travellers. It also has bungalows (per double €45). There are hourly buses to/from Nafplio (€1) until 8pm.

Hotel Economou (27520 23955; Argonafton 22; dm without bathroom €10, s €15–20, d €25–30, tr €45) This basic but adequate hotel keeps a couple of shared rooms aside for budget travellers. The welcoming elderly owner speaks English. Turn at the Dia Discount supermarket.

Dimitris Bekas (27520 24594; Eftimiopoulou 26; s/d/tr €22/28/38) The only good, central budget option. The clean, homey rooms have a top-value location on the slopes of the Akronafplia, as does its rooftop terrace.

Hotel Epidaurus (/fax 27520 27541; Kokinou 2; s/d €40/50/70) Just makes the grade, with ageing décor and fittings.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Byron (27520 22351; www.byronhotel.gr; Platonos 2; d €60–80, tr €90;) Occupying a fine Venetian building and reasonably priced, the Byron is a reliable favourite, with neat rooms, iron bedsteads and period furniture. Breakfast costs €6.

our pick **Pension Marianna** (27520 24256; www.pensionmarianna.gr; Potamianou 9; s €60–75, d €75–85, tr €90–100, all incl breakfast;) The choice for Nafplio's best-value sleeping option is this bright yellow icon. The equally warm and welcoming owner-hosts, the Zotos brothers, epitomise Greek *filoxenia* (hospitality) and serve up more than just delicious breakfasts in a cheerful dining area. Clean and comfortable rooms (all different, and some smaller than others) open onto terraces where you can feast on the view from your hill-top position. Heights come at a (small) cost – several flights of stairs. Parking is available on the road behind leading up to the fortress.

Hotel Rex (27520 26907; Bouboulinas 21; s €65–75, d €85–95, tr €100–110) A modern alternative in the new town, but often booked out by groups.

Hotel Nafsimedon (27520 25060; www.nafsimedon.gr; Sidiras Merarhias 9; s €66, d €82–106, tr €97–120, all incl breakfast;) Unpretentious and elegant lodgings in a fine neoclassical mansion just outside

BOUTIQUE HOTELS

Recently, there has been an explosion of boutique hotels in Nafplio, catering to the moneyed Athenians and weekend out-of-towners. Most have between four and eight rooms in tastefully renovated mansions, with contemporary (or period) furnishings, plush fabrics and luxurious touches, including gourmet breakfasts, internet access and cable TV. Following are some excellent choices:

Hotel Amfitriti (☎ 27520 96250; www.amfitriti-pension.gr; Kapodistriou 24; d incl breakfast €85; ♿) The most artistic choice, with five stylish funky rooms. One bathroom has creatively incorporated a former *hammam* (Turkish bath).

Kyveli Suites (☎ 27520 96230; www.kyveli.com.gr; Alexandrou 18-20; s €90-100, d €120-130) Rich furnishings in contemporary setting, and the best designer loos in Greece.

Aetoma (☎ 27520 27373; www.nafplionhotel.com; Plateia Agiou Spiridonos 2; d €90-110, tr €130) Dark, heavy and stylish furnishings. Readers report enjoyable stays in this 170-year-old mansion.

Hotel Latini (☎ 27520 96470; www.latinihotel.gr; s/d/ste €80/90/140) Overlooking the pretty Plateia Agiou Nikolaou, with sunny, airy rooms and great views of the castle, water or plaza.

Pension Nikolaos (☎ 27520 96282; www.pension-nikolaos.com; Plateia Psaromachala; s/d/tr €70/130/150) At the far western end of the old town, with lovely outlook over a quaint plaza and DIY breakfasts stocked in your fridge. Doubles are small.

the old town. Antique rugs, timber floorboards and period furniture add to its charm.

Hotel Iliion (☎ 27520 25114; www.iliionhotel.gr; Kapi-distriou 4; s incl breakfast €70, d incl breakfast €80-180) In-your-face elaborate rococo-style décor with your very own frescoes and fiddly bits.

Hotel Grande Bretagne (☎ 27520 96200; www.grandbretagne.com.gr; Plateia Filellinon; s/d/tr incl breakfast €130/180/280; ♿) Nafplion elegance – this is a plush, traditionally styled period hotel and right in the heart of the waterfront café action. Reduced rates on weekdays.

TOP END

Amphitryon Hotel (☎ 27520 70700; www.amphitryon.gr; Spiliadou; d €290; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This luxurious choice is close to Nafplio's café action and has contemporary décor, a touch of snob value, and comfort and service to match. Rates are higher for superior luxury and executive rooms. There is no single occupancy rate, but singles can have a double 'delux' room at single rates on Sunday to Thursday for €261.

Nafplia Palace (☎ 27520 70800; www.nafplionhotels.gr; Akronafplia; d/bungalows/villas €350/480/1300; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) For a step up in the ultimate take-no-prisoners luxury stakes, Amphitryon's sister hotel offers ultramodern, uberchic villas, with personal butlers, hi-tech audiovisuals and mini swimming pools.

Eating

The streets of the old town are filled with dozens of restaurants, all serving good, hearty

taverna fare. The in-your-face tourist eateries along Staikopoulou won't stretch your sense of adventure; instead explore the alleys, where you'll find hidden treats.

Mezedopoleio O Noulis (☎ 27520 25541; Moutzouridou 22; mezehes €2-10; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat) This modest place serves a faultlessly fresh range of mezehes. The tasting plate of 10 different morsels is a tasty lunch in itself.

Omorfí Poli (☎ 27520 29452; Bouboulinas 75; mains €7-18; ☎ dinner Mon-Sat) More upmarket than the neighbouring tavernas and well worth splurging the extra euro or two, the professional chef does gourmet wonders with Greek and Italian dishes to a changing menu (surprise!). If it's on offer, try to catch the farfalle with salmon (€9). There is an excellent wine list with many local choices (€17 to €47).

our pick Antica Gelateria di Roma (☎ 27520 23520; www.anticagelateria.gr; cnr Farmakopoulou & Komninou) 'Bongiorno – this is an Italian gelati shop!' announces Italian gelati *maestro* and *maestra* Marcello and Claudio Raffo as you enter their premises. That's just in case you didn't see and smell (and we'll bet, soon taste) the smorgasbord of the best (yes, best) traditional gelati outside Italy. And don't say we didn't warn you!

Recommended tavernas open daily for lunch and dinner (unless stated otherwise): **Arapakos** (☎ 27520 27675; Bouboulinas 81; mains €6-10, fish per kg €25-80) If you're feeling fishy, hook onto this upmarket morsel for quality seafood.

Epi Skinis (☎ 27520 21331; mains €6-10) The name means 'on stage'. The menu is less theatrical, but puts in an excellent performance.

O Pseiras (☎ 27520 24117; Porou 5; mains €6-10; ☎ dinner Wed-Mon) This no-nonsense taverna will get you out of your comfort zone (it's in the Prania region, west of town), with reasonable fare, fun hosts and occasional live music.

Taverna Paleo Arhontiko (☎ 27520 22449; Ypsilandou; mains €6-13) The 'Old Mansion' is popular for its reasonably priced hearty dishes. There's live music nightly in summer and on Friday and Saturday nights in winter.

To Omorfo Tavernaki (☎ 27520 25944; Olgas 1; mains €6-12) Smaller servings of homemade delights in a convivial restaurant adorned with antique oddments. The mezehes plate (€6) is especially good.

Self-caterers will find a choice of supermarkets in Nafplio's new town, including **Marinopoulos** (cnr Syngrou & Flessa) and **Atlantik** (Bouboulinas 24).

Drinking

Despite being simply jammed with cafés and bars, there still doesn't seem to be enough of them in town to hold the throngs of trendy party animals who flock to Nafplio in summer. Most options are on Bouboulinas – just cruise along until you find an image (and the latest décor) to your taste and a musical volume you can handle.

Lathos (Vasileos Konstantinou 3; ☎ 7pm-late Wed-Mon) An alternative to the above in every respect, this quirky drinking hole is jam-packed with remote-controlled junkyard automata from moving tables to an arm clanging a cymbal. Depending on his mood, the DJ plays a hazardous mix of musical beats – perfect for jiving with your surroundings.

Shopping

The alleyways of Nafplio's old town between Plateia Syntagmatos and the war museum are the places for browsing for clothing, jewellery, accessories and anything boutique oriented.

To Entotio (☎ 27520 21143; Staikopoulou 40) Traditional and modern Greek shadow puppets are created and sold here. Prices start at €10.

Nektar & Amvrosia (Nectar & Ambrosia; ☎ 27520 43001; Farmakopoulou 6) Nikos 'the honey man' sells a delectable range of honey, produced using traditional methods. Sweet indeed. See boxed text, p186.

Karonis (☎ 27520 24446; Amalias 5) Wine enthusiasts can find a fine selection of wines from all over the country, especially Nemean reds.

Museum of the Komboloi (☎ 27520 21618; www.komboloi.gr; Staikopoulou 25; adult/concession €3/free; ☎ 9.30am-9pm Mon-Thu & Sun, to 9.30pm Fri & Sat) More of a shop than a museum, it sells *komboloi* (worry beads), evil-eye charms and amulets.

Getting There & Away

The **KTEL Argolis bus station** (☎ 27520 27323; Syngrou 8) has buses to Athens (€11.30, 2½ hours, hourly) via Corinth (€5.50, 1½ hours), Argos (€1.20, 30 minutes, half-hourly), Tolo (€1.20, 15 minutes, hourly), Epidavros (€2.15, 45 minutes, four daily), Mycenae (€2.15, one hour, three daily), Kranidi (€6.60, two hours, three daily Monday to Saturday) and Galatas (€7, two hours, two daily Monday to Friday). Other destinations include Tripoli (€4.05, 1½ hours, four daily Monday to Friday, two on Saturday and Sunday). Note: weekend schedules are often reduced.

Getting Around

For taxis call ☎ 27520 24120 or head to the rank on Syngrou.

There are several car-rental places in town, so it pays to shop around.

Avis (☎ 27520 24160/1; www.carrental-greece.gr; Bouboulinas 51)

Euro Moto Rent (☎ 27520 21407; eurokalk@otenet.gr; Polizoidou 8) Also rents bicycles and motorcycles.

Staikos Tours (☎ 27520 27950; www.staikostravel.gr; Bouboulinas 50) A travel agency that uses a range of car outlets.

AROUND NAFPLIO

Tiryns Τίρυνθα

Situated 4km from Nafplio, just to the east of the Nafplio-Argos road, is the impressive acropolis of **Tiryns** (☎ 27520 22657; adult/concession €3/2; ☎ 8.30am-7pm summer, 8.30am-3pm winter), an important Mycenaean acropolis and the apogee of Mycenaean architectural achievement, especially its massive walls. In parts, they are 7m thick and, according to mythology, were built by the Cyclopes.

Tiryns shares equal billing on the World Heritage list with Mycenae, although its setting is less awe-inspiring. You'll need imagination to envisage its former glory, but the layout of some of the ruins is easy to make out, and there are few crowds. As yet, the site has no signs or descriptions; it's worth buying a guide book, such as *Tiryns* by Dr Alkestis Papademetriou (€7), at the ticket office. While further

NIKOS, THE (DESIGNER) HONEY MAN

Bees have been integral to the life of Nikos Reppas. Since the age of three, his job in his family's long-running honey business was to smoke the bees out of their hives while his father collected the honey. 'Bees have been my family's work for 200 years,' he boasts proudly. Now, he says (he takes a long drag on his hand-rolled cigarette and leans lazily forward to stir his strong espresso – his fourth for the day), he has had another 37 years' experience in all aspects of the honey industry from production to sales. Nikos owns and runs honey shop **Nektar & Amvrosia** (Nectar & Ambrosia; see p185) in the town of Nafplio.

Nikos gets a buzz from his bees. He has 500 hives from which he gains 50,000kg of honey annually. He collects, jars and sells the honey to locals and tourists. Sometimes he adds extras – such as walnuts or pistachios – to the chemical-free, organic honey syrup.

Nafplio's contemporary honey man is not your elderly labourer with calloused hands. This man doesn't drive a *bakaziera* (the miniature trucks with tray, quite common in villages), and his shop is far from a tin shed with jars. This guy sports designer shirts (that's when he's not wearing a T-shirt with a bee print) and his other passions include his two 1000cc motorbikes. His self-designed shop window features a huge wire hive dripping with giant bees and a beekeeper outfit (an all-white uniform which, apart from the long rubber boots, resembles an astronaut's attire). Inside, mirrored shelves hold lines of perfectly spaced jars.

Nikos repeatedly stresses that Greece, especially Nafplio, is the best region in the world for producing honey. 'This area is away from citrus trees (these don't produce high-quality nectar) and there are no chemicals. This region has many wildflowers and herbs with excellent-quality nectar, plus thyme and sage. We take the bees to Tripoli so they can feed off the region's pine. Each flavour is special.'

But back to being the honey man. Nikos loves the variety in his work and the fact that there is no 'typical' day. Full season (between March and October) is his busiest time. 'I get up early, open the hives, inspect the bees and see what work needs to be done. I come to the shop around 10am and return, sometimes, to the hives in the afternoon.'

He enjoys the ongoing learning process related to the complicated life of bees. 'You need to be around them all day in order to understand them at a basic level. And you need a lifetime to learn about their lives; these are like labyrinths.'

Each time Nikos collects the honey, he is stung at least 10 times. 'I like the stings – they are merely honey, royal jelly and pollen and this is good for your health,' he says. (Spoken like a true Greek.) 'Besides,' he adds, 'bees are among the most intelligent and creative living creatures on earth.'

While Nikos currently has no children to whom he is passing on his knowledge, he is training up to 10 beekeepers in the traditional practices. 'It's very important that we keep this knowledge and tradition going in Greece. Our honey is like caviar – top of its class. This is not only important for the Greek economy, but also, we want people to experience the best honey on earth!'

Nikos may be taking the tradition out of the honey men, but (thankfully) not the honey men out of the tradition.

excavations continue, visitors are limited to exploring the Upper and Lower Citadels.

Any Nafplio–Argos bus can drop you outside the site.

EPIDAVROS ΕΠΙΔΑΥΡΟΣ

In its day **Epidavros** (☎ 27530 22009; admission €6; 🕒 8am–7.30pm summer, 7.30am–5pm winter), 30km east of Nafplio, was famed and revered as far away as Rome as a place of miraculous healing. Visitors came great distances to this sanctuary of Asclepius,

god of medicine, to seek a cure for their ailments.

Today visitors are more likely to flock to the site for its amazingly well-preserved theatre, which is still a venue during the Hellenic Festival (opposite) for classical Greek theatre (along with other more modern plays, opera and music), first performed here up to 2000 years ago. The site occupies a glorious setting amid pine-clad hills. Not surprisingly, Epidavros is protected under World Heritage listing.

History

Legend has it that Asclepius was the son of Apollo and Coronis. While giving birth to Asclepius, Coronis was struck by a thunder bolt and killed. Apollo took his son to Mt Pelion where the physician Chiron instructed the boy in the healing arts.

Apollo was worshipped at Epidavros in Mycenaean and Archaic times, but by the 4th century BC he had been superseded by his son. Epidavros became acknowledged as the birthplace of Asclepius. Although the afflicted worshipped Asclepius at sanctuaries throughout Greece, the two most important were at Epidavros and on the island of Kos. The fame of the sanctuary spread, and when a plague raged in Rome, Livy and Ovid came to Epidavros to seek help.

It is believed that licks from snakes were one of the curative practices at the sanctuary. Asclepius is normally shown with a serpent, which – by renewing its skin – symbolises rejuvenation. Other treatments provided at the sanctuary involved diet instruction, herbal medicines and occasionally even surgery. The sanctuary also served as an entertainment venue and every four years, during the Festival of Asclepieia, Epidavros hosted dramas and athletic competitions.

Sights

THEATRE

Today it's the 3rd-century theatre, not the sanctuary, that pulls the crowds to Epidavros. It is one of the best-preserved classical Greek buildings, renowned for its amazing acoustics; a coin dropped in the centre can be heard from the highest seat. Built of limestone, the theatre seats up to 14,000 people. Its entrance is flanked by restored **Corinthian pilasters**. It's used for performances of ancient drama during the annual Hellenic Festival (right).

SANCTUARY

The ruins of the sanctuary are less crowded than the theatre. In the south is the huge **kata-gogion**, a hostelry for pilgrims and patients. To the west is the large **banquet hall** in which the Romans built an **odeum**. It was here that the Festival of Asclepieia took place. Opposite is the **stadium**, venue for the festival's athletic competitions.

To the north are the foundations of the **Temple of Asclepius** and next to them is the **abaton**. The therapies practised here seemed

to have depended on the influence of the mind upon the body. It is believed that patients were given a pep talk by a priest on the powers of Asclepius, then put to sleep in the *abaton* to dream of a visitation by the god. The dream would hold the key to the healing process.

East is the **Sanctuary of Egyptian Gods**, which indicates that the cult of Asclepius was an adaptation of the cult of Imhotep, worshipped in Egypt for his healing powers. To the west of the Temple of Asclepius are the remains of the **tholos** (built 360–320 BC); the function of which is unknown.

Set among the green foothills of Mt Arahneo, the air redolent with herbs and pine trees, it's easy to see how the sanctuary would have had a beneficial effect upon the ailing. Considering the state of Greece's current health system, perhaps the centre should be resurrected.

MUSEUM

The museum, between the sanctuary and the theatre, houses statues, stone inscriptions recording miraculous cures, surgical instruments, votive offerings and partial reconstructions of the sanctuary's once-elaborate *tholos*. There's not much in the way of written information but some of the statuary and the chunks of marble do hint at the sanctuary's former status. After the theatre, the *tholos* is considered to have been the site's most impressive building and fragments of beautiful, intricately carved reliefs from its ceiling are also displayed.

Festivals & Events

Epidavros Theatre stages performances to a changing programme (with both modern theatre and ancient Greek dramas) during the annual **Hellenic Festival** in July and August. Tickets can be bought in Epidavros at the **site office** (☎ 27530 22026; www.hellenicfestival.gr; 🕒 9am–2pm & 5–8pm Mon–Thu, 9.30am–9.30pm Fri & Sat), or from the Hellenic Festival box office in Athens (p130). Prices vary according to seating, and student discounts are available. There are special buses from Athens and Nafplio.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Avaton (☎ 27530 22178; fax 27530 23059; s/d €35/55; 📍 🚻) If you're planning an early-morning visit to the site, this small, clean

and modern hotel is the best accommodation option, just 1km away, at the junction of the road to Kranidi and the ancient theatre.

There is a choice of restaurants on the main street of Ligourio.

Getting There & Away

There are buses from Nafplio to Epidavros (€2.15, 45 minutes, four daily), and three buses daily to Athens from nearby Ligourio (€10.80, 2½ hours). Buses depart from the main bus station.

SOUTHWEST ARGOLIS

Very few travellers take the time to venture down to the southwestern heel of the Argolis Peninsula, centred on the agricultural service town of **Kranidi**, located 90km southeast of Nafplio. The region is famous for its pomegranates, which appreciate the mild winter temperatures around here. These spectacular ruby-red fruits ripen in November.

The small resorts of **Porto Heli**, 4km south of Kranidi, and **Ermioni**, 4km east of Kranidi, are both popular weekend escapes for Athenians. For travellers, they offer convenient connections to the Saronic Gulf islands of Hydra and Spetses.

The **Frachthi Cave** (admission free), overlooking Kilada Bay 7km north of Kranidi, rates among the most important early sites in Europe. Excavations around here have revealed a history of continuous occupation from Upper Paleolithic to Late Neolithic times (25,000–3000 BC), providing a perfect snapshot of the slow transformation from a hunter-gatherer society to a pastoralist society. The turn-off to the cave is signposted 6km north of Kranidi, just south of the village of Fourni. The road leads another 4km to a small pebble (and littered) beach. A sign painted on the rocks at the southern end of the beach points to a path that weaves 300m around the shoreline, taking you to the cave entrance.

The cave is floodlit at night, creating a spectacular backdrop for diners at the fish restaurants at **Kilada**, on the southern side of the bay.

Getting There & Away BUS

There are bus services between Kranidi and Nafplio (€6.60, two hours, three daily except Sunday), and local buses from Kranidi to

Ermioni (€1.20, 10 minutes, five daily) and Porto Heli (€1.20, 10 minutes, four daily).

HYDROFOIL

There are at least four high-season hydrofoils (☎ 27540 51543, in Athens 210 413 2188; www.euroseas.com) daily (with different companies) departing from Porto Heli to Piraeus (€31.50, two hours) via Spetses (€5, 10 minutes) and Hydra (€11.50, 50 minutes), and four daily from Ermioni to Piraeus (€25.50, two hours) via Hydra (€7.50, 20 minutes).

ARKADIA ΑΡΚΑΔΙΑ

The picturesque rural prefecture of Arkadia occupies much of the central Peloponnese. Its name evokes images of grassy meadows, forested mountains, gurgling streams and shady grottoes. It was a favourite haunt of Pan, who played his pipes, guarded herds and frolicked with nymphs in this sunny, bucolic idyll.

Almost encircled by mountain ranges, Arkadia was remote enough in ancient times to remain largely untouched by the battles and intrigues of the rest of Greece, and was the only region of the Peloponnese not conquered by the Dorians. The region – dotted with crumbling medieval villages, remote monasteries and Frankish castles – is popular among outdoor-loving Greeks and, increasingly, like-minded tourists. It also has 100km or so of rugged and unspoilt coastline on the Argolic Gulf, running south from the pretty town of Kiveri to Leonidio.

TRIPOLI ΤΡΙΠΟΛΗ

pop 25,520

The violent recent history of Arkadia's capital, Tripoli (*tree-po-lee*), is in stark contrast with its peaceful rural surroundings. In 1821, during the War of Independence, the town was captured by Kolokotronis and its 10,000 Turkish inhabitants massacred. The Turks retook the town three years later, and burnt it to the ground before withdrawing in 1828.

Tripoli itself is not a place where tourists tend to linger, but it's a major transport hub for the Peloponnese and hard to avoid if you're relying on public transport.

Orientation

Tripoli can seem a little bit confusing at first. The streets radiate out from the central square, Plateia Vasileos Georgiou, like an erratic spider's web. The main streets are Washington, which runs south from Plateia Vasileos Georgiou to Kalamata; Ethnikis Andistasis, which runs north from the square and becomes the road to Kalavryta; and Vasileos Georgiou, which runs east from the square to Plateia Kolokotroni. El Venizelou runs east from Plateia Kolokotroni, leading you to the Corinth road.

The well-organised main KTEL Arkadia bus station is 1km west of Plateia Kolokotroni, past El Venizelou and along the Argos–Corinth road. It's just beyond the AB Supermarket. The city's other bus 'station' is opposite the train station, about a 10-minute walk away, at the southeastern end of Lagopati, the street that runs behind the KTEL Arkadia bus station.

Information

Tripoli has branches of all the major banks on Plateia Kolokotroni and Plateia Vasileos Georgiou.

Lembekos (Plateia Vasileos Georgiou) Sells English-language newspapers.

Memories Lounge Net Café (☎ 2710 235 600; Dareiotou 10; per hr €2; ☎ 8am–late)

Police (☎ 2710 230 540; OHE Ave) Out on the western edge of town, between the train station and the KTEL Arkadia bus station.

Post office (cnr D Plapouta & Nikitara; ☎ 7.30am–8pm Mon–Fri)

Tourist office At the time of research, there was no official tourist office; the Town Hall, which formerly housed the office, was currently under renovation. Best to check its status.

Sights

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

The city's **Archaeological Museum** (☎ 2710 242 148; Evangelistrias 2; adult/concession €2/1; ☎ 8.30am–3pm Tue–Sun) is clearly signposted off Vasileos Georgiou, behind Hotel Alex, and is well worth dropping into. It houses relics from the surrounding ancient sites of Megalopoli, Gortys, Lykosoura, Mantinea and Paliokastro, including some important prehistoric finds, such as Neolithic fertility figures and ornate storage jars, plus sculptures from Herodotus Atticus. The little votive offer-

ings from Arkadian shrines in the area are also interesting.

Sleeping

Hotel Alex (☎ 2710 223 465; Vasileos Georgiou A26; s/d/tr €45/70/90; ☎ P) Centrally positioned, spacious rooms with TV represent good value.

Hotel Anactoricon (☎ 2710 222 545; anactorikon@otenet.gr; Ethnikis Andistasis 48; s/d/tr €67/96/114; ☎ P) The pick of places in town for comfort and plush furnishings, this friendly, family-run boutique-style hotel is beyond the Town Hall.

Eating

Kapaki (☎ 2710 238 235; Kennenty 39; mains €4.50–11; ☎ lunch & dinner) Put the lid on your hunger at this tasteful, central and modern taverna. Dishes include lamb, pork and rooster caseroles.

Taverna Piterou (☎ 2710 222 058; Kalavryton 11a; mains €6–9; ☎ lunch & dinner) A bustling taverna nestling under the shade of vine trellises on Kalavrytou (the northern extension of Ethnikis Andistasis), beyond the park with the old steam train. The huge selection of tasty mains and accompanying side dishes includes rabbit *stifadho* (sweet stew cooked with tomato and onions), beef stew, codfish and even braids of lamb's intestines.

The numerous supermarkets around town include a large **Atlantik** (☎ 2710 223 412; cnr Atlantis & Lagopati).

Getting There & Away BUS

The **KTEL Arkadia bus station** (☎ 2710 222 560; Plateia Kolokotroni) is the main bus terminal, 1km from the city centre. There are 13 buses daily to Athens (€12.80, 2½ hours) via Corinth Isthmus (€7, one hour). There are also two buses daily west to Olympia (€10.60, three hours) and Pyrgos (€12.20, 3½ hours), and four east to Argos (€5, one hour) and Nafplio (€5, 1½ hours).

Regional services include buses to Megalopoli (€2.90, 40 minutes, 10 daily) and Stemnitsa (€3.60, one hour, once daily Monday to Friday). There are also two daily services (one on Sunday) to Dimitsana (€5.60, 1½ hours), Andritsena (€6.80, 1½ hours) via Karitena (€4.50), and Leonidio (€7.80, 2½ hours).

The **bus stop** (☎ 2710 242 086) on Lagopati handles departures to Achaia, Lakonia and

Messinia. Services include buses to Sparta (€4.70, one hour, four daily), Kalamata (€6.90, two hours, 10 daily), Kalavryta (€8, 2½ hours, one daily) and Patra (€11.90, 3½ hours, two daily).

TRAIN

Tripoli lies on the Corinth–Kalamata line. The section between Tripoli and Kalamata passes through some spectacular country and is a favourite with railway enthusiasts. At the time of research, this line was under repair. Although there are replacement buses, it's best to stick with KTEL.

MEGALOPOLI ΜΕΓΑΛΟΠΟΛΗ

pop 5114

Despite its name, there's little left of Megalopoli (Great City) that reflects its former grandeur. It was founded in 371 BC as the capital of a united Arkadia and was nestled in a leafy valley; now the ruins lie near an enormous smoke-spewing power station that's fuelled by coal strip-mined from surrounding plains.

Sadly, the government seems to have abandoned maintenance of Megalopoli's ruins, including the main tourist attraction, a magnificent ancient theatre (now closed); today the town merely acts as a transport hub on the main route from Tripoli to Kalamata and Pyrgos.

Sleeping & Eating

Most hotels in town are booked out long-term by power station workers. Booking ahead is advised.

Hotel Paris (☎ 27910 22410; Agiou Nikolaou 9; s/d/tr €30/40/50; 🚰) Very basic 1960s-style place, but with clean rooms close to the central square, Plateia Polyvriou. It's signposted off Arheou Theatrou, the main road west to Karitena.

There is a supermarket opposite Hotel Paris, and several cheap restaurants around the central square. Recommended:

Estiatorio To Leontari (☎ 27910 25580; Kolokotroni 15; mains €3-7; 🍷 Tue-Sat)

Estiatorio Ivi (☎ 27910 22413; Arheou Theatrou 7; mains €3-7)

Getting There & Away

The bus station is about 25m from Hotel Paris. There are bus services to Athens (€15.60, three hours, eight daily) via Tripoli (€2.90, 40 minutes) and Kalamata (€4.20, one hour), as well

as to Andritsena (€3.90, 1¼ hours, two daily) via Karitena.

CENTRAL ARKADIA

The area to the west of Tripoli is a tangle of medieval villages, precipitous ravines and narrow winding roads, woven into valleys of dense vegetation beneath the slopes of the Menalon Mountains. This is the heart of the Arkadia prefecture, an area with some of the most breathtaking scenery in the Peloponnese. The region is high above sea level and nights are chilly, even in summer. Snow is common in winter.

Generally speaking you'll need your own transport, but the three most important villages – Karitena, Stemnitsa and Dimitsana – are within reach of Tripoli by public transport.

Karitena Καρίταινα

pop 271

High above the Megalopoli–Andritsena road is the splendid medieval village of Karitena (kar-*eet*-eh-nah). A stepped path leads from the central square to the 13th-century **Frankish castle**, perched atop a massive rock. The castle was captured by Greek forces under Kolokotronis early in the War of Independence, and became a key stronghold as the war unfolded.

Before the advent of the euro, Karitena was known as the home of the wonderful arched stone bridge over the River Alfios that adorned the old 5000 drachma note. The old bridge now sits beneath a large modern concrete bridge.

ACTIVITIES

Based in the village of Maratha (northwest of Karitena), **Trekking Hellas of Arcadia** (☎ 21033 10323; www.trekking.gr) offers various activities, including white-water rafting (€52 to €80) on the nearby Lousios and Alfios Rivers, hot dogging in inflatable canoes (€52) and hiking (€20 to €50). Athens-based adventure specialist **Alpin Club** (☎ 21067 53514; www.alpinclub.gr) offers similar trips. Its Peloponnese base is on the main road, just north of the Alfios Bridge.

Caution: river activities must not be taken lightly. At the time of research, six hikers drowned and a couple were still missing after they were swept into the Lousios River, whose banks had collapsed after heavy rain.

SLEEPING & EATING

Vrenthi Rooms (☎ 27910 31650; d/tr €50/65) As one of the few places to stay, this attractive stone hotel could charge a bomb, but it doesn't. It's good value, save for a few gritty problems, including the odd blown light globe. The nearby Café Vrenthi doubles as reception for the rooms.

Stavrodromi (☎ 27910 31284; mains €5-10) Stavrodromi means crossroads, the location of this reliable option – serving warm, filling meals – if the village taverna is closed. It's down the hill at the junction (own transport recommended).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are two buses daily (one on Sunday) from Tripoli to/from Karitena (€4.50, one hour). These may continue to Andritsena (€2) – check the schedule at Café Vrenthi. (Note: some buses arrive/depart from the crossroads, from where it's an arduous walk to the village.)

Stemnitsa Στεμνίτσα

pop 412

Stemnitsa, 15km north of Karitena, is a striking and beautiful village of stone houses and Byzantine churches. North of the village, signposts point the way to a monastery, **Moni Agiou Ioannitou Prodromou**. It's a 20-minute walk beyond the car park, but you'll need to ask around beforehand in the village for the key to see the 15th-century frescoes as monks are no longer there. From here, paths lead to other deserted monasteries, and also south along the riverbank to the site of **ancient Gortys**.

The town boasts a small **folk art museum**, but check the sign for its irregular opening times.

SLEEPING & EATING

Our pick Mpelleiko (☎ 6976607967; www.mpelleiko.gr; s/d/tr incl breakfast €70/80/90) Reaching new heights in design and location, this recently renovated house is perched behind the village and is the most original of all sleeping options. The hospitable English-speaking owner has converted her family home (dating from 1650) into a guesthouse in artistic and tasteful contemporary Greek style. You can even sleep in the former 'donkey basement'. The breakfast room is especially tasteful. For directions, inquire at the sweet shop at the southern end of town; look for the 'B&B' sign.

Hotel Trikolonion (☎ in Athens 210 688 9249; www.countryclub.gr; d incl breakfast €132; 🍷) A member of the Country Club group, the large, stone-hewn Trikolonion offers a more predictable luxurious, lodge-style experience. The rooms feature dark-wood furnishings, muted colours and heavy fabrics. It also has a small spa, gym and sauna. Rates climb around 100% on Friday and Saturday.

To 1821 (☎ 6945350658, 27950 81438; mains €6-9; 🍷 lunch & dinner Wed-Mon) Situated on the main street near the square, this welcoming taverna has tasteful décor, woven rush seats and an open fireplace. Its extensive menu features goat with oregano (€9) and soups.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There is one bus each weekday between Stemnitsa and Tripoli (€3.60, one hour).

Dimitsana Δημητσάνα

pop 230

Built amphitheatrically on two hills at the beginning of the Lousios Gorge, Dimitsana (dih-mi-*tah*-nah), 11km north of Stemnitsa, is a delightful medieval village. Despite its remoteness, the town played a significant role in the country's struggle for self-determination. Its Greek school, founded in 1764, was an important spawning ground for the ideas leading to the uprisings against the Turks. Its students included Bishop Germanos of Patra and Patriarch Gregory V, who was hanged by the Turks in retaliation for the massacre in Tripoli. The village also had a number of gunpowder factories and a branch of the secret Filiki Eteria (Friendly Society) where Greeks met to discuss the revolution.

It's a sleepy village in low season, but on weekends and during summer the town springs to life as eager hikers and out-of-towners enjoy its ambience and surrounding walks.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Open-Air Water Power Museum

It may sound of marginal interest but this excellent little **museum** (☎ 27950 31630; www.piop.gr; adult €3; 🍷 10am-6pm Wed-Mon) offers an illuminating insight into the region's preindustrial past. It occupies the old Agios Yiannis mill complex 1.5km south of town (signposted), where a spring-fed stream once supplied power for a succession of mills spread down the hillside. A flour mill, a gunpowder mill

and a fulling tub (for treating wool) have been restored to working order. There's also an old leather factory.

The intelligent and imaginative explanations and subtitled videos (both in English) explain the processes of gunpowder and leather production.

Hiking

Hiking is a popular activity in these magnificent surroundings. There are some wonderful walks around Dimitsana, particularly along the Lousios River. The principal walks are outlined in *Walker's Map of the River Lousios Valley*, available at the Open-Air Water Power Museum.

SLEEPING & EATING

You'll see several signs for domatia in the middle of town (Plateia Agias Kyriakis).

Tsiapas Rooms to Rent (☎ 27950 31583; d €50-60) These great-value rooms boast fridges and tea- and coffee-making facilities. The communal living room has a fireplace – perfect for a cold evening. Signposted off Plateia Agias Kyriakis.

Hotel H Teyois (☎ 27950 32604/5/6; s/d/tr €55/65/85) The plainer option, but the non-English-speaking owners are praised by travellers for their Greek hospitality and decent home-style breakfasts. Set in the lower edge of the village – look for the signs.

Hotel Dimitsana (☎ 27950 31518; hotel_dimitsana@yahoo.gr; s/d/tr incl breakfast €99/129/150; P) Situated 1km south of the village on the road to Stemnitsa, this place is like a giant ski lodge, with puffy sofas, rich fabrics and an open fire. The comfortably appointed rooms have wonderful views over the Lousios Valley.

There is little to distinguish the village's four tavernas – all serve reasonable, if similar, fare, such as rooster in red wine and *fasoladha* (bean soup).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are buses from Tripoli to Dimitsana (€5.60, 1½ hours, two daily) and once daily on weekdays from Dimitsana to Tripoli.

KYNOURIA KYNOYPIA

Kynouria is the coastal region of Arkadia. It covers a narrow strip of territory that stretches south from the tiny village of Kiveri, 41km east of Tripoli, to Kosmas, perched high in the Parnonas Mountains. Much of

the land is incredibly rugged, with a narrow coastal plain and very little fertile ground.

In ancient times the region was contested by Argos and Sparta – the Argives held sway in the north and the Spartans controlled the south. The easiest access is from Argos.

Kiveri to Leonidio Κιβέρι προς Λεωνίδιο

No more than a blip on the map, **Kiveri** is just south of where the main roads east from Tripoli and south from Argos meet. From here, the road hugs the coast for most of the 64km south to Leonidio, curving above a succession of tiny pebble-beached villages.

The first town of consequence is **Astros**, perched in the hills 28km south of Argos. The main attraction around here is the **Villa of Herodes Atticus**, in the hills 4.5km from the turn-off to Tripoli (or 2.5km from central Astros). It was built in the 2nd century AD for the wealthy Roman founder of the celebrated Odeon of Herodes Atticus in Athens (p115). This was his modest country retreat, spread out over a small plateau with views over the Argolic Gulf. Recent excavations have uncovered a stunning spread of more than 10,000 sq metres of mosaics. At the time of research they were being excavated and were fenced off.

Apart from some magnificent coastal scenery, there's very little to see between Astros and the minor resort of **Paralia Tyrou**, 29km further south.

Leonidio Λεωνίδιο

pop 3224

Leonidio, 76km south of Argos, has a dramatic setting at the mouth of the Badron Gorge. Its tiny Plateia 25 Martiou is an archetypal, unspoilt, whitewashed Greek village square. Some of the older people around here still speak Tsakonika – a highly distinctive dialect dating back to the time of ancient Sparta.

There are some pleasant beaches to be found at the nearby seaside villages of **Plaka** and **Pouliothra**. Plaka, 5km from Leonidio and the town's port, is no more than a cluster of buildings around a small square. The fertile alluvial river flats between Leonidio and the coast are intensively farmed.

Leonidio is famous for its Tsakonian aubergines; each summer the town holds an annual **Aubergine Festival**.

SLEEPING & EATING

There are apartments for rent in town, but most people head for the beach at Plaka, where there are several domatia.

Hotel Dionysos (☎ 27570 23455; s/d €35/45) Plaka's only hotel, opposite the port, is a good spot to unwind and do nothing for a few days.

Fishermen's Tavern (☎ 27570 22815; fish per kg €35-45; ☎ lunch & dinner Apr-Oct) The most modest (and the least contrived) of Plaka's eateries is this small place with a cosy terrace. Net the daily catch of Nikos, the understated son of the owner and also a fisherman.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are buses up and down the coast to/from Argos (€6.50, 2¼ hours, three daily) and Tripoli (€7.80, 2½ hours, two daily).

South of Leonidio

The road south from Leonidio over the Parnonas Mountains to the village of **Geraki** in Lakonia, 48km away, is one of the most scenic in the Peloponnese. For the first 12km, the road snakes west up the **Badron Gorge**, climbing slowly away from the river until at times the water is no more than a speck of silver far below. The road then leaves the Badron and climbs rapidly towards Kosmas on dramatic hairpin bends (that make the Monaco circuit seem like an airstrip).

Just before the top of the climb, there's a sealed road to the left leading to **Moni Panagias Elonis**, a remarkable little monastery perched precariously on the mountainside. Visitors are welcome provided they are suitably dressed.

It's another 14km from the monastery to the peaceful, beautiful mountain village of **Kosmas**. There are several sleeping options here, but even if you don't stay overnight, it's worth taking a break beneath the huge plane trees in the square.

After Kosmas the road descends – more gently this time – to the village of **Geraki**. A brief pause is warranted to visit the quaint churches and to see the locals at play in the busy plaza. From here you can head 40km west to Sparta, or continue south through Skala, Molai and Sikia, also in Lakonia, to Monemvasia.

SLEEPING

Filinouda Studios (☎ 27570 31463; Central Square; s/d/tr €45/55/60) Watch the village world go by from one of these five studios (with cooking

facilities), housed in a beautiful stone building. All share a pleasant communal living area with open fireplace. Run by those in the Ceramic Store on the main square. No English spoken.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There is no public transport between Leonidio and Kosmas.

LAKONIA ΛΑΚΩΝΙΑ

The region of Lakonia occupies almost identical boundaries to the powerful mountain-skirted kingdom ruled by King Menelaus in Mycenaean times. It is home to legends, including the city of Sparta and the spectacular ruins of Mystras, the Byzantine Empire's last stronghold.

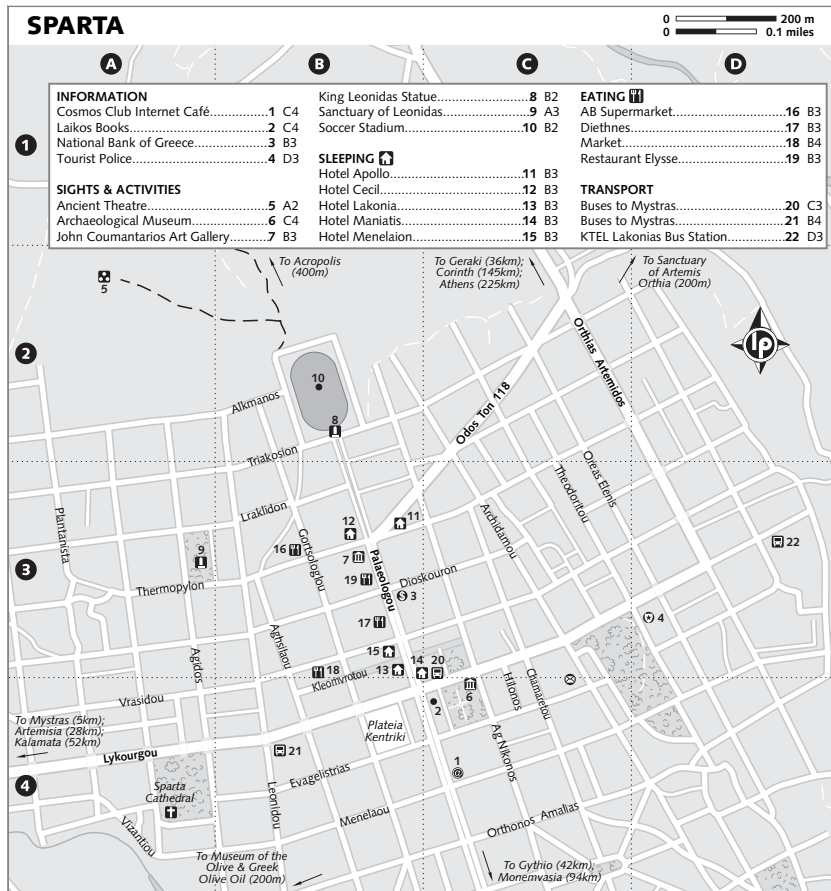
Dominating the landscape are two massive mountain ranges, the Taÿgetos Mountains in the west and the Parnonas Mountains in the east. These taper away to create the central and eastern fingers of the Peloponnese.

Between them lies the fertile valley of the Evrotas River, famous for its olives and oranges. The valley has been a focal point of human settlement since Neolithic times, and the location of the original Mycenaean Sparta, home of King Menelaus and his wife Helen, possessor of the 'face that launched a thousand ships'. It was the abduction of Helen, by Paris of Troy, that sparked the Trojan Wars of Homer's *Iliad*.

The site of this Mycenaean city has yet to be confirmed, but it is thought to have been at Pellana, 27km north of modern-day Sparta.

The city was re-established in its present location by the Dorians at the start of the 1st millennium BC. Unfortunately, this ancient city lies beneath the modern town, leaving little to explore. The disappointment is more than compensated for, however, by the glorious Byzantine churches and monasteries at Mystras, just to the west in the foothills of the Taÿgetos Mountains. Another place not to miss is the evocative medieval town of Monemvasia, in the southeast.

English speakers can thank the Lakonians for the word 'laconic' (terse or concise), which many Lakonians are still.



SPARTA ΣΠΑΡΤΗ

pop 14,817

The gridlike streets of modern Sparta (*spar-tee*) are in line with its ancient precursor's image of discipline, although fortunately, not deprivation. It is an easy-going, if unremarkable, town that lies at the heart of the Evrotas Valley, surrounded by olive and citrus groves, while the Taygetos Mountains, snowcapped until early June, provide a stunning backdrop to the west.

The town was refounded in 1834 on the orders of King Otto, who had just made the decision to move his court from Nafplio to Athens.

Mindful of history, Otto and his court felt that since Athens was to be rebuilt to

reflect its former glory, so too should Sparta. There's a pleasant enough square and a fascinating oil museum, and a few ruins attesting to its ancient pre-eminence. Most visitors are heading to the nearby site of Mystras, but it's worth spending at least a few hours here.

Orientation

Sparta's layout is as ordered as its ancient troops. With two main roads, Paleologou runs north-south through the town and Lykourgou east-west, intersecting in the middle of town. The central square, Plateia Kentriki, is a block southwest of the intersection. The main bus station is at the eastern end of Lykourgou.

Information

Cosmos Club Internet Café (☎ 27310 21500; Paleologou 34; per hr €2; ☎ 8am-10.30pm)

Laiikos Books (☎ 27310 23687; Paleologou 62) Good for maps and foreign newspapers.

National Bank of Greece (cnr Paleologou & Dioskouron) Has ATM.

Post office (Archidamou 10; ☎ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri)

Tourist police (☎ 27310 89580; Theodoritou 20)

Sights

EXPLORING ANCIENT SPARTA

'If the city of the Lacedaemonians were destroyed, and only its temples and the foundations of its buildings left, remote posterity would greatly doubt whether their power were ever equal to their renown.'

Thucydides, The Histories

A wander around ancient Sparta's meagre ruins bears testimony to the accuracy of Thucydides' prophecy. Head north along Paleologou to the **King Leonidas statue**, which stands belligerently in front of a soccer stadium. West of the stadium, signs point the way to the southern gate of the **acropolis**.

Signs point left (west) through olive groves to the 2nd- or 3rd-century-BC **ancient theatre**, the site's most discernible ruin. You'll find a reconstructed plan of the theatre at the Restaurant Elyse.

The main cobbled path leads north to the acropolis (some of which is fenced off), passing the **Byzantine Church of Christ the Saviour** on the way to the hill-top **Sanctuary of Athena Halkioitou**. Some of the most important finds in the town's archaeological museum were unearthed here. Alternatively, you can see and approach the theatre from here. There are impressive views of the snowcapped Taygetos Mountains.

The history of the **Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia**, on the northeastern side of town, is more interesting than the site. Like most of the deities in Greek mythology, the goddess Artemis had many aspects, one of which was Artemis Orthia. In the earliest times this aspect of the goddess was honoured through human sacrifice. The Spartans gave this activity away for the slightly less gruesome business of flogging young boys in honour of the goddess. The museum houses a collec-

tion of clay masks used during ritual dances. The sanctuary is signposted at the junction of Odos Ton 118 and Orthias Artemidos. One of the other remaining remnants of ancient Sparta is the **sanctuary of Leonidas**, although in reality its provenance and purpose in ancient Sparta is unknown.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

Sparta's **archaeological museum** (☎ 27310 28575; cnr Lykourgou & Agiou Nikonos; adult/concession €2/1; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Tue-Sun) sits in a beautiful park setting with a fountain and an orange grove. It holds a few dusty artefacts from Sparta's illustrious past, including votive sickles that Spartan boys dedicated to Artemis Orthia, heads and torsos of various deities, a statue of the great King Leonidas, masks and grave stelae. It also has photographs and finds from Mycenaean chamber graves at Pellana, thought to be the Sparta of King Menelaus.

MUSEUM OF THE OLIVE & GREEK OLIVE OIL

This stunningly designed **museum** (☎ 27310 89315; piop@piraeusbank.gr; Othonos Amalias 129; adult/concession €2/1; ☎ 10am-6pm 1 Mar-15 Oct, 10am-5pm 16 Oct-18 Feb) shows and tells you everything you could want to know about the olive. The high-quality explanations in English trace the history of the olive from its first appearance in the Mediterranean to the modern day. There are some magnificent antique olive presses, as well as a series of working models that demonstrate changes in pressing technology. The downstairs café serves good coffee.

JOHN COUMANTARIOS ART GALLERY

While the permanent collection of 40 paintings in the **John Coumantarios Art Gallery** (☎ 27310 81557; Paleologou 123; admission free; ☎ 9am-3pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) are being repaired, this quaint place houses temporary exhibitions from the National Art Gallery of Athens.

Sleeping

The closest camping ground is in nearby Mystras (p199).

Hotel Lakonia (☎ 27310 28954; Paleologou 89; s/d/tr incl breakfast €47/75/90) The 32 cutting-edge rooms in this new kid on the block are for the sleek geeks, and are far from Spartan. Two-tone chairs, spot lighting and portal access (€5 per day) are a few of the mod cons. Let's hope the prices remain at this good-value rate.

THE SPARTANS

During the battle of Thermopylae in 480 BC, one of the most celebrated battles in history, a few hundred soldiers held an entire Persian army at bay and died to a man doing so. What kind of soldiers could display such selfless bravery? Spartan ones, of course.

Admired and feared in equal measure, the Spartans were held in almost mythic awe by their fellow Greeks for their ferocious and self-sacrificing martial supremacy, marching into battle in a disciplined, lock-stepped phalanx, living (and very often dying) by the motto 'return with your shield or on it'.

They were the product of an almost unbelievably harsh ideology, which finds disturbing echoes in recent totalitarian regimes. Every Spartiate (or full citizen) was by definition a soldier, or hoplite, who began his training almost from birth. Poor recruits were weeded out early – a citizen's committee decided which newborn babies did not pass muster (they would then be left on a mountain top to die).

The surviving children weren't much better off, undergoing 13 years of training to foster supreme physical fitness from the age of seven, and suffering, among many other hardships, institutionalised beating 'competitions' to toughen them up.

All hoplites were bound to military service until the age of 60, lived in barracks until the age of 30 (even the married ones) and were obliged to eat at the *phiditia* (mess hall). Shame and often death awaited retreaters, cowards and those who generally didn't live up to their tough code of battle.

But the Spartiates were the lucky ones. Helots, Sparta's slaves, had no rights at all and those suspected of any kind of misdemeanour were hunted and killed by Sparta's secret police.

A measure of the contempt in which the Spartiates held their helots (and also a sign of their galloping paranoia) came after the Peloponnesian Wars (in which Sparta was the ultimate victor). Dwindling numbers of Spartiates meant that the lower orders had to fight as well. Asked by their helot masters to pick 2000 of their bravest, these fighting helots, who thought they were to be made full citizens, were then executed en masse.

Although admired by some Greek thinkers, most notably Plato (albeit from the safety of an easy-going democracy), an authoritarian system that could motivate a body of men to sit calmly under a hail of arrows also necessarily stifled individual initiative and the introduction of new ideas.

This rigidity and lack of innovation contributed, along with the exhausting Peloponnesian Wars, to the decline of Sparta, which did not quite know what to do with the dominance it achieved at the end of them. The battle of Leuctra in 371 BC was the first major defeat of the Spartans in open battle and marked the beginning of the collapse of their influence and power.

Hotel Maniatis (☎ 27310 22665; www.maniatishotel.gr; Paleologou 72-76; s/d/tr incl breakfast €65/100/130; 🍴) These light and pleasant rooms have more designer shapes than a NYC-contemporary design exhibition, and the service is efficient. The upmarket Zeus restaurant (mains €5 to €13.90) is attached.

Hotel Menelaion (☎ 27310 22161/5; www.menelaion.com; Paleologou 91; s/d/tr €84/112/141; 🍴 📺) This place has one of the town's finest neoclassical façades. Beyond this, it has comfortable rooms, but plans to refurbish in the near future in line with its competitors. Breakfast costs €9.

Also recommended:

Hotel Apollo (☎ 27310 22491/2/3; fax 27310 23936; Thermopylon 84; s/d/tr €35/55/65) A reasonable alternative close to the Cecil.

Hotel Cecil (☎ 27310 24980; fax 27310 81318; Paleologou 125; s/d €40/55; 🍴) The small, family-run Cecil is personable, spruce and a little dated. Worth it only if you prefer smaller places. Breakfast costs €5.

Eating

There are several restaurants along Paleologou, but no stand-out star. Spartans clearly eat at home before coming out in droves in the evening to lounge in the town's cafés.

Diethnes (☎ 27310 28636; Paleologou 105; mains €6-8) It's been going for 45 years (as has the décor, it seems), but it's a very reasonably priced, no-nonsense local favourite.

Restaurant Elysse (☎ 27310 29896; Paleologou 113; mains €5.50-9.50) A popular place offering hearty home cooking, including a couple

of Lakonian specialties, like *bardouniotiko* (chicken cooked with onions and feta) and *arni horiatiki* (lamb baked with bay leaves and cinnamon).

Self-caterers will find a super-abundance of supermarkets in Sparta. **AB Supermarket** (cnr Thermopylon & Gortsologlou), opposite the Sparta Inn, is bigger and better stocked than most. There's also a fresh produce **market** (Kleomvrotou).

Getting There & Away

Sparta's well-organised **KTEL Lakonia bus station** (☎ 27310 26441; cnr Lykourgou & Thivronos) has buses to Athens (€16.80, 3¼ hours, 10 daily) via Corinth (€10, two hours), Gythio (€3.70, one hour, five daily), Neapoli (€12.20, three hours, four daily), Tripoli (€4.70, one hour, four daily), Geraki (€3.50, 45 minutes, three daily) and Monemvasia (€8.70, two hours, three daily).

Travelling to Kalamata (€4.40, one hour, two daily) involves changing buses at Artemisia (€2.80, 40 minutes, two daily) on the Messinian side of the Langada Pass.

Departures to the Mani peninsula include buses to Gerolimenas (€8.90, 2¼ hours, three daily) via Areopoli (€6, two hours) and a 9am service to the caves at Pyrgos Dirou, returning at 12.45pm (one way €6.90, 2¼ hours).

There are also buses to Mystras (€1.20, 30 minutes, 10 daily). You can catch these on their way out to Mystras at the stop next to the OTE building on Lykourgou, or at the stop on Leonidou.

MYSTRAS ΜΥΣΤΡΑΣ

The captivating ruins of churches, libraries, strongholds and palaces in the fortress town of Mystras (miss-*trahss*), a World Heritage-listed site, spill from a spur of the Taygetos 7km west of Sparta. The site is among the most important, historically speaking, in the Peloponnese. This is where the Byzantine Empire's richly artistic and intellectual culture made its last stand before an invading Ottoman army, almost 1000 years after its foundation.

History

The Frankish leader Guillaume de Villehardouin built the fortress in 1249. When the Byzantines won back the Morea from the Franks, Emperor Michael VIII Paleologus made Mystras its capital and seat of government. Settlers from the surrounding plains began to move here, seeking refuge from the

invading Slavs. From this time, until Dimitrios surrendered to the Turks in 1460, a despot of Morea (usually a son or brother of the ruling Byzantine emperor) lived and reigned at Mystras.

While the empire plunged into decline elsewhere, Mystras enjoyed a renaissance under the despots. Gemistos Plethon (1355–1452) founded a school of humanistic philosophy here and his enlightened ideas, including the revival of the teachings of Plato and Pythagoras, attracted intellectuals from all corners of Byzantium. After the Turks occupied Mystras, Plethon's pupils moved to Rome and Florence, where they made a significant contribution to the Italian Renaissance. Art and architecture also flourished, as seen in the splendid buildings and frescoes of the town.

Mystras declined under Turkish rule, but thrived again after the Venetians captured it in 1687 and developed a flourishing silk industry, the population swelling to 40,000. The Turks recaptured it in 1715 and from then on it was downhill all the way; the Russians burnt it in 1770, the Albanians in 1780 and Ibrahim Pasha torched what was left in 1825. By the time of independence it was a largely abandoned ruin. Much restoration has taken place since the 1950s (and continues to this day) and in 1989 it was declared a World Heritage Site.

Sights

EXPLORING THE SITE

At least half a day is needed to do justice to the **ruins of Mystras** (☎ 27310 83377; adult/concession €5/3; 🕒 8am-7.30pm summer, 8.30am-3pm winter). Wear sensible shoes and bring plenty of water. The site is divided into three sections – the *kaстро* (the fortress on the summit), the upper town (*hora*) and the lower town (*kato hora*). You can approach the ruins from either direction – top to bottom or vice versa (both options are quite strenuous). If you have transport and start at the top and walk down, you'll need to return to your car at the end of your visit. An alternative is to catch a taxi to the top and walk down.

KASTRO & UPPER TOWN

From opposite the upper entrance ticket office, a path (signposted '*kaстро*') leads up to the fortress. The fortress was built by the Franks and extended by the Turks.

The path descends from the ticket office leading to **Agia Sofia**, which served as the palace church, and where some frescoes survive. Steps descend from here to a T-junction.

A left turn leads to the **Nafplio Gate**. Near the gate, and closed for restoration at the time of research, is the huge **Palace of Despots**, a complex of several buildings constructed at different times. The 14th-century vaulted audience room, with a painted façade and ornate window frames, was the largest of the palace's buildings, but hundreds of years of neglect have robbed it of its former opulence.

From the palace, a winding, cobbled path leads down to the **Monemvasia Gate**, the entrance to the lower town.

LOWER TOWN

Through the Monemvasia Gate, turn right for the well-preserved, 14th-century **Convent of Pantanassa**. This features a beautifully ornate stone-carved façade and is still maintained by nuns, Mystras' only inhabitants. It's an elaborate, perfectly proportioned building – never overstated. Exquisite, richly coloured, 15th-century frescoes are among the finest examples of late Byzantine art. Look out for the tiny stamped silver and gold votive offerings beneath the large icon of the Virgin. You'll find images of eyes, ears, legs, arms, breasts and even houses stamped onto these small tablets, depending on the (usually health-related) problems the faithful are hoping for supernatural help with. There is a wonderful

view of the pancake-flat and densely cultivated plain of Lakonia from the columned terrace on the northern façade. The nuns ask that, before entering, you cover bare legs with the cloths provided.

The path continues down to the **Monastery of Perivleptos** (closed on weekends), built into a rock. Inside, the 14th-century frescoes, preserved virtually intact, equal those of Pantanassa. The church has a very high dome and in the centre is the Pantokrator (the Byzantine depiction of Christ as the universal, all-powerful ruler), surrounded by the apostles, and the Virgin flanked by two angels.

As you continue down towards the Mitropolis, you will pass **Agios Georgios**, one of Mystras' many private chapels. Further down, and above the path on the left, is the **Laskaris Mansion**, a typical Byzantine house.

The **Mitropolis** (Cathedral of Agios Dimitrios) is a complex of buildings enclosed by a high wall. The original church was built in the 1200s, but was greatly altered in the 15th century. The church stands in an attractive courtyard surrounded by stoa and balconies. Its impressive ecclesiastical ornaments and furniture include a marble iconostasis, an intricately carved wooden throne and a marble slab in the floor in which features a two-headed eagle (symbol of Byzantium) – located exactly on the site where Emperor Constantine XI was crowned. The church also has some fine frescoes. The adjoining **museum** houses fragments of sculpture and pottery taken from Mystras' churches.

Beyond the Mitropolis is the **Vrontokhion Monastery**. This was once the wealthiest monastery of Mystras, the focus of cultural activities and the burial place of the despots. Of its two churches, **Agios Theodoros** and **Aphentiko**, the latter is the most impressive, with striking frescoes.

Outside the lower entrance to Mystras is a *kantina* (mobile café) selling snacks and drinks.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Paleologio Mystras (☎ 27310 22724; fax 27310 25256; camp sites per adult/tent €7/4; (♻) year-round; (♿)) This small, friendly camping ground, 2km west of Sparta, is on the road to Mystras. Buses to Mystras can drop you off there.

Hotel Byzantion (☎ 27310 83309; www.byzantionhotel.gr; s/d/tr incl breakfast €40/60/65; (♻) (♿)) Right in the centre of the modern village of Mystras is

this small, appealing option, an alternative to sleeping in Sparta. There's a delightful garden and the bright rooms have balconies offering arresting valley or mountain views. It's about 1km from the site.

There are also several *domatia* around the village, along with a couple of cafés and tavernas.

Getting There & Away

Frequent buses go to Mystras from Sparta (€1.30, 30 minutes). A taxi from Sparta to Mystras' lower entrance (Xenia Restaurant) costs €7 to €8, or €9 to €10 to the upper entrance. A cheaper option is to take a taxi (☎ 27310 25300) from Mystra.

LANGADA PASS

ΟΡΕΙΝΗ ΔΙΑΒΑΣΗ ΛΑΓΚΑΔΑ

The 59km Sparta–Kalamata road is one of the most stunning routes in Greece, crossing the Taygetos Mountains by way of the Langada Pass.

The climb begins in earnest at the village of **Trypi**, 9km west of Sparta, where the road enters the dramatic **Langada Gorge**. To the north of this gorge is the site where the ancient Spartans left babies too weak or deformed to become good soldiers to die (see boxed text, p196).

From Trypi, the road follows the course of the Langada River before climbing sharply through a series of hairpin bends to emerge in a sheltered valley. This is a good spot to stop for a stroll among the plane trees along the river bank. The road then climbs steeply once more, to the high point of 1524m – crossing the boundary from Lakonia into Messinia on the way. You can stop overnight here. The descent to Kalamata is equally dramatic.

Travelling this route by bus involves changing buses at Artemisia, the closest Messinian settlement to the summit.

Sleeping & Eating

Pandoheio Canadas (☎ 27210 21436; s/d/tr €20/28/29) This small guesthouse, 22km from Sparta, is perched on the upper slopes of the Taygetos Mountains at an altitude of 1250m. The rooms are basic but offer great mountain views. The restaurant (mains €3.50 to €7) is a major attraction, turning out delicious homemade treats such as pork sausages.

Hotel Taygetos (☎ 27210 99236; fax 27210 98198; s/d/tr €30/40/46) The Taygetos has a superb location

MYSTRAS

0 100 m
0 0.1 miles



at the very top of the Langada Pass. It also boasts a good restaurant with specialities such as roasted goat, rooster with red wine and rabbit *stifadhó*. It's 24km from Sparta.

GEFYRA & MONEMVASIA

ΓΕΦΥΡΑ & ΜΟΝΕΜΒΑΣΙΑ

pop 8

Vast, imposing, spectacular Monemvasia (mo-nem-vah-see-ah) is the Greek equivalent to France's Mont Saint Michel. This perfect fortress is an iceberglike slab of rock moored off the coast, with sheer cliffs rising hundreds of feet from the sea, and a single highly defensible causeway.

In summer Monemvasia (and its mainland counterpart Gefyra), 99km southeast of Sparta, brims with visitors, but the extraordinary visual impact of the medieval town – and the delights of exploring it – override the effects of mass tourism. Only eight people are permanent residents. The poet Yannis Ritsos was born and lived here for many years.

From Gefyra, you can see little of Monemvasia. But cross the causeway and follow the road that curves around the side of the rock and you will come to the official entrance, a narrow tunnel in a massive fortifying wall. The tunnel is L-shaped, so the magical town is concealed until you emerge, blinking, on the other side.

If you sleep at one of the many excellent guesthouses on the rock, surely one of the most atmospheric places to stay in Greece (and there aren't that many places in the world where you get the chance to sleep on a World Heritage-listed site), you'll have many of the narrow cobbled streets – and heart-stopping sea vistas – to yourself.

History

The island of Monemvasia was part of the mainland until it was cut off by an earthquake in AD 375. Its name means 'single entry' (*moni* – single, *emvasia* – entry), as there is only one way to the medieval town.

During the 6th century barbarian incursions forced inhabitants of the surrounding area to retreat to this natural rock fortress. By the 13th century it had become the principal commercial centre of Byzantine Morea – complementing Mystras, the spiritual centre. It was famous throughout Europe for its highly praised Malvasia-grape wine.

The Franks, Venetians and Turks all invaded in the following centuries. During the War of Independence its Turkish inhabitants were massacred after their surrender, following a three-month siege.

Orientation & Information

All the practicalities are located in Gefyra. The main street is 23 Iouliou, which runs south around the coast from the causeway, while Spartis runs north up the coast and becomes the road to Molai. Malvasia Travel, just up from the causeway on Spartis, acts as the bus stop. The National Bank of Greece, with an ATM, and the **post office** (☎ 7.30am–2pm Mon–Fri) are opposite. The **police** (☎ 27320 61210; Spartis 137) are in one of the few buildings in town with a street number.

Sights

MEDIEVAL TOWN

You can find everything you want in this city – except water.

18th-century Turkish traveller

The narrow, cobbled main street is lined with souvenir shops and tavernas, flanked by winding stairways that weave between a complex network of stone houses with walled gardens and courtyards. The main street leads to the central square and the **Cathedral of Christ in Chains**, dating from the 13th century. Opposite is the **Church of Agios Pavlos**, built in 956. Further along the main street is the **Church of Myrtydiotissa**, virtually in ruins, but still with a small altar and a defiantly flickering candle. Overlooking the sea is the recently restored, whitewashed 16th-century **Church of Panagia Hrysafitissa**.

The path to the **fortress** and the **upper town** is signposted up the steps to the left of the central square. The upper town is now a vast and fascinating jumbled ruin, except for the **Church of Agia Sofia**, which perches on the edge of a sheer cliff.

MONEMVASIA ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

This small **museum** (☎ 27320 61403; admission free; ☎ 8.30am–3pm Tue–Sun; ☎) displays a detailed map of Monemvasia, useful for orientating yourself. It also houses finds unearthed in the course of excavation and building around the old town. The star turn is the

templon (chancel screen) from an 11th-century church near the sea gate. Other pieces of note include a marble door frame from the Church of Agia Sofia and plenty of fine ceramics.

Sleeping

There's no truly budget accommodation in Monemvasia itself but considering the location, some places offer excellent value. (You'd probably pay small fortunes elsewhere around the Mediterranean for such dramatic scenery.) Many guesthouses occupy sympathetically converted medieval buildings with bags of character. If this place doesn't give you the urge to splurge, there are cheaper hotels and numerous *domatia* in Gefyra.

BUDGET

Hotel Akrogiali (☎ 27320 61360; s/d with shower €35/45) Over on Gefyra, this basic but spotless hotel, next to the National Bank of Greece on Spartis, has the cheapest rooms in town.

MIDRANGE & TOP END

All of the following are on the rock itself (book ahead). A pocket torch and sensible shoes are a good option for those staying on cobbled, dimly lit Monemvasia. Prices of the competitive hotels are far from solid as a rock; they can alter drastically depending on their accommodation nemesis.

The hotels are nearly identical – boutique in manner, stylishly furnished in timber and muted materials throughout. Some rooms have balconies. Rooms for both the Malvasia Hotel and Hotel Byzantino are located in various locations in the old town (inquiries offices for both hotels are on the main street).

Malvasia Hotel (☎ 27320 61160/63007; malvasia@otenet.gr; s incl breakfast €45–65, d incl breakfast €65–120; ☎) Easily the best value on Monemvasia (if you can believe its prices).

Hotel Byzantino (☎ 27320 61254/351; hotelbyzantino@yahoo.gr; s/d/tr €60/90/120; ☎) Also great value; rooms are a notch smarter. Try to get a room with sea-facing balconies. Breakfast costs €6.

Hotel Lazareto (☎ 27320 61991; lazaretohotel@yahoo.com; s; €90, d €135–160; ☎) Located outside the fortress walls, past the causeway and occupying the handsome stone buildings of a former quarantine hospital, the Lazareto is the most luxurious choice. The furnish-

ings in the well-equipped rooms are stylishly muted. But watch your head – the door frames are for little people. Breakfast is €6. Travellers report the hotel's terrific restaurant, Castellano, is open only in season.

Monopati Rooms & Apartments (☎ 27320 61772; www.byzantine-escapade.com; ste €120, apt €90–105, cottage €150–170) These delightful stone options ooze personality, as do the owners. Rates vary according to the number of people in each of the cosy studios or apartments. All are stylishly decorated to fill their quirky spaces.

Kellia (☎ 27320 61520/951; kelliath@yahoo.gr; d €65–200, tr €95–180) A converted monastery-by-the-sea with stone-and-timber rooms (former cells), next to the Church of Panagia Hrysaphitissa. Lacks some of the personality of the other places.

Eating

Matoula (☎ 27320 61660; main street, Monemvasia; mains €7.50–14) The pick of the places in the old town. Its terrace, beneath vine trellises and overlooking the sea, is a great place to enjoy its selection of local delights, including *dolmadhes* (€6.50), the original recipe of Matoula, the restaurant's *matriach*.

Taverna Trata (☎ 27320 62084; Gefyra; fish per kg €45–55) On the right immediately after you cross the causeway back to Gefyra. The hanging gulls and model yachts point to a nautical theme – seafood is the recommendation here, but prices can be mega-tidal.

Self-caterers will find most things at the Lefkakis supermarket just past the post office in Gefyra.

Getting There & Away

Buses leave from outside **Malvasia Travel** (☎ 27320 61752), just up the causeway on Spartis; Malvasia also sells tickets. There are buses to Athens (€25.40, 5½ hours, four daily) via Sparta (€7.50, two hours), Tripoli and Corinth/Isthmus.

Getting Around

The medieval town of Monemvasia is inaccessible to cars and motorcycles, but these can cross the causeway. Parking is available along the narrow road skirting the rock, outside the old town. It's sometimes easier to park in Gefyra than risk the tight squeeze.

A shuttle bus operates between the causeway and old Monemvasia (8am to midnight June to September, Christmas and Easter).

Car rental is available from **Kypros Rent a Car** (☎ 27320 61383; www.kypros-rentacar.gr, houltris@otenet.gr). Turn right at the street after the National Bank of Greece.

NEAPOLI ΝΕΑΠΟΛΗ

pop 2727

Neapoli (neh-ah-po-lih), 42km south of Monemvasia, lies close to the southern tip of the eastern prong of the Peloponnese. It's a functioning, if uninspiring, town, in spite of its location on a huge horseshoe bay. The western flank of the bay is formed by the small island of Elafonisi. The town is popular enough with local Greek holiday-makers to have several seafront hotels and domatia. Most other travellers come here only to catch a ferry to the island of **Kythira**, clearly visible across the bay.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Aivali (☎ 27340 22287; Akti Voion 164; s/d €35/40; ☼) This small family hotel is ideally located right on the seafront, close to the ferry dock for Kythira. Like all the hotels in town, it's booked out during August.

There are numerous lively *ouzeries* along the waterfront, serving the local speciality: delicious grilled octopus.

Getting There & Away

BUS

KTEL (☎ 27340 23222) has buses from Neapoli to Athens (€29, three daily) via Sparta (€12.20, three hours, three daily) and Molai (€5.80, 1½ hours). Molai is the place to change buses for Monemvasia.

FERRY

There are daily ferries from Neapoli to Dia-kofti on Kythira (per person/car €8.20/40, one hour). Tickets are sold at **Dermatis Travel** (☎ 27340 24004), the first road to your left on the waterfront. (Leave plenty of time to find the place and buy the ticket.) Frequency varies depending on the season; count on at least two per day in July and August.

GYTHIO ΓΥΘΕΙΟ

pop 4489

Once the port of ancient Sparta, Gythio (*yeethi-o*) is the gateway to the Lakonian Mani. This attractive fishing town's bustling waterfront has pastel-coloured, 19th-century buildings, behind which crumbling old Turkish

houses and scruffy streets clamber up a steep, wooded hill.

Orientation

Gythio is not too hard to figure out. Most restaurants and cafés are along the seafront on Akti Vasileos Pavlou. The bus station is at the northeastern end, next to the small triangular park known as the Perivolaki (meaning 'tree-filled'). Behind this is the main square, Plateia Panagiotou Venetzanaki.

The local shopping area is Ermou, lined with old-fashioned street lamps and the main approach to/from town.

The square at the southwestern end of Akti Vasileos Pavlou is Plateia Mavromihali, hub of the old quarter of Marathonisi. The ferry quay is situated opposite this square. Beyond it the waterfront road becomes Kranais, which leads south to the road to Areopoli. A causeway leads out to Marathonisi Islet at the southern edge of town.

Information

EOT (☎/fax 27330 24484; Vasileos Georgiou 20; ☎ 8am-2.30pm Mon-Fri) This is the information equivalent of Monty Python's famous cheese-free cheese shop: remarkably information-free, even by EOT's lamentable standards.

Hassanakos Bookstore (☎ 27330 22064; Akti Vasileos Pavlou 39) Also stocks international newspapers.

Internet Jolly Café (cnr Dirou & Grigoraki; per hr €2.50) One block from the bus station.

Kostas Vretto's Antiquities Shop (Vassileos Pavlou 25) Not official information per se, but this philosopher-poet-man-of-the-world is well worth dropping into for a visit.

Police (☎ 27330 22100; Akti Vasileos Pavlou)

Post office (cnr Ermou & Arheou Theatrou; ☎ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri)

Sights & Activities

MARATHONISI ISLET

According to mythology, tranquil pine-shaded Marathonisi is ancient Cranae, where Paris (prince of Troy) and Helen (wife of Menelaus) consummated the affair that sparked the Trojan Wars. The 18th-century **Tzanetakis Grigorakis tower** at the centre of the island houses a small **Museum of Mani History** (admission €1.50; ☎ 8am-2pm), which relates Maniot history through the eyes of European travellers who visited the region between the 15th and 19th centuries. The architecturally minded will find an absorbing collection of plans of the Maniot tower and castle upstairs.

ANCIENT THEATRE

Gythio's small but well-preserved ancient theatre is next to an army camp on the northern edge of town. It's signposted off Ermou, along Arheou Theatrou. (Turn right after the post office.) You can scramble up the hill behind the theatre to get to the **ancient acropolis**, now heavily overgrown. Most of ancient Gythio lies beneath the nearby Lakonian Gulf.

BEACHES

There's safe swimming along the 6km of sandy beaches that extend from the village of **Mavrovouni**, 2km south of Gythio.

Sleeping

There are many domatia signs along the waterfront.

Camping Meltemi (☎ 27330 23260; www.campingmeltemi.gr; camp sites per adult/tent/car €5.50/4.50/3.50; ☎ Apr-Oct) Very well organised and the pick of the three camping grounds at Mavrovouni. Three kilometres southwest of Gythio, it's right behind the beach and sites are set among 3000 well-tended olive trees. There are also bungalows with kitchen, air-con and TV (€40 to €55). Buses to Areopoli stop outside.

Xenia Karlaftis Rooms to Rent (☎ 27330 22719, 27230 22991; s/d/tr €25/35/40) The most hostel-style place in town, with basic rooms and ideally situated opposite Marathonisi. The communal kitchen area upstairs has a fridge and small stove for making tea and coffee.

Aktion Apartments (☎ 27330 23112; info@alkyon-rooms.gz; Mavrovouni beach; d €35; ☼) If you want a beach setting, these smart and modern apartments are the best value at Mavrovouni (2km south of Gythio) and are equipped with small kitchenettes. Taxis to/from Gythio cost €4.

Saga Pension (☎ 27330 23220; Kranais; d €50; ☼) This is a good-value (saga-free!), comfortable place with balconies. It's 150m from the port, overlooking Marathonisi Islet. The upmarket Saga Restaurant is below.

Matina's (☎ 27330 22518; d/tr €50/60) A great location, right in the heart of town, this budget diamond is appropriately above the town's jewellery shop. Matina speaks no English, but is welcoming and runs a clean and comfortable abode.

Eating

Seafood is the obvious choice, and the waterfront is lined with numerous fish tavernas,

especially on Kranais, where tourists walk the gauntlet of waiters touting for custom.

Taverna Petakou (☎ 27330 22889; mains €3-7) This no-frills place is a favourite with locals. The day's menu is written down in an exercise book in Greek. It may include a hearty fish soup, which comes with a large chunk of bread on the side. Beside the stadium on Xanthaki.

Taverna O Potis (☎ 27330 23245; mains €5.50-15, fish per kg €47) The model sea craft hanging from the ceiling of this new place reflect its ship-shape condition. Spotless kitchen, clean interior and generous helpings that locals flock aboard for. The house red is a bit like a massive ocean swell, but it's well worth the walk to the far end of the promenade, opposite Maronisi Islet.

Saga Pension (☎ 27330 21358; Kranais; mains €6-9, fish per kg €40-60; ☎ lunch & dinner; ☼) Large, stylish with white cloths and fancy chairs, this serves top-notch eating options.

Psarotaverna I Gonia (☎ 27330 22122; mains €6-10, fish per kg €30-70) This is your no-nonsense corner pub-cum-restaurant popular with locals wanting bright lights and action. Fortunately, this extends to the kitchen where everything from excellent *riganada* (rusk bread with feta, tomato and oil) to cod fish with garlic (€7.50) is whipped up.

For self-catering, we recommended super-markets **Kourtakis** (Irakleos), around the corner from the bus station, and **Karagiannis** (cnr Vasileos Georgiou & Orestou).

Getting There & Away

BUS

The **KTEL Lakonia bus station** (☎ 27330 22228; cnr Vasileos Georgiou & Evrikleos) is found northwest along the waterfront. Services run north to Athens (€22.70, four hours, four daily) or via Sparta (€3.70, one hour) and Tripoli; and south to Areopoli (€2.30, 30 minutes, four daily), Gerolimenas (€5.20, 1½ hours, three daily), the Diros Caves (€3.20, one hour, one daily) and Vathia (€5.90, 1½ hours, three weekly).

Helpful George will explain the best way to see Mani from Gythio (return) in one day. Getting to Kalamata can be fiddly; it involves taking onward connections from either Itilo (€2.30, 45 minutes) or Sparta. There are only two buses daily (5am and 1pm) to Itilo (the 1pm bus may require a change at Areopoli).

FERRY

ANEN Lines (www.anen.gr) has three weekly ferries to Kissamos-Kastelli on Crete (€21.40, seven hours), via Kythira (€9.90, 2½ hours) and Antikythira (€15.80, four hours), from July to early September, with two services weekly in winter. Check the ever-changing schedule with **Rozakis Travel** (☎ 27330 22207; rosakigy@otenet.gr), on the waterfront near Plateia Mavromihali.

Getting around

For car rental, contact **Rozakis Travel** (☎ 27330 22207; rosakigy@otenet.gr). Mopeds and scooters are available from **Moto Makis** (☎ 27330 22950; Kranais). The town **taxi rank** (☎ 27330 23400) is opposite the bus station.

THE MANI H MANI

The Mani, the region covering the central peninsula in the south of the Peloponnese, is a wild, rugged place. Greeks from elsewhere will tell you, so are its people. Such was the formidable reputation of the inhabitants of the remote inner Mani that many would-be occupants opted in the end to leave them alone.

For centuries the Maniots were a law unto themselves, renowned for their fierce independence, resentment of attempts to govern them and for their bitter, spectacularly murderous internal feuds. Dotted around the territory – particularly in the inner Mani – you'll find bizarre tower settlements that were built as refuges during clan wars from the 17th century onwards.

Thankfully these feuds, some of which took entire armies to halt, are long forgotten and the Maniots are as friendly and hospitable as Greeks elsewhere. The architecture lives on, however, and buildings continue to adhere to a stone, albeit more user-friendly, Maniot style.

It's worth including the remote region in your itinerary. The steep tumbling skirts of the Taygetos Mountains (threaded with wonderful walking trails) and the tiny coves and ports nestling beside them make for some memorably dramatic scenery. As well as the towers, there are magnificent churches, and caves, including the touristy Diros Caves.

The Mani is generally divided into the Messinian Mani (or outer Mani) and the Lakonian (or inner) Mani. The Messinian Mani starts southeast of Kalamata and runs south

between the coast and the Taygetos Mountains, while the Lakonian Mani covers the rest of the peninsula south of Itilo.

Anyone visiting the region should definitely arm themselves with a copy of Patrick Leigh Fermour's *Mani*, a vivid and erudite account of the area (he loved the region so much he settled here). Keen explorers should ask at local shops for *Inside The Mani: A Walking Guide* by Mat Dean, and *The Mani* by Bob Barrow and Mat Dean, both Stoupa residents. The books are full of walking and information gems about the region's villages, towers and churches. Also worth reading is *Deep into Mani* by Eliopoulos and Greenhold.

History

The people of the Mani regard themselves as direct descendants of the Spartans. After the decline of Sparta, citizens loyal to the principles of Lycurgus (founder of Sparta's constitution) chose to withdraw to the mountains rather than serve under foreign masters. Later, refugees from occupying powers joined these people, who became known as Maniots, from the Greek word 'mania'.

The Maniots claim they are the only Greeks not to have succumbed to foreign invasions. This may be somewhat exaggerated but the Maniots have always enjoyed a certain autonomy and a distinctive lifestyle. Until independence the Maniots lived in clans led by chieftains. Fertile land was so scarce that it was fiercely fought over. Blood feuds were a way of life and families constructed towers as refuges.

The Turks failed to subdue the Maniots, who eagerly participated in the War of Independence. But, after 1834, although reluctant to relinquish their independence, they became part of the new kingdom.

LAKONIAN MANI

Grey rock, mottled with defiant clumps of green scrub, characterises the bleak mountains of inner Mani. Cultivable land is at a premium, and supports little more than a few stunted olives and figs. The wild flowers that cloak the valleys in spring exhibit nature's resilience by sprouting from the rocks.

The indented coast's sheer cliffs plunge into the sea, and rocky outcrops shelter pebbled beaches. This wild and barren landscape is broken only by austere and imposing stone towers, often abandoned (some being re-

stored), still standing sentinel over the region.

With your own vehicle you can explore the Mani by the loop road that runs down the west coast from the main town, Areopoli, to Gerolimenas, and return via the east coast (or vice versa). Public transport is effectively limited to the west coast.

Areopoli Αρεόπολη
pop 774

Areopoli (ah-reh-o-po-lih), capital of the Mani, is aptly named after Ares, the god of war. Dominating the main square, Plateia Athanaton, is a statue of Petrobey Mavromihalis, who proclaimed the Maniot insurrection against the Turks. Konstantinos and Georgos Mavromihalis (1765–1848), who assassinated Kapodistrias, belonged to the same family. The town retains many other reminders of its rumbustious past.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The town is split into two parts: the new upper town, around Plateia Athanaton, and the old lower town, around Plateia 17 Martiou. The two squares are linked by a 'main' lane (formerly Kapetan Matapan but no longer officially referred to). There is no tourist office or tourist police.

Konstantinakos (☎ 27330 51253; Plateia Athanaton) Foreign newspapers and a small selection of books are available here.

National Bank of Greece (Petrobey Mavromihali; ☎ 8am–1pm Mon–Thu, to 1.30pm Fri Aug, 8am–1pm Tue & Thu Sep–Jul) The only bank in town, with an ATM outside.

Post office (Petrobey Mavromihali; ☎ 7.30am–2pm Mon–Fri) At the northern edge of town.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

There are some fine examples of Maniot architecture to be found in the narrow alleyways surrounding Plateia 17 Martiou.

They start with the 18th-century **Church of Taxiarches** on the southern side of the square. Its four-storey bell tower marks it as the most important of the town's many churches. Look out for the extremely well-preserved relief carvings above the main door. The much older **Church of Agios Ioannis**, on the southern edge of the old town, contains a series of frescoes relating the life of Jesus. It was built by the Mavromihalis family.

There are numerous examples of tower houses, although some are in very poor condition. The towers in the best condition are those that have been converted into accommodation.

The **Mavromihalis Tower** (Tzani Tzanaki), which is south of Plateia 17 Martiou, was once the mightiest tower in town, but now it stands sadly derelict.

Walking is superlative in the area and until now, a well-kept secret. A board in the main square outlines some walks with corresponding signs in the region, although cynics say that this was an overenthusiastic municipality project and the actual tracks are not as clear as they should be. Experienced hikers should have no problem with compasses and equipment. Amateurs or walkers who prefer the company of small groups of people can join knowledgeable British expat and walking and cultural guide, **Anna Butcher** (☎ 6937772996; asimi.ab@virgin.net). Her day walks, with full guiding, cost €45. Longer (and more pricey) hikes are available.

SLEEPING Budget

Hotel Kouris (☎ 27330 51340; fax 27330 51331; Plateia Athanaton; s/d €40/50) Out of place against the Maniot towers, this concrete block is characterless, but a useful fallback.

Tsimova Rooms (☎ 27330 51301; Kapetan Matapan; s €50–55, d €60, apt €70) You might have to battle your way through the cuddly toys and photos in this homey place, a renovated tower located behind the Church of Taxiarches. Not to forget the weaponry collection of an ex-partisan, ranging from daggers to cast-iron cannons. Rooms are overpriced; the two-room apartment with kitchen is better value.

Midrange & Top End

Hotel Trapela (☎ 27330 52690; www.trapela.gr; d/tr €80/80; 🍷) This small 12-room place is promoted as a 'new traditional' hotel, as indeed it is. The comfortable wood and stone rooms have tasteful muted colours and, with exception of the large windows, the design is along Maniot lines.

Londas Pension (☎ 27330 51360; londas@otenet.gr; d/tr incl breakfast €80/110) This place is the undisputed king of the castle: stylish rooms housed in a 200-year-old tower, signposted right off Kapetan Matapan at the Church of Taxiarches.

The whitewashed stone rooms are decorated with taste in an antique and modern fusion.

EATING

Nicola's Corner Taverna (☎ 27330 51366; Plateia Athanaton; mains €5-8) Ignore the menu – this popular spot on the central square displays a good choice of tasty taverna staples that change daily.

Barba Petros (☎ 27330 51205; mains €5-9) This is primarily a *psistaria*, but it also has daily specials like eggplant-and-potato pie – €5 for a huge serving. On the way down to the church square on the left.

For self-caterers, the small **Koilakos supermarket** (☎ 27330 51221) is near Plateia Athanaton.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The **bus station** (☎ 27330 51229; Plateia Athanaton) is next to Europa Grill. There are buses to Gythio (€2.30, 30 minutes, four daily), which proceed to Athens (€22.70), Itilo (€1.20, 20 minutes, three daily Monday to Saturday, no service Sunday) via Limeni, Gerolimenas (€2.90, 45 minutes), the Diros Caves (€1.20, 15 minutes, one daily), Lagia (€3.20, 40 minutes, one daily) and Vathia (€3.60, one hour, two daily).

Limeni Λιμένι

The tiny village of Limeni is 3km north of Areopoli on the southern flank of beautiful **Limeni Bay**.

In a glorious location set out over water, fish lovers will get hooked on **Takis** (☎ 27330 51327; fish per kg €45-60; ☎ lunch & dinner); it's *the* place for fish in the area. Bookings advised.

High on the hill, on the south side of Limeni Bay is **Limeni Village** (☎ 27330 51111; www.limeni.village.gr; s/d incl breakfast €80/120; P ☎ ☎), a complex of replica Maniot towers with spectacular vistas of the bay, hills and village. Restaurant attached.

Itilo & Nea Itilo Οίτυλο & Νέο Οίτυλο

pop 331
Itilo (*ee-tih-lo*), 11km north of Areopoli, was the medieval capital of the Mani. To travel between Lakonian and Messinian Mani, you must change buses at Itilo.

The village is a tranquil backwater, but shows signs of recent renovation, and is perched on the northern edge of a deep ravine traditionally regarded as the border between outer and inner Mani. Above the ravine is

the massive 17th-century **Castle of Kelefa**, from which the Turks attempted to constrain the Maniots. It's on a hill above the road from Nea Itilo. Nearby, the **Monastery of Dekoulo** has colourful frescoes in its church. Nea Itilo, 4km away, lies at the back of secluded Limeni Bay.

There are three buses daily to Areopoli (€1.50, 20 minutes) and Kalamata (€6, 2½ hours). Areopoli–Itilo buses go via Nea Itilo and Limeni.

Diros Caves Σπήλαιο Διρού

These extraordinary **caves** (☎ 27330 52222; adult/concession incl tour €12/7; ☎ 8.30am–5.30pm Jun–Sep, 8.30am–3pm Oct–May) are 11km south of Areopoli, near the village of Pyrgos Dirou – notable for its towers (signposted to the right off the road down to the caves).

The natural entrance to the caves is on the beach and locals like to believe the legend that they extend as far north as Sparta (speleologists have so far estimated the caves to be 14km; tourists enter to 1.5km). They were inhabited in Neolithic times, but were abandoned after an earthquake in 4 BC and weren't rediscovered until 1895. Systematic exploration began in 1949. The caves are famous for their stalactites and stalagmites, which have fittingly poetic names such as the Palm Forest, Crystal Lily and the Three Wise Men.

Unfortunately, the 25-minute guided tour through the caves is disappointingly brief and doesn't justify the admission charge. It covers only the lake section, and bypasses the most spectacular formations of the dry area, currently closed for research.

The nearby **Neolithic Museum** (☎ 27330 52223; adult/concession €2/1; ☎ 8.30am–3pm Tue–Sun) houses items found in an adjoining Neolithic Cave, the Alepotrypa Cave. Entrance to the museum includes entrance to this cave. This was used to store crops, and housed workshops, living areas and formal burial grounds. The inhabitants died as a result of the earthquake of 4 BC, after the cave was sealed by boulders.

Pyrgos Dirou to Gerolimenas Πύργος Διρού προς Γερολιμένας

Journeying south down Mani's west coast from Pyrgos Dirou to Gerolimenas, the barren mountain landscape is broken only by deserted settlements with mighty towers. A right turn 9km south of Pyrgos Dirou leads down to the **Bay of Mezapos**, sheltered to the east by

the frying pan-shaped Tigani peninsula. The ruins on the peninsula are those of the **Castle of Maina**, built by the Frankish leader Guillaume de Villehardouin in 1248, and subsequently adapted by the Byzantines.

Kita, 13km south of Pyrgos Dirou, positively bristles with the ruins of war towers and fortified houses. It was the setting for the last great interfamily feud recorded in the Mani, which erupted in 1870 and required the intervention of the army, complete with artillery, to force a truce.

Gerolimenas Γερολιμένας

pop 55
Gerolimenas (*yeh-ro-lih-meh-nahss*) is a tranquil fishing village built around a small, sheltered bay at the southwestern tip of the peninsula. It's the perfect place for scenic seclusion.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Akrogiali (☎ 27330 54204; www.gerolimenas-hotels.com; s €25-30, d €40-50, tr €50-70, 2-person apt €50-70, 3-person apt €60-80, 4-person apt €100-140; ☎) The Akrogiali has a great setting overlooking the bay on the way into town. It has as many prices as it does rooms, which range from OK doubles in the traditional hotel building to a tasteful new stone wing, and apartments nearby. Breakfast costs €5.

Hotel Akroteneritis (☎ 27330 54205; s €60-65, d €75-80, tr €85; ☎) The rough outside doesn't reflect the cosy inside of this ski lodge-style place with its wooden features, marble floors and smart fixtures. The front room – with balcony and view of the harbour – is the bargain of Mani. There are cheaper rooms in an older building nearby (€40).

our pick **Hotel Kirimai** (☎ 27330 54288; www.kirimai.gr; d €110-210, ste €300; P ☎ ☎) The luxurious Kirimai is one of Greek's most swish hospitality experiences. It sits in an idyllic setting at the far southern end of the harbour. The stone-floored, timber-beamed rooms are individually finished with décor-magazine flair. Its restaurant is open to nonguests. It's worth splurging here; the restaurant's head chef was Greek Chef of the Year 2006. The kitchen creates traditional dishes (mains €16 to €25) with a contemporary flair, such as caramelised octopus. Bookings recommended.

There is a small supermarket on the promenade, and a couple of cafés and tavernas.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

There are three buses daily from Gerolimenas to Areopoli (€3, 45 minutes) – and on to Athens (€24), Gythio (€6, 1¼ hours) and Sparta (€9, 2¼ hours). The stop is outside Hotel Akroteneritis; tickets are bought on board.

Gerolimenas to Porto Kagio

Γερολιμένας προς Πόρτο Κάγιο
South of Gerolimenas, the road continues 4km to the small village of Alikia, where it divides. One road leads across the mountains to the east coast, and the other goes south to Vathia and Porto Kagio. The southern road follows the coast, passing pebbly beaches. It then climbs steeply inland to **Vathia**, the most dramatic of the traditional Mani villages, comprising a cluster of closely packed tower houses perched on a rocky spur. It's well worth stopping to explore.

A turn-off to the right 9km south of Alikia leads to **Marmari**, with its two sandy beaches, while the main road cuts across the peninsula to the tiny east-coast fishing village of **Porto Kagio**, set on a perfect horseshoe bay. The village's two competing accommodation options are in as remote a place you'll find anywhere on the Peloponnese.

Akroteri Domatia (☎ 27330 52013; www.porto-kagio.com; Porto Kagio; d €70-80, tr €100) is the type of place you'll book into spontaneously...that is, if there's availability. Its large rooms with balconies overlook the bay and the setting is blessed (speaking of which, there's a great walk from here to the peninsula to a small church). Owner Nikos also runs boat trips.

The above (former) monopoly is no longer rock-solid. Enter **Hotel Psamathous** (☎ 27330 52033; www.portokagio; d/tr incl breakfast €70/90; ☎), this new Flinstones-style (modern Maniot) place owned by the crowd at Porto Taverna. Set back from the waterfront, it has stone platform beds, mezzanines and a nearly-but-not-quite-there designer touch.

Your next-hardest decision is which of the three fish waterfront tavernas to eat at. Prices are much the same for all (mains €5 to €14, fish per kg €50 to €60).

East Coast

The east coast is even more rugged and barren than the west. The main town is **Lagia**, 12km northeast of the Alikia turn-off. Perched some 400m above sea level, it was once the chief town of the southeastern Mani. Although

many of its towers are now derelict, it remains a formidable-looking place, especially when approached from Alika.

From Lagia, the road winds down with spectacular views of the little fishing harbour of **Agios Kyprianos** – a short diversion from the main road. The next village is **Kokala**, a busy place with two pebbled beaches. The best beach is further north at **Nyfi**, where a turn-off to the right leads to sheltered **Alipa Beach**. Continuing north, a turn-off beyond Flomohori descends to **Kotronas**, while the main road cuts back across the peninsula to Areopoli.

There are a couple of seasonal hotels in Kokala and Kotronas, but nothing worth stopping for.

Public transport is limited to a daily bus service between Areopoli and Lagia (€3.20, 40 minutes).

MESSINIAN MANI

The Messinian Mani, or outer Mani, lies to the north of its Lakonian counterpart, sandwiched between the Taygetos Mountains and the west coast of the Mani peninsula. Kalamata lies at the northern end of the peninsula. The rugged coast is scattered with small coves and beaches, and backed by mountains that remain snowcapped until late May. There are glorious views and hiking opportunities.

Stoupa Στούπα pop 625

The former fishing village of Stoupa, 10km south of Kardamyli, is an upmarket resort teetering on the verge of overdevelopment, and billed as a place for discriminating (mainly British) package tourists. Although not as picturesque as Kardamyli, it does have two lovely sandy beaches.

Celebrated author Nikos Kazantzakis lived here for a while and based the protagonist of his novel *Zorba the Greek* on Alexis Zorbas, a coal mine supervisor in Pastrova, near Stoupa. Useful for walkers is *Walks in the Stoupa Area* by Lance Chilton, available from travel agencies.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Stoupa is 1km west of the main Areopoli–Kalamata road, connected by roads both north and south of town. Both roads lead to the larger of Stoupa's main beaches – a crescent of golden sand.

Stoupa's amenities have yet to catch up with its development. There is no tourist office, and most travel agencies will reliably change money and organise car rental. Recommended agencies include **Doufexis Travel** (☎ 27210 77677; doufexis@kal.forthnet.gr) and **Thomeas Travel** (☎ 27210 77689; www.thomeastravel.gr). On the coast road behind the main beach, **Katerina's supermarket** (☎ 27210 77777) doubles as the post office; it also changes money and sells phonecards.

SLEEPING & EATING

Stoupa's growing band of pensions and custom-built domatia tend to be block booked by package-tour operators. **Doufexis Travel** (☎ 27210 77677; doufexis@kal.forthnet.gr) may know of vacancies.

Hotel Apartments Maistrali (☎ 27210 77595; maistrali@otenet.gr; 2-person studio €60; ♿) The Maistrali is comfortable, clean and about 100m back from the beach, with a small garden.

Hotel Lefktron (☎ 27210 77322; info@lefktron-hotel.gr; s/d incl breakfast €87/104; ♿) Signposted off the southern approach road to Stoupa, this is a comfortable modern hotel 150m from the beach. The rooms have fridge and air-con, satellite TV and balconies.

Dolcini (☎ 27210 78234) Chocaholics will love this pastry shop – it's almost worth coming to Stoupa for this place alone.

Taverna Akrogiali (☎ 27210 77335; mains €6-10.50) This taverna has a top location at the southern end of the beach, and an extensive menu that's strong on seafood (platters for €10) and local dishes such as rabbit or meatballs.

Voula's Yesterday & Today (☎ 27210 77535; mains €4.50-12.50; ☺ dinner) Voula and her friendly staff serve a full menu, traditional foods from a bygone era. There's lamb in the oven (€10), smoked pork with pesto and mozzarella (€12.50), and homemade pies (from €4.50), as well as other sweet and savoury treats.

There are supermarkets on the main road behind Stoupa.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Stoupa is on the main Itilo–Kalamata bus route. There are regular buses to Itilo (40 minutes) and Kalamata (one hour, 20 minutes). There are bus stops at the junctions of both the southern and northern approach roads, but the buses don't go into town.

Kardamyli Καρδαμύλη pop 400

It's easy to see why Kardamyli (kahr-dah-mee-lih) was one of the seven cities offered to Achilles by Agamemnon. This tiny village has one of the prettiest settings in the Peloponnese, nestled between the blue waters of the Messinian Gulf and the Taygetos Mountains. The **Vyros Gorge**, which emerges just north of town, runs to the foot of **Mt Profitis Ilias** (2407m), the highest peak of the Taygetos. Today the gorge and surrounding areas are very popular with hikers. Visitor numbers can swell to around 4000 in summer.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Kardamyli is on the main Areopoli–Kalamata road. The central square, Plateia 25 Martiou 1821, lies at the northern end of the main thoroughfare.

Kardamyli's main pebble-and-stone beach is off the road to Kalamata; turn left beyond the bridge on the northern edge of town. The road up to Old (or Upper) Kardamyli is on the right before the bridge. The **post office** (☎ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri) is on the main strip.

ACTIVITIES

Hiking

Hiking has become Kardamyli's biggest drawcard. The hills behind the village are crisscrossed with an extensive network of colour-coded walking trails. Many guesthouses in the village can supply you with a map that explains the various routes. Most of the hikes around here are strenuous, so strong footwear is essential to support your ankles on the often relentlessly rough ground, particularly if you venture into the boulder-strewn gorge itself. You will also need to carry plenty of drinking water.

Many of the walking trails pass through the mountain village of **Exohorio**, which is perched on the edge of the Vyros Gorge at an altitude of 450m. For nonwalkers the village is also accessible by road, and it's a good place to get into a spot of more gentle exploration. The turn-off to Exohorio is 3km south of Kardamyli.

SLEEPING Budget

There are plenty of domatia signs along the main road. The street down to the sea opposite the pharmacy is a good place to look.

Olympia Koumounakou Rooms (☎ 27210 73623/21026; s/d €25/30) Olympia loves her budget travellers (as they do her) and offers clean, comfortable rooms and a communal kitchen. On the road before the pharmacy.

Stratis Bravacos Rooms (☎ 27210 73326; d/tr €35/45) Stratis, directly opposite Olympia's, is also great value for spotless studio apartments with kitchen facilities.

Lela's Rooms (☎ 27210 73541; d €45) Located at the end of the street before the pharmacy and overlooking the sea, Lela's rooms have a peaceful outlook but a noisy setting – her taverna (p210) is below.

Midrange & Top End

I Elies (☎ 27210 73140, 6974722819; 2-6-person apt €105-155) A new and tasteful provincial-style complex of stone maisonettes, set in an olive grove. There's also a popular weekend lunch restaurant (mains €5.50 to €9) and a children's playground. About 1km north of the village.

Kalamitsi Hotel (☎ 27210 73131; www.kalamitsi-hotel.gr; d €110-160; ☺ Apr-Sep) This hotel is about 1km south of town and worth considering if you're not budgeting too keenly. The Kalamitsi is a lovely, modern, stone-built, terracotta-tiled hotel with serene, well-appointed rooms (family bungalows also available €220) and tree-shaded grounds leading to the hotel's own small, pebbly beach. Home-cooked dinners (set menu €20, guests only) and fresh buffet breakfasts (€10) also available.

Hotel Vardia (☎ 27210 73777; www.vardia-hotel.gr; studio €85, apt €115-170) March into this top choice: a relaxing and stylish stone place (near a former sentry tower and situated high behind the village), with exceptional views of the Messinian Gulf. For those with transport, it's worth the hike. Turn up the hill at the bookshop.

EATING

There's no shortage of eating options in and around Kardamyli.

Kafe Plateia (☎ 27210 72642) An authentic *kafeneio* (coffee house). Vangelis, the owner, serves great Greek coffee. Handily located opposite the bus stop.

Taverna Dioskouri (☎ 27210 73236; mains €4.50-8) A safe, nothing-over-the-top option, except for the view, that is; it overlooks the sea from the hillside just south of town.

Ta Kumaristria (☎ 27210 73250) This place is known for its live music (8pm to 11pm), along

with the hospitable host who serves tapas-style dishes and a damned good time.

Lela's Taverna (☎ 27210 73541; mains €5-9) Lela's Taverna has a dreamy setting – with a foliage-covered terrace overlooking the sea and tasty home-style cuisine.

There are two supermarkets side by side at the northern edge of the village.

GETTING THERE & AROUND

Kardamyli is on the main bus route from Itilo to Kalamata (€2.50, one hour). The bus stops at the central square, at the northern end of the main thoroughfare.

Early birds can catch the sole bus to Exohorio at around 5.45am (check changing times); most travellers prefer to take a taxi (around €7).

MESSINIA ΜΕΣΣΗΝΙΑ

Its remote location on the southwestern corner of the Peloponnese ensures that fewer travellers make it to Messinia than other parts, which is great news for those that do reach this region. The beaches in the southwest are some of the best in the country, and while villages like Finikounda have felt the weight of package tourism, the old Venetian towns of Koroni and Methoni still remain delightful hideaways.

Messinia's boundaries were established in 371 BC following the defeat of Sparta by the Thebans at the Battle of Leuctra. The defeat ended almost 350 years of Spartan domination of the Peloponnese – during which time Messinian exiles founded the city of Messinia in Sicily – and meant the Messinians were left free to develop their kingdom in the region stretching west from the Taygetos Mountains. Their capital was ancient Messini, about 25km north-west of Kalamata on the slopes of Mt Ithomi.

KALAMATA ΚΑΛΑΜΑΤΑ

pop 49,154

Kalamata is Messinia's capital and the second-largest city in the Peloponnese. Compared to its more peaceful surrounds, it is a less inspiring destination for visitors, but museum lovers will be sated. Built on the site of ancient Pharai, the city takes its modern name from a miracle-working icon of the Virgin Mary known as *kalo mata* (good eye). It was discovered in the stables of the Ottoman aga (governor), who converted to Christianity as a result of the miracles it performed. The

icon now resides inside the city's oversized cathedral, the **Church of Ypapantis**.

In front of the *kastro* is the small, but attractive, old town, which was almost totally destroyed by the Turks during the War of Independence and rebuilt by French engineers in the 1830s. On 14 September 1986 Kalamata was devastated by an earthquake; 20 people died, hundreds were injured and more than 10,000 homes were destroyed.

Orientation

The lively waterfront along Navarinou is a long, hot walk from the *kastro*, which is situated above the old town. The main streets linking the two areas are Faron and Aristomenous. The city centre is situated around the central square on Aristomenous.

The KTEL Messinia bus station is on the northern edge of town on Artemidos, while local buses leave from Plateia 23 Martiou – bus 1 goes to the waterfront. The train station is on Frantzi, west of the central square. At the southern end of Aristomenous is the leafy OSE park, home to a collection of old steam locomotives and carriages.

Information

There are branches of all the major banks. The National Bank of Greece has a branch on Aristomenous, at the central square, and another on the waterfront on the corner of Akrita and Navarinou.

Diktyo Internet Café (☎ 27210 97282; Nedontos 75; per hr €2; ☎ 24hr)

EOT (☎ 27210 22059; Polyvriou 5; ☎ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri) Barely ever open, but given the paucity of information on offer, no great shame.

Launderette (☎ 27210 95978; Methonis 3; per load wash & dry €8; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-9pm Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat)

Post office (Olgas; ☎ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri)

Port post office (Navarinou; ☎ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri) Opposite the port.

Post Café & Internet (☎ 27210 99555; Iatropoulou 6; per hr €2; ☎ 24hr) A weird combo of café, nightclub and internet services.

Tourist police (☎ 27210 44680; Messinis; ☎ 8am-9pm Mon-Fri)

Sights

KASTRO

Looming over the town is the 13th-century **kastro** (admission free; ☎ 8am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-3pm Sat & Sun). Remarkably, it survived the 1986 earthquake. The entry gate is its most impressive



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feature. There's not much else to see, but there are good views from the battlements.

BENAKION ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

The **Benakion Archaeological Museum** (☎ 27210 26209; Papazoglou 6; adult/concession €2/1; ☎ 8am-2.30pm Tue-Sun) is a small museum. The 1st-floor prehistoric displays are particularly good, with comprehensive explanations in English. It's just north of Plateia 23 Martiou, signposted off Ypapantis.

MILITARY MUSEUM

Keen military buffs should march into the **Military Museum** (☎ 27210 21219; Mitropolitou Meletiou 10; admission free; ☎ 9am-2pm Tue-Sat, 6-8pm Wed, 11am-2pm Sun). The displays span a broad chronological sweep from the Turkish occupation (depicted in grisly paintings) to the 21st century. National servicemen take guided tours (English speakers are supposedly available). Unfortunately, all signage is in Greek.

Sleeping

The waterfront east of Faron is lined with characterless C-class (two-star) hotels that are best avoided.

KALAMATA OLIVES

Kalamata gives its name to the prized Kalamata olive, a plump, purple-black variety that is found in delicatessens around the world and grown extensively (although not exclusively) in neighbouring Lakonia. The region's reliable winter rains and hot summers make for perfect olive-growing conditions.

The Kalamata tree is distinguished from the common olive (grown for oil) by the size of its leaves. Like its fruit, the leaves of the Kalamata are twice the size of other varieties and greener.

Unlike other varieties, Kalamata olives cannot be picked green. They ripen in late November, and must be hand-picked to avoid bruising. You can buy and sample these famous olives at the markets in Kalamata.

Pension Avra (☎ 27210 82759; Santa Rosa 10; d/t with-out bathroom €25/32) This place has aged gracefully like its owner – a little grey and frayed around the edges, but clean and respectable. The very basic rooms have balconies.

Hotel Haikos (☎ 27210 88902; www.haikos.com; Navarino 115; s/d/tr €55/85/91) One of the best choices of the modern(ish) two-star hotels along the beachfront, with motel-style trimmings, such as hair dryers and bar fridges. Rooms at the front can catch the street noise. Breakfast is €6 extra. Prices are significantly less outside high season.

Hotel Rex (☎ 27210 94440; www.rexhotel.gr; Aristomenous 26; s/d/ste incl breakfast €97/138/245; ♿) The Rex stands unchallenged as the best address (with the slowest lift) in Kalamata. It occupies a fine neoclassical building, and offers travellers comfortable – if slightly cramped – modern rooms with all the facilities, including air-con, satellite TV and internet access.

Eating

15 The Restaurant (☎ 27210 28925; Sidirodromikou Stathmou 15; mains €5-8; ☹ lunch & dinner) The nearest thing to a fast-food joint, but along Greek lines (and minus the clowns), with a decent selection of local dishes from *mousakas* (sliced eggplant and mincemeat arranged in layers and baked) to sardines.

To Limeni (☎ 27210 95670; Kalamata Marina; mains €5-14, fish per kg €40; ☹ lunch & dinner) At the far western end of the Marina, you'll find the

Limeni serving fresh, flavourful taverna classics under a shady terrace overlooking bobbing yachts.

I Milopetra (☎ 27210 98950; snacks €3.50-10; ☹ lunch & dinner) A cosmopolitan, contemporary and upmarket café with an olive theme, in a handy location in the old town. Serves gourmet snacks and olive-based products.

The Marina is the best place for seafood and other tavernas at a varying range of styles and prices.

Self-caterers should visit the large **Food market** (Nedontos) across the bridge from the KTEL Messinia bus station. Kalamata is noted for its olives, olive oil and figs (see the boxed text, left).

There are dozens of supermarkets around town. **AB** (Kritis 13) is the biggest and the best.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Olympic Airways runs a flight (€76, three weekly) between Kalamata and Thessaloniki (but not Athens).

BUS

In town, **KTEL Messinia bus station** (☎ 27210 28581; Artemidos) has buses to Athens (€18.90, 4½ hours, 13 daily) via Tripoli (€6.90, 1¼ hours) and Corinth (€13.50, 2½ hours), Kyparissia (€5.80, 1¼ hours, five daily) and Patra (€19.50, four hours, two daily) via Pyrgos (€10.90, two hours).

Heading west, there are buses to Kotroni (€4.10, 1½ hours, nine daily), Pylos (€4.10, 1¼ hours, eight daily), Methoni (€5, 1½ hours, four daily) and Finikounda (€6.30, 1¼ hours, two daily). Heading east across the Langada Pass to Sparta involves changing buses at Artemisia (€2.10, 45 minutes). There are also three buses a day to the Messinian Mani, travelling as far as Itilo (€6.10, 2¼ hours) via Kardamyli (€3, 45 minutes) and Stoupa (€3.70, 1¼ hours). Sunday services are greatly reduced or nonexistent.

FERRY

A weekly ferry service operated by **ANEN Lines** (www.anen.gr) runs from Kalamata to Kissamos-Kastelli (per person/car €23/82, eight hours), on Crete, via Kythira. Contact **SMAN Travel/Maniatis** (☎ 27210 20704; smantrv@acn.gr; Psaron), by the port, for the schedule.

TRAIN

Kalamata is the end of the line for the Peloponnese railway (see the boxed text, p161). There are three trains departing daily on the west coast line to Corinth (normal/Intercity €14/20), Pyrgos (normal/Intercity €2.80/6) and Patra (normal/Intercity €5/10, five hours).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Kalamata's airport is 10.5km west of the city near Messini. There is no airport shuttle bus. A taxi costs about €10.

BUS

Local buses leave from Plateia 23 Martiou. The most useful service is bus 1, which goes south along Aristomenous to the seafront and then east along Navarinou to the edge of town. The flat fare is €1. Buy tickets from kiosks or the driver.

CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Kalamata is a good place to rent a vehicle, due to hot competition between the agencies at the waterfront end of Faron. Recommended options:

Alpha Rent a Bike (☎ 27210 93423; Vyronos 143)

Rents a range of bikes from 50cc to 500cc.

Avis (☎ 27210 20352; Katsari 2)

Hertz (☎ 27210 88268; Methonis & Kanari 88)

Rent a Car Hellen (☎ 07210 94644; Faron 210)

Verga Rent a Car (☎ 27210 95190; Faron 202)

MAVROMATI (ANCIENT MESSINI) MAYPOMATI (ΑΡΧΑΙΑ ΜΕΣΣΗΝΗ)

pop 388

The fascinating ruins of Ancient Messini lie scattered across a small valley below the pretty village of Mavromati, 25km northwest of Kalamata. The village takes its name from the fountain in the central square; the water gushes from a hole in the rock that looks like a black eye (*mavro mati* in Greek).

History

Ancient Messini was founded in 371 BC after the Theban general Epaminondas defeated Sparta at the Battle of Leuctra, freeing the Messinians from almost 350 years of Spartan rule.

Built on the site of an earlier stronghold, the new Messinian capital was one of a string of defensive positions designed to keep watch

over Sparta. Epaminondas himself helped to plan the fortifications, which were based on a massive wall that stretched 9km around the surrounding ridges and completely enclosed the town.

Apart from its defensive potential, Ancient Messini was also favoured by the gods. According to local myth, Zeus was born here – not Crete – and raised by the nymphs Neda and Ithomi, who bathed him in the same spring that gives the modern village its name.

Sights

EXPLORING THE SITE

The best views of this beautiful site are from Mavromati's central square, and it's worth briefly examining the layout before heading down for a closer look. Access is by a couple of steep paths leading downhill either side of the museum, about 300m northwest of the square.

The **museum** (☎ 27210 51201; admission €2; ☹ 8.30am-3pm Tue-Sun) houses a small and interesting collection of finds from the site, mainly statues recovered from the asklepon. They include two statues assumed to be of Machaon and Podaleiros, the sons of Asclepius. They are thought to be the work of the sculptor Damophon, who specialised in oversized statues of gods and heroes, and was responsible for many of the statues that once adorned ancient Messini.

Before heading down to the site, it's worth continuing another 800m along the road past the museum to view the celebrated **Arcadian Gate**. This unusual circular gate guarded the ancient route to Megalopoli – now the modern road north to Meligalas and Zerbisia – which runs through the gate. Running uphill from the gate is the finest surviving section of the mighty defensive wall built by Epaminondas. It remains impressive, studded with small, square forts, and is well worth the gentle uphill walk from the village.

The site itself (admission free) remained unexplored until very recent times, and is slowly emerging from the valley floor. Excavation so far has concentrated on the **asklepon** complex that lay at the heart of the ancient city.

This extensive complex was centred on a **Doric temple** that once housed a golden statue of Ithomi. The modern awning west of the temple protects the **artemision**, where

fragments of an enormous statue of Artemis Orthia were found. The structures to the east of the asklepion include the **ekklesiasterion**, which once acted as an assembly hall.

The site's main path leads downhill from the asklepion to the **stadium**, which is surrounded by the ruins of an enormous **gymnasium**.

Sleeping & Eating

Rooms to Rent/Taverna Ithomi (☎ /fax 27210 51298; d €40) The Ithomi's proprietors have four very comfortable family rooms with pine ceilings, above their restaurant (this means some noise). A large communal balcony overlooks the site. The taverna downstairs specialises in grilled food and salads (mains €5 to €10), and serves breakfasts.

Getting There & Away

There are two buses daily to Mavromati (€2.20, one hour) from Kalamata, one in the early morning, the other in the afternoon, to a changing schedule. Check at the taverna.

KORONI ΚΟΡΩΝΗ

pop 1668

Koroni (ko-ro-nih) is a delightful old Venetian port town, 43km southwest of Kalamata, situated on Messinia Bay. Medieval mansions and churches line the town's quaint, narrow and winding streets. These lead to a promontory, on which perches an extensive castle.

Orientation & Information

Buses will drop you in the central square outside the Church of Agios Dimitrios, one block back from the harbour. The main street (formal name Perikli Ralli, but few know it) runs east from the square, one block back from the sea.

There is no tourist office, but the large town map on the cathedral wall shows the location of both banks and the **post office** (☎ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri), all of which are nearby. There are no tourist police.

Sights & Activities

Much of the old castle is occupied by the **Timios Prodromos Convent**. Note the castle's impressive Gothic entrance. The small promontory beyond the castle is a tranquil place for a stroll, with lovely views over the Messinian Gulf to the Taygetos Mountains.

Koroni's main attraction is **Zaga Beach**, a long sweep of golden sand just south of the

town. It takes about 20 minutes to walk to Zaga Beach – you can cut through the castle or go via the road. Ask locals for directions.

Sleeping & Eating

Accommodation is a bit limited in Koroni. Most of the rooms are spread around a cluster of domatia (singles/doubles €30/40) by the sea, at the eastern end of the main street. There are more domatia overlooking Zaga Beach, but they are often booked in summer.

Camping Koroni (☎ 27250 22119; Koroni; camp sites per adult/tent/car €7/4/4; 🚰) Located only 200m from Koroni, near the beach and with good facilities.

Hotel Diana (☎ /fax 27250 22312; s/d €30/45; 🚰) This place is blessed (or otherwise) with Byzantine gold-plated bar stools, icons and the like. Management's mood isn't always as shiny but rooms are better. It's off the central square almost on the seafront.

Vagas Apartments (☎ 6973 754036; Zaga Beach; 2-4-person apt €65/80, 4-6-person cottage €120; 🚰) Personable apartments with kitchen facilities and balconies and views over Zaga Beach.

Kagelarios Restaurant (☎ 27250 22648; main street; mains €6-14, fish per kg €50-68) A busy, popular place, open year-round. Locals rave about the fish, including *gavros* (anchovy), and *mezedhes*. Along the waterfront (about 100m from Hotel Diana).

Getting There & Away

There are eight buses daily to Kalamata (€4.10, 1½ hours) and one to Athens (€23).

FINIKOUNDA ΦΟΙΝΙΚΟΥΝΤΑ

pop 560

The fishing village of Finikounda, midway between Koroni and Methoni, is now something of a seasonal minipackage-tour resort. Thankfully it lacks high-rises, but its new highway cuts a swathe behind the village. It's maintained the reasonable **beaches** that stretch either side of the village, and it's popular for **windsurfing**.

All the shops and facilities are in the old village around the port. The bus stop is outside Hotel Finikountas, 100m from the port.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Anemomilos (☎ 27230 71362; fax 27230 71124; camp sites per adult/tent/car €5/3.50/2.50; 🚰 year round) Popular with younger campers, although not exclusively so, this camping

ground is right by the beach, 3km west of Finikounda, off the road to Methoni.

Hotel Korakakis Beach (☎ 27230 71221; korakaki@otenet.gr; s/d €55/65; 🚰) A comfortable 1980s-style hotel at the eastern end of the main town beach, away from the madding crowd.

Akti Studios (☎ 27230 71316; d/tr €65/65; 🚰 🚰) This small, family-run place has comfortable studios with kitchen facilities. It's set back from the beach road about 250m east of the port. The rooms have balconies with beach views.

Taverna Elena (☎ 27230 71235; mains €6-12.50) Position, position, position. With a prime spot on the headland overlooking the port at the western end of town, it's the perfect spot to relax and take in the views. There's dish of the day, a kids' menu and wi-fi.

Getting There & Away

There are buses to Kalamata (€5.40, 3¼ hours, four to five daily) via Methoni and Pylos.

METHONI ΜΕΘΩΝΗ

pop 1169

Methoni (meh-tho-nih), 12km south of Pylos, was another of the seven cities of Homer to Achilles by Agamemnon. Homer described it as 'rich in vines'. Today it's a pretty seaside town with a popular sandy beach, next to which crouches a sturdy 15th-century Venetian fortress.

Orientation & Information

The road from Pylos forks on the edge of town to create Methoni's two main streets, which then run parallel through town to the fortress. As you come from Pylos, the fork to the right is the main shopping street. It has numerous shops, *kafeneia*, a National Bank of Greece (and ATE Bank ATM) and a nearby supermarket. The left fork leads directly to the fortress car park, passing the **post office** (☎ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri) on the way. Turn left at the fortress end of either street onto Miaouli, which leads to Methoni Beach. The small square by the beach is surrounded by fairly characterless hotels and several seafood restaurants.

There is no tourist office or tourist police. The regular **police** (☎ 27230 31203) are signposted near the post office.

Sights FORTRESS

This splendid **kastrò** (admission free; ☎ 8am-7pm May-Sep, to 3pm Oct-Apr), a great example of military architecture, is vast and romantic. Within the walls are a Turkish bath, a cathedral, a house, a cistern, parapets and underground passages. See how many Lion of St Mark insignias you can spot.

This vast fortification is built on a promontory south of the modern town and is surrounded on three sides by the sea and separated from the mainland by a moat. The medieval port town, which was located within the fortress walls, was the Venetians' first and their longest-held possession in the Peloponnese. It was also a stopover point for pilgrims en route to the Holy Land. During medieval times the twin fortresses of Methoni and Koroni were known as 'the Eyes of the Serene Republic'.

A short causeway leads from the fortress to the diminutive octagonal **Bourtzi castle** on an adjacent islet.

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Methoni (☎ 27230 31228; camp sites per adult/tent/car €4.30/3/2.60) This basic camping ground has a good beachfront location, but is not the shadiest of spots.

Hotel Achilles (☎ /fax 27230 31819; www.achilleshotel.gr; s/d €55/70; 🚰 year-round; 🚰) The smartest of a range of small family hotels in town, with comfortable modern rooms. There's a light, airy dining area and balcony, too. Breakfast costs €6.

Apartments Melina (☎ 27230 31505; www.geocities.com/messinias; studio €65, 4-person apt €80-120) Immaculate apartments right across from the beach, with a trim garden of vines, roses and palms, and friendly English-speaking owners.

Taverna Nikos (☎ 27230 31282; mains €5-9; 🚰 year-round) 'Good, clean, cheap and with big helpings' is the local boast of this no-frills taverna, halfway along Miaouli near the fortress.

Methoni Beach Café Restaurant (☎ 27230 28720; mains €6.50-12; 🚰 breakfast, lunch & dinner summer) Situated beside the fortress moat and beneath the hotel of the same name (singles/doubles/triples including breakfast €9/110/135), this bustling place has a huge menu of Greek, Mediterranean and international dishes, including an extensive selection of salads, pasta dishes and fresh fish. Among the local specialties on offer are *pastitsio* (layers of buttery

macaroni and seasoned minced lamb) and *mousakas*. It offers umbrellas, and a beach bar with personalised service.

Getting There & Away

Buses depart from Methoni from the fork at the Pylos end of town where the two main streets meet. Bus services depart for Pylos (€1.50, 15 minutes, five daily), Kalamata (€5.50, 1½ hours, five daily) and Finikounda (€2, 15 minutes, two daily). For a timetable, try your luck at the newspaper shop near the bus stop.

PYLOS ΠΥΛΟΣ

pop 2104

Pylos (*pee-loss*), on the coast 51km southwest of Kalamata, presides over the southern end of an immense bay. With its huge natural harbour almost enclosed by the Sfaktiria Islet, a delightful tree-shaded central square, two castles and surrounding pine-covered hills, Pylos is one of the most picturesque towns in the Peloponnese.

From the bay on 20 October 1827, the British, French and Russian fleets, under the command of Admiral Codrington, fired at point-blank range on Ibrahim Pasha's combined Turkish, Egyptian and Tunisian fleet, sinking 53 ships and killing 6000 men, with negligible losses on the Allies' side.

The attack was known as the Battle of Navarino (which is the town's former name) and was decisive in the War of Independence, but it was not meant to have been a battle at all. The Allied fleet wanted to achieve no more than to persuade Ibrahim Pasha and his fleet to leave, but things got somewhat out of hand. George IV, on hearing the news, described it as a 'deplorable misunderstanding'.

Orientation & Information

Everything of importance is within a few minutes' walk of the central square, Plateia Trion Navarhon (Sq of the Three Admirals), down by the seafront.

The bus station is on the inland side of the square. Nileos runs uphill from the bus station.

There is no tourist office. The National Bank of Greece and ATE Bank (with ATM) is on the square.

Internet P@ndigit@I (Episkopou 17; per hr €2.50) Cutting-edge services.

Police station (☎ 27230 23733/2316) On the central square.

Post office (Nileos; ☎ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri)

Sights & Activities

CASTLES

There are castles on each side of Navarino Bay. The more accessible of them is the **Neo Kastro** (☎ 27230 22010; adult/concession €3/2; ☎ 8.30am-7pm Tue-Sun), on the hill top at the southern edge of town, off the road to Methoni. It was built by the Turks in 1573 and later used as a launching pad for the invasion of Crete. It remains in good condition, especially the formidable surrounding walls. Within its walls are a citadel, a mosque converted into a church and a courtyard surrounded by dungeons (used as a prison until the 1900s). The road to Methoni from the central square goes past the castle. Allow a couple of hours for relaxed exploration.

For coverage of the ancient Paleokastro, the other castle that is 6km north of Pylos, see opposite.

BOAT TOURS

Club Boats (☎ 27230 23155, 6972263565) in the kiosk on the quay runs boat tours around the Bay of Navarino and to Sfaktiria Island. The price depends on the number of passengers, but reckon on about €8 each for a group of four or more. On the trip around the island, stops can be made at memorials to admirals of the Allied ships. Napoleon's nephew and British casualties are also buried here. Boats pause to see silt-covered wrecks of sunken Turkish ships, still discernible in the clear waters.

Sleeping

Rooms to Rent Stavroula Milona (☎ 27230 22724; d without bathroom €30) This creaky place (with wobbly floors) is charming. The small, basic rooms are clean and comfortable. There's a communal kitchen and TV lounge. It's on the seafront, south of Hotel Miramare, above Café-Bar En Plo (the bar's nightly music may bother some).

Hotel Miramare (☎ 27230 22751; fax 27230 22226; s/d/tr incl breakfast €45/65/75; ♿) This place holds no surprises – it's a comfortable midrange seafront hotel, just south of the harbour, with views over Navarino Bay.

Eating

There are plenty of tavernas with standard favorites and seafood.

Restaurant Grigoris (☎ 27230 22621; mains €4.50-11) A great alternative to the central square options. Forget the menu – round off your appetite with the chef's stove-top displays. In summer there's a shady garden. On a quiet spot one street north of, and parallel to, the harbour.

Café Krinos (☎ 27230 22756; ☎ 6am-1am) Open since 1937 on the central square, this café (meaning 'lily') boasts a recent contemporary make-over, plus the best pastries around. Known for its *galaktoboureko*, a sweet dough and custardlike pastry. Owner Paul knows heaps about the region.

There is a supermarket on the central square.

Getting There & Away

From the bus station **KTEL Messinia** (☎ 27230 22230) has buses to Kalamata (€4.20, 1¼ hours, eight daily), Kyparissia (€5, 1¼ hours, five daily) via Nestor's Palace (€1.40, 30 minutes, four services Saturday and two on Sunday), and Hora (€2, 35 minutes), Methoni (€1.20, 20 minutes, five daily) and Finikounda (€1.80, 30 minutes, three services daily Monday to Saturday, none on Sunday). On weekends there are two buses a day to Athens (€23.10, five hours). For Patra, there's one connection per day at Kyparissia.

GIALOVA ΓΙΑΛΟΒΑ

pop 260

The village of Gialova lies 8km north of Pylos on the northeastern edge of Navarino Bay. It boasts a fine sandy beach and safe swimming in the sheltered waters of the bay. The Gialova Lagoon is a prime bird-watching site in winter (see boxed text, p218).

Sleeping & Eating

Camping Erodioid (☎ 27230 28240; www.camping.gr/erodioid; camp sites per adult/tent/car €6/5/3.50, 2-/4-bed cabins €55/70) Erodioid, which is Greek for heron, is a new camping ground northwest of the village on the road leading out to the Gialova Lagoon and Paleokastro. It has a good stretch of beach on Navarino Bay and great facilities.

Hotel-Restaurant Zoe (☎ 27230 22025; www.hotelzoe.com; s/d/tr incl breakfast €58/70/110; ♿) The Zoe is a small family-run hotel on the seafront near the pier. The owners have lots of information about bird-watching and walks around the wetlands.

Taverna To Spitiko (☎ 27230 22137; mains €6-10) There's a strong Cypriot presence in the kitchen at To Spitiko, which cooks fresh, flavoursome food, including a tasty *saganaki* from Cypriot cheese, and superb Cypriot-style pork meatballs flavoured with fresh herbs (*seftelies*).

Getting There & Away

There are five buses a day south to Pylos (€1.20, 15 minutes) and five north to Kyparissia via Nestor's Palace and Hora.

AROUND GIALOVA Paleokastro

The ruins of this ancient castle lie 5km west of Gialova on rugged **Koryfasion Hill**, a formidable natural defensive position overlooking the northern entrance to Navarino Bay.

The road out to the castle is signposted on the northern edge of the village. It crosses the narrow spit of land that separates Navarino Bay from the Gialova Lagoon, and finishes at a car park at the southern end of the hill. Signs point to the beginning of a rough track that snakes up the steep hillside to the castle entrance.

The castle was built by the Franks at the end of the 13th century, and sits on the site of the acropolis of ancient Pylos. It was occupied in 1381 by Spanish mercenaries from Navarra, after whom the bay is named.

The car park is also the starting point for another track that skirts around the base of Koryphasion Hill to **Voidokilia Beach**. This beautiful, sandy horseshoe bay is presumed to be Homer's 'sandy Pylos', where Telemachus was warmly welcomed when he came to ask wise old King Nestor the whereabouts of his long-lost father, Odysseus, King of Ithaca. There's another path up to the castle from the southern side of the beach that passes **Nestor's Cave**. According to mythology, this is the cave where Hermes hid the cattle he stole from Apollo. It boasts some impressive stalactites.

Voidokilia Beach can also be approached via road from the village of **Petrohori**, about 4km north of Gialova off the road to Hora.

Nestor's Palace

So called because it is believed to have been the court of the mythical hero Nestor, who took part in the voyage of the Argonauts and fought in the Trojan War, **Nestor's Palace** (☎ 27630 31437; admission €3; ☎ 8.30am-3pm) is

the best preserved of all Mycenaean palaces. Originally a two-storey building, the palace's walls stand 1m high, giving a good idea of the layout of a Mycenaean palace complex. The main palace, in the middle, was a building of many rooms. The largest room, the **throne room**, was where the king dealt with state business. In the centre was a large, circular hearth surrounded by four ornate columns that supported a 1st-floor balcony. Some of the fine frescoes discovered here are housed in the museum in the nearby village of Hora. Surrounding the throne is the **entry box**, **pantry**, **waiting room**, a **vestibule** and, most fascinating, a **bathroom** with a terracotta tub still in place.

The most important finds were 1200 or so Linear B script tablets, the first discovered on the mainland. Some are in Hora's museum. The site was excavated later than the other Mycenaean sites, between 1952 and 1965. An excellent guidebook by Carl Blegen, who led the excavations, is sold at the site.

Nestor's Palace is 17km north of modern Pylos. Buses from Pylos to Kyparissia stop at Nestor's Palace (€1.40, 30 minutes).

Hora Χώρα

Hora's fascinating little **archaeological museum** (☎ 27632 31358; admission €1.50; 🕒 8.30am-3pm Tue-Sun), 3km northeast of Nestor's Palace, houses finds from the site and other Mycenaean artefacts from Messinia. The prize pieces are the frescoes from the throne rooms at Nestor's Palace.

Buses from Pylos to Kyparissia stop at Hora.

ELIA ΗΛΙΑ

Most people come to Elia for one reason: to visit the historically important and impressive site of Ancient Olympia, birthplace of the Olympic Games, in the region's western prefecture. Elia is otherwise largely an agricultural area.

Ancient Elia took its name from the mythical King Helios. Its capital was the city of Elis, now a forgotten ruin on the road from Gastouni to Lake Pinios. When the Franks arrived, they made Andravida the capital of their principate of Morea. Pyrgos is the dull modern capital.

THOLOS TO PYRGOS ΘΟΛΟΣ ΠΙΡΟΣ ΠΥΡΓΟΣ

Heading north into Elia from Messinia, the mountains to the east give way to populated plains fringed by golden-sand beaches. Elia's coastline has one of the longest stretches of beaches, even if interspersed here and there by pebbled shores and rocky outcrops. Among the best southern beaches are **Tholos**, **Kakovatos** and **Kouroutas**. There is seaside accommodation available in each village, but most of it is in uninspiring concrete buildings.

A sign outside Tholos points to the mountain village of **Nea Figalia**, 14km inland. From here, it's a further 21km to reach the tranquil and overgrown site of **Ancient Figalia**, set high above the River Neda. Laurel, cypress and citrus trees are clustered around the ruins of this ancient Arkadian marketplace, with

remnants of towers, a small acropolis and a temple to Dionysos, the wine pourer. A road leads about 19km east from Nea Figalia to Andritsena.

PYRGOS ΠΥΡΓΟΣ

pop 23,274

Pyrgos, the capital of Elia prefecture, 98km southwest of Patra and 24km from Olympia, is a busy service town with little of interest to the visitor, except for shops. But you'll probably end up here: all forms of public transport, including buses and trains to Olympia, pass through the town. The train and bus stations are about 400m apart, the former at the northern edge of town on Ypsilantou and the modern, well-organised bus station on the other side of the train tracks northwest of the station.

Sleeping

If you need to stay overnight, there are several hotels on the streets leading into town, off Ypsilantou.

Hotel Pantheon (☎ 26210 29746; pantheon@mailbox.gr; Themistokleous 7; s/d €40/50; 🍷) This place was built in the 1980s and has not changed since. But it's pleasant, clean and central. Breakfast costs €6.

Getting There & Away BUS

There are up to 16 buses daily to Olympia (€1.90, 30 minutes), as well as 10 daily to Athens (€23.80, four hours), nine daily to Patra (€8.40, two hours), and two daily to Andritsena (€5.30, two hours), Kyllini (€4.60, one hour), Kyparissia (€5.20, 1¼ hours) and Kalamata (€10, two hours). The schedule is reduced on weekends.

TRAIN

Heading north, there are six trains daily to Corinth (express/normal €10.30/5.60, 4¼/3½ hours) via Patra; heading south, there are five trains daily to Kyparissia (express/normal €4.40/1.80, 1¼ hours), which continue to Kalamata (express/normal €6/2.80, 3¼ hours). There are also trains daily on the branch line to Olympia (€0.70, 40 minutes).

AROUND PYRGOS

Nemea's wine country is not the only region of the Peloponnese to produce a decent drop. The **Mercouri Estate** (☎ 26210 41601; www.mercouri

.gr; 🍷 tastings 9am-2pm Mon-Sat), 1km north of Korakohori village and about 15km from Pyrgos, is another worthwhile winery. This handsome estate produces a dry white Folei, and a prize-winning rich red, its flagship **Domaine Mercouri**. It also runs tours of the grounds (book ahead).

OLYMPIA ΟΛΥΜΠΙΑ

pop 1000

With countless overpriced souvenir shops and eateries, the modern village of Olympia (*o-lim-bee-ah*) panders unashamedly to the hundreds of thousands of tourists who continually pour through here on their way to Ancient Olympia. Despite this, the town is far from kitsch. Beyond the well-kept leafy streets are several even leafier walks, including that along the Kladeos River. Only 500m south of town is Ancient Olympia, one of the most luxuriantly green, beautiful and historically important sites to be consumed. Try to head to the site as it opens and savour a few quiet minutes before the hordes arrive. Lone entry to the site's stadium is guaranteed to give you goose bumps.

Orientation

The main street, Praxitelous Kondyli, runs through town and leads to the Ancient Olympia site. The bus stop for Pyrgos and Tripoli is one block before the church as you enter Olympia from Pyrgos, and the train station is close to the town centre near the end of Douma St.

Information

Ep@thlon Cafe (☎ 26240 23894; per hr €4; 🕒 8am-midnight)

National Bank of Greece (cnr Praxitelous Kondyli & Stefanopoulou) One of four banks in town.

Olympia Municipal Tourist Office (Praxitelous Kondyli; 🕒 May-Sep) Closed at the time of research, it should be back in service for high season. In the meantime, bus, train and ferry schedules (from Kyllini and Patra) are posted on the window.

Post office (Pierre Coubertin 3; 🕒 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri)

Tourist police (☎ 26240 22550; Spiliopoulou 5)

Sights

Four museums focus on Ancient Olympia and Olympia (and Olympics) mania. The Archaeological Museum and Museum of the History of the Olympic Games are not to be

BIRD-WATCHING

The best – and most accessible – bird-watching site in the Peloponnese is the **Gialova Lagoon**. Between November and March the lagoon is home to up to 20,000 assorted water birds, while many others pause here on their spring migration between Africa and Eastern Europe.

The Hellenic Ornithological Society has recorded 262 of the 423 species found in Greece, including 10 species of duck and eight types of heron. Waders descend in their thousands, along with flamingos and glossy ibis. Birds of prey include the imperial eagle, osprey, peregrine falcon and harriers.

The lagoon and associated wetlands cover 500 hectares at the northern end of Navarino Bay, separated from the bay by a narrow spit of land leading out to Koryphasion Hill. They are fed by two freshwater streams that flow into the reed beds on the northern and eastern flanks of the lagoon and empty into Navarino Bay, below Koryphasion Hill.

The wetlands and surrounding coastal habitats were declared a protected area in 1996. The old pump house, former nerve centre of an ill-considered drainage scheme, has been converted into an information centre and is the starting point for a walking trail that guides visitors through a range of habitats.

missed; the other two are only worth it if you have time to kill or interest to satisfy. And this is before you even hit the Olympic site itself.

You can buy a joint ticket for both the Olympic site and for the Archaeological Museum – highly recommended.

MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES IN ANTIQUITY

This **museum** (admission free; ☎ 12.30-7.30pm Mon, 8am-7.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct, 10.30am-5pm Mon, 8.30am-5pm Tue-Sun Nov-Mar), opened in 2004 (after the Athens Olympics), is a beautifully presented space depicting the history of all things athletic, as well as the Nemean, Panathenaic and, of course, Olympic Games. The sculptures, mosaics and other displays all play tribute to athletes and athleticism. Women – and their involvement (or lack of) – is also acknowledged.

MUSEUM OF THE HISTORY OF EXCAVATIONS IN OLYMPIA

Next to the Museum of the History of the Olympic Games, and housed in a small historic building, this **museum** (admission free; ☎ 12.30-7.30pm Mon, 8am-7.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct, 10.30am-5pm Mon, 8.30am-5pm Tue-Sun Nov-Mar) will appeal more to archaeology and history buffs. It displays items relating to the site's German excavations in the 19th century.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

This superb **museum** (☎ /fax 26240 22529; adult/concession €6/3 incl site visit €9/5; ☎ 12.30-7.30pm Mon, 8am-7.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct, 10.30am-5pm Mon, 8.30am-3pm Tue-Sun Nov-Mar) – Ancient Olympia's archaeological site museum – about 200m north of the sanctuary's ticket kiosk, is a great place to start or end your visit to the site of Ancient Olympia.

There is a scale site model, and the reassembly of the pediments and metopes from the Temple of Zeus are spectacular (despite not being complete). The **eastern pediment** depicts the chariot race between Pelops and Oinomaos, the **western pediment** shows the fight between the Centaurs and Lapiths, and the **metopes** depict the Twelve Labours of Hercules.

Don't miss the 4th-century Parian marble statue of **Hermes of Praxiteles**, a masterpiece of classical sculpture from the Temple of Hera. Hermes was charged with taking the infant Dionysos to Mt Nysa.

You'll also find intriguing collections of tiny, but beautifully crafted, votive offerings

discovered on the site, and the sculptured **Head of Hera**.

HISTORICAL MUSEUM OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES

Only real Olympic devotees will enjoy this rather uninspired **museum** (☎ 26240 22544; adult/concession €2/1; ☎ 8.30am-3.30pm Tue-Sat, 9am-4pm Sun). It houses a collection of commemorative stamps and literature, mostly in French. It's two blocks west of Praxitelous Kondyli, opposite the junction of Agerinai and Kosmopoulou.

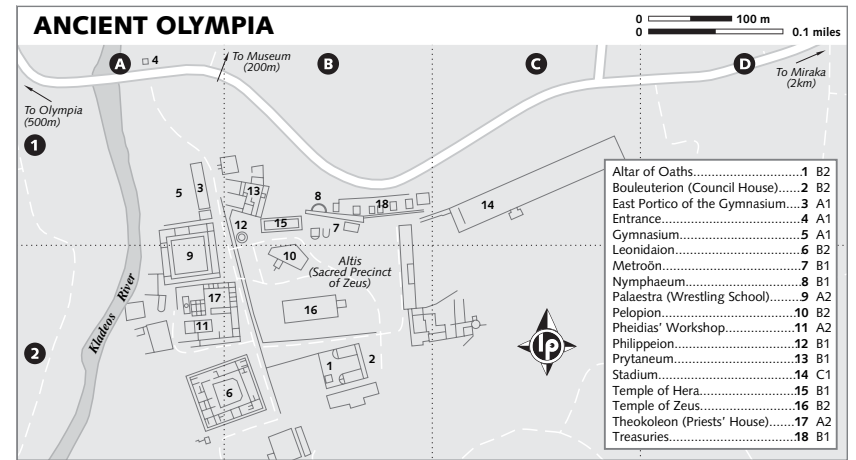
SITE OF ANCIENT OLYMPIA

The Olympics were undoubtedly the Ancient World's biggest sporting event. During the games warring states briefly halted their squabbles, corporate sponsors vied to outdo each other, and victorious competitors won great fame and considerable fortune (sometimes even living at public expense). You could say much the same about their modern-day equivalent, the main difference being that back then only men could compete and they did most of it *sans* underpants. Held every four years until their abolition by killjoy Emperor Theodosius I in AD 394, the games lasted at least 1000 years. The World Heritage-listed site of **Ancient Olympia** (☎ 26240 22517; adult/concession €6/3, site & archaeological museum €9/5; ☎ 8am-7.30pm Apr-Oct, 8.30am-3pm Nov-Mar) is still a recognisable complex of temples, priests' dwellings and public buildings. The site contains excellent explanatory boards, with depictions of what the buildings would have looked like, along with a plan and description in English.

History & Mythology

The origins of Olympia date back to Mycenaean times. The Great Goddess, identified as Rea, was worshipped here in the 1st millennium BC. By the classical era Rea had been superseded by her son Zeus. A small regional festival, which probably included athletic events, began in the 11th century BC.

The first official quadrennial Olympic Games were declared in 776 BC by King Iphitos of Elis. By 676 BC they were open to all Greek males and reached the height of their prestige in 576 BC. The games were held in honour of Zeus, popularly acclaimed as their founder, and took place around the first full moon in August.



The athletic festival lasted five days and included wrestling, chariot and horse racing, the pentathlon (wrestling, discus and javelin throwing, long jump and running), and the *pancratium* (a vicious form of fisticuffs).

Originally only Greek-born males were allowed to participate, but later Romans were permitted. Slaves and women were not allowed to enter the sanctuary as participants or spectators. Women trying to sneak in were thrown from a nearby rock.

The event served purposes besides athletic competition. Writers, poets and historians read their works to large audiences, and the citizens of various city-states got together. Traders clinched business deals and city-state leaders talked in an atmosphere of festivity that was conducive to resolving differences through discussion, rather than battle.

The games continued during the first years of Roman rule. By this time, however, their importance had declined and, thanks to Nero, they had become less sporting. In AD 67 Nero entered the chariot race with 10 horses, ordering that other competitors could have no more than four. Despite this advantage he fell and abandoned the race, yet was still declared the winner by the judges.

The games were held for the last time in AD 394, before they were banned by Emperor Theodosius I as part of a purge of pagan festivals. In AD 426 Theodosius II decreed that the temples of Olympia be destroyed.

The modern Olympic Games were instituted in 1896 and, other than during WWI

and WWII, have been held every four years in different cities around the world ever since, including (to much celebration in Greece) the 2004 Olympics. The Olympic flame is lit at the ancient site and carried by runners to the city where the games are held.

Exploring the Site

Ancient Olympia is signposted from the modern village. The entrance is beyond the bridge over the Kladeos River. Thanks to Theodosius II and various earthquakes, little remains of the magnificent buildings of Ancient Olympia, but enough exists to sustain an absorbing visit in an idyllic, leafy setting; allow a minimum of half a day. A visit to the museum (opposite) beforehand will help with visualising the ancient buildings. The first ruin encountered is the **gymnasium**, which dates from the 2nd century BC. South of here is the partly restored **palaestra** (wrestling school), where contestants practised and trained. The next building was the **theokoleon** (priests' house). Behind it is **Pheidias' workshop**, where the gargantuan ivory-and-gold Statue of Zeus, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, was sculpted. The workshop was identified by archaeologists after the discovery of tools and moulds. Beyond the **theokoleon** is the **leonidaion**, an elaborate structure that accommodated dignitaries.

The **altis**, or **Sacred Precinct of Zeus**, lies east of the path. Its most important building was the immense 5th-century Doric **Temple of Zeus**, which enshrined Pheidias' statue, later

removed to Constantinople by Theodosius II (where it was destroyed by fire in 475 BC). One column has been restored and re-erected, and helps you put into perspective its sheer size.

South of the Temple of Zeus is the **bouleuterion** (council house), containing the **altar of oaths**, where competitors swore to obey the rules decreed by the Olympic Senate.

The **stadium** lies to the east of the *altis* and is entered through an archway. The start and finish lines of the 120m sprint track and the judges' seats still survive. The stadium could seat at least 45,000 spectators. Slaves and women spectators had to be content to watch from the Hill of Cronos.

To the north of the Temple of Zeus was the **pelopion**, a small, wooded hillock with an altar to Pelops. It was surrounded by a wall containing the remains of its Doric portico. Many artefacts, now displayed in the museum, were found on the hillock.

Further north is the 6th-century Doric **Temple of Hera**, the site's most intact structure. Hera was worshipped along with Rea until the two were superseded by Zeus.

To the east of this temple is the **nymphaeum**, erected by the wealthy Roman banker Herodes Atticus in AD 156–60. Typical of buildings financed by Roman benefactors, it was grandiose, consisting of a semicircular building with Doric columns flanked at each side by a circular temple. The building contained statues of Herodes Atticus and his family. Despite its elaborate appearance, the nymphaeum had a practical purpose; it was a fountain house supplying Olympia with fresh spring water.

Beyond the nymphaeum and up a flight of stone steps, a row of 12 **treasuries** stretched to the stadium, each erected by a city-state for use as a storehouse and marking the northern boundaries of the *altis*.

At the bottom of these steps are the scant remains of the 5th-century-BC **metroön**, a temple dedicated to Rea, the mother of the gods. Apparently the ancients worshipped Rea in this temple with orgies.

The foundations of the **philippeion**, west of the Temple of Hera, are the remains of a circular construction with Ionic columns built by Philip of Macedon to commemorate the Battle of Khaironeia (338 BC), where he defeated a combined army of Athenians and Thebans. The building contained statues of Philip and his family.

North of the philippeion was the **prytaneum**, the magistrate's residence. Here, winning athletes were entertained and feasted.

Sleeping

Camping Diana (☎ 26240 22314; fax 26240 22425; camp sites per adult/tent/car €7/5/5; ☹ year-round; 📍) A well-run place, nestled on a leafy hillside and clearly signposted 250m west of the village.

Hotel Hermes (☎ 26240 22577; fax 26240 22040; s/d €30/40) This friendly, family-run option has basic, but spotless, rooms with linoleum floors. It's after the BP petrol station, and on the right-hand side as you come into town (from the south).

Pension Posidon (☎ 26240 22567; Stefanopoulou 9; s/d/tr €35/40/45) The owner is justifiably proud of his recently renovated and centrally located simple, bright and airy rooms with balconies. Breakfast costs €5.

Hotel Kronion (☎ 26240 22188; www.hotelkronion.gr; s €42-45, d/t €55/70; 🍷) Clean and spacious 1970s-style option and helpful multilingual owner.

Hotel Pelops (☎ /fax 26240 22543; www.hotelpelops.gr; Varela 2; s/d/tr/steindbreakfast €48/60/84/110; 🍷 📍) Among the town's best contenders, with light, spacious and comfortable rooms, opposite the church. Gasp! – there's even nonsmoking rooms. The friendly Greek-Australian owners have a wealth of knowledge about the area. The buffet breakfast is fit for an athlete. On offer each night is the Pelops Platter, a massive dish of gourmet mezedhes.

Best Western Hotel Europa International (☎ 26240 22650; hoteleuropa@hellasnet.gr; s/d/tr €90/130/150; 📍 🍷 📍) It may have a franchise name and is popular with groups, but this family-owned hotel (1km west of town) wins the gold medal for its warmth and efficiency. The large, luxurious rooms offer balcony vistas. A bar, restaurant, swimming pool, tennis court and a decent pool-side taverna (under the shade of olive trees) add value to its winning streak.

Eating

There's no outstanding favourites among Olympia's restaurants; with so many one-off customers passing through, they lack incentive to strive for excellence. You're better off heading to the tiny hamlet of Miraka, 2km from Ancient Olympia, or the village of Floka, 1.5km north. At the time of research the village road to Miraka from Olympia was diverted, thanks to the discovery of archaeo-

logical treasures beneath its surface. Ask locals the way via the new national road.

OThea (☎ 26240 23264; mains €5-8; ☹ lunch & dinner Apr-Oct) It's worth the effort to venture uphill (even on foot) to the small village of Floka, 1.5km north of Olympia, for hearty traditional taverna fare. Enjoy the grills, zucchini balls (€3) and views of Floka from the large terrace. That is, if the locals don't beat you to it. It's open irregularly outside high season.

Taverna Drosia (☎ 26240 22311; mains €5.50-7) A strong contender in Miraka village's culinary race, this taverna offers diners a good range of fresh appetisers, as well as flavoured mains, including lamb fricassee with wild greens.

Taverna Bacchus (☎ 26240 22298; www.bacchus-tavern.gr; mains €6-12; ☹ lunch & dinner; 🍷 📍 📍) The god of wine, Bacchus, has extended his portfolio to include delectable delights with fresh ingredients in this smart stone taverna in nearby Miraka. Don't miss the lamb with oregano (€12). The restaurant is on new premises with accommodation (per room including breakfast €70), a pool and lovely valley views. Mmmm, now where's Cupid?

Best Western Hotel Europa International (☎ 26240 22650; mains €8.50-11.50; ☹ lunch & dinner) Familiar Greek dishes and veggies (from the family farm), served in a hotel-style dining room. The summer taverna under the olive trees deserves a laurel or two (open June to September).

Self-caterers will find a good supermarket near the Shell petrol station.

Getting There & Away

BUS

There is no direct service from Olympia to Athens. Eight or so of the 16 buses (reduced schedule on Sunday) go via Pyrgos (€1.70) and allow time to connect for services to Athens (see p219). From Olympia, there are also buses east to Tripoli (€10.60, three hours, at least two daily), and on weekdays to Dimitisana (€6.20, 2½ hours). For these services, buy your ticket in advance from the small KTEL Arkadia outlet situated on the main street, one block before the church.

TRAIN

Train services from Olympia head to Pyrgos only – there are five local departures daily (€0.70, 30 minutes). From Pyrgos, you can catch connections to other destinations. Note: to get to Athens, take the train to Cor-

inth, where you must change for the new train to Athens.

ANDRITSENA ΑΝΔΡΙΤΣΑΙΝΑ

pop 575

The village of Andritsena, situated 65km southeast of Pyrgos, hovers on a hillside overlooking the valley of the River Alfios. Crumbling stone houses, some with rickety wooden balconies, flank the village's narrow cobbled streets and a stream gushes and bubbles its way through the central square, Plateia Agnostopoulou. Keep an eye out for the fountain emerging from the trunk of a huge plane tree. Andritsena makes an appealing base from which to visit the magnificent Temple of Vasses, a World Heritage-listed site, located some 14km away from the village.

Information

An ATE Bank ATM and the **post office** (☹ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri) are near the central square.

Sights

NIKOLOPOULOS ANDRITSENA LIBRARY

You don't need to be a reader to appreciate this stunning legacy of Nikolopoulos at this **library** (☎ 26260 22242; admission free; ☹ 8am-3pm Tue-Sat). In 1838 he donated 4000 rare books – then one of Europe's largest private collections, including a book from 1502 and a 1657 Bible with rare binding – to his father's home town to establish a school. The nearby village of Stemnitsa donated another 4000 books and today the collection is on display, along with manuscripts from Greece's 1821 Independence Movement. Don't miss the short explanatory video in English. The library is housed above the town's lending library behind Hotel Theoxenia.

TEMPLE OF VASSES

Situated on a wild, isolated spot overlooking rugged mountains and hills, the World Heritage-listed **Temple of Vasses** (☎ 26260 22275; adult/concession €3/2; ☹ 8am-8pm) is one of Greece's most romantic and atmospheric archaeological sites. The 14km road from Andritsena climbs along a mountain ridge, taking you through increasingly dramatic scenery, until you arrive at the temple, which stands at an altitude of 1200m.

The striking and well-preserved temple is robbed of some of its splendour and

immediate visual impact by the giant (and semipermanent) steel-girded tent enclosing it, as it undergoes a slow restoration programme, but it's magnificent all the same.

The temple was built in 420 BC by the people of nearby Figalia, who dedicated it to Apollo Epicurus (the Helper) for delivering them from the plague. Designed by Ictinus, the architect of the Parthenon, the temple combines Doric and Ionic columns and a single Corinthian column – the earliest example of this order.

No public buses run to Vasses. In summer it's sometimes possible to find people in the central square to share a taxi for about €20 to €25 return.

Sleeping & Eating

Epikourios Apollon (☎ 26240 22840; Plateia Agnostopoulou; s/d incl breakfast €50/75; ♾️ year-round) This guesthouse-cum-hotel has well-equipped, warm and cheerful rooms overlooking the central square or the valley behind.

For eating, try any of the half a dozen casual tavernas and grill places spread along the main street.

Getting There & Away

There are buses to Pyrgos (around €5, 1½ hours, two daily except Sunday), and to Athens (around €8, two hours, two daily) via Karitena, Megalopoli, Tripoli and Corinth.

KYLLINI KYAAHNH

The port of Kyllini (kih-lee-nih), 78km southwest of Patra, warrants a mention merely as the jumping-off point for ferries to Kefallonia and Zakynthos. Most people arrive on buses from Patra that board the ferries.

Getting There & Away

BUS

There are three to seven buses daily to Kyllini (€6.50, 1¼ hours) from the Zakynthos bus station in Patra, as well as at least two daily from Pyrgos (€4.60, one hour).

FERRY

There are boats to Zakynthos (per person/car €6.50/29.90, 1¼ hours, up to six daily), and to Poros (per person/car €8/37.70, 1½ hours, up to five daily) and Argostoli (per person/car €12.50/44.50, two hours, one daily) on Kefallonia. Check www.ionianferries.gr as schedules change regularly.

KYTHIRA & ANTIKYTHIRA

KYTHIRA KYΘHPA

pop 3334

The island of Kythira (*kee-thih-rah*), 12km south of Neapoli, is perfect for people who want to experience a genuine, functioning and unspoilt island.

Some 30km long and 18km wide, Kythira dangles off the tip of the Peloponnese's Lakonian peninsula, between the Aegean and Ionian Seas. The largely barren landscape is dominated by a rocky plateau that covers most of the island, and the population is spread among more than 40 villages that capitalise on small pockets of agriculturally viable land. The villages are linked by narrow, winding lanes, often flanked by ancient dry-stone walls.

Although Kythira is part of the Ionian Islands, some of the houses, especially those in the island's main town, Hora, are more Cycladic in looks, with whitewashed walls and blue shutters. Mythology suggests that Aphrodite was born in Kythira. She's meant to have risen from the foam where Zeus had thrown Cronos' sex organ after castrating him. The goddess of love then re-emerged near Pafos in Cyprus, so both islands haggle over her birthplace.

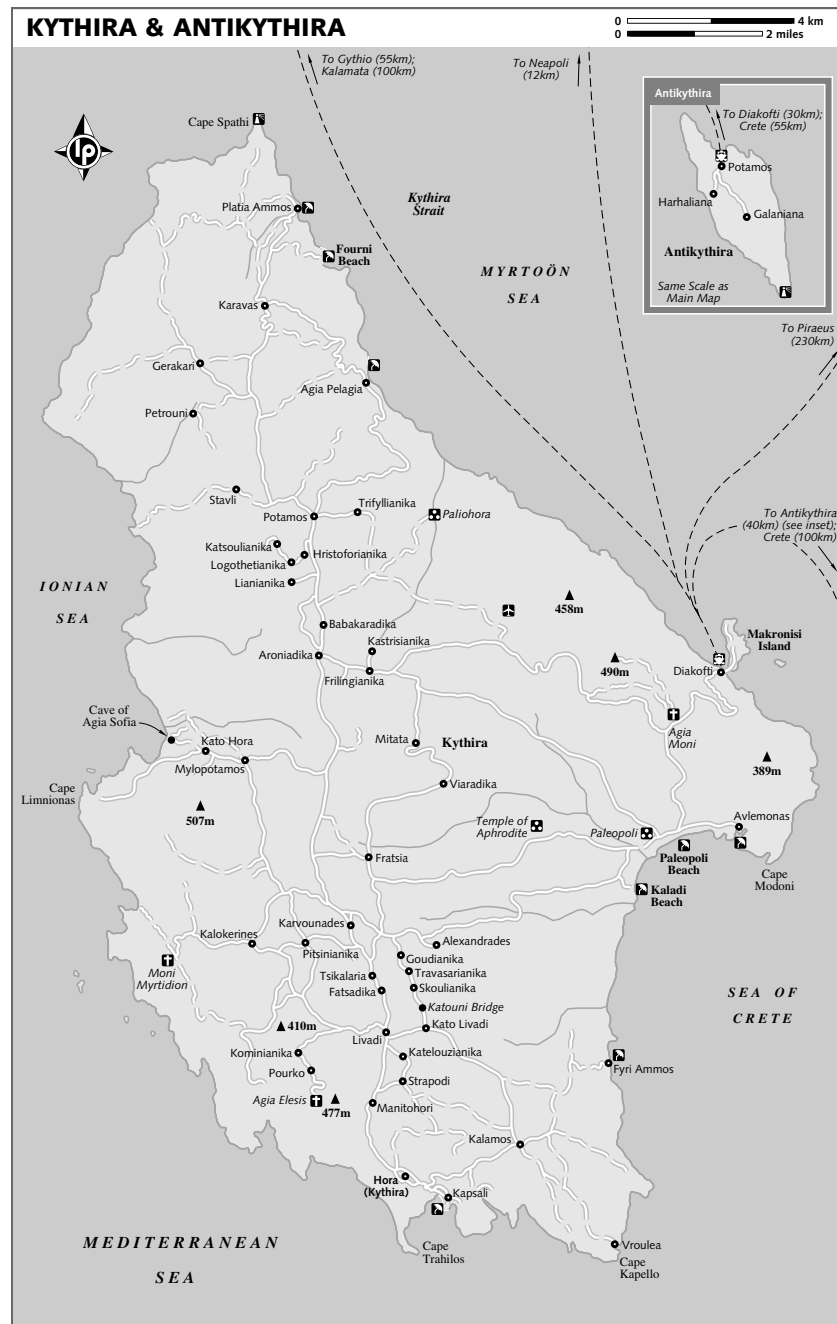
Tourism remains very low-key on Kythira for most of the year, until July and August, when the island goes mad. Descending visitors include the Kythiran diaspora returning from Australia to visit family and friends (who themselves have returned after leaving the island several decades ago). Accommodation is virtually impossible to find during this time, and restaurants are flat out catering for the crowds. For the remaining 10 months of the year, Kythira is a wonderfully peaceful island with some fine, uncrowded beaches. The best times to visit Kythira are in late spring and around September/October.

For information on the island, see www.kythira.com or www.kythera.gr.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

In high season there are daily flights between Kythira and Athens (€47 to €60,



40 minutes). The airport is 10km east of Potamos, and **Olympic Airlines** (☎ 27360 33362) is on the central square in Potamos. Book also at **Kythira Travel** (☎ 27360 31390) in Hora.

Ferry

The island's main connection is between Dia-kofti and Neapoli (per person/car €8.30/40, one hour) in the Peloponnese. The frequency of the service ranges from four times daily in July and August, down to once a day in winter. Tickets are sold at the quay just before departure, or at **Kythira Travel** (☎ in Hora 27360 31390, in Potamos 27360 31848) in Hora and Potamos.

ANEN Lines (www.anen.gr) calls at the southern port of Diakofti on its weekly schedule between Piraeus, Kythira, Antikythira, Kissamos-Kastelli (Crete) and Gythio (Peloponnese). From mid-June to September there are two ferries weekly to Gythio (€9.90, 2½ hours) and two to Kissamos-Kastelli (€15.70, four hours), which call at Antikythira (€9, two hours). There are also three services weekly to Piraeus (€21.50, 6½ hours). Note: these change annually. Information and tickets are available from **Porfyra Travel** (☎ /fax 27360 31888; porfyra@otenet.gr) in Livadi. See also www.kythira-kithira-kythera.com for ferry schedules.

GETTING AROUND

Occasional buses may operate during August. There are taxis, but the best way to see the island is with your own transport. Panayotis at **Moto Rent** (☎ 27360 31600; fax 27360 31789) on Kapsali's waterfront rents cars and mopeds.

Hora Χώρα

pop 267

Hora (or Kythira), the island's capital, is a pretty village of Cycladic-style white, blue-shuttered houses, perched on a long, slender ridge stretching north from an impressive 13th-century Venetian *kastró*. The central square, planted with hibiscus, bougainvillea and palms, is Plateia Dimitriou Staï. The main street, Spyridonos Staï, runs south from the central square to the *kastró*.

INFORMATION

Branches of the National Bank of Greece and Bank ATE, both with ATMs, are on the central square.

Internet Service (Kodak shop, Spyridonos Staï; per hr €5; ☎ 9am-2pm & 6-9pm Mon-Sat) Travellers can check email here.

Police station (☎ 27360 31206) Near the *kastró*.

Post office (☎ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri) On the central square.

SIGHTS

Hora's Venetian *kastró* (admission free; ☎ 8am-7pm), built in the 13th century, is at the southern end of town. If you walk to its southern extremity, passing the Church of Panagia, you will come to a sheer cliff – from here there's a stunning view of Kapsali and, on a good day, of Antikythira.

Call in to **Stavros** (☎ 27360 31857), a shop north of the square (opposite the turn-off to Kapsali) and pick up some of the local produce, including Greece's best honey.

At the time of research, the town's **archaeological museum**, north of the central square, was closed due to damage from the earth tremor in January 2006.

SLEEPING

Castello Rooms (☎ 27360 31069; jfatseas@otenet.gr; d/tr €40/55; 🛏) These comfortable rooms represent the best deal in town, if not the island. Set back from the main street, this place is surrounded by a well-tended garden full of flowers, vegetables and fruit trees. The rooms have TV and some have kitchen facilities. It's signposted at the southern end of Spiridonos Staï.

Hotel Margarita (☎ 27360 31711; www.hotel-margarita.com; off Spyridonos Staï; s/d incl breakfast €90/100; 🛏) This white-walled, blue-shuttered and generally charming hotel offers atmospheric rooms (all with TV and telephone) in a renovated 19th-century mansion, featuring B&W marble floors and a quirky old spiral staircase. The white-washed terrace affords fantastic port views.

Zorba's (☎ 27360 31655) The pick of the bunch for the town's meals and highly recommended by locals.

Kapsali Καψάλι

pop 34

The scenic village of Kapsali, 2km south of Hora, served as Hora's port in Venetian times. It features twin sandy bays and a curving waterfront; this looks striking viewed from Hora's castle. Restaurants and cafés line the beach, and safe **sheltered swimming** is Kapsali's trademark. However, it can get crowded in high season.

Offshore you can see the stark rock island known as **Itra** or **Avgo** (Egg), rearing above the water. Some Kytherians believe that this was the place Aphrodite sprang from the sea.

Kapsali goes into hibernation in winter, coming to life between April and October. There's a small supermarket, and the Kytherian Gallery sells international newspapers as well as souvenirs. It's worth grabbing a copy of the community newspaper *Kythera*, published in English.

ACTIVITIES

Panayotis at **Moto Rent** (☎ 27360 31600), on the waterfront, offers water-skiing lessons, and rents canoes and pedal boats as well as cars, mopeds and bicycles.

SLEEPING & EATING

Camping Kapsali (☎ 27360 31580; camp sites per adult/tent €5/4.50; ☎ Jun-15 Sep) This small, quiet pine-shaded camping ground (signposted on the road from Hora) has minimum facilities. It's 400m from Kapsali's quay, behind the village.

Cengo Hotel (☎ 27360 31451; afrodite@aias.gr; s/d/tr €95/110/130; 🛏) This modest place is located above and behind the Cengo Café Bar. The rooms are clean and adequate. Six rooms have balconies and a few have a view of the water. Only worth considering if you want to be close to the village action.

Spitia Vassilis (☎ 27360 31125; www.kythirabunga.lowsvasilis.gr; d €110, tr & q €120; 🛏) This attractive green-and-white complex of studios has the perfect setting – away from the hordes and overlooking Kapsali Beach. The spacious rooms feature that rustic-painted-timber-floor look (one of the owner-artists has let loose with the brush) and good bay views. It is on the right as you approach Kapsali from Hora. Olga, the friendly manager, knows all there is to know.

Raikos Hotel (☎ 27360 31629; www.raikoshotel.gr; d/tr incl breakfast €160/192; 🛏 🛏 🛏) Signposted off the Hora-Kapsali road is this very smart, friendly hotel, offering spacious, pleasantly decorated rooms with terraces overlooking Kapsali and Hora's *kastró*. There's a lovely pool and bar area, too.

Hydragogio (☎ 27360 31065; mains €5-12, fish per kg €20-70) Occupying a great spot overlooking the beach at the far end by the rocks, and specialising in fresh fish and mezzedhes (with a good vegetarian range), this is a good place to splurge on lobster (per kg €70) if your budget stretches that far.

Estiatorio Magos (☎ 27360 31407; mains €2.80-6) The *magos* (magician) in question is owner Antonis, who magically whips up lobster with

spaghetti (lobster per kg €80) and a tasty fish soup (€4).

Potamos Ποταμός

pop 680

Potamos, 10km southwest of Agia Pelagia, is the island's commercial hub. Its **Sunday morning flea market** seems to attract just about everyone on the island.

INFORMATION

The National Bank of Greece (with ATM) is on the central square.

Kafe Selana (☎ 27360 33997; per hr €3) On the central square; has internet access.

Post office (☎ 7.30am-2pm Mon-Fri) Just north of the central square.

SLEEPING & EATING

Taverna Panaretos (☎ 27360 34290; mains €6-10) This place is a natural – it's open year-round, popular with locals and uses home-grown everything, from oil to veggies and cheese. Want to try wild goat with olive oil and oregano (€8) or eggplant on coals (€3.50)? Naturally.

Mylopotamos Μυλοπόταμος

pop 70

Mylopotamos is a quaint village nestled in a small valley, 12km southwest of Potamos. Its central square is flanked by a charming church and authentically traditional **Kafeneio O Platanos** (☎ 27360 33397), which in summer becomes a restaurant with an outdoor setting in the square. It's worth a stroll to the **Neraïda** (water nymph) waterfall, with luxuriant greenery and mature, shady trees. As you reach the church, take the right fork and follow the signs to an unpaved road leading down to the falls. (Alternatively, you can head there on foot – follow the signs after the church.)

To reach the abandoned *kastró* of Mylopotamos, take the left fork after the *kafeneio* and follow the old faded sign for **Kato Hora** (Lower Village) and then the modern signs to the Cave of Agia Sofia. The road leads to the centre of Kato Hora, from where a portal leads into the spooky *kastró*, with derelict houses and well-preserved little churches (usually locked).

Further along the same road is the **Cave of Agia Sofia**, reached by a precipitous, unpaved 2km road. The staff at Kafeneio O Platanos can tell you when it's open (in summer only).

If you fall in love with the history of this place, stay at the comfortable, and newly converted **studio apartments** (☎ 27360 33439; €65-75) of Pula Stratiga, or inquire at Kafeneio O Platanos about options.

Agia Pelagia Αγία Πελαγία

pop 280

Kythira's northern port of Agia Pelagia is a simple, friendly waterfront village, although sadly, this is on the verge of being ruined by modern buildings, as are the sand-and-pebble beaches either side of the quay. Nevertheless, it's pleasant for relaxing, and **Red Beach**, south of the headland, is a good swimming spot.

SLEEPING & EATING

Hotel Pelagia Aphrodite (☎ 27360 33926/7; pelagia@otenet.gr; s/d/tr €65/80/105; ☎ Apr-Sep; ♿ ♿) This Greek-Australian-run place is modern and spotless with large, airy rooms, most with balconies overlooking the sea. Its perfect location is a small headland on the southern edge of the village. Breakfast is €7.

Stellas (☎ 27360 33513; mains €6-11) You can't go wrong with any of the options along the waterfront; we like this for its unpretentious, family atmosphere. It serves reliable traditional Greek favourites from mezedhes to meats. Try Stella's veal (€7).

Around Kythira

If you have transport, a spin round the island is rewarding. The monasteries of **Agia Moni** and **Agia Elefis** are mountain refuges with superb views. **Moni Myrtidion** is a beautiful monastery surrounded by trees. From Hora, drive northeast to **Avlemonas**, via **Paleopoli** with its wide, pebbled beach. Archaeologists spent years searching for evidence of a temple at Aphrodite's birthplace at Avlemonas. Don't miss the spectacularly situated ruins of the Byzantine capital of **Paliohora**, in the island's northeast, fun for exploring.

Just north of the village of **Kato Livadi** make a detour to see the architecturally anomalous **Katouni Bridge**, a British-built legacy of Kythira's time as part of the British Protectorate in the 19th century. In the far north of the island the village of **Karavas** is verdant, very attractive and close to both Agia Pelagia and the reasonable beach at **Platia Ammos**. Beachcombers should seek out **Kaladi Beach**, near Paleopoli. **Fyri Ammos**, closer to Hora, is another good beach – but hard to access.

EATING

Varkoula (☎ 27360 34224; Platia Ammos; mains €5-7; ☎ lunch & dinner daily May-Oct, Fri & Sat Nov-Mar) Locals rave about this 'little boat' (*varkoula*). Where else can you enjoy freshly cooked fish to the tunes of the bouzouki-strumming owner and his cardiologist guitar-playing friend? Athena's famous fried bread with cheese is a real heart stopper. It's a beat away from Karavas, in the island's north. As it's a decent drive north, ring ahead first to confirm opening hours.

Estiatorion Pierros (☎ 27360 31014; Livadi; mains €4-8; fish per kg €50) Since 1933 this family-run and long-standing favourite has served non-nonsense Greek staples. Visit the kitchen to view the daily offerings – there's no menu. On the main road through Livadi.

Sotiris (☎ 27360 33722; Avlemonas; ☎ lunch & dinner) This popular fish taverna in pretty Avlemonas has good lobster and fish soup (fish and lobster is priced per kilo).

Skandia (☎ 27360 33700; Paleopolis; mains €6-8; ☎ lunch & dinner) By all reports, it's currently the place to eat on the island, mainly because of its setting: near water, under shady elm trees, in a homey environment. Its fish is priced per kg.

Psarotaverna H Manolis (☎ 27360 33748; fish & lobster per kg €40-75; ☎ lunch & dinner) A star among Diakofti's uninspiring port setting. Locals head here for the excellent fresh fish and seasonal offerings.

ANTIKYTHIRA ANTIKYΘHPA

pop 20

The tiny island of Antikythira, 38km southeast of Kythira, is the most remote island in the Ionians. It has only one settlement (Potamos), one doctor, one police officer, one telephone and a monastery. It has no post office or bank. The only accommodation option is 10 basic rooms in two purpose-built blocks, open in summer only. Potamos has a *kafeneio-cum-taverna*.

Getting There & Away

The ferry company **ANEN Lines** (www.anen.gr) calls at Antikythira on its route between Kythira and Kissamos-Kastelli on Crete, offering three services a week in each direction; single-leg tickets cost around €9.10 and take two hours, while the through journey, Kythira–Crete, is around €16.10. This is not an island for tourists on a tight schedule and will probably only appeal to those who really like isolation. For information and tickets, contact **Porfyra Travel** (☎ /fax 27360 31888; porfyra@otenet.gr) in Livadi on Kythira.

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