

Northern Greece

Βόρεια Ελλάδα



With its astonishing wealth of natural attractions, and a unique blend of histories and cultures, Northern Greece is arguably the country's most fascinating region, yet one that remains relatively undiscovered. Its major metropolis, Thessaloniki, offers outstanding eateries, nightlife and shopping, while towns like Xanthi and Komotini in Thrace, Kastoria and Edessa in Macedonia, and Ioannina and Metsovo in Epiros offer an enthralling mix of traditional architecture, historical sites and welcoming locals.

The waters of Northern Greece are equally enticing, ranging from Halkidiki's hidden Aegean beaches to the tranquil Prespa Lakes and Evros Delta marshes, all home to rare bird populations. Other waterways, such as the Nestorio River in western Macedonia and the Ardas in eastern Thrace, host rockin' summer festivals. The stylish Mediterranean resort of Parga, on the aquamarine Ionian Sea, has great sandy beaches and nightlife.

Although a location of very ancient civilisations, Northern Greece is one of the modern country's 'younger' parts. It was up for grabs during the turbulent decades leading to the Balkan Wars (1912–13) and through WWI, as regional entities and outside powers vied for control. This mixed legacy can be experienced in ways culinary and cultural alike. Indeed, getting off the beaten track in Greece's Balkan north brings many unexpected rewards for the curious traveller.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Night Fever** Savouring the cafés and bars of sophisticated Thessaloniki (p284) in Macedonia
- **Step Back in Time** Visiting the last outpost of Byzantium, the monasteries of Mt Athos (p291) in Macedonia
- **Chill-out Spot** Exploring traditional Pomak villages (p314) in Thrace's tranquil Rhodopi Mountains
- **National Treasures** Discovering the perfectly preserved stone-and-slate villages of Zagorohoria (p332)
- **Close Up** Bird-watching on the Turkish border at the Evros Delta (p319) in Thrace
- **Magic Moment** Experiencing dusk on the serene Prespa Lakes (p305) in western Macedonia
- **Sweet Surrender** Sampling the Ottoman-style sweets of Komotini (p315) in Thrace
- **Summer Nights** Luxuriating amid the golden beaches and island-style nightlife on the Epiros coast at Parga (p341)



■ POPULATION: 3.12 MILLION

■ AREA: 19,117 SQ KM

MACEDONIA ΜΑΚΕΔΟΝΙΑ

pop 2.4 million / area 33,785 sq km

The biggest and most diverse region in Greece, Macedonia (mah-keh-do-nee-ah) also boasts the country's second city, stylish Thessaloniki. It's a place with both natural beauty and a deep history, and the two are often intertwined. Mt Olympus, Greece's highest peak (2918m), is both the fabled refuge of the ancient Greek gods and an excellent hiking destination, while the isolated monasteries of Mt Athos, deep amid wilderness on the third finger of the Halkidiki Peninsula, have constituted the beating heart of Byzantine spirituality for over a millennium.

Despite being on the mainland, Macedonia also draws big crowds in summer to its beaches on Halkidiki's first two fingers (Kassandra and Sithonia), though you can still find some idyllic, unvisited stretches of sand there too. Beyond Florina, far up in the northwest of Macedonia, brown bears amble through forested mountains that descend to placid Prespes, aqueous home to colourful pelicans and magnificent medieval churches. Other inimitable attractions are the palm-lined port town of Kavala, crowned by a castle; the ancient Macedonian capital of Pella; and Vergina, where the Macedonian kings were buried.

History

Macedonia's human history goes back at least 700,000 years; however, most often it's associated with the 4th-century-BC empire of Alexander the Great, which stretched, briefly, from the Adriatic Sea to India. Deemed barbarians by cultivated Athenians, the Macedonians subjugated Greece under Alexander's father, Philip II, yet adopted Greek mores. Alexander and his generals spread the Greek culture and language widely, creating a Hellenistic society that would be absorbed by the Romans and later, after the empire split into eastern and western halves in the 4th century AD, emerge as the Greek-speaking Byzantine Empire.

Although the major ancient Macedonian cities declined, Thessaloniki became Byzantium's second city, a vital commercial, cultural and strategic centre on the crossroads

of Balkan trade routes. However, 6th- and 7th-century-AD Slavic migrations brought new populations to Macedonia and challenges for the empire, which was frequently at war with the medieval Bulgarian kingdom from the 9th century to the 11th century. In 1018, Emperor Basil II finally defeated Bulgar Tsar Samuel, who had ruled much of the southern Balkans from his capital on western Macedonia's Mikri Prespa Lake.

Macedonia, along with most of the Balkans, was overrun by the Ottoman Turks in the 14th century. The Ottoman system distinguished its subjects by religion, not race, something that exacerbated the confusion of the late 19th century, when a bewildering array of guerrilla movements arose to fight the Turks, pledging to annex Macedonia for Greece, Bulgaria or even an independent state of its own. Ottoman atrocities against Macedonia's Christian populations caused the European Great Powers to enforce a reform programme on the Turks (from 1902 to 1908), but it failed to stop the bloodshed. In the 1912-13 Balkan Wars, Greece, Bulgaria and Serbia united to drive the Turks from Macedonia, which was then split between Greece and Serbia, with a small piece for Bulgaria and a sliver to the new state of Albania.

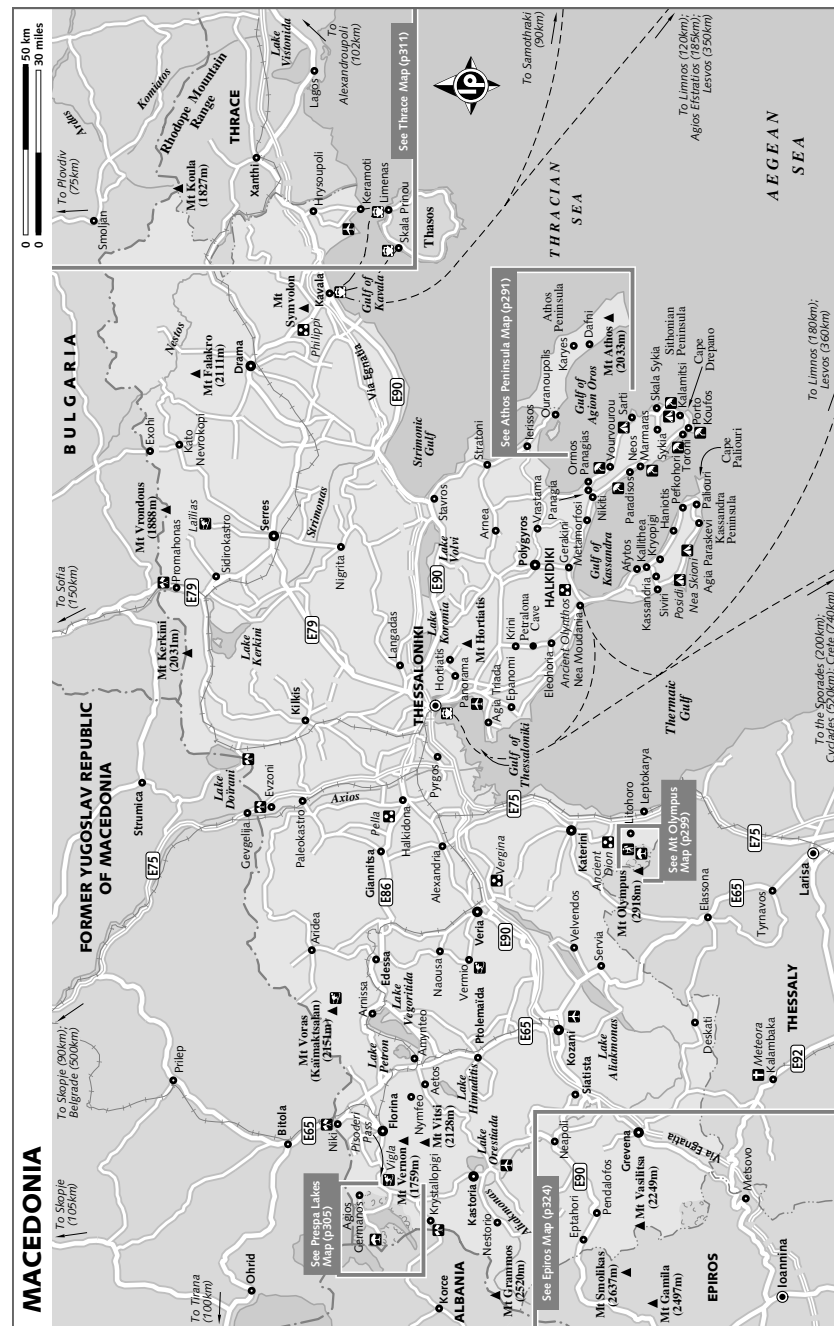
In the Greek-Turkish population exchanges of 1923, many Anatolian Greek refugees were resettled in Macedonia, where a vigorous programme for assimilating non-Greeks was getting under way. In WWII, Greece was occupied by the Nazis, who deported and killed most of Macedonia's very significant Sephardic Jewish population.

THESSALONIKI ΘΕΣΣΑΛΟΝΙΚΗ

pop 363,987

If you're going to splurge anywhere in Northern Greece, Thessaloniki (thess-ah-lo-nee-kih) is the place to do it. Greece's second city, and its cultural capital, Thessaloniki (also called Salonica) lets you indulge in fine food, sinful sweets, ultra-chic shopping, an energetic nightlife and more concerts, parties, art shows and events than you can keep track of.

What really enhances Thessaloniki's hip atmosphere, however, are the enduring symbols of its glorious history, from the White Tower on its café-lined waterfront all the way up to the Byzantine walls, just above the Upper Town (Ano Poli), an enchanting neighbourhood of pretty traditional houses set on



winding, peaceful alleyways. Down from them are impressive constructions like the 4th-century Church of Agios Dimitrios (said to be the largest in Greece), the enormous Roman Rotunda, and the sculpted Arch of Galerius in Kamara, thronged with students from Thessaloniki's universities.

Indeed, Thessaloniki's multitude of young people gives it a vivacious, stylish mood, which can be felt in its cafés, restaurants and bars, even in its shops and designer hair salons. Still livable and relatively small, Thessaloniki has none of Athens' opprobrious traffic or smog. True, it's no budget destination, but Thessaloniki is packed with life and should be on every traveller's itinerary.

History

Thessaloniki was named in honour of a woman who herself had been named to commemorate a military victory, that of her father, Philip II, over a tribe in Thessaly with the help of crack Thessalian horsemen. This royal daughter grew up to marry the Macedonian general Kassandros, and after he named the city for her in 316 BC, Thessaloniki's name would forever be on the lips of all who would ever experience the city.

In 168 BC, the Romans conquered Macedonia, making it a subordinate province with its capital in Thessaloniki. The city's ideal location on the Thermaic Gulf and the east-west Via Egnatia, plus its proximity to the Axios/Vardar River valley corridor leading north into the Balkans, all helped turn it into a leading commercial centre. Under Emperor Galerius in the early 4th century AD, Thessaloniki became the eastern imperial capital, and with the empire's division later that century, it became Byzantium's second city, a flourishing Constantinople in miniature.

However, Thessaloniki's attractiveness led to frequent attacks by Goths, Slavs, Saracens and Latin Crusaders. Nevertheless, the city flourished culturally and contributed greatly to the creation of Southeastern Europe with the missionary work of the 9th-century Thessaloniki monks Cyril and Methodius (creators of the Glagolitic, precursor to the Cyrillic alphabet), who expanded Orthodox Byzantine literary culture among the Slavs of the Balkans.

In 1430, Thessaloniki was captured by the Ottomans, under whom it remained a major city. In the late 15th and early 16th centuries,

Sephardic Jewish exiles fleeing the Spanish Inquisition transformed Thessaloniki, which would become one of the most important Jewish cities in Europe.

Although much of Greece was liberated after the 1821 War of Independence, Thessaloniki and Macedonia remained Ottoman. Both before and after the period Greeks call the 'Macedonian Struggle' (1904–08), Thessaloniki was the base for mutually antagonistic rebel groups and reform movements, including the Young Turks, which sought to introduce Western-style reforms to save the dwindling Ottoman Empire. One notable Young Turk and Thessaloniki native, Mustafa Kemal, would later become the founder of modern Turkey, and be deemed Atatürk (Father of the Turks).

The world wars were darkly decisive for Thessaloniki. A great fire in August 1917 burned down most of the city. The population exchanges of 1923 with Turkey were followed by a smaller one with Bulgaria in 1926. Then most of Thessaloniki's Jewish population was deported when the city (and the rest of Greece) was occupied by the Nazis. The character and complexity of the city changed almost overnight, the result today being a mostly Greek city built according to the avenue scheme of a French architect in 1920. Finally, in 1977, a destructive earthquake damaged many buildings.

Thessaloniki's next major innovation, the long-promised metro, is currently being dug along Egnatia. Peering into the trenches there beside the sidewalk reveals much older layers of Thessaloniki just beneath the surface.

Orientation

Central Thessaloniki is bounded on the south by the sea and on the north by a sloping hill, site of the old Upper Town (Ano Poli), and above it the Byzantine Walls. The café-lined waterfront avenue, Leoforos Nikis, runs west from the port to the White Tower (Lefkos Pyrgos) in the east. Going from the water and Leoforos Nikis north (uphill), other principal streets also run parallel to the sea: first Mitropoleos, Tsimiski and, above them, main thoroughfare Egnatia; north of this, other major east-west streets are Filippou and Agiou Dimitriou.

Thessaloniki's main squares include Plateia Eleftherias, near the port, and the grand Plateia Aristotelous, a popular meeting

point that runs between Egnatia and Leoforos Nikis. Squares further east include Plateia Agias Sofias and Plateia Navarinou, just south of Egnatia.

The most common meeting point for locals is Kamara, the area around the Arch of Galerius on the northern side of Egnatia opposite Plateia Navarinou. Just east of Kamara, Egnatia intersects with Ethnikis Amynas; to the northeast of this intersection is the large Aristotle University, to the southeast, the HelExpo trade fair. After it crosses these facilities, Egnatia continues eastwards as Nea Egnatia. Taking Egnatia back westwards past Kamara and Plateia Aristotelous brings you to the cheap shopping/hotel district around Plateia Dimokratias. After this, Egnatia becomes Monastiriou and shortly passes the train station to the right, and continues towards the main bus station (3km further west).

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Bustart (☎ 2310 284 414; Gr Palama 21) Trendy new shop for art, design, photography and fashion books.
Travel Bookstore Traveller (☎ 2310 275 215; www.traveler.gr; Proxenou Koromila 41) This cosy shop outfits travellers with Road Editions maps and Lonely Planet guides.

EMERGENCY

Farmakeio Sofia Tympanidou (☎ 2310 522 155; Egnatia 17) Empathetic Kyria Sofia has long run this well-stocked pharmacy, and can often get hard-to-find medicines quickly.

First-Aid Centre (☎ 2310 530 530; Navarhou Koundourioti 10) Near the port.

Ippokraton (☎ 2310 837 921; Papanastasiou 50) Large public hospital; 2km east of the centre.

Port police (☎ 2310 531 504)

Tourist police (☎ 2310 554 871; 5th fl, Dodekanisou 4; ☎ 7.30am–11pm)

INTERNET ACCESS

The Web (☎ 2310 237 031; S Gonata 4, Plateia Navarino; per hr €2.40; ☎ 24hr) Big, well-equipped café with fast internet and helpful staff.

LAUNDRY

Bianca Laundrette (Panagias Dexias 3; per 6kg load €7; ☎ 8am–8.30pm Tue, Thu & Fri, 8am–3pm Mon, Wed & Sat) In just two hours your clothes are washed, dried and folded at this no-nonsense laundromat powered by classic rock.

MONEY

Banks and/or ATMs are plentiful, especially along Egnatia and Tsimiski, and at the port area and Plateias Navarino and Aristotelous. Commission-hungry private exchange bureaux are on western Egnatia. The train station, bus station and ferry passenger terminals contain ATMs.

National Bank of Greece (Tsimiski 11)

PERMITS

Mt Athos Pilgrims Bureau (☎ 2310 252 578; fax 2310 222 424; pilgrimsbureau@c-lab.gr; Egnatia 109; ☎ 9am–2pm Mon–Fri, 10am–noon Sat) Permits for the monastic community of Mt Athos are issued here.

POST

Post office Aristotelous (Aristotelous 26; ☎ 7.30am–8pm Mon–Fri, 7.30am–2.15pm Sat, 9am–1.30pm Sun); Koundouriotou (Koundouriotou 6; ☎ 7.30am–2pm) Next to the port.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Tourist information office (☎ 2310 500 310; ☎ 9am–2pm Mon–Fri, 8am–2pm Sat) In the port's passenger terminal.
www.cultureguide.gr Details latest exhibitions and cultural events.

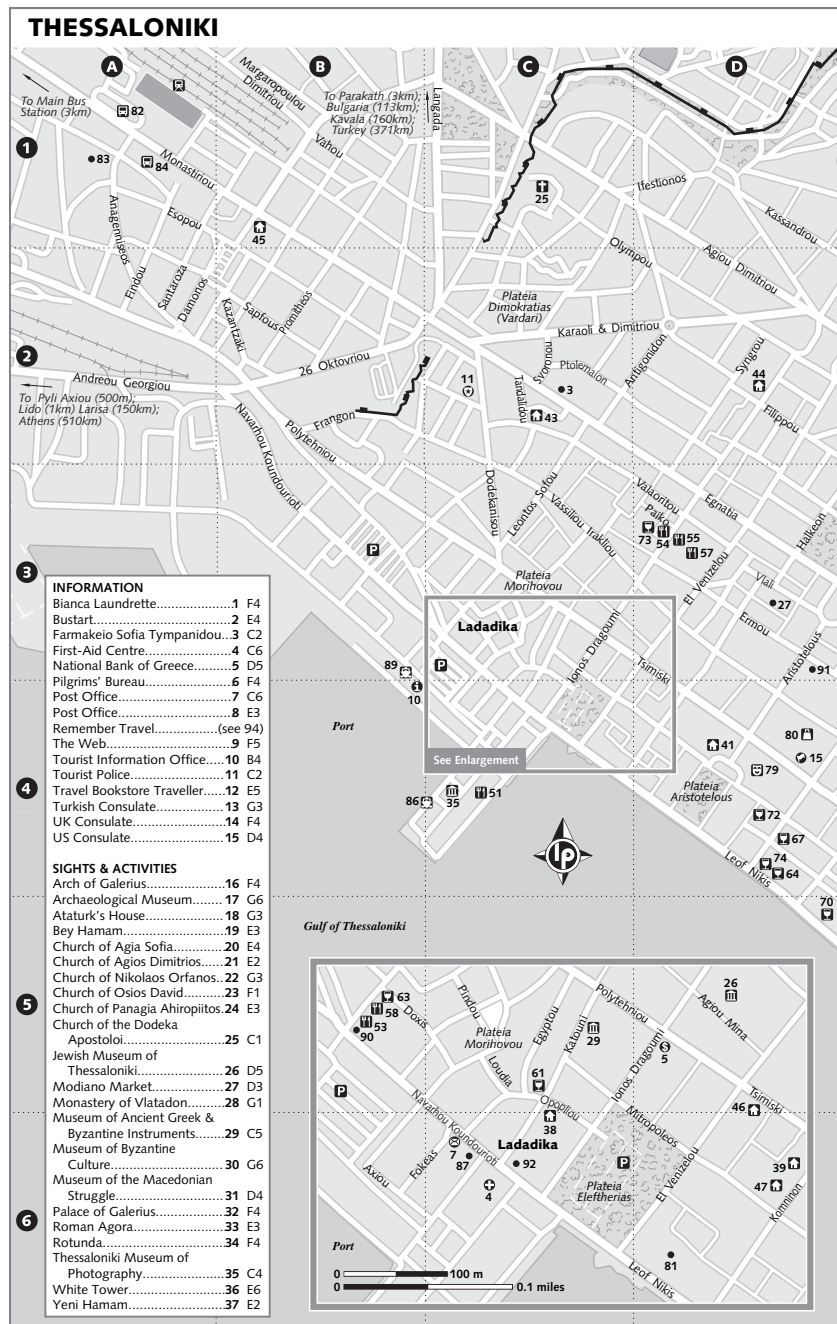
Sights

WHITE TOWER

The history of Thessaloniki's most famous landmark, the pacific **White Tower** (☎ 2310 267 832; Lefkos Pyrgos; adult €2; ☎ 8am–7pm Tue–Sun, 12.30–7pm Mon), is actually bathed in blood. In 1826, Ottoman Sultan Mahmud II ordered here the massacre of janissaries (elite troops made up of forcibly Islamised Christian boys) deemed disloyal. After Greeks captured the city in 1913, the 'bloody tower' was whitewashed to expunge the dark memories. The whitewash has long been removed, though the name stuck. At time of writing, the tower's small **Byzantine Museum** was about to get a new permanent exhibit; it's up a wide circular stairway, where stands a small café offering impressive views of the city and sea.

PALACE, ARCH & MAUSOLEUM (ROTUNDA) OF GALERIUS

Very close to one another, from Plateia Navarino north across Egnatia, stand three major monuments associated with the early-4th-century Roman emperor Galerius. The ruined **Palace of Galerius** (Plateia Navarinou; admission free;



NORTHERN GREECE

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THE WILD EAST

If Pavlos Melas, or any of Greece's other celebrated revolutionaries of the 1904–08 'Macedonian Struggle' were alive today, they would have a very hard time recognising the region. Similarly, visitors today can hardly imagine what it looked like then, at one of the most important moments in modern Greek history.

In the very early 20th century, Macedonia was Europe's Wild East, a vast Ottoman possession caught up in the sound and fury of rebellions and horrific Turkish reprisals. The seed of discord between regional rivals and, ultimately, the European Great Powers, Macedonia's mountains were filled with bandits, malaria and priests transforming the nationless, Ottoman-ruled Christians into deadly efficient weapons of nationalism. Turn-of-the-century Thessaloniki, then mostly populated by Sephardic Jews, Slavs and Turks, was a conspiratorial city of secret societies, terrorist bombings and spies, all representative of a bewildering array of mutually antagonistic liberation and reform movements.

The Greek attempt to put retrospective order on this unruly situation is Thessaloniki's **Museum of the Macedonian Struggle** (☎ 2310 229 778; Proxenou Koromila 23; admission free; ☞ 9am–2pm Tue–Fri, 10am–noon Sat). It's heavy on firepower, with old weapons on display and rather camp life-sized cut-out images of Cretan fighters, the so-called *Makedonomahi* (Macedonia-fighters). Perhaps most interesting, however, are the huge wall maps, which enhance the narrative of key events dictated on a useful English-language sheet (ask the caretaker for one).

To understand just how different Ottoman and early Greek Thessaloniki was from the city you will encounter today, read the acclaimed historian Mark Mazower's *Salonica, City of Ghosts: Christians, Muslims and Jews, 1430–1950* (HarperCollins, 2004).

☞ 8.30am–3pm Tue–Sun) sprawls east–west across the square. You can descend into it, or just peer over the handrail. Pieces of floor mosaic, columns and a few walls survive. Across Egnatia is the **Arch of Galerius**, featuring sculpted soldiers in combat; it was erected in 303 AD to celebrate the emperor's victories over the Persians in 297.

Just north of the arch is the unmistakable **Rotunda** (☎ 2310 218 720; Plateia Agiou Georgiou; admission free; ☞ 8am–5pm Tue–Sun). Galerius built this hulking brick structure as his future mausoleum, though he never used it, dying in retirement in what is now Serbia instead. Constantine the Great made the Rotunda Thessaloniki's first church (Agiou Giorgiou); the Ottomans would transform it into a mosque (the minaret's been mostly restored). There are surviving frescoes inside the enormous building.

ROMAN AGORA

The **Roman Agora** (Plateia Dikastirion; admission free; ☞ 8am–3pm Tue–Sun) lies north of Plateia Aristotelou, across Egnatia on upper Plateia Dikastirion. Commercial activity began in the 3rd century BC and peaked under the Romans, when the area was buzzing with public affairs, services and shops. A helpful, English-language board explains the layout

of the remains, which include clustered shop walls and a few mosaic floor remnants.

BYZANTINE CHURCHES

Thessaloniki's enormous, 5th-century **Church of Agios Dimitrios** (☎ 2310 270 008; Agiou Dimitriou 97; admission free; ☞ 8am–10pm, crypt 8am–7.30pm Tue–Sun, 1.30–7.30pm Mon, 9–11pm Fri), is named in honour of the city's patron saint. A Roman soldier, Dimitrios was killed around 303 on the site (then a Roman bath), on the command of Galerius, infamous for persecuting Christians. The martyrdom site is now an eerie underground **crypt**, which you can visit during the day or during the special Friday-night service (see boxed text, p282). In 1980, the saint's relics were returned from Italy, and now lie in an elaborate silver reliquary inside.

The Ottomans made Agios Dimitrios a mosque and plastered the walls. After they were kicked out, the plaster was removed, revealing Thessaloniki's finest church mosaics. While the 1917 fire was very damaging, five 8th-century mosaics have survived; look for them on either side of the altar.

The 8th-century **Church of Agia Sofia** (☞ 8.30am–1pm & 5.30–8pm), a not-so-small miniature of its namesake in Istanbul, occupies Plateia Agias Sofias south of Egnatia. The dome has a striking mosaic of the Ascension of Christ.

Also see the restored, 5th-century **Church of the Panagia Ahiropiitos**, which has an early basilica form; some mosaics and frescoes remain. The name, meaning 'made without hands', refers to the miraculous 12th-century appearance of an icon of the Virgin.

Up near the walls, the **Monastery of Vlatadon** (cnr Eptapyrgiou & Agathangelou; ☞ 7–11am & 6–7.30pm) has a leafy, secluded location and a small **museum** (☞ 10am–noon Sun). A gift shop selling icons is inside. Just down from Vlatadon is the little 5th-century **Church of Osios David** (☞ 9am–noon & 5–7pm), allegedly built to commemorate the secret baptism of Galerius' daughter, Theodora, while father was away. It contains well-preserved mosaics and rare 12th-century frescoes depicting the baptism of Christ.

Also in the Kastrá is the 4th-century **Church of Nikolaos Orfanos** (☎ 2310 213 627; Irodotou 20; ☞ 9am–noon), which has superb frescoes.

MUSEUMS

The **Archaeological Museum** (☎ 2310 830 538; Manoli Andronikou 6; admission €4; ☞ 8.30am–3pm) has finds from the prehistoric period through to ancient Macedonian and Hellenistic times. The most famous exhibit, the **Gold of Macedon**, presents precious objects (6th to 2nd century BC) from the royal tombs and other central Macedonian excavation sites. The craftsmanship is phenomenal; delicate filigree wreaths, pins for fastening dresses, and grave masks from Sindsos are among the best.

The **Derveni Crater** (330–320 BC), a vast, ornate Hellenistic vase of bronze and tin used initially for mixing wine and water and later as a funerary urn, has intricate relief carvings illustrating the life of Dionysus, with mythical figures, animals, vines and ivy branches. The **Derveni Treasure** contains a papyrus piece (250–320 BC) likely to be Greece's oldest.

The ground-floor exhibit, **Pre-Historic Thessaloniki**, boasts the Petralona Hoard – axes and chisels in an urn, abandoned by the artisan, in the Petralona Cave north of Halkidiki. Other finds include daggers, pottery and tools from mound tombs dating from the Neolithic period to the late Bronze Age.

The **Museum of Byzantine Culture** (☎ 2310 868 570; www.mbc.gr; Leoforos Stratou 2; admission €4; ☞ 8am–7.30pm Tue–Sun, 1–7.30pm Mon) is a well-presented modern museum that uses ambient lighting and a good running wall text to enliven the 3000 or so artefacts in its permanent collection. They include frescoes, mosaics, embroi-

dery, ceramics, inscriptions and icons from the early Christian period to the Fall of Constantinople (1453) in Macedonia.

The **Museum of Ancient Greek & Byzantine Instruments** (☎ 2310 555 263; Katouni 12–14; admission €4.40; ☞ 9am–3pm & 5–10pm Tue–Sun) is an unusual, three-floor museum that displays instruments from antiquity to the 19th century. Excellent multilingual museum catalogues are available (€15).

The story of how heroic Greek revolutionaries wrested Macedonia from the clutches of both Turks and Bulgars is graphically told at the **Museum of the Macedonian Struggle** (☎ 2310 229 778; Proxenou Koromila 23; admission free; ☞ 9am–2pm Tue–Fri, 10am–noon Sat). Housed in the former Greek consulate to the Ottoman Empire, this museum has hard-to-find maps, old firearms, photos, uniforms and more (see boxed text, opposite).

The **Thessaloniki Museum of Photography** (☎ 2310 566 716; www.thmphoto.gr; Warehouse A, Thessaloniki Port; ☞ 11am–7pm Tue–Fri, 11am–9pm Sat & Sun), located in a cool former warehouse on the port, displays historical and contemporary Greek photography, plus dynamic temporary exhibitions. The small café overlooks the water.

The **Jewish Museum of Thessaloniki** (☎ 2310 250 406; Agiou Mina 13; admission free; ☞ 11am–2pm Tue–Fri & Sun, 5–8pm Wed & Thu) traces Jewish history in Thessaloniki from 140 BC to the Spanish arrivals in 1492 and until WWII through well-presented displays and photos. The museum houses remains from Thessaloniki's large Jewish cemetery, vandalised in 1942 by the Nazis.

KASTRÁ & THE BYZANTINE WALLS

When old Thessaloniki burned in the 1917 fire, the Turkish quarter of Kastrá or Ano Poli was all that remained. Entering this living window on the past brings you to timber-framed houses painted in soft tones, some having overhanging upper storeys. Small, whitewashed dwellings have bright shutters, perfect for a cat to pass through on his way home. Ambling up and down Kastrá's steep, winding lanes, with plenty of steps and tiny rivulets for water to drain, is a great pleasure. There are fine panoramic views of modern Thessaloniki and the Thermaic Gulf from the Byzantine walls above the houses.

Kastrá's original walls were built by Theodosius (379–475), who modelled them on the great walls he built in Constantinople. These

defensive structures were rebuilt in the 14th century and, in 1821, were strengthened with marble stones from the Jewish cemetery.

OTHER SITES

Atatürk's House (📍 2310 248452; Apostolou Pavlou 75; admission free; 🕒 9am-5pm), located within the Turkish Consulate grounds, is where the dashing Mustafa Kemal was born in 1881. The museum honours modern Turkey's founder, and has original furnishings and memorabilia.

Yeni Hamam (Aigli; cnr Kassandrou & Agiou Nikolaou) is a grand 17th-century Ottoman structure with great acoustics; it's now used as a sophisticated concert hall. If something's on, it's well worth seeing a show there.

Bey Hamam (Egnatia at Plateia Dikastirion; admission free; 🕒 9am-9pm Mon-Fri, 8.30am-3pm Sat-Sun), also known as Paradeisos Baths, is Thessaloniki's oldest Turkish bath, dating from 1444. This large and labyrinthine structure is now used for art shows.

Walking Tour

You can see everything (excluding museums) in one day; if you stop for coffee and lunch along the way, it can all work out nicely. To make it happen, though, you have to start early (around 9am), as many churches close by noon. Sunday, Tuesday and Saturday are the best days to do the tour. Definitely don't go on Monday, when most sites are closed.

Bus 23 goes to the *kastró* (castle), but you're better off taking a time-saving taxi (€2.80 to €5). From the *kastró*, first get your bearings at the **viewing platform (1)**, then gaze out over the city you're about to conquer. The platform is at the easternmost end of the walls surrounding the inner citadel or **Eptapyrgio**. Follow the walls west on the main road (also called Eptapyrgio); after Agathangelou, you'll see the leafy, relaxing **Monastery of Vlatodon (2)**; p279) on the left. See the church here and, if it's open, the museum. Exit through the back and turn left on Lysia; on the left just past Timotheou is the next church, the 5th-century **Church of Osios David (3)**; p279). See the rare 12th-century frescoes depicting the baptism of Christ, and dip into the ancient spring.

If you want to wander the labyrinthine Ano Poli, head east along the small streets. The most direct route starts you on Myronos, the street below Osios David that then briefly becomes Tyrtaiou. Then, veering right on Soufliou, cross the major road Akropoleos

and Soufliou has become Moreas. Continue down Moreas, turning left at Kordou and right at Irodotoú to find the little-visited, 4th-century **Church of Nikolaos Orfanos (4)**; p279), with its exquisite 14th-century frescoes.

Now return to Moreas and follow it south, crossing Olympiados. You then reach Kassandrou. Walk several blocks west along this large street, turning south on Agiou Nikolaou. On the right-hand side of this street you'll see **Yeni Hamam (5)**; left). This restored 17th-century Turkish bath is a voluminous, atmospheric structure with evening concerts and wine.

Just below Aigli is the enormous **Church of Agios Dimitrios (6)**; p278), occupying its own square. Make sure you see the saint's relics, the 8th-century mosaics near the altar, and the otherworldly, subterranean crypt, where St Dimitrios was martyred (see boxed text, p282).

From the church continue south on Agnostou Stratiotou across Olympiou, and find the ruins of the **Roman Agora (7)**; p278) sprawled out before you. The entry about halfway down on Stratiotou is clearly marked and there's a helpful explanatory board. After checking it out, retrace your steps to Agiou Dimitriou, and proceed east on that street nine blocks until you find, on the left-hand side, **Atatürk's House (8)**; p275). Since it's inside the Turkish Consulate, you'll need an identity card or passport to show the guard. The staff lead you through the faithfully restored house where the father of modern Turkey was born. As well as numerous original furnishings and memorabilia, you'll see other Atatürk paraphernalia like suits, white gloves and cane. Sporting!

Across from the consulate, and a block further east on Agiou Dimitriou, turn right on D Gounari for the **Rotunda (9)**; p275). Take a look inside and and poke around the ruins in back. Continuing downhill you'll find the photogenic **Arch of Galerius (10)**; p275) at Kamara. Crossing Egnatia, continue downhill on D Gounari. You'll notice **Roman ruins** running down the centre of this pedestrian street, culminating at the **Palace of Galerius (11)**; p275) on Plateia Navarinou. It's worth exploring, though you can also just peer down on it from the edge of the square.

Continuing downhill, cross Tsimiski and, at Plateia Fanariotou, arc left down Mela Pavlou. This brings you to Thessaloniki's most beloved landmark, the **White Tower (12)**; p275). Take in the views upstairs over a drink, and see

the small museum. Then continue west along the water to enjoy a seaside stroll.

Leave the water by crossing Leoforos Nikis at a small traffic light at Agias Sofias. Either see the **Church of Agia Sofia (13)**; p278) by walking straight until Plateia Agias Sofias, or proceed west on Tsimiski for some window shopping on Thessaloniki's most fashion-conscious street. You'll soon hit Aristotelous, which has many cafés, unique architecture

and, on the south side, the large, lively **Plateia Aristotelous (14)**.

Continue up Aristotelous on its western side and cross Egnatia to find the atmospheric **Bey Hamam (15)**; opposite), a restored Turkish bath with many hidden corners, now hosting cool art and photography exhibitions. Then return to Aristotelous and proceed downhill, turning right on Vali. This will bring you through **Modiani Market (16)**, full of fish on ice, trayloads of olives and cheese, hot-tempered butchers, and Greek grandmas arguing with vegetables.

Continue straight through the market; after it, cross El Venizelou and turn left towards the water on the next street parallel to it, Ion Dragoumi. Carry on down Ion Dragoumi

WALK FACTS

Start Kastro/Byzantine walls

Finish Port

Duration Three to four hours

WALKING TOUR



and, at the intersection with Tsimiski, you pass the splendid **National Bank of Greece (17)** building; after it, turn right onto Mitropoleos, immediately left on Katouni and right again on curving Aigyptou. Here begins the **Ladadika district (18)**, once comprising olive oil warehouses and now home to some appealing, atmospheric restaurants and cafés.

From here, continue to the port, where the tour ends. Cross Kountouriotou, and walk through the gate and out onto the port's eastern jetty. Then plomp yourself down on one of the big, soft couches at the cool **Kitchen Bar (19; p284)** for a relaxing drink. Congratulations!

Festivals & Events

Thessaloniki hosts several fairs and festivals at HelExpo during September and October. The major **International Trade Fair** is followed by a **cultural festival**, which includes film screenings and musical performances, cul-

minating with the celebration of **St Dimitrios' Day (26 October)**. Military parades follow on **Ohi Day (28 October)**.

The increasingly prominent **Thessaloniki International Film Festival** (☎ 2310 378 400; www.filmfestival.gr) occurs over 10 days each November. Cinemas in various locations show 150 or so high-quality international films, ranging from experimental and obscure to works of well-known international directors. The **Thessaloniki Documentary Festival** (www.filmfestival.gr) is held in mid-March.

The **Tourist Information Office** (☎ 2310 500 310; ☎ 9am-2pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat) has more info.

Sleeping

Hotel rates and availability are fluid; Thessaloniki's main convention and festival schedules will help you plan. Autumn festival time is especially busy; hoteliers suggest watching the HelExpo website (www.helexpo.gr) to see when fairs are being held.

CRYPTICAL ENVELOPMENT

Being a Christian in late Roman Thessaloniki was extremely dangerous. Galerius (250–311) made practising the new religion punishable by death – a stark reality that drove worshippers literally underground. One day in about the year 303, a young soldier named Dimitrios was caught preaching in a subterranean portico in the city *agora* (market). Dragged off to the baths, Dimitrios was spared to death as an example to others.

After the Eastern Roman Empire officially adopted Orthodox Christianity under Emperor Constantine the Great, Dimitrios became venerated as Thessaloniki's patron saint. Numerous miracles were credited to him, including sudden appearances to save the city whenever it fell under barbarian siege. Miraculous healing of the sick was especially associated with the crypt where Dimitrios was martyred, which lies beneath the enormous 5th-century church named after him.

During the Turkish occupation, however, the crypt was filled in and forgotten, only to be recovered after the Greek capture of Thessaloniki in 1912. The devastating fire of 1917 caused extensive damage to both church and crypt, necessitating much conservation work.

Open regularly to the public, the stone-and-brick crypt is mazelike and hauntingly lit, and displays archaeological finds from the ancient church. For a truly unearthly and uniquely Thessaloniki experience, descend into this other world of pungent incense and prayer at the special liturgy held here every Friday from 9pm to 11pm. People file in silently in ones and twos, heads down like members of some secret society, and take up places, freeform, in crumbling corners or in the darkness under stone archways that are soon reverberating with the deep intonations of Byzantine chants.

Observing a service in the underground crypt, one of the holiest places in Greece, also gives travellers the chance to experience, in some small way, religion as Thessaloniki's first Christians did, at a time when one's faith was constantly being tested by the all-too-real fear of being discovered and killed by the State. When the priest gathers parishioners around the site of the saint's martyrdom and speaks in soft tones of moral edification, this past reality really hits home.

The crypt liturgy also allows female travellers who wish they could visit Mt Athos a chance to experience modern Greece's unbroken tradition of ancient Orthodox spirituality first-hand. You don't have to be particularly religious to attend, so long as you dress and act quietly and respectfully (turn off your phone).

BUDGET

West Egnatia, once host to seedy budget hotels, has seen international chains move in and raise rates, while the area's remaining fleabag joints continue their slide into uncontested, indistinguishable obsolescence. With Thessaloniki increasingly popular, quality budget accommodation has almost become extinct.

Hotel Acropol (☎ 2310 536 170; Tandalidou 4; s/d €22/28) The Acropol's smoke-stained, down-on-its-luck vibe was not enhanced by a recent price hike that further diminishes the appeal of soldiering on in its Spartan confines.

Hotel Pella (☎ 2310 524 221; Ionos Dragoumi 63; s/d €35/50) Decent for budget travellers, the Pella has small but clean rooms near the Ladadika/port district.

Hotel Rex (☎ 2310 517 051; Monastiriou 39; s/d incl breakfast €45/55; ☎) Ideal for those with early-morning trains or buses to catch, this unpretentious hotel near the train station has clean though cramped rooms.

MIDRANGE

Live a little – Thessaloniki's midrange hotels are a big improvement on its budget ones. You'll get discounts in summer.

Tourist Hotel (☎ 2310 270 501; www.touristhotel.gr; Mitropoleos 21; s/d/tr €55/70/90; ☎) This classic place (built 1925) has an old-school gated lift and ornate chandeliers. The clean, well-kept rooms have soundproof windows.

Le Palace Hotel (☎ 2310 257 400; www.lepalace.gr; Tsimiski 23; s/d €95/104; ☎) At night gaze down from your little balcony at twinkling Tsimiski roaring by below (there's soundproofing). Le Palace has spacious, modern rooms with all mod cons.

Egnatia Palace Hotel (☎ 2310 222 900; www.egnatia-hotel.gr; Egnatia 61; s/d/stc €96/109/145; ☎) This four-star hotel centrally located above Aristotelous offers bright, modern rooms and suites with individual design and furnishings. The wellness facilities include a heated pool, gym, *hammam* (Turkish bath), sauna and massage room.

City Hotel (☎ 2310 269 421; www.cityhotel.gr; Komnino 11; s/d €120/135; ☎) This sleek, four-star business hotel in Ladadika has very professional service and some subdued elegance in its handsome rooms. Amenities include internet, laundry services and parking. There's a big American-style breakfast.

TOP END

Electra Palace Hotel (☎ 2310 232 221; www.electrahotels.gr; Plateia Aristotelous 9; s/d €160/175; ☎) Even if you come only to gaze out onto the harbour from the rooftop garden café, it's impossible to miss the appeal of this five-star city landmark that stands splendidly over Plateia Aristotelous. The Electra Palace offers spacious rooms and all the amenities, including a mosaic-tiled indoor pool, rooftop outdoor pool and *hammam*.

Capsis Bristol (☎ 2310 506 500; www.capsishotel.gr; cnr Oploupiou & Katouni 2; s/d €192/250; ☎) What was fated to become a stylish and friendly modern hotel was originally built in 1870 as Thessaloniki's post office. The Capsis Bristol's 16 rooms and four suites, decorated with ornate antiques, Persian rugs and artworks, suffuse the hotel with an old-world charm befitting its location in historic Ladadika.

ourpick Daios (☎ 2310 250 200; www.daioshotels.com; Leoforos Nikis 59; s/d with sea view €196/212; ☎) With its unsurpassed location on the waterfront, just up from the White Tower, Daios has created a buzz since opening in 2006, immediately becoming a favourite among Greece's upper stratum. A keen sensitivity to light and shadow pervades the whole hotel, which has a contemporary, minimalist design. Suites have enormous, soundproofed windows and wrap-around balconies (from some you can't even see the street, only sea). The hotel's waterfront café is equally sophisticated and full of colour. Staff is friendly and professional. The entrance is on the side street, at 2 Smyrnis.

Eating

You'll find great eating everywhere in Thessaloniki; that said, Ladadika has several great eateries, while there's ambience at night up in the Kastrá. The posh eastern suburb of Kalamaria has an array of trendy new supper spots and bars.

Note that many restaurants now try to outdo one another on the complimentary dessert front. *Crème brûlée*, crepes, baklava or delicate chocolate cakes are all liable to wind up unannounced in front of you – so hold off on ordering.

To Etsi (☎ 2310 222 469; Nikofofos Fokas 2; pites €2.30) This bawdily decorated, iconic eatery near the White Tower offers refreshingly light souvlaki (cubes of meat on skewers) and *soutzoukakia* (meat rissoles) with vegetable dips, in Cypriot-style pita bread. Look for the neon sign.

Ouzou Melathron (☎ 2310 275 016; Karypi 21; mezedhes €3-5.50, mains €5-11) Just from the sight of the scroll-like menu at this very popular side-street *ouzerie*, you know you're in for something special. Occupy yourself with ouzo and mezedhes (appetisers), then dig into heartier fare like lamb in sweet wine sauce.

Panellinion (☎ 2310 567 220; Salaminos 1; mains €6-8) This friendly taverna has traditional Ladadika décor, with its wooden floors and walls lined with olive-oil bottles and tins of produce. Panellinion has great variety, from ouzos and cheeses to delicious seafood mezedhes; only organic vegetables are used.

our pick **Myrsini** (☎ 2310 228 300; Tsopela 2; mains €6-10) Myrsini serves up hearty portions of authentic Cretan dishes for Thessaloniki's boisterous young hedonists. The food is delicious and healthy, from rusks topped with tomato, Cretan olive oil and soft cheese (*dakos*) and flavoured wild greens (*horta*) to roast rabbit, pork and – crucially – *mizithropitakia* (flaky filo triangles with sweet *mizithra* cheese). Décor is simple, with worn wood floors and traditional accoutrements. Violin and bouzouki music from Greece's best island plays on in the background.

Dore Zythos (☎ 2310 279 010; Tsirogianni 7; mains €7-10) Grab a table outside when the weather's warm and watch the White Tower across the way while savouring imaginative Mediterranean cuisine. Sister establishment Zythos (☎ 2310 540 284, Katouni 5, mains €8 to €12) in Ladadika has great architecture and equally fine food.

Kitchen Bar (☎ 2310 528 108; Warehouse B, Thessaloniki Port; mains €7-13) Whether you're just coming for a cool waterside coffee or seeking some inventive international fare, this lofty, sumptuously decorated café-restaurant on the port is fab. The salads and risotto are as bright as the flames in the open kitchen, where the chefs, like the style-conscious clientele, are always on display.

Parakath (☎ 2310 653 705; Konstandinoupoleos 114; mains €8-12; ☎ dinner) Thessaloniki's only Pontian restaurant does rich, traditional pasta-based dishes with old Black Sea flair. Frenetic Pontian live music on weekends, when bookings are essential, keeps things loose. Take a taxi to get there.

Molyvos (☎ 2310 555 952; cnr Ionos Dragoumi & Kapodistriou; mains €8-15) This place has a lovely refined setting and elevates Greek cuisine to fine dining; nearby Molyvos Ethnik (☎ 2310

555 952), located on the corner of Ionos Dragoumi and Papadopoulou is its freewheeling companion eatery, with a smooth interior of high ceilings and polished mirrors, imaginative almost-fusion cuisine (mains €6 to €9) and Latin music.

Draft (☎ 2310 555 518; www.draft.gr; cnr Lykourgou 3 & Salaminos; mains €9-13) Near to Krikelas, this three-level brick-and-wood restaurant and pub has a classic feel, with its vintage jukebox, well-shone rails and long bar with many draught beers. It serves designer pub fare like you'd expect in some big-city financial district lunch spot. Upstairs, however, cultivates a more after-hours lounge-bar effect, with dimmed lights and ambient Latin and jazz.

Krikelas (☎ 2310 501 600; Salaminos 6; mains €10-18; ☎ Mon-Sat) The iconic Krikelas offers a superlative, refined dining experience for gastronomes, with dishes ranging from wild game to Cretan snails and other local Greek specialties. The wine list is of course deep.

Miami (☎ 2310 447 996; Thetidos 18, Nea Krini; fish €11-18) This seaside fish taverna east of the centre is preferred by the Greek jet set, but regular folks also confirm it's got some of the best fish in town. Take a taxi.

Drinking

Thessaloniki's drinking scene is inexhaustible, ranging from vintage old-man *kafeneia* (coffee houses) to pubs and thumping bars. Many stay open till 'late' – code for until no-one's left standing. Note that most of the cafés listed here transform into bars at night, though not necessarily vice versa. Also note that in summer many city-centre nightclubs close and reopen in bigger spaces outdoors, on the airport road.

BARS

Flou (☎ 2310 261 448; Nikoforou Foka 9; ☎ Mon-Sat 9pm-late) What the French call 'Bobo' characterises this cosy bar on a White Tower side street. Exuding neon and a *je ne sais quoi* eclectic retro décor, Flou gets packed on weekends with an early-thirties crowd and plays a shameless selection of vintage pop.

Extra Blatt (☎ 2310 256 900; Svolou 46) For beer lovers who don't want to truck all the way to Kalamaria, this very central bar/restaurant has an impressive range of European and even American beers. The décor is nothing special, but it's the beer that counts.

Art House (☎ 2310 233 761; Vogatsikou 4; ☎ 9pm-late) Go up the old stairs and open the door

THE SWEET LIFE

Greeks prize few things more than their sweets. The *zaharoplasteia* (patisseries) of Thessaloniki are particularly famous for their traditional Eastern-flavoured delicacies, sinfully French-style sweets and some truly iconic local creations. While many of the Ottoman-era offerings are now common throughout Greece, Thessaloniki's discerning locals are particularly demanding in their pursuit of the sweet life, as becomes clear at the following well-polished, inviting *zaharoplasteia*, most of which now have multiple branches throughout the city. Most sweets are sold by the kilo; count on spending €1 to €4 per piece.

Kokkinos Fournos (Apostolou Pavlou 1, Rotunda) Just above the Rotunda, this classic bakery does Thessaloniki's best *koulouraki vanillias* – crunchy, slightly sweet golden cookies perfect for dipping in Greek coffee.

Hatzis (☎ 2310 968 400; www.chatzis.gr; Egnatia 119) In operation since 1908, when Thessaloniki was still an Ottoman city, this local legend brings the tastes of old Constantinople to you. After Hatzis, you'll never ask for a simple 'baklava' again. The veritable symphony of sweets served at Hatzis includes *vezir parmak* (*politika* syrup cake with cream filling), *hanoum bourek* (handmade pastry with raisins, peanuts and cream) and a dish of *malempi mastiha* (cream from milk and rice porridge, flavoured with *mastiha* from Chios and served with rose syrup).

Agapitos (☎ 2310 268 368; Egnatia 134) This posh patisserie is the place to go for a taste of the Continent. Its cakes, fruit concoctions and *profiterols* (chocolate pudding with a crunchy base and white cream) are all excellent. Try the superlative *efrosini* chocolate cake, or smudge your fingers on the delicious mini-eclairs.

Trigones Elenidis (☎ 2310 257510; cnr D Gounari & Tsimiski) A veritable institution since 1960, Elenidis is a very rare thing in today's world: a shop that sells only one product. Its sweet, flaky triangular cones filled with cool and unbelievably tasty cream are legendary; locals come out with two-kilo boxes, but one large triangle will certainly fill you up.

to the party at standing-room-only Art House, full of dark curves and Vulcan tints in the arches, mottled walls and worn wood floors. Music is funk and Eurohouse, the clientele mid-twenties.

Santé (☎ 2310 510 088; Kapodistriou 3; ☎ 9pm-late) This merry bar is a relaxed, stylish nightclub with Brazilian flair, and invigorating live music, like smokin' blues bands, on weekends.

Malt & Jazz (☎ 2310 278 876; Proxenos Koromila) Another live-music haven, Malt & Jazz has mainly jazz, but sometimes world music bands. Call after eight to find out who's on.

Elvis (☎ 2310 227 905; 21 Leoforos Nikis) This DJ bar on the waterfront plays more-interesting music than most of Nikis' bars; next door Thermaikos (23 Leoforos Nikis) is a hipster stand-by that gets full and hypnotic late.

Flip Side (☎ 2310 233 761; Proxenos Koromila 11; ☎ noon-late) A throwback to the '50s and '60s with lithograph Warhol deco and vintage poster art, Flip Side is a fun, relaxed rock bar near Aristotelous.

Beer Academy (☎ 2310 449 606; Mixalakopoulou 2, Kalamaria) A beer or five in Kalamaria is just what the doctor ordered on an unproduc-

tive Thessaloniki afternoon. It takes time, after all, to sample the very substantial offerings at Thessaloniki's trend-setting *biraria* (beer bar).

CAFÉS

our pick **Loxias** (☎ 2310 233 925; Isavron 7; ☎ noon-2am) Thessaloniki's first bookstore-*ouzerie*, Loxias is that great rarity, a café with culture. Educated Greeks started gravitating years ago to this whimsical *steki* (hang-out) to discuss philosophy or literature over ouzo and snacks. Loxias is decorated with wine casks, bursting bookshelves in the basement shop, and photos of Greek writers, Montenegrin princesses and the dervishes of old Hania. Charismatic owner Ioannis Kyprianidis has revived the old Thessaloniki tradition of the bookshop as a place for ideas – assisted by Greek firewater and good European beers, of course. Romantics can duck the commotion out on the back balcony's table for two, which overlooks Roman ruins.

Verdi (☎ 2310 236 803; cnr Svolou & Angelaki) The last on Svolou's café row, Verdi has a spiffy wood-trim interior, cosy tables and a vaguely French attraction.

Émigré (☎ 2310 262 282; Svolou 54) Next to Verdi, popular Émigré serves good espressos accompanied by crumbly cookies.

I Prinkipos (Apostolou Pavlou 22) This big coffee house is beside the Turkish Consulate, up on Agiou Dimitriou. It's ideal for a Greek coffee and baggammon.

Gioiello (☎ 2310 254 692; Leoforos Nikis 59) The waterfront café of the Daios Hotel, Gioiello is a relaxing spot for a coffee or light lunch, with a glittering interior and sharp service.

Kafe Nikis 35 (☎ 2310 230 449; Leoforos Nikis 35) Another waterfront bar, but much more stylish than the generic ones around it, this snug, friendly café just under street level is perfect for a Sunday-morning macchiato. Get a window table and feel the dappled sunlight dancing through the blinds.

Entertainment

Lido (☎ 2310 539 055; Frixou 5, Sfageia; ☎ 9pm-late) Thessaloniki's big, mean disco machine, Lido is an enormous nightclub playing R&B, house and more. Like most nightclubs, in summer it operates out on the airport road.

National Theatre of Northern Greece (☎ 2310 288 000; Ethnikis Amynis 2) This theatre presents classical Greek drama and more-modern theatrical works.

Pyli Axiou (☎ 2310 553 158; cnr Andreou Georgiou & Ermionis; ☎ 11pm-late) For a somewhat baser experience of contemporary Greek culture, give in to the frenetic, bouzouki-driven fun at one of Thessaloniki's most popular *bouzoukia*.

Also check out the following cinemas:

Aristotelion (☎ 2310 262 051; Ethnikis Amynis 2)

Cinema Pallas (☎ 2310 278 515; Leoforos Nikis 73)

Olympion (☎ 2310 277 113; Plateia Aristotelous)

Plateia Alpha Odeon (☎ 2310 290 100; cnr Tsimiski 43 & Aristotelous)

Shopping

West Egnatia has bargains, and Tsimiski is the fashion capital. That said, not everything there is inordinately expensive; women's shoes and jewellery are both affordable and good quality. International name-brand shops line Tsimiski, and fill the large shopping complex off it, below the US Consulate.

Rihardos (☎ 2310 860 254; fax 2310 838 648; www.rihardos.gr; Konstantinopoleos 27) Who knew there were so many different kinds of bouzouki? Rihardos, one of Greece's biggest purveyors of traditional instruments, has a huge array of Greek instruments, as well as Western brand-

name guitars and Chinese knock-offs that sound just as sweet for half the price. The friendly old owner, Rihardos, and his English-speaking son, Joseph, explain everything about the hundreds of unusual instruments. To get there, take bus 31 from Egnatia east to the Faliro stop (five to 10 minutes). Continue across the intersection with Paraskeopoulos, turn left and Rihardos is facing you.

Getting There & Away

Thessaloniki is Northern Greece's transport hub and the gateway to the Balkans. Major European airlines and budget airlines fly regularly. Ferries to the Sporades, Cyclades, northeastern Aegean islands and Crete also depart from Thessaloniki.

AIR

The **airport** (☎ 2310 473 212) is 16km southeast. **Olympic Airlines** (☎ 2310 368 666; www.olympicairlines.com; Navarhou Koundourioti 1-3) is near the port, and **Aegean Airlines** (☎ 2310 280 050; www.aegeanair.com; Venizelou 2) is on Plateia Eleftherias.

Domestic

Olympic Airlines operates over 15 domestic routes. These are the more important ones: Athens (€45 to €105, 55 minutes, seven daily); Limnos (€65, 50 minutes, daily); and Mytilini (€87, one hour 50 minutes, six weekly). It also has two to four flights weekly to Kerkyra (€75, 55 minutes), Iraklio (€100, 1½ hours), Mykonos (€95, one hour), Hania (€105, 2½ hours), Chios (€80, 2¾ hours), Skyros (€58, 40 minutes) and Samos (€90). Some flights are via intermediate airports.

Aegean Airlines has 12 daily flights to Athens (€66 to €93), and with lesser frequency to Mytilini (€80), Rhodes (€110) and Santorini (€105). **Remember Travel** (☎ 2310 246 026; remembertravel@mail.gr; Egnatia 119), just off Kamara, is a central travel agency for plane tickets with good post-sale customer service.

International

Thessaloniki's Macedonia Airport (www.hcaa-eleng.gr/thes.htm) serves numerous destinations across Europe.

BUS

Domestic

Most Thessaloniki buses depart from the giant space pod known as the **main bus station** (☎ 2310 595 408; Monastiriou 319), located 3km west of the

BUS DEPARTURES FROM THESSALONIKI

Destination	Duration	Fare	Frequency
Alexandroupoli	6hr	€25.30	6 daily
Athens	7hr	€30.80	13 daily
Edessa	1½hr	€7.20	hourly
Florina	3½hr	€13.40	6 daily
Ioannina	6hr	€27.10	5 daily
Kastoria	4hr	€15.10	6 daily
Kavala	2-3hr	€12.90	hourly
Komotini	4½hr	€20	8 daily
Ouranopoli	3½hr	€10.70	7 daily
Pella	1hr	€2.90	every 45 mins
Polygyros	4hr	€5.40	9 daily
Sarti	4hr	€15.80	6 daily
Veria	1½hr	€5.50	hourly
Volos	4hr	€12.45	7 daily
Xanthi	4hr	€16	8 daily

centre. Meant to correct the former chaos of individual stations for individual destinations, the new station has succeeded magnificently in putting all that chaos into one room; there are now different windows selling tickets to specific destinations, meaning the worker at one window cannot sell you a ticket for or give information about anything other than his/her specified destination. There's no general information booth and this enhances the station's unpleasant, stressful nature.

Buses for the Halkidiki Peninsula leave from the **Halkidiki bus terminal** (☎ 2310 316 555; www.in-ktel.gr), on Thessaloniki's eastern outskirts. Take bus 2 or 31 to the Botsari stop from either the train station or anywhere along Egnatia; at Botsari, the line terminates and you take bus 36 for the final 10 minutes. With traffic, it's about one hour from the train station to the Halkidiki station.

International

OSE (☎ 2310 599 100; Aristotelous 26) runs buses to Sofia (€19.10, seven hours, two to four times daily). Buses serve Istanbul (€44, 12 hours, 7.15am Tuesday to Sunday, 2am daily) and Tirana (€28, twice daily). Get tickets at the small office on the train station's eastern side. For buses to Korça (Korysta) in Albania (€20, six hours, 9am, 7.30pm and 1.30am), see **Alvavel** (☎ 2310 535 990; Giannitson 31) across from the station.

FERRY

Four weekly ferries serve the Sporadic islands of Skiathos (€17.70, seven hours) and Skopelos

(€19.90, nine hours); three continue to Alonnisos (€23.20, 10 hours).

Boats serve Chios three times weekly (€34.20, 19 hours) via Limnos (€22.10, eight hours, five times weekly) and Lesbos (€34.40, 14 hours, five times weekly). One boat weekly continues to Samos (€39.20, 20 hours). The Dodecanese are also served once weekly, to Kalymnos (€41.90, 21 hours), then Kos (€43.80, 22 hours) and Rhodes (€52.40, 26 hours). In summer, two boats weekly serve Iraklio, Crete (€45.60, 26 hours).

Get tickets from port-area travel agencies, like the helpful **Polaris Travel Services** (☎ 2310 548 655; fax 2310 548 290; Navarhou Koundourioti 19; ☎ 8am-8.30pm), which also has a second, central office (☎ 2310 278 613; fax 2310 265 728; polaris@otenet.gr; Egnatia 81; ☎ 8am-8.30pm) near Agias Sofias on Egnatia.

HYDROFOIL

In summer hydrofoils reach the Sporadic islands of Skiathos (3¼ hours), Skopelos (four hours) and Alonnisos (4½ hours). Tickets are €35.30. Try **Karatharisis Travel & Shipping Agency** (☎ 2310 524 544; fax 2310 532 289; Navarhou Koundourioti 8; ☎ 8am-8.30pm).

TRAIN

Much cheaper, often more comfortable and not always slower than the bus, the train can get you anywhere in mainland Greece (except Kastoria, Halkidiki, Kavala and Epiros) and to all neighbouring countries (except Albania). Further, Thessaloniki's **train station**

(☎ 2310 517 517; Monastiriou) is closer to the centre than the bus station. Get tickets at the station or from **OSE** (☎ 2310 598 120; Aristotelous 18).

There are regular trains and intercity (IC or ICE) trains; the latter are substantially more expensive, and slightly faster, than the former. Prices given are for the regular trains. Book in advance for Athens, especially for the cheap train. There are usually long lines at the station, so don't leave it till the last minute to get a ticket.

Domestic

Five regular trains daily serve Athens (€15.20, 6½ hours) via Larisa (€5, two hours), which has connections to Volos (€7, 4½ hours). The Athens intercity is much more expensive (€35.50) but not significantly faster (5½ hours).

Some 14 daily trains service Veria (€2.10, one hour) and Edessa (€4.50, 1½ hours); of these, five continue on to Amyndeo (for Kastoria bus connections) before terminating at Florina (€5.30, 2¾ hours), which has bus connections to the Prespa Lakes.

Thessaloniki–Thrace trains go five times daily to Orestiada (€12.30, 8½ hours), via Xanthi (€7, four hours), Komotini (€8.20, 4½ hours) and Alexandroupoli (€10, six hours).

Thessaloniki's train station has a National Bank of Greece, a post office, a couple of ATMs, cardphones and an OTE (telephone office), kiosks and a restaurant (6am to 10pm). There are automatic luggage machines (€3 base price) or a check-in storage room (€3 per item per day), which closes after 10pm. For the latter, present your train ticket when depositing luggage.

International

A daily old workhorse train leaving Thessaloniki at 8.20am plies the northern route through the ex-Yugoslav Republics of Macedonia, Serbia, Croatia and Slovenia, serving their respective capitals of Skopje (€12, 4½ hours), Belgrade (€30, 13 hours), Zagreb (€54, 20 hours) and finally Ljubljana (€58, 24 hours). The evening train at 6.50pm serves Skopje and Belgrade only. These trains stop in every town and village along the way and are frequently late. Note that the departure times of these trains change in winter and summer, so always double-check in advance.

Three daily trains connect Thessaloniki with Sofia (€15.40, six hours) via Kilikis in Greece and Blagoevgrad in Bulgaria. Two leave early (6.16am and 5.47am) and the third at midnight; this midnight train continues to Budapest.

Svilengrad and Plovdiv in Bulgarian Thrace are reached via the Thessaloniki–Thrace train route, departing Thessaloniki daily at 11:44pm. A weekly, three-day train to Moscow usually runs in summer.

Trains to İstanbul (€48, two daily) follow the Thracian route, passing through Alexandroupoli en route to Pythio, where you change trains before entering Turkey. A direct train, the Filia Dostluk Express, leaves at 8.35pm from Thessaloniki and returns from İstanbul at 8pm. The journey takes 11½ hours. A 2nd-class sleeper car costs €48.20, a 1st-class one €84.90.

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Bus 78 runs every 30 minutes from the airport west to the main bus station via the train station. A taxi from the centre to the airport costs €8 to €10.

BUS

Orange articulated buses operate within Thessaloniki, and blue-and-orange buses operate both within the city and the suburbs. The local bus station is at Plateia Dikastirion on Filippou. Bus 1 connects the bus station and the train station every 10 minutes; bus 31 goes every six minutes through the centre to Voulgari, where you catch bus 36 for the Halkidiki bus station. Bus 78 runs to/from the airport every 30 minutes. To reach major points on Egnatia like Aristotelous, Agias Sofias and Kamara, buses 10 and 14 are fairly frequent and start at the train station.

Buy a ticket from a *periptero* (street kiosk) for €0.50, or from the ticket machine on board (€0.60). If the former, validate it on board. However, if you will use the bus frequently, buy a 24-hour unlimited usage ticket (€2). Note the machine will not give change and doesn't accept bills.

Have change when getting on the bus, and buy a ticket immediately. Thessaloniki's ticket police combine the finesse of the amateur boxer with the efficiency of the Gestapo, and pounce on any sign of confusion – foreigners are especially easy targets.

If they nab you, you'll pay €30 on the spot, or you can go with one of these specimens to plead your case to the police.

CAR

The **ELPA** (Greek Automobile Club; ☎ 2310 426 319; Vasilisis Olgas 228) is in Kalamaria. **Budget Rent a Car** (☎ 2310 229 519; Angelaki 15) and **Euro Rent** (☎ 2310 826 333; G Papandreou 5) are two of many rental agencies.

There's a large parking lot by the ferry passenger terminal (per hour €1). Parking downtown is tough, but you will eventually succeed.

TAXI

Thessaloniki's blue-and-white taxis carry multiple passengers, and won't take you if you're not going in the same direction that the other passengers are. Stand in the direction you hope to go, flag one down and yell out your destination – good luck! The minimum fare is €2.80. Drivers, more scrupulous than those in Athens, work for five companies:

Alfa-Lefkos Pyrgos (☎ 2310 249 100; Omirou 12, Sykies)

Makedonia (☎ 2310 550 500; Karyofylli 4)

Megas Alexandros (☎ 2310 866 866)

Omega (☎ 2310 511 855; Terma Giannitson 179)

Thessaloniki (☎ 2310 551 525; Giannitson 140)

HALKIDIKI ΧΑΛΚΙΔΙΚΗ

With its three 'fingers' stretching into the North Aegean, the Halkidiki Peninsula is the most popular holiday getaway for Northern Greeks. The first finger, **Kassandra**, has fared worst, filled with unimaginative holiday villas, concrete and trinket shops. The second, **Sithonia**, has escaped most of the excesses and contains some truly magical beaches. The easternmost promontory largely belongs to the monastic community of Mt Athos (Agion Oros), open only to male pilgrims.

In summer, budget accommodation in Halkidiki is nonexistent and getting there from Thessaloniki can be exasperatingly slow. Campers, however, have over 30 high-quality camping grounds available. In its best spots, Halkidiki has long, sandy beaches surrounded by aquamarine seas and pine forest and is particularly inviting in September, when the waters are warmest and the crowds have dispersed.

Kassandra Peninsula Χερσόνησος Κασσάνδρας

The **Kassandra Peninsula** is what happens when Greek urbanites go on vacation and bring their motorcycles, concrete sidewalks and consumerism with them. It's not an oasis of tranquillity, but if you're after nightlife it's great. **Kallithea** on the east coast is the centre of the action. Along with fleshed-out discos and bars, it has a long but crowded beach. For reasonable self-catering *domatia* with air-conditioning (€50), ask at **Kallithea Market**, next to the stop where the bus from Thessaloniki will leave you. **Manita Tours** (☎ 23740 24036) in the centre does numerous day trips including a tour (€25) of several superior beaches on the coast of Sithonia Peninsula opposite.

Kassandra has good camping grounds, especially at **Posidi** and **Nea Skioni** on the quieter western shore. **Siviri** has a sandy beach, but is overdeveloped.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Thirteen buses daily go from Thessaloniki's **Halkidiki bus terminal** (☎ 2310 316 555; www.in-ktel.gr) to **Kallithea** (€7.60, 1½ hours) on the east coast; 10 go to **Pefkohori** (€10.20, two hours), also on the east coast, via **Krypigi** and **Haniotis**; and seven go to **Paliouri** (€11.10, two hours) on the southern tip.

Sithonia Peninsula Χερσόνησος Σιθωνίας

WEST COAST

Escapist **Sithonia** has better beaches, more spectacular nature and a more relaxed feel than **Kassandra**. The southern end and eastern coastline have beautiful beaches; outside high summer, they're yours.

The coast road loops around **Sithonia**, skirting wide bays, climbing into pine-forested hills and dipping down to the resorts. The west coast has good stretches of sandy beaches between **Nikiti** and **Paradisos**, notably **Kalogria Beach** and **Lagomandra Beach**. Beyond, **Neos Marmaras** is **Sithonia's** largest resort, with a crowded beach but many *domatia*.

From **Neos Marmaras** the road climbs into the hills, from which roads (some dirt) descend to more beaches and camping grounds. Development here is scarcer and you can find isolated beaches.

Toroni and **Porto Koufos**, small resorts on **Sithonia's** southwestern coast, offer relaxing beaches and a cute yacht harbour sheltered

in a deep bay, with domatia and fish tavernas. Sithonia's southern tip, still relatively isolated, is rocky, rugged and dramatic. Rounding the road's southeastern tip, spectacular Mt Athos rises across the gulf.

Kalamitsi, though it has a gorgeous beach, is suffering from overdevelopment. There's boat rental at **North Aegean Diving Centre** (☎ 23750 41338), which also does dives (€40) and courses (from €70).

Porto Camping (☎ 23750 41346; camp sites per adult/tent €3.80/4.50), on Kalamitsi's main beach, and the pricier **Camping Kalamitsi** (☎ 23750 41411; camp sites per adult/tent €6.50/7.20; ☒ May-Sep), around the western headland, are both good bets. The best rooms are **O Giorgakis** (☎ 23750 41338; fax 23750 41013; studios €75), above the eponymous restaurant opposite the beach. The studios sleep five and are fully equipped. The quieter **Souzana Rooms** (☎ 23750 41786; apt €50) sits in a spacious garden and has good-sized apartments.

EAST COAST

Sarti, further up the coast, is a quiet resort with some nightlife, rooms and eating options. It has a long, sandy beach and great views of Mt Athos, which can also be seen by boat excursions run by Sarti travel agents.

Haus Theodora (☎ 23750 94341; www.sarti-theodora.gr; apt €50), overlooking Sarti beach's northern end, offers brightly painted modern studios with spacious balconies.

Kivotos (☎ 23750 94143; mains €5-9) on the central waterfront offers great grilled fish on a table in the sand. Owner Daniel can help with finding rooms.

Between Sarti and Panagia the loop roads meet up and things get more interesting. Sithonia's best camping grounds and beaches are here. Rent a scooter to explore; 6km north of Sarti is a turn-off leading to **Kavourotrypes** (Crab Holes) – several small rocky coves great for swimming. Some 13km further north is popular **Vourvourou**, which has camping grounds and rooms for rent. Although it feels a bit packaged, the spacious **Hotel Vergos** (☎ 23750 91379; www.halkidiki.com/vergos; s/d/apt incl breakfast €58/63/105; ☒) offers well-furnished rooms in a relaxed setting with a big lawn for kids.

A short dirt road from the centre leads to Vourvourou's best beach, **Karydi**. Backed by shady pine trees, this beach is an ideal mix of sand, rocks and solitude. Another sandy beach is at **Ormos Panagias**, 1km north.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses leave from Thessaloniki's **Halkidiki bus terminal** (☎ 2310 316 555; www.in-ktel.gr) for Neos Marmaras (€11.20, 2½ hours, seven daily), Sarti (€15.80, 3½ hours, five daily) and Vourvourou (€10.50, four daily). Most of the Sarti buses loop around the Sithonian Peninsula, enjoying coastal views.

Getting to Sithonia from Kassandra by bus requires changing at Nea Moudania, at the foot of Kassandra.

Athos Peninsula (Secular Athos)

Χερσόνησος Αθῶ

The celebrated Athonite monasteries occupy the southeastern part of Halkidiki's third (easternmost) finger. Land entry is not allowed from the secular part of Athos (dominated by nondescript package tourism, though with some fine beaches) into the mountainous monastic part. The narrow strip at the north-western, secular edge of the Athos Peninsula features on its northern coast the town of **Ierissos**, where regular ferries service Athos' east-coast monasteries, and on the southern coast **Ouranopoli**, where ferries depart for the west-coast monasteries and their administrative centre at Karyes.

If you're not going to monastic Athos, visit **Ammoliani**, a tiny island with fine beaches, domatia, camping and tavernas. Get there via ferry (six daily) from **Trypiti** on the south coast of the peninsula.

OURANOUPOLI ΟΥΡΑΝΟΥΠΟΛΗ

Ouranopoli, which is located on the southwestern coast of the Athos Peninsula, is a low-key tourist village with good nearby beaches. It is, however, better known as the major jumping-off point for Athos' monastic community.

Along with daily ferries for pilgrims, daily sightseeing **boat cruises** (per person €15; ☒ 10.30am) circle the Athos Peninsula from here. This gives females, banned from monastic Athos, a chance to see something. Alternatively, hiring a boat (€35) lets you visit the sandy, uninhabited Drenia archipelago, one nautical mile offshore.

Sleeping

Ouranopoli has signposted domatia.

Ouranopoli Camping (☎ 23770 71171; fax 23770 71396; camp sites per adult/tent €9/9; ☒ 20 May-30 Oct) A

decent, though pricey camping ground; it's on Ouranopoli's northern beach side.

Xenios Zeus (☎ 23770 71274; www.ouranoupoli.com/zeus; s/d/tr €35/55/65; ☒) This friendly, family-run place on the main street has clean and comfortable rooms with harbour views. If you're en route to monastic Athos, it will hold unnecessary luggage for you.

Lazaros Andonakis Rooms (☎ 23770 71366; s/d €45/50; ☒) This reasonable choice has airy, pine-furnished rooms, some with harbour views. To get there, continue 50m seaward from the Pilgrims' Office.

Mt Athos (Agion Oros) Αγίου Όρους

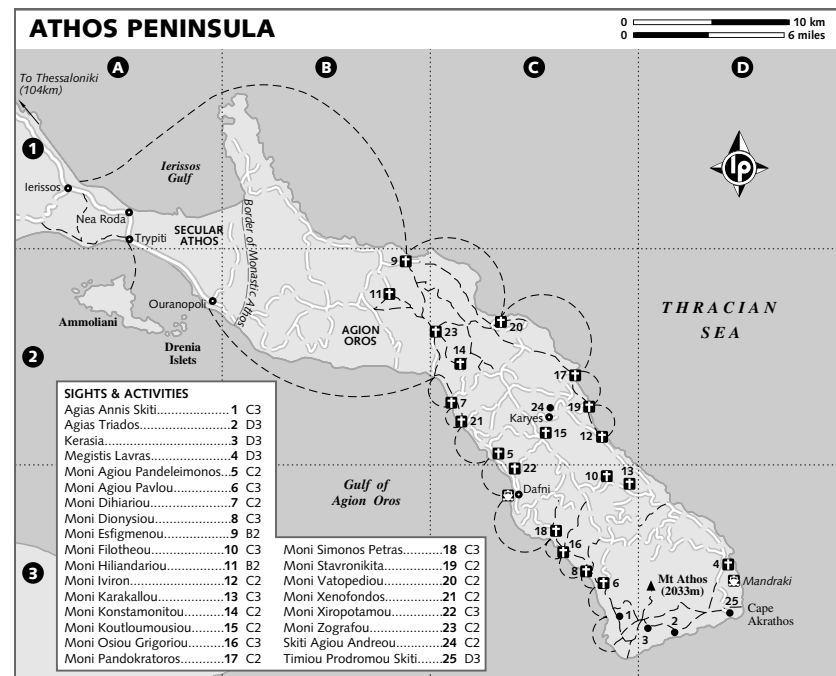
If you're lucky enough to be able to visit Mt Athos, do it. It's one of the most unusual places in the world. A semi-autonomous monastic republic that still follows the Julian calendar, along with many other Byzantine edicts and mores, the Holy Mountain (as it is in Greek) consists of 20 working monasteries and smaller dependencies (*skites*), with a few *very* old-school, remote mountain hermitages still inhabited. An enormous World Heritage Site that occupies most of

the Athos Peninsula, Mt Athos is formally a part of the Greek state, though ecclesiastically it remains under the Greek Patriarchate of Constantinople (Istanbul).

Apocryphal legends say that the Virgin Mary herself visited Athos and blessed it; the Holy Mountain is considered the Garden of the Virgin, and it is dedicated exclusively to her, meaning there's no room for other women. Although frustrated Eurocrats in Brussels have contested this prohibition, they have proven no match for over 1000 years of tradition and the gold-sealed decrees (*chrysobulls*) of Byzantine emperors, whose names are still invoked in prayers and whose edicts continue to be respected.

For men, visiting monastic Athos requires considerable advance planning (see Getting the Permit, p292). Visits are restricted to four days, though they can be extended with special permission.

Experiencing the monasteries, set amid unsullied nature, is wonderfully peaceful – and tiring. You follow the monks' lifestyle, eating with them, attending services with them (even at 3.30 in the morning) and generally



respecting the monasteries' customs. You are free to walk in the still Athonite forests and down worn trails that connect the monasteries, and to marvel at their architecture and art treasures, enjoying the simple hospitality and anecdotes of the wise old monks over a cup of Greek coffee or *raki* (Greek fire water).

HISTORY

Ever since early Byzantine times, ascetics were drawn to rugged, inaccessible Athos. Gradually, a loose community formed. A *chrysobull* of Emperor Basil I in 885 confirmed Athos' special status. In 943, the monastic territory's extent was officially mapped. Some 20 years later the Holy Mountain was formally dedicated, when Emperor Nikofores II Fokas funded the Megistis Lavras, which was the biggest, if not the first, monastery.

As the monastic community continued to flourish under imperial patronage, it also expanded, sparking a reaction from conservative monks who feared traditions were being diluted and that monasteries were becoming too commercially involved. Their grumblings prompted corrective imperial edicts, which reaffirmed prior ones; the most famous is that of Constantine IX Monomahos in 1060, which barred entry for women, female domestic animals, beardless persons and eunuchs. Today, women are still banned, hens are tolerated for their eggs, beards are no longer mandatory, and eunuchs are not readily available.

The 11th century was a glorious time for Athos, but destructive pillaging by pirates, Catalans and Crusaders (in 1204) followed. Nevertheless, the Holy Mountain was always reborn. Since founding and subsidising monasteries conferred considerable prestige on the donor, numerous Bulgarian, Russian and Serbian princes started doing so.

Athos submitted to Ottoman rule with Thessaloniki's capture in 1430, but managed to retain its semi-independent status throughout Ottoman times. In 1542, the last Athonite monastery, Stavronikita, was founded. During the Greek War of Independence (1821–29), monasteries were plundered and entire libraries burned by Turkish troops. The Russian Revolution would cause a drastic decline in Russian participation and patronage during atheistic Soviet times.

Nowadays, there are 20 ruling monasteries and several dependencies and hermitages. Athos' modern constitution dates from 1924,

and was guaranteed in the 1975 Greek Constitution. Athos is part of Greece: monks, regardless of origin, become Greek citizens, while the Holy Council (*Iera Synaxis*), composed of one representative from each monastery, is responsible for internal administration. About 1600 monks currently live on Athos.

GETTING THE PERMIT

Plan ahead: advance booking of up to six months is required for summer (though in winter it's easier). Only 10 non-Orthodox adult males and 100 Orthodox men may enter Mt Athos daily. Those under 18 must be accompanied by their father or, if visiting with a group leader or guardian, will need written permission from their father.

You must formally declare your wish to be a pilgrim in writing, stating your preferred visit dates. Send a passport copy to Thessaloniki-based **Mt Athos Pilgrims Bureau** (☎ 2310 252 578; fax 2310 222 424; pilgrimsbureau@c-lab.gr; Egnatia 109; ☹ 9am–2pm Mon–Fri, 10am–noon Sat), just west of Kamara. There you can start the permit process. While you should double-check in advance, in some cases pilgrims can also just book by email/fax, then print out the confirmation reply email/fax and go directly to Ouranopoli. Ordained clergymen need written permission from the **Ecumenical Patriarchate of Constantinople** (☎ in Turkey 90 212 534 9037) to visit Athos.

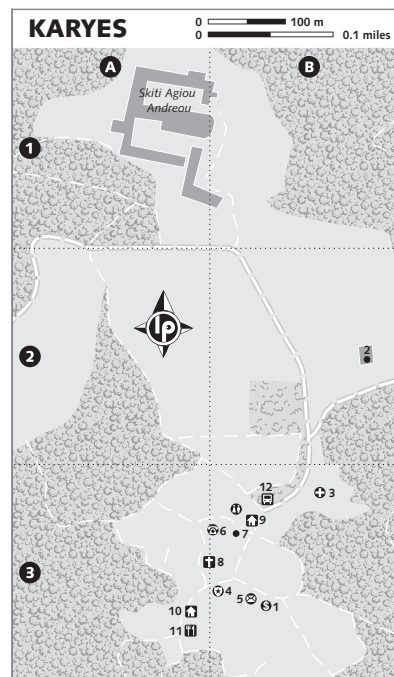
With your reservation secured and written/printed confirmation from the Pilgrims' Office, go to Ouranopoli to obtain your final permit (*diamonitirion*).

ENTERING ATHOS

In Ouranopoli, go to the **Pilgrims' Office** (☎ 23770 71422; fax 23770 71450; ☹ 8.10am–2pm), on the right-hand street just before a Byzantine flag. Look for the black-and-yellow flag.

Officials will check your passport and booking confirmation, and issue a three-night (four-day) *diamonitirion*: students pay €10, Orthodox believers €25, and everyone else €30. Free entry is granted on a case-by-case basis to the poor, the sick, and so on. Video cameras aren't allowed, but cameras are fine. Travellers with a vehicle can park at the lot (per day €7.50) on Ouranopoli's south side.

Alternatively, if you're going to east-coast Athonite monasteries, drive or take a bus from Thessaloniki directly to Ierissos: get your *diamonitirion* here and then board the ferry.



From Ouranopoli, the first boat to Athos' main port of **Dafni** is the *Agia Anna*, which leaves at 8am and 11am Monday to Saturday, and 8.30am Sunday (€6). The *Axion Esti* leaves Ouranopoli at 9.45am (€4.50). The **ticket office** (☎ 23770 71248) is on the waterfront. Get your *diamonitirion* sorted out early, as well as your ferry ticket, as queues are common.

The voyage takes two hours, with intermediate stops at several monasteries. In Dafni, a bus continues to the administrative capital of **Karyes** (€2.60). Alternatively, take a fast Ouranopoli–Dafni **water taxi** (☎ 69740 60744), fitting eight passengers (€140).

Once in Karyes, head to your chosen monastery. You stay free, but technically you're supposed to spend only one night in each. The *diamonitirion* can be extended in Karyes for another two days at the end. Try to book your monasteries in advance, especially in summer.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Athos' main port of Dafni has a port authority, police, customs, post office, shops selling food and locally produced religious items,

INFORMATION	
Bank.....	1 B3
Civil Administration Office.....	2 B2
Community Clinic.....	3 B3
Police Station.....	4 B3
Post Office.....	5 B3
Telephone.....	6 B3
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	
Mt Athos Holy Administration.....	7 B3
Protaton.....	8 A3
SLEEPING	
Guesthouse.....	9 B3
Ilarion Guesthouse.....	10 A3
EATING	
Bakery.....	11 A3
TRANSPORT	
Bus & Taxi Stop.....	12 B3

and a café. Cardphones are available, and all Greek mobile networks operate.

For internet information on Athos, visit www.mountathos.gr, a very detailed and visually attractive Athos site, or www.athosfriends.org, the informative website of the British-based Friends of Mt Athos, whose members include no less than Prince Charles.

Karyes hosts the monastic community's **Civil Administration Office** (☎ 23770 23314), **police station** (☎ 23770 23212), **Agrotiki Bank**, post office, OTE, **community clinic** (☎ 23770 23217), bus stop and rudimentary shops, including a bakery, and a public telephone. Athos' two nonmonastic guesthouses, a nameless one (☎ 23770 23362) and the **Ilarion Guest House** (☎ 23770 23243) are here too.

In the northern part of the Athos Peninsula, the landscape is thickly forested; the south is dominated by the stark, soaring peak of Mt Athos (2033m). Since there's neither industry nor hunting, monastic Athos is practically a nature reserve. You won't find monks swimming around Athos' breathtaking, craggy coast, though you may hear tales of the occasional spearfishing, scuba-diving ascetic.

Be aware that if you're staying in a monastery where pilgrims dine with the monks, the meal concludes as soon as the simultaneous spiritually edifying reading ends – so eat up!

EXPLORING ATHOS

Although you can take monastic vehicles, local **taxi** (☎ 23370 23266) or boat, walking is the best way to experience Athos' serenity. You'll be travelling on paths passing through

tranquil forests, where the only sounds are the rustling of leaves, chirping of birds and the occasional passing monk, rhythmically reciting his prayers.

Boat travel (around €1), provides another view of Athos. A caique leaves Agias Annis daily at 9.45am for Dafni, serving intermediate west-coast monasteries or their *arsanas* (assigned landing areas) and returning from Dafni every afternoon. A less-regular, east-coast caique travels three times weekly between Ierissos and Mandraki (the harbour for Megistis Lavras). Another service around the south connects Mandraki and Agias Annis.

While in **Karyes**, visit the 10th-century **Protaton**, the basilican church opposite the Holy Epistasia. Its treasures include paintings by Panselinos, the master of the so-called 'Macedonian School' of ecclesiastical art.

Karyes to the Southeast Coast Monasteries & Mt Athos

To start the grand tour of southeastern Athos, and perhaps hike the mountain, first head northeast from Karyes by foot to the coastal **Moni Stavronikita** (☎/fax 23770 23255; ☞ noon-2pm) or, just under it, **Moni Iviron** (☎ 23770 23643; fax 23770 23248; ☞ noon-2pm). The latter was founded by Georgian monks and contains a library of over 2000 manuscripts, including 100 rare Georgian-language parchments.

From Iviron, continue by coastal paths or by caique and foot to **Moni Filotheou** (☎ 23770 23256; fax 23770 23674). Filotheou is also accessible from Karyes, along a shady path with available spring water (3½ hours). Beyond **Moni Karakallou** (☎ 23770 23225; fax 23770 23746) the old Byzantine path becomes a road; from here it's a 5½-hour walk to Megistis Lavras, though you may catch a lift in a monastic vehicle.

Moni Megistis Lavras (☎ 23770 23754; fax 23770 23013) is Athos' biggest monastery and the only one never damaged by fire. Incorporated in 963, it contains treasures like frescoes by Theophanes of Crete and the tomb of St Athanasios, its founder.

A caique leaves Megistis Lavras at about 3pm for **Agias Annis Skiti** (☎ 23770 23320), a hermit's dwelling. Alternatively, get there via the wilderness path around the peninsula's southern tip; it passes first **Timiou Prodromou Skiti**, then **Agias Triados** on the coast (off the main track), then **Kerasia** and finally the hospitable Agias Annis. Kerasia or Agias Annis are good bases for climbing **Mt Athos** (2033m).

The hike is not easy; inform someone that you will do it, and don't go up alone. Take food and water and extra clothes, since it gets cold up there. There's a well with drinking water below the summit, at the chapel of Panagia (Virgin Mary). You can return to Dafni from Agias Annis by caique.

Karyes to the Southwest Coast Monasteries

Alternatively, start west from Karyes towards the coast, site of spectacular cliff-top monasteries like Simonos Petras and Dionysiou. The first monastery you will reach, just west and then south of Karyes, is the friendly **Moni Koutloumousiou** (☎ 23770 23226; fax 23770 23731). West of Koutloumousiou near the coast is **Moni Xiropotamou** (☎ 23770 23251; fax 23770 23733; ☞ 12.30-2.30pm), which boasts comfortable, oil-lit guest rooms. Somewhat unusually, food and drink is served to guests separately from the monks. Walking south, the path leads to Dafni; you can follow the coastal path or take the daily caique, which leaves for Agias Annis at 12.30pm, calling at Simonos Petras, Osiou Grigoriou, Dionysiou and Agiou Pavlou. Alternatively, wooded paths in the peninsula's centre, accessible from Moni Koutloumousiou or Moni Filotheou, also reach Simonos Petras.

Moni Simonos Petras (Simopetra; ☎ 23770 23254; fax 23770 23707; ☞ 1-3pm), fronted by wooden balconies jutting above a cliff, is Athos' most-photographed monastery. Here and at the other cliff monasteries, standing in the dark under a sky teeming with stars, with the sound of the sea below, is almost a religious experience in itself. From Simonos Petras the coastal path branches off the trail to the *arsanas* at a small shrine, bringing you to **Moni Osiou Grigoriou** (☎ 23770 23668; fax 23770 23671). This seafront monastery has a comfortable guesthouse by the harbour, outside the main monastery building.

The coastal path from here south climbs and descends three times before reaching the sublime **Moni Dionysiou** (☎ 23770 23687; fax 23770 23686), another cliff-hanging monastery especially ethereal at night. Dionysiou's *katholikon* (principal church) contains a very important wax-and-mastic icon of the Virgin and Child. Legend says that in the year 626, facing a grim combined Persian and Avar siege of Constantinople, the patriarch carried the icons round the walls and the city was miraculously saved.

The icon is considered to be the oldest in Athos, and though its features are no longer visible, the dark shape indeed resonates with a strange power in its ornate silver case.

After Dionysiou, the coastal path continues to **Moni Agiou Pavlou** (☎ 23770 23741; fax 23770 23355) and Agias Annis Skiti.

Karyes to the Northern Monasteries

Taking the path north from Karyes towards Moni Vatopediou, Moni Xenofondos and Moni Konstamonitou, the first monastery is the sprawling **Skiti Agiou Andreou** (☎ 23770 23810). Once home to Russian monks, it was largely abandoned during Soviet times but is currently being revitalised. Although it doesn't figure in the tourist guides, humble Agiou Andreou is actually at the very forefront of Mt Athos' current cultural and artistic endeavours. The *skiti* hosts projects by **Restaurateurs San Frontieres** (www.rsfturkey.org), a leading international organisation that has, in the last decade, carried out expert restoration work on over 600 icons and 400 sq metres of wall paintings at a dozen Athonite monasteries, including Iviron, Stavronikita, Koutloumousiou and Dionysiou.

Agiou Andreou itself now has a cultural centre, where artists, photographers, writers and musicians inspired by the Holy Mountain exhibit their works. Like-minded pilgrims or other art-lovers should definitely visit this unusual monastery.

After Agiou Andreou, continue to the coastal **Moni Pandokratoros** (☎ 23770 23880; fax 23770 23685), or take the long, lovely forest path to **Moni Vatopediou** (☎ 23770 41488; fax 23770 41462; ☞ 9am-1pm), further along the northeast coast. Although not exactly unorthodox, Vatopediou is unique in that it follows the modern Gregorian (Western) calendar. Vatopediou's sumptuous main church is a must-see, with a jaw-dropping collection of treasures.

From Vatopediou, a coastal path leads to **Moni Esfigmenou** (☎ 23770 23229). Further on is **Moni Hiliandariou** (☎ 23770 23797; fax 23770 23108), a very hospitable and friendly Serbian monastery. In March 2004, a fire burned half the monastery; nevertheless it remains open. Donations for repairing Hiliandariou can be made through the British-based Friends of Mt Athos (see p293).

The humble, pretty **Moni Konstamonitou** (☎/fax 23770 23228) is worth visiting, but the

Bulgarian **Moni Zografou** (☎/fax 23770 23247) further north is more famous. Its name, meaning 'painter', comes from a miraculous icon not painted by human hands. The northernmost west-coast monastery, **Moni Dohiariou** (☎/fax 23770 23245), slopes down gently to the sea and boasts some of Athos' best architecture. These west-coast monasteries are served by the Ouranopoli-Dafni ferry.

Next on the coastal path is **Moni Xenofondos** (☎ 23770 23633; fax 23770 23631), first mentioned in 998, but probably dating to the 6th century. Its seafront position made it a target for pirates and it was frequently plundered. Nevertheless, Moni Xenofondos has impressive mid-Byzantine marble and woodcarved iconostases in its older, 10th-century *katholikon* (principal church of a monastic complex); its newer one, completed in 1838, is Athos' largest.

Continue on to **Moni Agiou Pandeileimonos** (☎/fax 23770 23252; ☞ 10am-noon), the friendly Russian monastery, which at time of writing was closed. Over 1000 monks once inhabited this enormous facility.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

The bus to Ouranopoli leaves from Thessaloniki's **Halkidiki bus terminal** (☎ 2310 316 555; www.in-kel.gr) seven times daily (€10.70, 2½ hours). These buses also serve Ierissos (€9.30).

Taking the first bus (6.15am) from Thessaloniki cuts it close for organising your *diamonitirion* and ticket before the 9.45am boat; to be safe, stay overnight in Ouranopoli. This lets you rest, buy extra food, and store unnecessary luggage.

The return ferry from Athos to Ouranopoli leaves Dafni at noon. There's a quick customs check, meant to prevent antiquities theft. The morning caique from Agias Annis arrives in Dafni in time for the Ouranopoli-bound boat. The irregular east-coast caique provides an alternative exit to Ierissos.

The last daily bus to Thessaloniki leaves Ouranopoli at 6.15pm, and Ierissos at 6.35pm.

KAVALA ΚΑΒΑΛΑ

pop 60,802

With its splendid row of palms on the waterfront, and a hilltop castle standing over a colourful old town, cheery Kavala is instantly likeable. Macedonia's easternmost major town, Kavala is also an important ferry hub

for the northeast Aegean and Dodecanese. However, it itself is worth a little exploring. Kavala's grand aqueduct of great Ottoman Sultan Süleyman the Magnificent (1520–66) complements the Byzantine fortress, and there are tasty tavernas in the little streets of Panagia, the hillside old quarter, while the harbour-front is good for an evening drink.

Modern Kavala is built over ancient Neopolis, the port of Philippi. Mehmet Ali (1769–1849), Pasha of Egypt and founder of its last royal dynasty, was born in Kavala, where his former home still exists. As was the case in Athens and Thessaloniki, the 1923 Greek-Turkish population exchanges brought many new residents.

Orientation

Kavala's focal point is Plateia Eleftherias. The main thoroughfares, Eleftheriou Venizelou and Erythrou Stavrou, run west from here parallel with the waterfront (Ethnikis Andistasis). The old quarter, Panagia, stands at the harbour's southeastern side, above Plateia Eleftherias.

The bus station is on the corner of Hrysostomou Kavalas and Filikis Eterias, near the Thasos hydrofoil quay. There are public toilets near the hydrofoil departure point.

Information

ATM-equipped banks line Eleftheriou Venizelou.

INFORMATION	EATING	DRINKING	TRANSPORT
Cybernet.....1 A2	Ariko.....16 C2	Omilos.....19 A3	Aegean Airlines.....20 B2
National Bank of Greece.....2 C2	Tembelhanio.....17 D3		Alkyon Travel Service.....21 B2
Newsstand.....3 A2	Zytheio.....18 C1		Budget Rent a Car.....22 B2
Papadogiannis Bookshop.....4 C1			Bus Station.....23 B2
Port Police.....5 B2			Bus Stop for Alexandroupoli.....24 B2
Post Office.....6 B2			Europcar.....(see 21)
Tourist Information.....7 C2			Ferries for Aegean Islands.....25 C3
Tourist Police.....8 D2			Hydrofoils for Thasos.....26 B2
			Nikos Miliadis Shipping Agency.....27 C3
			Olympic Airlines.....28 B2
			SAOS Ferries.....29 C3
			Taxi Stand.....30 B2

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES	SLEEPING
Archaeological Museum.....9 A2	Galaxy Hotel.....14 C2
House of Mehmet Ali.....10 D3	Giorgos Alvanos Rooms.....15 D3
Imaret.....11 D3	
Municipal Museum of Kavala.....12 A1	
Statue of Mehmet Ali.....13 D3	

Cybernet (☎ 25102 30102; Erythrou Stavrou 64; per hr €2; ☎ 6am–4am)

National Bank of Greece (cnr Megalou Alexandrou & Dragoumi) Has exchange machine and ATM.

Newsstand (Erythrou Stavrou 32) Sells foreign newspapers and magazines.

Papadogiannis Bookshop (Omonias 46) Stocks international newspapers and magazines.

Post office (cnr Hrysostomou Kavalas & Erythrou Stavrou)

Tourist Information (☎ 25102 31011;

detaktic@otenet.gr; Plateia Eleftherias; ☎ 8am–2pm Mon–Fri) Helpful staff provide maps, plus accommodation, transport and events information.

Tourist police (☎ 25102 22905; Omonias 119)

Sights

The Archaeological Museum (☎ 25102 22335; Erythrou Stavrou 17; adult €2; ☎ 8am–3pm Tue–Sun), on Ethnikis Andistasis' western end, has finds from ancient Amphipolis, an Athenian colony west of Kavala that operated gold mines on nearby Mt Pangaeum. The finds include sculpture, jewellery, grave stela, terracotta figurines and vases. **The Municipal Museum of Kavala** (☎ 25102 222706; Filippou 4; admission free; ☎ 8am–1.30pm Mon–Sat) displays contemporary Greek art, along with a folk-art collection including costumes, jewellery, handcrafts, household items and tools.

Ascend the narrow, tangled streets of the **Panagia quarter**, lined with pretty pastel houses, for an evening stroll and atmospheric dining. The grandest of several well-preserved 18th-century buildings here is the **Imaret** (☎ 25102 20151; www.imaret.gr; Poulidou 6). This huge 18-domed structure overlooking the harbour was built in 1817 by Pasha Mehmet Ali as a hostel for theology students. The Imaret is now a very exclusive hotel; alas, the hotel has swallowed up the restored **House of Mehmet Ali**, so it's no longer for public viewing.

Sleeping

Batis Beach Camping (☎ 25102 45918; camp sites per adult/tent €5/4.90) Small, decent camping ground 3km west.

Giorgos Alvanos Rooms (☎ 25102 21781; Anthemiu 35; s/d €20/30) Kavala's best budget option, marked by consistent prices and clean and comfortable rooms, these simple domatia are in a 300-year-old house up in Panagia. Rooms have refrigerators and sea views, but bathrooms are shared. It's a steep walk uphill to get here, so call Giorgos first to make sure there's a room.

Galaxy Hotel (☎ 25102 24521; fax 25102 26754; Eleftheriou Venizelou 27; s/d €40/55; ☎) This old stand-by has good if unremarkable rooms with all mod cons and a nice location above the waterfront, but there's street noise.

Imaret (☎ 25106 20151; www.imaret.gr; Poulidou 6; s/d/ste ind breakfast €220/330/880; ☎) Nowhere else in northern Greece is there a hotel like this. The restored Imaret seeks to complement the original stone architecture devised by Pasha Mehmet Ali in the early 19th century with modern luxuries and elegant lighting. The huge rooms, with vaulted ceilings, harbour views and large fireplaces, are located around three inner courtyards. A Turkish *hammam* has been lavishly restored; there's a candle-lit indoor pool for essential oils treatments, a reading room and even an orangerie.

Eating & Drinking

Poulidou in Panagia has good tavernas, while lively café-bars are on the western waterfront.

Tembelhanio (☎ 25102 32502; Poulidou 33b; mezedhes €3–5) A good spot for seafood mezedhes, Tempelhanio has a relaxed setting in Panagia and a dedicated, ouzo-imbibing Greek clientele.

Ariko (☎ 25102 27173; Erythrou Stavrou 2; mains €5) Housed in the old fish market building, this popular place with its inviting outdoor dining has a wide-ranging fish menu and other traditional specialities. The owner recommends the clam *saganaki*.

Zytheio (☎ 6948 207720; Pavlou Mela 5; mains €7–10) This new place in the middle of town, which subtiles itself 'the world of beers', has 25 international brews, bountiful salads, and filling lunch options ranging from Greek specialities to pasta to spare ribs.

Omilos (port; ☎ 10am–late) Watch the boats bob in the harbour from the draped blue-and-white-striped couches at this smooth café on the jetty at the port's western side. Omilos has a spacious central bar on the inside for when it gets busy at night.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Kavala shares the Alexander the Great Airport near Hrysoupoli (29km), with Xanthi. **Olympic Airlines** (☎ 25102 23622; www.olympicairlines.com; Ethnikis Andistasis 8) does two daily Athens flights (€76), Aegean Airlines, one daily (€66).

BUS

The **bus station** (☎ 25102 23593; cnr Filikis Eterias & Hrysostomou Kavalas) has buses to Athens (€40, 9½ hours, three daily), Xanthi (€4.70, one hour, half-hourly), Keramoti (€4, one hour, hourly) and Thessaloniki (€12.90, two hours, hourly). There's inexpensive luggage storage at the bus station's storeroom (*apothiki*).

Buses for Alexandroupoli (€10.95, two hours, seven daily) depart from the **bus stop** (Hrysostomou Kavalas 1) outside the small 7-Eleven Snack Bar opposite the KTEL office. Get tickets and information inside.

Turkey

OSE buses from Thessaloniki leave Kavala for Turkey at 4.30am daily except Monday (single/return €38/68).

Alkyon Travel Service (☎ 25102 31096; alkyon-trv@ticketcom.gr; Eleftheriou Venizelou 37), from which buses also depart, has tickets.

FERRY

Ferries go every two hours in summer to Skala Prinou on Thasos (€3.30, 1¼ hours, hourly), and frequent boats during summer go from Keramoti, 46km east of Kavala, to Thasos (Limenas) for €2. This boat takes 40 minutes.

In summer, a weekly ferry serves Samothraki (€14.50, four hours). Buy tickets and check the schedule at **Saos Ferries** (☎ 25108 35671) near the Aegean Islands ferry departure point.

Ferries also service Limnos (€15.30, five hours) and Lesvos (€26.50, 10 hours). Some services also go through to Lavrio (in Attica) and Piraeus via Chios and Samos. Get tickets at **Nikos Miliadis Shipping Agency** (☎ 25102 26147; fax 25108 38767; Karaoli-Dimitriou 36).

HYDROFOIL

In summer, four daily hydrofoils connect Kavala and Skala Prinou on Thasos (€7.50, 40 minutes); although the competition might tell you they don't, another four daily go from Kavala directly to Thasos (Limenas) (€10, 40 minutes). Get tickets on boarding. Hydrofoils berth at the port's western side, down from the bus station and by the port police kiosk, which posts hydrofoil and ferry schedules.

Getting Around**TO/FROM THE AIRPORT**

The only option is by taxi (€25).

CAR

Try **Budget Rent a Car** (☎ 25102 28785; Eleftheriou Venizelou 35) or nearby Europcar, located at **Alkyon Travel Service** (☎ 25102 31096; alkyon-trv@ticketcom.gr; Eleftheriou Venizelou 37).

TAXI

For **taxis** try the bus station, or dial ☎ 25102 32001.

PELLA ΠΕΛΛΑ

The birthplace of Alexander the Great, **Pella** (☎ 23820 31160; admission €6; ☎ 8am-7.30pm Tue-Sun, noon-7.30pm Mon) spans the Thessaloniki-Edessa road, and features spectacular mosaics. Pella became Macedon's capital under King Archelaos (who ruled from 413 BC to 399 BC), though the old capital of Aigai (Vergina) remained the royal cemetery.

Created with naturally coloured, subtly contrasting stones, the mosaics depict mythological scenes. They were created for ancient houses and public buildings now destroyed. Some are in situ, others in the museum. Also on this (northern) side of the road are six re-erected columns and a courtyard laid out with a black-and-white geometric mosaic.

On the southern side is the **museum** (admission free with Pella ticket; ☎ 8am-7.30pm). Room One has a wall reconstruction from an ancient house, and a circular table inlaid with intricate floral and abstract designs, which possibly belonged to Philip II. Room Two houses more mosaics.

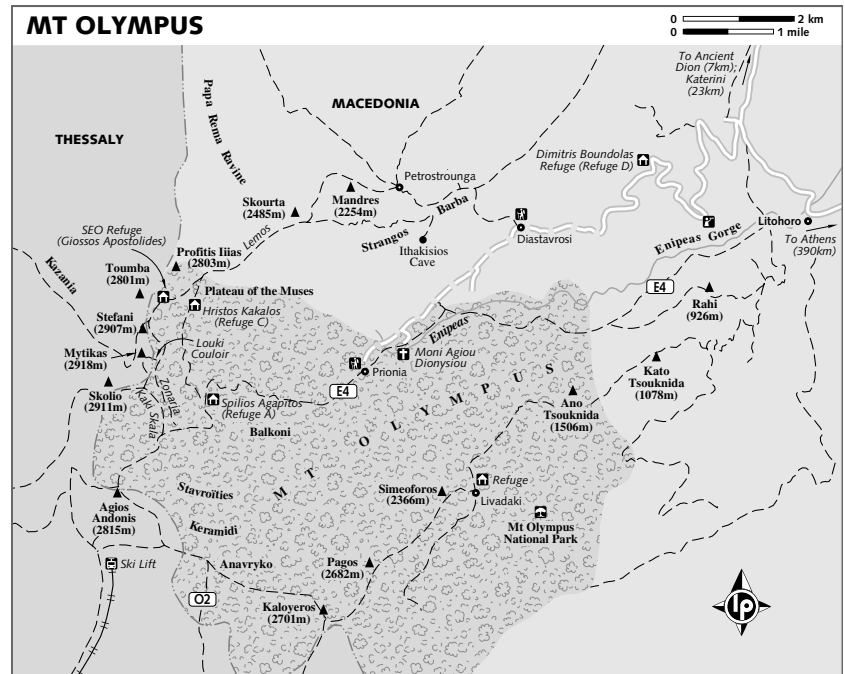
Getting There & Away

Thessaloniki-Pella buses go every 45 minutes from 6am to 10pm (€2.90, 40 minutes). To visit Pella and Vergina by bus in one day, first see Pella, then take a Thessaloniki-bound bus to Halkidona and take a Vergina bus from there.

MT OLYMPUS ΟΛΥΜΠΙΟΣ ΟΡΟΣ

The cloud-covered lair of the ancient Greek pantheon, awe-inspiring Mt Olympus is Greece's highest mountain and fires the imagination, just as it did in ancient times. It also hosts around 1700 plant species, some rare and endemic. Its slopes are covered with thick forests of numerous different deciduous trees, conifers and pines, and bird life is equally varied. Olympus became Greece's first national park in 1937.

The first known mortals to reach Mytikas (2918m), Olympus' highest peak, were



Litohoro local Christos Kakalos and Swissmen Frederic Boissonas and Daniel Baud-Bovy, in August 1913.

Litohoro Λιτόχορο
pop 7011 / elev 305m

Relaxing Litohoro (lih-to-ho-ro) is the base for climbing or just admiring Olympus, and is a charming getaway in its own right. It has numerous winding, cobbled streets and lovely Macedonian wood-balconied houses. The introduction to it is dramatic: on the final eastern approach to the village, the Enipeas River gorge parts, revealing the towering double peaks of Olympus.

Unsurprisingly, Litohoro gets plenty of tourists (and tour buses), so book ahead in summer.

ORIENTATION

The main entry road from Thessaloniki or Katerini, Agiou Nikolaou, is also Litohoro's main thoroughfare; it leads to Plateia Eleftherias, the main square. To reach Prionia, where the main trail up Olympus begins, go right on Ithakisiou, just before this *plateia*.

To the left of the *plateia* is 28 Oktovriou, site of most shops.

The bus station is on Agiou Nikolaou, opposite tourist information.

INFORMATION

The National Bank of Greece, on Plateia Eleftherias, and the nearby Alpha, Commercial and Agricultural banks have ATMs.

The **EOS** (☎ 23520 84544; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 6-8pm Mon-Sat Jun-Sep), just below the public parking lot, distributes pamphlets with general and hiking information on Olympus. Take Ithakisiou down from the square and turn left after 100m. The EOS runs three mountain refuges.

GRNet (☎ 23520 82300; cnr Atanas & Koutrouba; internet access per hr €2; ☎ 24hr) Internet café near the *plateia*.

Medical Centre (☎ 23520 22222) Located 5km away, at the Litohoro turn-off from the main coastal highway.

Police (☎ 23520 81100; cnr Ithakisiou & Agiou Nikolaou)

Post office (28 Oktovriou 11)

SEO (Association of Greek Climbers; ☎ 23520 84200; ☎ 6-10pm) Also informative and runs an Olympus refuge; however, the EOS has more English-speakers. Walk down Ithakiou, turn left and then left again.

Tourist information booth (Agiou Nikolaou) In a little white building with wooden eaves, just before Ithakiou.

www.lithoro.gr The informative official website of the Municipality of Lithoro.

SLEEPING & EATING

Campers should break for the coast, where camping grounds with good services exist (though the beaches are underwhelming). Lithoro's hotels have wonderful atmosphere.

Olympios Zeus (☎ 23520 22115; Plaka Lithorou; camp sites per adult/tent €6/3.50) A good bet, though somewhat ramshackle.

Olympos Beach (☎ 23520 22112; www.olympus-beach.gr; Plaka Lithorou; camp sites per adult €6.80, tent €5-7) Similarly decent, but livelier with its loud on-site Shark nightclub.

our pick **Xenonas Papanikolaou** (☎ 23520 81236; xenpap@otenet.gr; Nikolaou Episkopou Kitrous 1; s/d €40/45) Solitude-seekers, head here first. This romantic guesthouse, set in a flowery garden up in the backstreets, is a world away from the tourist crowds on Lithoro's main street. Rooms feel more spacious than they actually are, and the tasteful decoration is enhanced by nice views of Lithoro's traditional terracotta rooftops. The cosy downstairs lounge has a fireplace and couches, and management is friendly and helpful. To get there from the square, take 28 Oktovriou uphill and turn left on Nikolaou Episkopou Kitrous.

Villa Pantheon (☎ 23520 83931; fax 23520 83932; d/tr €50/70; ☎) Outfitted with all the mod cons and cursed as the 'white thing' appearing in front of Mt Olympus, the Pantheon has comfortable, airy rooms.

Hotel Olympus Mediterranean (☎ 23520 81831; www.olympusmed.gr; Dionysou 5; d/tr/luxury ste ind breakfast €90/100/135; ☎) This snazzy new four-star hotel up high in the backstreets has assumed the mantle as Lithoro's poshest. It's set in an imposing neoclassical building with ornate balconies, and has 20 luxurious rooms and three suites, plus an indoor pool, a mosaic-tiled Jacuzzi pool and a sauna. Some rooms also have fireplace and Jacuzzi.

Damaskinia (☎ 23520 81247; Vasileos Konstandinou 4; mains €5-8) A popular upper-town taverna, Damaskinia does tasty *mousakas* and *koko-retsí* (spit-roast lamb offal).

our pick **Gastrodromio** (☎ 23520 21300; Plateia Eleftherias; mains €7-11) If Gastrodromio was around in Olympian times, Zeus and Co would have eaten here. Lithoro's most delightfully inventive restaurant, the spacious,

traditionally decorated Gastrodromio serves flavourful dishes like octopus with pepper-corn, cumin, garlic, hot pepper and wine, or rabbit cooked in wine and glazed with almonds, cinnamon and nutmeg. The wine list itself is 21 pages long.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From the **bus station** (☎ 23520 81271), buses serve Katerini (€2, 25 minutes, 17 daily), Thessaloniki (€8, 1½ hours, 10 daily) and Athens (€28, 5½ hours, three daily via Katerini). Buses from Thessaloniki to Volos/Athens leave you on the highway, where you catch a Katerini-Lithoro bus.

Lithoro's train station, 9km away, gets 10 daily trains on the Athens-Volos-Thessaloniki train line.

Ancient Dion Δίον

Below Mt Olympus, just north of Lithoro, is **Ancient Dion** (Dion Archaeological Park; adult/student €6/2; ☎ 8am-5pm winter, 8am-7pm rest of year), sacred to the Macedonians for the worship of the Olympian gods. Before his eastern adventures, Alexander the Great sacrificed here.

Originally, a fertility earth goddess was worshipped here, and later, other gods came into vogue, such as Asclepius, god of medicine. Dion's **Sanctuary to Isis**, the exotic Egyptian goddess, stands in a lush, low-lying area. Its votive statues were found virtually intact, with faint colour remaining. Copies are in place of the originals, now in the site's museum. A well-preserved **mosaic floor** from 200 AD, depicting the Dionysos Triumphant Epiphany, is also magnificent. During August's Olympus Festival, Dion's reconstructed **theatre** hosts performances.

The archaeological park ticket is good for Dion's **museum** (☎ 23510 53206; ☎ 8am-7pm Tue-Fri, 10.30am-5pm Mon, 8.30am-3pm Sat & Sun), which has a well-labelled collection of statues and other finds.

Since Dion is somewhat isolated, staying overnight in the village becomes an option; **Dion Hotel** (☎ 23510 53222; s/d €30/35) on the main road has simple but decent rooms. For eats, try the standard **Restaurant Dionysos** (☎ 23520 53682; mains €5.50-7), opposite the museum.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Catching a taxi (€8) is best, as there aren't buses from Lithoro. Alternatively, regular buses go from Katerini, 16km north.

VERIA BEPOIA

pop 43,683

Nicknamed 'Little Jerusalem' for its 70-plus churches, Veria is an intriguing though little-visited town 75km west of Thessaloniki, on the road to ancient Vergina. It features an old Jewish quarter, traditional Turkish houses and numerous mineral springs. Peaches grow in abundance around Veria, as do grapes, with the local Boutaris vineyards producing some of Greece's best wines.

Orientation

The two main squares, Plateia Andoniou and Plateia Raktivan (1km apart), are linked by main thoroughfares, Venizelou and Mitropoleos. The conjunction of Venizelou and Mitropoleos Elias leads to the escarpment ridge along which Anixeos runs north-south. The bus station is one block east of Venizelou. The train station is 3km north of town on the old road to Thessaloniki.

Information

ATM-equipped banks line both Venizelou and Mitropoleos.

Municipal Culture Office (cnr Pavlou Mela & Bizaniou) This office is responsible for tourism promotion in Veria. It produces some useful brochures on the town.

Pla-Net Café (Elias 9; internet access per hr €3; ☎ 9.30am-2am)

Police (☎ 23310 22391; Mitropoleos)

Post office (Dionysiou Solomou 4)

Tourist information booth (Anixeos & Plateia Elias; ☎ 9am-5pm)

Sights & Activities

To reach Veria's evocative old Jewish quarter, **Barbouta**, walk from Plateia Andoniou down Vasileos Konstandinou, the commercial street of old Veria, flanked by shops and *kafeneia*. Halfway along on the right is a huge, ancient plane tree from which the Turks hanged Archbishop Arsenios in 1430, after taking Veria. Opposite is the dilapidated, 12th-century **cathedral**, whose decapitated minaret attests to the cathedral's Ottoman incarnation as a mosque.

The **archaeological museum** (☎ 23310 24972; Leoforos Anixeos 45; admission free; ☎ 8am-3pm Tue-Sun), at the northern end of Anixeos, contains finds from the Vergina tombs and nearby Lefkadia.

Numerous little **Byzantine churches** (a few are open) are found in Veria's old streets. Popular cafés and restaurants are found in the restored traditional area, south of Mitropoleos.

The popular ski resort of **Mt Vermio**, 22km west, has eight slopes and three ski lifts.

Sleeping & Eating

Veria's accommodation scene is not auspicious for budget travellers. Its dining specialities include oven-cooked bean soup (*fasoladha*) and *revani*, a sweet syrupy Turkish cake.

Hotel Macedonia (☎ 23310 66902; Kondogiorgaki 50; s/d €50/72; ☎) A quiet hotel with good, well-furnished rooms, the Macedonia also has a nice rooftop terrace. From Elias take Paster, which becomes Kondogiorgaki.

Hotel Villa Elia (☎ 23310 26800; eliaver@otenet.gr; Elias 16; s/d €55/70; ☎) Slightly louder but closer to the action is this business hotel with large, comfortable rooms.

Menou (☎ 23310 72788; Plateia Raktivan 14; mains €5-7) The *fasoladha* bean concoction is recommended at this vegetarian-friendly joint, as is the baked eggplant with ground beef (*imam baïdi*).

To Katayfgyi (☎ 23310 27227; Kondogeorgaki 18; mains €5-8) This 'hide-out', as its name means in Greek, is in a restored old building and serves game dishes, such as quail, and an inventive variety of mushroom dishes along with more usual taverna fare.

Getting There & Away BUS

From the **bus station** (☎ 23310 22342; Trembesinas) buses serve Thessaloniki (€5.50, 1¼ hours), Athens (€30, seven hours), Edessa (€4, one hour) and Vergina (€2, 20 minutes). Buses for Kastoria (€10.30, two hours) go from a station on Pierion 155, 2km west of town.

TRAIN

From the **train station** (☎ 23310 24444), just north of town off the old Thessaloniki road, 14 daily trains traverse the line connecting Veria with Thessaloniki (€2.10, one hour) and Florina (€3.50, two hours).

Getting Around

You can travel around Veria by **taxi** (☎ 23310 63394).

VERGINA BEPTINA

pop 1246

Vergina (ver-ye-e-nah), 11km southeast of Veria, is the legendary burial site of the Macedonian kings, and their first capital (ancient Aigai). In 336 BC, at the wedding of his daughter

Cleopatra, Philip II was assassinated here. At least the guests were already there.

This World Heritage-listed site is also called the **Royal Tombs** (☎ 23310 92347; adult €8; ☎ 12.30-7pm Mon, 8am-7pm Tue-Sun summer, 8.30am-3pm winter). A walkway through the darkened interior of the major tumulose (*tholos*) leads to the four individual tombs. **Tomb I** is called **Persephone's Tomb**, after a mural found inside depicting Hades' rape of Persephone. **Tomb II** probably belonged to **Philip II**. Intact until its discovery in 1977, the tomb yielded a gold larnax (ossuary) with bones. The sixteen-pointed star of the royal Macedonian family on the larnax lid, and damage to the skull identical with descriptions of an injury Philip sustained, pointed to its likely inhabitant. Philip's larnax and that of his presumed concubine or wife, plus some exquisite gold-leaf diadems, are displayed in the exhibition rooms. **Tomb III** was probably designated for **Alexander IV**, son of Alexander the Great, while the mysterious **Tomb IV** was looted in antiquity.

To see the rest of the site, continue 400m past the Royal Tombs to the ruins of an extensive **palatial complex**, summer residence of 3rd-century-BC king Antigonos Gonatas. The main attraction is a large Doric peristyle, surrounded by floors of pebble-mosaic; the most beautiful has geometric floral design.

Aside from the site, there's no reason to linger, though Vergina does have a few *pensions*.

EDESSA ΕΔΕΣΣΑ

pop 16,000

The deep breaths you will take in Edessa (*ed-eh-sah*) come with the sight of its great, rushing waterfalls set in lush verdure, and the moist, refreshing air they create. Edessa also has an attractive though dilapidated old quarter, little streams, shaded parks and a Byzantine bridge, perched precariously on a ledge overlooking the seemingly endless agricultural plain. Edessa also makes a good base for further explorations in western Macedonia.

Until 1977, when Vergina's royal tombs were discovered, Edessa was believed to be the ancient Macedonian city of Aigai. With the government's Hellenisation project of Macedonia following the Greek-Turkish population exchanges of 1923, the town's long-existing Slavic name of Vodena ('place of water') was changed to the ancient Greek name of Edessa.

Orientation

The bus station is near the centre, on the corner of Filippou and Pavlou Mela. From there cross Filippou and follow Pavlou Mela to the T-junction; turning right puts you in the centre on Dimokratias. The train station, on Leoforos Nikis, is a 10-minute walk along 18 Oktovriou to the centre.

Edessa's famous waterfalls and the Varosi old quarter are near and well signposted. If somehow you get lost, ask a local how to reach the *kataraktes* (waterfalls).

Information

Major banks with ATMs are on and around Dimokratias.

Police (☎ 23810 23333; Iroön Polytehnou) On the street between Filippou and Dimokratias.

Post office (Dimokratias 26)

Tourist information office (☎ 23810 23101; www.edessacity.gr; ☎ 10am-8pm) Helpful staff led by the friendly Evangelos Kyriakou provide maps of Edessa and nearby attractions; the office is in a kiosk before the waterfalls.

Sights

Edessa's **waterfalls** come in different sizes; the best are found in a well-signposted park near the tourist office. The biggest thunders dramatically down a high cliff, filling the air with moisture; take a cloth for your camera lens. There's an **observation deck** immediately behind this waterfall, and standing here behind the tumbling water and hanging green moss is revitalising.

On the path just before the observation deck is a small **cave** (€1), inside the cliff mass.

Following a winding path downwards to the other side of the cliff brings you to a second, less impressive waterfall. Down to the right of these waterfalls is the **Water Museum** (adult €1.50; ☎ 11am-4pm Wed-Mon), with a collection of water-industry equipment. It also houses a pretty wild **aquarium** with various species of fish, amphibians, snapping turtles, poisonous snakes and one cranky, cooped-up crocodile.

Continuing south along the escarpment ridge you'll reach **Varosi**, the old quarter of town, with cobbled streets, chapels and traditional houses in various states of disrepair. The colourful **Folkloric Museum** (adult €1.50; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is here too. Turning the other way from the waterfalls through the park brings you to Edessa's very pretty

Byzantine bridge, thought to have been part of the Via Egnatia.

Activities

Outdoor sports are big around Edessa. **Gianis Hatziantoniou** (☎ 69449 91075) arranges activities like hiking expeditions, cycling tours and GPS orienteering trips. **Tasos Privartitsanis** (☎ 69772 48581) is the man for parapente and hang-gliding opportunities. **George Mousios** (☎ 69737 43127; 1-2-hr rides €15/20) organises mountain horse-riding.

Sleeping

Our pick **Varosi** (☎ 23810 21865; www.varosi.gr; Arhieroos Meletiou 55-70; s/d incl breakfast €55/70; ♿ ♿) Edessa's best and most atmospheric *pension*, traditionally furnished Varosi is tucked away in the old Varosi quarter. It's lovingly run by Anastasia Salahora and her two daughters, who have restored this traditional Macedonian wood-and-stone house of eight rooms and furnished it with antique brass beds, fine linen and colourful embroidery. In winter, the lounge rooms are kept warm and cosy by log fires; in summer, there's a flower-filled balcony for relaxing over coffee. The hearty breakfast is recommended. Prices are often lower than those listed.

Hagiati (☎ 23810 51500; www.hagiati.gr; s/d incl breakfast €60/70; ♿) This small guesthouse of seven rooms, around the corner before Varosi, has a lovely open courtyard and peaceful setting. With its mostly modern fixtures, Hagiati doesn't have the traditional ambience of Varosi, but is still a nice choice.

Eating

Raeti (☎ 23810 28769; 18 Oktovriou 20; mezedhes €3-5, mains €5.50-8) Try the well-prepared Macedonian mezedhes and filling meat dishes.

Kataraktes Edessas (☎ 23810 27810; Kapetan Gareti-Perdika 1; mains €5-7) Publicly owned Kataraktes Edessas is next to the falls, with both outdoor and indoor dining. The menu is standard but dependable.

Getting There & Away

BUS

From the **bus station** (☎ 23810 23511; Pavlou Mela 13) buses serve Thessaloniki (€7.20, one hour 40 minutes, hourly), Veria (€4, one hour, six daily) and Athens (€39.70, eight hours, three daily). Buses for Florina depart from another

station (☎ 23810 29600), located 30m from the main one.

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 23810 23510; Leoforos Nikis) has trains to Thessaloniki (€4.50), Larisa (€6.10), Athens (€15.50), Kozani (€2.80) and Florina (€2.40).

Getting Around

You can travel around Edessa by **taxi** (☎ 23810 22904).

FLORINA ΦΛΩΡΙΝΑ

pop 15,555

Colourful Florina (*flo-rih-nah*), celebrated throughout Greece for its sweet red peppers, is nestled in a valley between mountains that make it frigid in winter. Although small, it's lived up by a student population that congregates under the bright awnings of cafés on its central pedestrian street. In evenings, its river is a favourite place for leisurely strolls.

Florina is also the gateway to the Prespa Lakes to the west, and is about 40km south of Bitola, the first major city in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia; the two have certain resemblances. Also, a small ski resort, **Vigla**, is located 15km west of Florina on the Prespes road.

Although it has only three small museums, Florina is important historically. It was the northernmost town annexed by Greek troops during the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, and near the front in subsequent wars. The issue of a (Slavic) Macedonian minority in Greece, which the government denies outright, has always been sensitive in Florina, where a significant percentage of the 'Greek' population speak the Macedonian language. Heavy, though subtle, pressure from Greek society, media and government has sought to stamp it out, but if you have sharp ears and local awareness, you will still hear Macedonian spoken in Florina and environs, though mostly by older people.

Orientation

Florina curves below a forested peak on its western edge, and is divided by a river. The central street, Pavlou Mela, leads to the main square (Plateia Georgiou Modi). Pavlou Mela's western, pedestrianised half is lined with cafés.

From the bus station, head downhill on either of the two roads hemming in the city park and cross Kastrisianaki to reach Pavlou Mela, or veer southwest onto Stefanou Dragoumi and after 300m find Plateia Georgiou Modi, marking the beginning of the pedestrianised half of Pavlou Mela. The river is just south.

From the train station, Pavlou Mela is very close, running east from the southwestern edge of the park beside the station.

Information

The National Bank of Greece, on Megalou Alexandrou, and the Commercial Bank behind it have ATMs; other major banks/ATMs are available, too.

InFlorina (☎ 23850 44144; www.inflorina.gr; Plateia Georgiou Modi 13) A private agency with local tourism information.

Netville (☎ 23850 29494; Pavlou Mela; internet access per hr €3; ☎ 10am-midnight) Internet café opposite, but slightly east of Hotel Hellinis.

Police (☎ 23850 22222; Sangariou 24) Five hundred metres west of Plateia Georgiou Modi.

Post office (Kalergi 22) Left of Stefanou Dragoumi when approaching the bus station.

Sights

Florina's little **archaeological museum** (☎ 23850 28206; Sidirodromikou Stathmou 3; admission €2; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Tue-Sun), near the train station, contains ancient finds, including objects from the **Hel-lenistic City** site on Agios Panteleimonos hill near Florina.

Straddling both riverbanks, **Old Florina** contains many attractive Turkish houses and neo-classical mansions; one has been restored by the Society for the Friends of Art of Florina, and reincarnated as the **Museum of Modern Art** (☎ 23850 29444; Leoforos Eleftherias 103; admission free; ☎ 6-8pm Tue-Sat, 10am-1pm Sun). The museum's permanent collection of contemporary Greek art is complemented by frequent exhibitions. Walk down 25 Martiou, cross the bridge and turn right; the museum's a further 200m.

The **Folk Museum** (☎ 23850; Karavitou 2; admission free; ☎ 6-8pm Mon, Wed & Sat) Near the courthouse, the museum keeps inconvenient hours, but has unique photographs and folk costumes.

Sleeping

ourpick Hotel Hellinis (☎ 23850 22671; hellinis@line.gr; Pavlou Mela 31; s/d €30/40) Clearly Florina's best budget option, the Hellinis has clean,

modern rooms and a friendly staff that provides helpful travel information for Florina and western Macedonia in general. None of Florina's budget hotels have air-conditioning, but unlike the others, the Hellinis at least provides fans. The eclectic coffee bar has a small balcony and is decorated with flower-painted walls, a working aquarium, paintings of schoolers and the odd guitar. It's two minutes west of the train station and a three-minute walk straight down the hill from the bus station.

Hotel Antigone (☎ 23850 23180; Arrianou 1; s/d incl breakfast €40/50) The faded Antigone is a little beyond the bus station, but well beyond its sell-by date, as indicated by the tattered rooms and old fixtures. Save a few euros by opting out of the lacklustre breakfast.

Hotel Lingos (☎ 23850 28322; www.hotel-lingos.gr; Tagmatarhou Naoum 1; s/d €75/95; ☎) If you're set on four-star accommodation, head to the Best Western-owned Lingos, just north of Plateia Georgiou Modi. It has all expected amenities, dedicated PC phone ports, a roof garden, and the occasional Greek celebrity or political guest.

Eating & Drinking

Florina has mostly simple tavernas cooking grilled meat. Cafés line Pavlou Mela's pedestrian-only western half.

Prespes (☎ 23850 23973; Tyrnovou 12; mains €5-7; ☎) dinner) A no-nonsense central eatery, Prespes is strong on meats, grilled or roasted.

ourpick Psarotaverna O Giorgos (☎ 23850 23622; Grevonon 16; fish €5-8; ☎ 9pm-1am, closed Sun) Florina's only fish restaurant, this friendly hilltop place 500m west of the centre serves tasty golden fillets of Prespa carp and trout, plus fish from the Aegean; the owner, Giorgos Hasos, visits Thessaloniki's fish markets three times weekly for fresh-off-the-boat seafood. It's open only for dinner, after 7pm in winter and after 9pm in summer.

To Varosi (☎ 23850 29191; Eleftherias 84; mains €6-8; ☎ Wed-Mon) Another good spot for grilled meats, this little restaurant is about 200m west of the centre, on the close bank of the river.

Art Café (☎ 23850 26535; Pavlou Mela 106; ☎ 9am-2am) Pavlou Mela has a string of colourful cafés with differing stylistic charms. Art Café, on the western end, with many juices, good ice cream, coffee drinks and flowery retro couches, is one of the more colourful.

Getting There & Away

BUS

Domestic
From the **bus station** (☎ 23850 22430) buses go to Athens (€43.40, nine hours, two daily), Thessaloniki (€13.40, 3½ hours, six daily).

For the Prespa Lakes, buses leave on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at 3pm to Agios Germanos (€4.40, 1½ hours); however, the bus continues to Psarades (€5.80) only on Wednesday. Buses from Florina return immediately, so you will have to stay over in Prespes.

To reach Kastoria from Florina, take a bus to Amynteo (€3.20, 30 minutes, eight daily) and change there. However, Amynteo has only three daily buses for the final one-hour leg to Kastoria, and they're not timed for seamless connections.

International

When school's in session, two buses daily go from Florina to the Macedonian border at Niki (€2, 30 minutes); in summer, it's just once a week. For Albania, a weekly bus stops at the Greek border post at Krystallopigi (€4.80, 1½ hours).

TAXI

A taxi to Bitola (40km) in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia costs about €40 one way or €50 return; the latter includes two hours for sightseeing. Ask local taxi drivers, or arrange through your hotel.

TRAIN

Florina's **train station** (☎ 23850 22404) is where the Thessaloniki train line terminates; five daily trains ply this route. Major stops before Thessaloniki (€5.30, three hours) include Edessa (€2.40, 70 minutes) and Veria (€3.50, two hours).

PRESPA LAKES ΛΙΜΝΕΣ ΠΡΕΣΠΩΝ

The magical, mountainous northwest corner of Greek Macedonia holds the twin treasures of lakes **Megali Prespa** and **Mikri Prespa** (collectively known as Prespes), separated by a narrow strip of land and partially divided between three countries. Since foreign tourists seldom visit, Prespes has retained its tranquil natural beauty, and boasts lovely traditional stone-house villages and significant Byzantine antiquities. The drive from Florina is an astonishing one, passing by thick forests with



sweeping mountain views and the occasional bear-crossing sign.

Mikri Prespa (43 sq km) is mostly Greece's, though Albania controls the lake's tiny southwestern tip. Although small, Mikri Prespa is serene, lined with rustling reed beds in which nest numerous species of birds, including cormorants, Dalmatian pelicans, egrets, herons and ibis, making for great bird-watching.

A tectonic lake at least one million years old, Megali Prespa (850m) is one of Europe's oldest lakes, feeding the equally old (but much larger) Lake Ohrid to the northwest through underground springs. Greece controls 38 sq km of southeastern Megali Prespa, while the majority (1000 sq km) further north is part of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia. Albania controls a small southwestern piece.

On the Greek side, much of the Megali Prespa shore is precipitous rock, rising dramatically from the chilly blue water. A few kilometres north across the Macedonian border, however, a sandy beach stretches 2km before the idyllic village of Dolno Dupeni; there's been talk of reopening this long-dormant border crossing, so check locally.

The whole 'microregion', as it's called by eager Eurocrats bent on multinational integration schemes, has been thankfully kept wild. In Greece, Prespes has been a national park for over 30 years; around the northern section of Megali Prespa, national parks of the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia cover each of its mountainous banks (Galicia

on the western, and Pelister on the eastern). Thus the whole area is a remarkably still haven for peace-seeking wildlife and human life alike.

As in Byzantine times, the whole Prespes region was a front-line battleground during the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, both World Wars and the Greek Civil War, causing widespread suffering, which resulted in emigration and forced exile, affecting thousands of locals.

Agios Germanos Άγιος Γερμανός pop 231

Polished Agios Germanos, filled with wonderful stone houses and notable Byzantine sites, is Prespes' main town and, though it's not on the lake, offers the most atmospheric accommodation. There's also good eating to be had, and hill trails to walk it off.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Agios Germanos has a bus stop, taxi and Prespes' only post office. There are no banks; change money at the post office.

Community clinic (☎ 23850 46284)

Information centre (☎/fax 23850 51452;

☎ 9.30am–3pm) On the road approaching the village, the Prespa National Park information centre has interesting displays. Ask about free, guided bird-watching.

Police (☎ 23850 51202)

Steki (☎ 23850 51332; ☎ 6–10pm Tue–Sat) In neighbouring Lemos, this friendly community centre has internet access.

SIGHTS

The village's two churches, **Agios Athanasios** and **Agios Germanos**, are outstanding examples of mid-Byzantine ecclesiastical architecture. The latter, named after the village's patron saint, is a cosy, domed brick structure from the 11th century, which contains some vivid frescoes. An explanatory board in the courtyard provides some background.

SLEEPING & EATING

Agios Germanos Hostel (☎ 23850 51357; www.prespa.com.gr; s/d €35/52; ☐) Signposted just opposite Agios Germanos church, this restored old farmhouse offers 10 wood-and-stone rooms and generous breakfasts.

To Petrino (☎ 23850 51344; s/d €40/50; ☐) The first hotel you'll see when entering town, To Petrino is a very appealing traditional guesthouse with rustic furniture and wood

beams. The hospitable owners can provide local travel information.

Our pick **To Tzaki** (☎ 23850 51470; mains €5–8) Just up past the Church of Agios Germanos, this garden taverna offers great spare ribs, sweet red Florina peppers in oil, *xinotyri* (sour cheese) and a flaky pie stuffed with nettles (not the stinging kind!) called *tsouknidopita*. The white dog and cat get along well enough to beg for scraps as a team.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

From Florina, buses depart at 3pm on Monday, Wednesday and Friday for Agios Germanos (€4.40, 1½ hours), returning to Florina immediately.

Psarades Ψαράδες pop 158

Situated on a gusty promontory at the southern end of Lake Megali Prespa, Psarades is a lovely, slightly disoriented village of old stone houses, with a friendly, mostly elderly Macedonian population. It's also the last Greek village before the aqueous international border, demarcated by a buoy.

Colourful caiques line Psarades' lakefront, where unique, endemic miniature cows spar in the grass. The village's upper streets (on the right-hand side of the main square) are totally authentic, filled with stone houses, jutting wood beams and drying blankets. You'll hear the Macedonian language spoken widely here. In Psarades, as elsewhere in Greek Prespa, carp is served in fillets.

ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

The road into Psarades ends at a lakefront carpark. Past this carpark, a small square hosts a taverna and a few shops, restaurants and domatia. The village's houses are in the upper streets to the right. There is a cardphone and all Greek mobile phone networks work here.

SIGHTS

A **boat trip** on Megali Prespa to the south side of the lake's three *askitiria* (hermitages), only approachable by water, is highly recommended. The first, 13th-century **Metamorfosi**, has scant remnants of its original rich painting, and two sections from the woodcarved votive screen (*temblon*), the rest being in the Florina museum. The second hermitage, **Mikri Analipsi**, dates from the 15th century, as

does the rock **Church of Panagia Eleousa**, tucked above a ravine. Climb the long staircase to see wonderful frescoes and views of the lake and Albania on the opposite shore. Your captain will also point out more religious rock paintings opposite Psarades, **Panagia Vlahernitisa** (1455–56) and **Panagia Dexiokratousa** (1373).

Organise the trip with a village fisherman, if one hasn't already approached you. You can negotiate, but expect to pay about €10 for a short tour to the rock paintings and one of the *askitiria*, or €12 for the full tour, with at least four people per boat. If you're solo, hope for €20.

In Psarades itself stands the **Church of Kimisis Theotokou** (1893), adorned with the double-headed eagle of Byzantium. An inscription refers to the village by its previous, Macedonian-language name, Nivitsi.

SLEEPING & EATING

Book ahead in summer.

Rooms Arhondiko (☎ 23850 46260; s/d €30/40; ☐) Right on the lakefront, friendly owner Eleftheria offers clean, breezy rooms with balconies overlooking the water.

To Hagiatii (s/d €30/40) This restored little stone house with comfortable, traditional-style rooms is visible by its sign on the right when entering the village.

Five tavernas line Psarades' elevated waterfront, all excellent. Along with lake fish, these tavernas serve the local *fasoladha* speciality. **Akrolimnia** (☎ 23850 46260; mains €5–7), run by the owners of Rooms Arhondiko, does tasty fried trout or carp and draught wine.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Rent a car in Florina or Kastoria; otherwise, three weekly buses go from Florina to Agios Germanos. Only the Wednesday bus continues to Psarades (€5.80); on the other days, take a **taxi** (☎ 23850 51247, 6942704496) from either Lemos or Agios Germanos. Approximate fares from Psarades are €15 to Lemos (to pick up the bus to Florina) and €40 direct to Florina or Kastoria.

Agios Ahillios Άγιος Αχιλλεῖος

Mikri Prespa's island of Agios Ahillios may be small, but it's got a big history. In the 10th century, it became the capital of Bulgar Tsar Samuel, then ruling over much of the southern Balkans, much to the irritation of

the Byzantines. The grand, concave outer wall of his **Basilica of Agios Ahillios** stands on the island's eastern shore, with some half-topped walls and columns, and a grand stone floor in front. The view of the basilica with the lake and mountains behind it is breathtaking, especially from the facing hill that runs across the island's spine. This hill is also good for bird-watching, though bird-watchers should also explore the island's more hidden corners further on.

The island's name, Agios Ahillios, derives from that of the church, which itself derives from Samuel's invasion of Thessaly; while conquering Larissa in 983, he rather rudely 'borrowed' the sacred relics of 4th-century Saint Ahillios, an avid opponent of heretics who once miraculously coaxed oil to ooze from a rock to make his theological point. To celebrate his conquest, Samuel dedicated the new church to the abducted saint.

To get to Agios Ahillios from Agios Germanos, take the road over the connecting strip between the two lakes and then turn immediately left; from Psarades, just keeping going straight south instead of turning onto the interlake strip. After parking, you walk across a 1km-long floating pontoon bridge to the island.

Off the bridge, the signposted path going slightly left hugs the east coast and leads to the Basilica of Agios Ahillios and other church ruins beyond.

Coming off the bridge, turn towards the right for the island's only shop and taverna, which rents rooms. Despite having been a medieval capital, Agios Ahillios is now sparsely inhabited, and it's full of ruined old stone houses. A **summer festival** is held every August, here and in other Prespes locations. During the headlining concert, inevitably featuring a big-name Greek singer, the amphitheatre basilica is magically transformed into a stage, with audiences of up to 5000 enjoying from the hill above it.

KASTORIA ΚΑΣΤΟΠΙΑ

pop 16,218

Cradled by the mountains of Grammos and Vitsi, quiet Kastoria (kah-sto-rih-ah) has an idyllic setting on the forested shores of placid **Lake Orestiada**. The town boasts over 50 Byzantine and post-Byzantine churches, and

several distinguished 17th- and 18th-century *arhontika* (mansions), once homes of the *arhons* – the town's leading citizens, mostly rich fur merchants.

Indeed, Kastoria's celebrated tradition of fur production goes back centuries. It was sustainable until displaced Jewish furriers, attracted by the lake's many *kastori* (beavers), arrived; their lucrative business made the Kastoria beaver extinct by the 19th century. Nevertheless, the reputation remains, and Kastoria's furriers (now working with fur imported from North America and Scandinavia) are busy beavers indeed. Huge fur warehouses line the entry road, while most shops sell furs. The annual **International Fur Exhibition** draws big crowds.

Orientation

The bus station is one block inland from the lake's southern side, on Athanasiou Diakou, where a park, the main taxi rank and a pay car park stand. Most services are at Kastoria's western end. The evocative old town with its *arhontika* and churches is on the eastern hill.

Information

Credit Bank (Grammou) Has ATMs.

Municipal tourist office (☎ /fax 24670 26777; www.kastoria.gr; ☎ 8am-3pm Mon-Fri) Brochures, maps and information. Located in the lakeside park.

National Bank of Greece (11 Noemvriou) Has ATMs.

Police (☎ 24670 83214; Grammou) Near the bus station.

Post office (Leoforos Megalou Alexandrou)

www.riverparty.gr Official website of the Nestorio River Festival of Greek music (see boxed text, below)

Sights & Activities

Many of Kastoria's **Byzantine churches** were originally chapels attached to *arhontika*. Most are locked; find a caretaker to enter.

External frescoes are visible, however, at some churches, such as **Taxiarhia of the Metropolis** (Plateia Pavlou Mela), south of Plateia Omonias, with its 13th-century fresco of the Madonna and Child above the entrance. It also contains the sacrosanct **tomb of Pavlos Melas**, the main Greek military leader associated with the 1904–08 'Macedonian Struggle' (*Makedonomahos*). The Museum of the Macedonian Struggle in Thessaloniki presents his exploits (see boxed text, p278).

The **Byzantine Museum** (☎ 24670 26781; Plateia Dexamenis; admission free; ☎ 8.30am-3pm Tue-Sun) houses outstanding icons from Kastoria's churches.

Most surviving *arhontika* are in **Doltso**, southern Kastoria. The most important are the **Emmanouil, Basara, Natz, Skoutari, Papia** and **Papaterpou** mansions; they're named after the

families that inhabited them. They're generally closed, but you can admire their often startling architecture from outside.

One nice *arhontika* is now the must-see **Kastorian Museum of Folklore** (☎ 24670 28603; Kapetan Lazou; adult €1; ☎ 8.30am-3pm, closed Mon). This 530-year-old house, formerly belonging to the wealthy Nerantzis Aivazis family, is sumptuously furnished, and displays ornaments, kitchen utensils and tools.

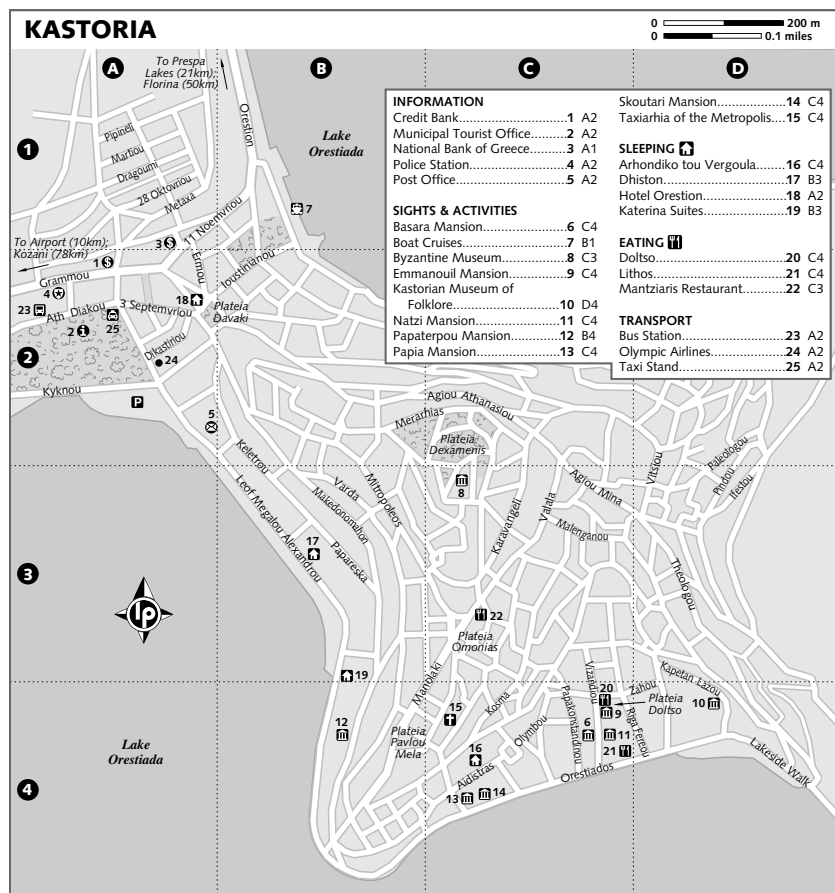
Noon and evening **boat cruises** (€3.50, 1½ hours) on Lake Orestiada start at the north-side Psaradika Quay.

Sleeping

Kastoria mostly accommodates visiting fur-traders and Greek weekenders. Prices are thus high, but negotiable.

Hotel Orestion (☎ 24670 22257; www.alhotel.gr; Plateia Davaki 1; s/d €45/65; ☎) This well-renovated business hotel has sleek modern rooms and the expected amenities. There are deep couches and a tucked-away bar in the lounge.

Dhiston (☎ 24670 22250; fax 24670 28755; Leoforos Megalou Alexandrou 91; d/tr €50/60) Upstairs from one of Kastoria's oldest cafés, these spacious



RIVER MADNESS

You won't miss the sea if you're inland in Northern Greece during summer – there's just too much river madness.

Billed as the biggest festival of Greek music anywhere, the **Nestorio River Festival** has been rockin' the otherwise quiet Nestorio River, set in mountain woodlands near Kastoria, for 30 years. It's grown rapidly in recent years, now boasting a six-day line-up of prolific singers and ambient DJs, who serenade around 10,000 young people, many camping on the river. Along with the music, fun distractions include paintball, archery, sports and a modern art tent. In 2007, tickets cost €35 for the full six days, and €10 to €15 for one day, depending on the acts. The river party is usually held in late July, extending into August.

The festival website (www.riverparty.gr) lists the scheduled performances, camping and hotel accommodation options, and ticket vendors; in Thessaloniki, try **Ticket House** (☎ 2310 253 630; cnr Ethnikis Amynis & Tsimiski). During the festival, KTEL Kastoria runs special buses to Nestorio. There's organised, full-service camping, plus guesthouses; call the festival organisers, who will happily book you a room.

A second summer festival, over on the northeastern Thracian plain near Kastanies, takes place for four days each July on the River Ardas (the dates of the two festivals don't conflict). The **Ardas River Festival** (☎ 25510 81140; www.ardas.gr; Municipality of Vryssa) also attracts top Greek singers, Turkish and Bulgarian groups, and DJs both Greek and foreign. Although smaller, this 14-year-old festival also draws several thousand young people from Northern Greece and neighbouring Balkan countries. Along with music, there's beach volleyball, minisoccer, motocross, theatrical performances and water-park trips.

The Ardas River Festival website gives details in Greek and English about tickets, rules, performances and accommodation options in Kastanies and nearby Orestiada. If you camp, get a tent with good netting; the mosquitos are said to be fierce.

suites have great lake views. The manager, who speaks French and English, can provide maps and local information.

Katerina Suites (☎ 24670 24645; Leoforos Megalou Alexandrou 127; s/d €50/60) A good choice for groups, these four suites with lake views can accommodate up to five people each. Suites are clean, modern and spacious; book ahead.

Arhondiko tou Vergoula (☎ 24670 23415; sfnas@otenet.gr; Aidistras 14; d/tr incl breakfast €50/70) This restored 150-year-old mansion in a quiet quarter has lovely lake views, and is decorated with pieces from the owners' Asian adventures, giving it an exotic feel. Rooms are breezy and well maintained. It also has a cosy breakfast/dinner salon.

Eating

Mantziaris Restaurant (☎ 24670 29492; Valala 8; mains €4.50-7) Unpretentious Mantziaris serves prepared dishes (*mayirefta*) and made-to-order grills.

Doltso (☎ 24670 24670; Plateia Doltso; mains €6-9; P) Housed in a rather imposing restored *arhontika*, Doltso has a primarily standard menu, though the house speciality, meatballs in *makalo* sauce (onion, garlic, flour and tomato-based), is unusual and excellent.

Lithos (☎ 24670 26760; Orestiadou 51; mains €6-10; P) The traditional wood-and-stone décor here matches the hearty taverna fare; the few innovations include 'Lithos aubergines' (herb-laced fried mushrooms).

Getting There & Away

AIR

Kastoria's **Aristotelis airport** (☎ 24670 42515), 10km south, offers flights to Athens (€77, four weekly). **Olympic Airlines** (☎ 24670 22275; www.olympicairlines.com; Leoforos Megalou Alexandrou 15) has a central office.

BUS

From Kastoria's **bus station** (☎ 24670 83455) buses serve Thessaloniki (€15.10, four hours, six daily), Ioannina (€16.30, three hours, two daily), Athens (€41.60, nine hours, two daily), and Veria (€10.30, two hours, two daily). For Florina (€3.20, 30 minutes, eight daily), take a bus to Amynteo and wait for a connecting bus.

TAXI

For taxis, dial ☎ 24670 82100.

THRACE ΘΡΑΚΗ

pop 363,300 / area 6129 sq km

Framed by leafy mountains in the north and west, a winding river in the east, and a long Aegean Sea coast in the south, Thrace (*thra-aaa-kih*) is one of Greece's most striking but least-visited areas, a diverse hinterland of marshes and forests concealing rare birds, an ancient dominion coloured by sunflowers, tobacco and wheat on vast plains where bulls stamp in the dust.

Thrace is indeed an earthy place, and agriculture has always dominated. The relative lack of tourism has preserved its character, one made even more unique by its Turkish minority, with its own traditions of language, culture and cooking dating back to Ottoman times. The landscape is dotted with mosque minarets and little villages of Turkish-style, red-roofed houses, while the traditional sweet shops are among Greece's best.

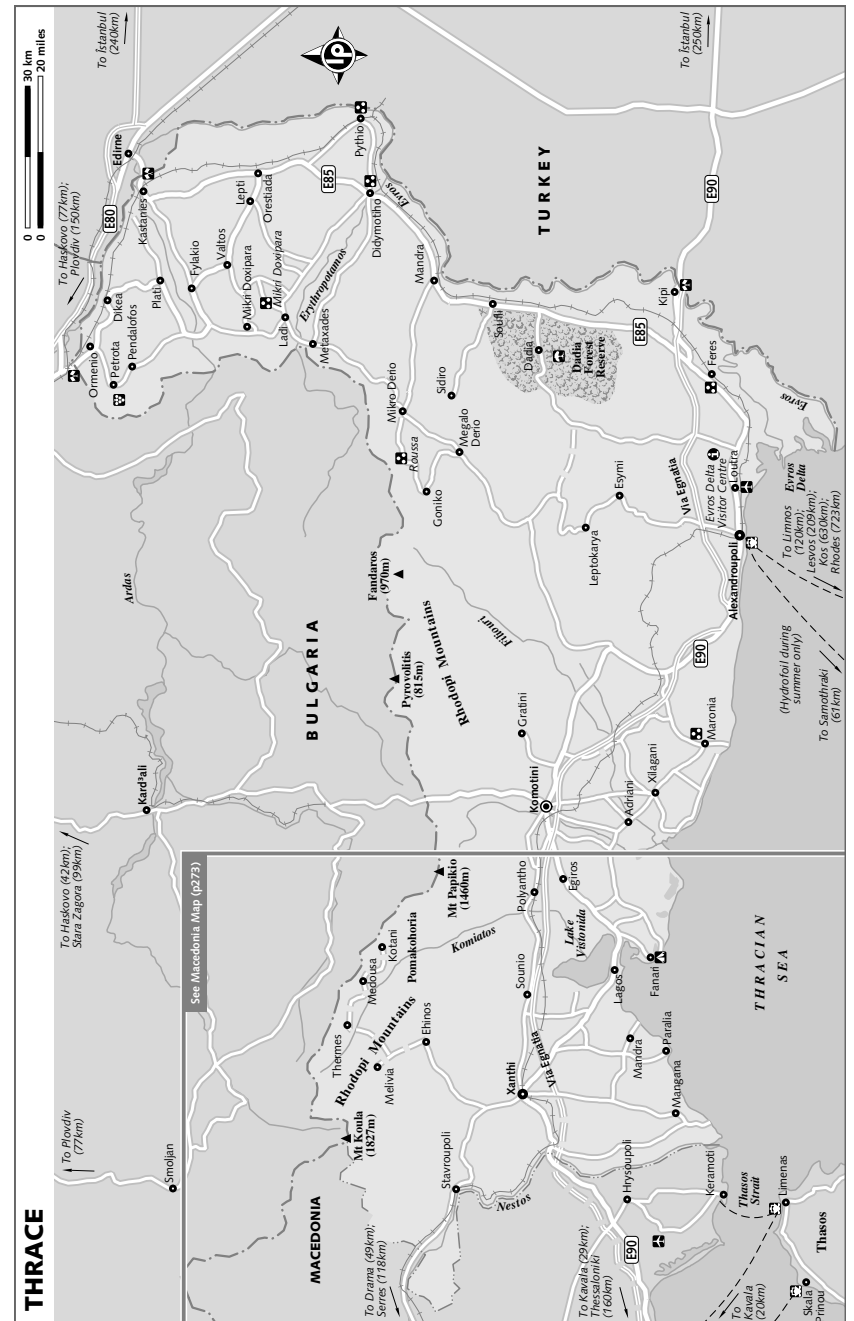
Thrace may be a hinterland, but as Greece's only land border with Turkey, it's a very strategic one. Around 30,000 Greek soldiers are regularly stationed there. However, the only Greek warriors you will see are the ones socialising in cafés along with university students called up to serve at various far-flung faculties. Since there's still little tourism, local communities appreciate the economic boost these twin armies provide.

History

Thrace's ancient history is shrouded in myth. The mystery religion of its warlike tribes, known as the cult of the Great Gods, began influencing Greek pagan religion after 1000 BC. At the Thracians' supreme temple on Samothraki, famous rulers of ancient Macedonia, Rome and Egypt were initiated into the cult. The secret rituals associated with Orpheus, the mythical, tragic Thracian father of music, also captivated society.

During the 7th century BC, powerful Greek city-states conquered the Thracian coast, and the Persians soon after. Athens took over after defeating Persia at the Battle of Plataea, but was herself ousted by Philip II of Macedonia in 346 BC.

With the 4th-century-AD division of the Roman Empire into western and eastern halves, Thrace, on the Via Egnatia trade route, became strategically significant.



Eastern Thrace was called the 'breadbasket of Constantinople', an allusion to its significant wheat production. Thrace was also a vital defence by the Byzantine capital. However, its flatness also made Thrace easy pickings for marauding Goths, Huns, Vandals, Bulgars, Pechenegs, Cumans and even poorly behaved Latin Crusaders. Indeed, only the Ottoman Turks, who invaded in the mid-14th century, were able to enforce extended periods of peace and quiet.

Thrace's turbulent past was reawakened in the late 19th century. From the Russo-Turkish War of 1877, the Balkan Wars of 1912–13 and the First World War up to the failed Greek invasion of Asia Minor in 1922, the territory changed hands frequently. The ancient Greek concept of hubris explains, as well as anything else, why the region's modern borders exist as they do; if not for various bombastic decisions, any of the three countries sharing Thrace could own more of it than they now do.

What really sets Thrace apart is its Turkish minority. Along with the Greeks of Constantinople and Imvros (Gökçeada) and Tenedos (Bozcaada) islands, these Turks were exempt during the 1923 population exchanges mandated by the Lausanne Treaty. However, while the Greek population in Turkey has dwindled, the Turkish one in Greek Thrace is flourishing.

XANTHI ΞΑΝΘΗ

pop 45,118

Don't be alarmed by the odd-coloured new apartments springing up like mushrooms on the outskirts of Xanthi, the first Thracian city you reach when coming from Macedonia; it's actually a lovely town, boasting an old quarter of traditional Ottoman houses set on steep, winding streets, and home to an intriguing minority Muslim population made up of Turks and Pomaks. Once wealthy for its tobacco industry, Xanthi is marked by the former mansions of tobacco barons, and that old Thracian regality survives in the stylish restaurants and cafés found in what is now a university town sustained by tobacco and other agricultural exploits.

Although definitely still a backwater for most, Xanthi's stature has been increased by the construction of the Egnatia Odos, which runs past it. In addition to being the gateway to eastern Thrace, Xanthi is close to the Macedonian port towns of Keramoti and Kavala,

which have ferries to Thasos, Samothraki and other islands. Solitude-seekers will be glad to know that just north of Xanthi are the rippling Rhodopi Mountains, a little-visited but beautiful area filled with deep forests and unique mountain villages – great for off-the-beaten-track adventures.

Orientation & Information

The bus and train stations are on Xanthi's south side, the former 800m southeast of the main square (Plateia Dimokratias), and the latter 2km south of this square. Dimokritou (later, Karaoli) leads to Plateia Dimokratias from the bus station, as does 28 Oktovriou, from the train station. North of Plateia Dimokratias is the Old Town, set on a hill crowned by a shaded grotto of pines, which is good for picnicking.

Banks with ATMs, and most restaurants and shops, are around Plateia Dimokratias and nearby Plateia Antiko.

Newsstand (Plateia Dimokratias) Sells foreign newspapers and magazines.

Police (☎ 25410 23333; cnr Nestou & Lykourgou Thraikis) Near the bus station.

Post office (A Georgiou 16)

The Web (Vasileos Konstantinou 63; internet access per hr €2.40; ☎ 24hr) Internet café off Plateia Antiko.

Sights & Activities

Overlooking modern Xanthi from a serene hillside setting, **Old Xanthi** is a collection of pastel-coloured, timber-framed houses clinging to narrow, winding lanes. There are also grand old neoclassical mansions, once belonging to wealthy tobacco merchants. This element of faded grandeur, combined with the bulbous, white-plastered bubbles on the sides of humble homes, gives the place a slightly forlorn feel. Nevertheless, the animated shouting of little boys kicking footballs livens up Old Xanthi, also home to the town's old Muslim minority, as attested to by the modern mosque and the many satellite dishes tuned to Turkish TV stations.

The stately **Folk Museum** (Odhos Antika 5-7; admission free; ☎ 8.30am–2.30pm Wed–Fri & 10.30am–3pm Sat & Sun) stands in adjacent mansions, formerly the residences of the tobacco-millionaire Kougioumtzoglou brothers. The downstairs has been beautifully restored to create an atmosphere of 1930s life, while the original ceiling and wall paintings upstairs are lavish and imaginative.

On Saturday, Xanthi's lively **open market**, east of Plateia Dimokratias, maintains a venerable Balkan custom, selling clothes, jewellery, and fruits and vegetables to gesticulating grandmas and other townfolk.

All Greece knows about Xanthi's **winter carnival**, a pre-Lenten celebration that features colourful floats prepared by various local clubs, accompanied by music and masked merrymaking. For information, check the official website (www.carnival-of-xanthi.gr).

Another annual celebration, the **Xanthi Old Town Festival**, takes place in late August to early September and features theatre, music and art exhibits.

Sleeping

Ourpick Hotel Paris (☎ 25410 20531; www.parishotel.gr; Dimokritou 12; s/d €30/40; ☎) This very solid choice for budget travellers is a minute's walk from the bus. Named for the owner, not the city, the Paris is a small renovated hotel where all rooms have private bathroom, TV and telephone, plus good firm beds and the occasional large balcony. The only drawbacks are the street noise and the location, which is a bit far from downtown, though it's ideal for catching early-morning buses. The cheerful reception staff provide travel information and maps of Xanthi town and environs.

Hotel Xanthippion (☎ 25410 77061; fax 25410 77076; 28 Oktovriou 212; s/d €35/45; ☎) It's not the most central place, being 500m south of Plateia Dimokratias, but this old stand-by has well-kept, clean rooms with minibar and TV, plus friendly and helpful owners.

Hotel Dimokritos (☎ 25410 25111; fax 25410 25537; 28 Oktovriou 41; s/d €40/50; ☎) Another reasonable budget option, and just 100m south of Plateia Dimokratias, the Dimokritos has clean, comfortable rooms, though they're a bit small. Rooms include the usual amenities plus a phone port internet hook-up.

Z Palace (☎ 25410 64414; www.z-palace.gr; Terma Georgiou Kondyli; s/d/ste €70/101/268; ☎) Unexpectedly posh five-star hotels spring up in the strangest of places. With an outdoor swimming pool, a fitness room, a children's hall, a French gourmet restaurant and even a hair salon, this business hotel by the entrance to town hearkens back to the opulent days of the tobacco barons – though not in its décor, which though elegant is hardly traditional.

Eating & Drinking

Ourpick Taverna To Perasma (☎ 25410 78014; Ikoniou 16; mezdedhes €2–4, mains €5–8) When you see a restaurant well away from the Old Town that's filled with merry locals, you know you're on to something good. Located off on a side street not far from the bus station, To Perasma serves up huge portions of tasty mezdedhes and Turkish-inspired Thracian delights. Try the roka salad with tomato and cucumber, oven-cooked aubergines topped with cheese (*melitzanes 'special'*), liver with wine (*sykoti krasato*) and spicy beef kebabs with yogurt set on fried pita strips with salsa (*yiaourtlou kebab*); it will set you back about €20, and feed four.

Restaurant Palia Poli (☎ 25410 68685; Hasirtzoglou 7; mains €5–9) Most of the Old Town's restaurants are more or less the same; however, the wood-and-brick Palia Poli, tucked discreetly into a side lane, is more inventive, offering unusual dishes for gastronomes like quail, roast pork with plum sauce and orange duck.

Nedim (☎ 25410 25959; Basileos Konstantinou 35) The Xanthi branch of this Komotini-based classic Turkish sweet shop has a temptingly prominent setting in the centre – do give in to temptation.

Café Antico (☎ 25410 62193; Vasileos Konstantinou 86; ☎ 9am–2am) This voluminous two-level café in the centre has a relaxed, traditional flavour, with long wooden rafters, soft couches and antique implements on the walls. A glass of wine is lovely here; in winter, try one of the Antico's many hot chocolates.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Xanthi shares Alexander the Great Airport with Kavala in Macedonia. It's some 40km southwest of Xanthi, near Hrysoupoli. **Olympic Airlines** (☎ 25410 22944; www.olympicairlines.com; Michael Vogdou 4) has an office near Plateia Dimokratias.

BUS

From the **bus station** (☎ 25410 22685; Dimokritou 6) buses go to Komotini (€4.00, 45 minutes, 14 daily), Thessaloniki (€16, four hours, eight daily) and Athens (€50, 10 hours, two daily). Thessaloniki buses go via Kavala (€4.60, one hour). There are no direct buses to Alexandroupoli (€7.40, one hour, 45 minutes); change at Komotini. Buses also serve

HOT TUBBIN' WITH EUROPE'S LAST OTTOMANS

If you're up for a Thracian adventure involving hot mineral baths, magnificent mountains, indefinable locals and the odd roast goat, then a day trip to Xanthi's Pomakohoria is the place for you. In Greek, the name means 'Pomak villages', after its inhabitants, the singular Muslim Pomak minority, whose placid villages are dotted across Greece's Rhodopi Mountains between Xanthi and the Bulgarian border.

A curious relic of the borderless Ottoman centuries, the Pomaks spill across the frontier created by the Rhodopi Mountains between Greece and Bulgaria. In Greece, they are fluent in all three languages – Bulgarian, Turkish and Greek – the bewilderment being compounded by the fact that different people will give you different answers regarding their true ethnic identity, sometimes in the same sentence. The one cohesive element, therefore, is religion; however, despite being Muslims, some Pomaks drink alcohol. Indeed, there's something beguilingly multicultural and Ottoman in the Pomaks' fluid, interchangeable constellation of identities.

With neighbouring Bulgaria now an EU member, the Pomakohoria has become less of a hinterland, though it's still relatively unvisited by tourists. The area's richly forested mountains thus remain tranquil, the villages authentic. Nevertheless, the Pomakohoria is also easily accessible from Xanthi, and can be visited as a day trip by car and even by bus.

One such trip takes you to the hot baths in **Thermes**, a small village 43km (90 minutes) north of Xanthi. The bus for Thermes (€3.70 one way) leaves at 6.30am daily, and returns to Xanthi at 3.30pm. A later bus leaves Xanthi for Thermes at 2.10pm, but then you must stay overnight in Thermes. It's a pleasant, interesting drive through the mountains from Xanthi to its neighbouring villages.

Surrounded by thickly forested mountains, Thermes is especially tranquil in early morning, when the air is cool, birds are singing and the dew sparkles on the grass. Stop in for a Greek coffee and chat with the locals at the village's simple restaurant/shop, Kafe Psistaria O Kalemzi, located on the main road beside the small **Chapel of Agioi Ioakeim & Anna**; further down is the village **mosque**.

Taking a dip in the **hot baths** is perfect on a cool morning. There are two: the main bath, in a building opposite the church, costs money to enter; the other is outdoors and free – from the restaurant, it's about 100m to the right-hand side and below the main road. The latter is fed by a bubbling high shower, and enclosed almost completely by aluminium sidings that thunder in the breeze. The baths are relaxing and therapeutic (people are treated for various medical ailments in the indoor one), so enjoy, but don't forget that since the Pomakohoria is a conservative area the baths are no place for debauchery, shouting or gleeful nudity.

Hill walking is wonderful here, though there's no tourist information or marked trails. However, a 90-minute walk along the road up to the tiny, remote hamlet of **Kidaris**, just across from Bulgaria, offers stunning mountain views and total serenity; indeed, since the village is now essentially uninhabited, you're unlikely to see anyone along the way.

To start off, cross the meadow behind the restaurant and scramble up through a short patch of foliage until you hit the road. Then turn right and follow the paved road upwards, after 90 minutes terminating at Kidaris. Descend the narrow path between the old and lovely houses to reach the centre, such as there is, though don't expect services of any kind. Continue down, however, and the brand-new Turkish-built mosque, **Sariyerköy Camii**, appears on a bluff overlooking Bulgarian Rhodopi.

Back in Thermes, O Kalemzi's daily lunch might include Greek salad, country bread and spit-roasted lamb or goat slow-cooked on embers (€6.50). It's as bucolic as it gets, and the restaurant has a surprisingly good assortment of Greek liqueurs.

If you want to sleep in Thermes, restaurant owner Kemal Kalemzi provides simple **rooms for rent** (Enikiazomena Domatia Kalemzi Kemal; ☎ 25540 22474, 6977597500; d €20) in an adjacent building, which is mostly utilised by people visiting for spa treatments in the main baths. His son, Hassan, speaks English. A visit to the mountain redoubt of Europe's last Ottomans is bound to be memorable.

Pomakohoria villages like Thermes (€3.70, 1½ hours).

TRAIN

Eastward-bound trains from Xanthi's **train station** (☎ 25410 22581; Terma Kondyli) go to Komotini (€1.50, one hour, seven daily) and Alexandroupoli (€2.80, 1½ hours, seven daily). Other trains head west to Thessaloniki (€7, four hours, seven daily), with four of them continuing on to Athens (€22.10, 10 hours). A taxi to/from the train station costs €3 to €4.

Getting Around

There are no Olympic Airlines buses to Hryssoupoli; take a taxi (€32). Alternatively, take a Kavala-bound bus to Hryssoupoli, then a taxi 12km to the airport.

KOMOTINI KOMOTHNH

pop 46,586

Komotini(ko-mo-tih-nee), 52km east of Xanthi, is capital of Rhodopi prefecture and central Thrace's biggest town. While it's often disparaged as dull, Komotini actually has a surprisingly rich assortment of intriguing museums and historic sites; unsurprisingly, considering the large and active student body, it also has a vibrant nightlife. Although few tourists visit Komotini, it offers enough to keep you busy for at least a couple of days.

Among other things, the young Greek students who fill the cafés of the main square (Plateia Irinis) dilute the visibility of the town's Muslim presence; roughly half of Komotini's population is Greek and half is Turkish – the largest percentage of Turks in any major Greek town. While the two cohabit the town amicably enough, they do generally live separate lives.

The main attractions of Komotini, built in the 4th century AD, stem from this mixed heritage, comprising Byzantine churches, Ottoman mosques and neoclassical mansions. So explore Komotini's street markets and characteristic old quarters, indulge in Turkish sweets and Greek bouzouki life – and enjoy an authentic Thracian town in all its dusty splendour.

Orientation & Information

Sprawling Komotini can be confusing at first, but you'll soon figure it out. The furthest arrival point, the train station, is 1km southwest of the centre on Panagi Tsaldari. The bus sta-

tion is much closer, only a five-minute walk north-northeast to the oblong Plateia Irinis, centre of Komotini's little universe. This square is hard to miss, and not only because of the unexpected playground in the form of a pirate ship that stands in the middle of it; most ATMs, hotels, eateries and cafés are close by too. The main attractions are within walking distance of this square.

Explorer Net Store (☎ 25310 32535; Nikolau Zoidi 52; per hr €2; ☎ 24hr) A good central internet café.

Hospital (☎ 25310 24601; Sismanoglou 45) Nine-hundred metres southeast of Plateia Irinis.

Police (☎ 25310 34444)

Sights

Sparsely remains of Komotini's **Byzantine Fortress**, built in the 4th century AD by Emperor Theodosius, lie just off Plateia Irinis. The fortress originally had 16 towers, though only the ruins of one survive. Near it is the **Church of the Assumption of Mary** (Ekklesia Kimisis Theotokou), built in 1800 on the site of an earlier Byzantine shrine. The church contains 16th-century icons and wood-carvings.

Finds from Thracian archaeological sites are presented with aplomb at the classy **archaeological museum** (☎ 25310 22411; Simeonidi 4; admission free; ☎ 8.30am–5pm). The collection, accompanied by informative wall text in English detailing the history of ancient Thrace, contains Roman coins, clay figurines, delicate gold wreaths and Byzantine glazed ceramics, among other items. Visit here to get background on places of historical interest elsewhere in Thrace. The helpful staff will guide you and they provide a detailed map with the major archaeological sites in Thrace and Eastern Macedonia.

Very valuable post-Byzantine icons are displayed at the **Ecclesiastic Museum** (☎ 25310 34177; Xenofontos 8; admission €3; ☎ 10.30am–1.30pm Tue–Sun & 5–8pm Wed–Fri), also called **Imaret**. The museum occupies Komotini's most unique building, an early Ottoman almshouse (*ptohokomeio* in Greek) set in an enclosed courtyard. The structure's brickwork and design are reminiscent of a Byzantine church; indeed, it was built around 1363 by Gazi Ervinoz Bey, the Ottoman conqueror of Byzantine Komotini. The icons are marvellous and well laid out, with occasional surprises like 500-year-old printed gospels, silver ceremonial crosses, gold embroidery and 18th-century Hebrew scrolls.

Just behind Plateia Irinis begins Komotini's **Turkish quarter**, a relaxing place lined

with quaint old houses, barber shops and tea-houses. Its sights include the **Clock Tower** (Orologio), built in 1884, and mosques such as **Yeni Camii** ('New Mosque' in Turkish) and **Eski Camii**. The latter was built in 1608 during Ottoman rule and, though it now has flowers growing out of its roof, still operates.

Sleeping

Komotini's hotels cater to a business clientele, so there are no miracles on the budget accommodation front. However, midrange hotels are classy and close to the action.

Democritos Hotel (☎ 2531 022 579; fax 2531 023 396; Plateia Vizynou 8; s/d €37/45; 🏠) Budget purists will soldier on to the Democritos. It has a fairly central location, though there's considerable street noise and rooms are small and musty.

Orpheus Hotel (☎ 25310 37180; orfhotel@otenet.gr; Parassiou 1; s/d/t €37/47/53; 🏠) With its prominent location at the *plateia's* entrance and big windows, you can't miss the Orpheus. The hotel has nicely restored and soundproofed modern rooms. Management is welcoming and friendly.

Hotel Astoria (☎ 25310 22707; www.astoriakomotini.gr; Plateia Irinis 28; d €50; 🏠) More elegant than the Orpheus, but easier to miss, the Astoria is concealed by the square's side cafés. It offers modern rooms with attractive, understated décor and amenities, plus small balconies overlooking the lively square.

Eating & Drinking

Our pick **Nedim** (☎ 25310 22036; www.nedim.gr; cnr Leoforosoros Orfeos & Syntagmatos Kriton; sweets €1.80-3) This emporium of traditional sweets has been serving perhaps the best baklava this side of Istanbul since 1950. Try the *saray kataifi*, a delicate golden treat of the Ottoman palace, and *samali*, a sweet cake with almonds that's flavoured by aromatic mastic from Chios. There are 35 kinds of traditional sweets, none having quite the visual effect of the monstrous *soutzouk loukoumi* – thick Turkish Delight dusted with confectioner's sugar and in the shape of a giant, curling sausage.

Ta Aderfia (☎ 25310 20201; Orfeos 33; mains €5-7) An unassuming, old-school taverna just west of the square, Ta Aderfia is especially good at lunch, when over 30 kinds of *mayirefta* are on offer; dinners are good too but the selection narrows.

Ydrohoos (☎ 25310 33786; Papaflesa 2; mains €5-8) This taverna on Plateia Irinis' northwest side

serves hearty portions of *mayirefta* and grilled meats.

Komotini's cafés and bars line Plateia Irinis; **Café Bel Air** (Plateia Irinis 55; ☎ 10am-3am) is a student favourite. For Greek nightlife in all its scantily dressed licentiousness, head to the **Ithodromio** (Parassiou 4; ☎ 9pm-4am), a loud *bouzoukia* (nightclub where bouzouki is played) where groups of students enjoy mezedhes, lusty dancing and some seriously overpriced cocktails.

Getting There & Away

BUS
From Komotini's **bus station** (☎ 25310 22912) buses serve Xanthi (€4, 45 minutes, nine daily) and Alexandroupoli (€5.80, 70 minutes, nine daily). Going west, buses reach Kavala (€8.20, 1½ hours), Thessaloniki (€20, 4½ hours, eight daily) and Athens (€55, 11 hours, two daily).

TRAIN

From the **train station** (☎ 25310 22650) six trains daily go east to Alexandroupoli (€1.90, one hour) and seven go west to Thessaloniki (€8.20, 4½ hours), via Xanthi (€1.50, 30 minutes). A train to Istanbul via Pythio leaves every day at 11.30am (€38.50, 16 hours).

Getting Around

Komotini sprawls, but is fine for walking. There are **taxis** (☎ 25310 37777) and **Evros Car Rental** (☎ 25310 32905; evrosacar@hol.gr; Tountzas 1) rents cars (€30) and Jeeps (€60).

ALEXANDROUPOLI

pop 49,176

The appealing port city of Alexandroupoli (ah-lex-an-dhroo-po-lih) is eastern Thrace's largest town and the axis of local travel in four directions. Everyone going to Turkey or Bulgaria passes through Alexandroupoli, and in summer it gets crowded with tourists waiting for ferries to Samothraki and other northeast Aegean islands. However, Alexandroupoli is worth closer examination, having as it does two marvellous museums, a pretty if somewhat kitsch lighthouse, good seafood restaurants and, with its population of students and hale young soldiers, elementary nightlife.

Part of the Greek state since 1920, Alexandroupoli was occupied by the Bulgarians from 1912 to 1914, and again during WWII.

Today, this coveted prize near the Via Egnatia east-west highway is poised to reassert its strategic role, with the completion (expected by end of 2010) of a major oil pipeline starting in Burgas, on Bulgaria's Black Sea coast – something that raises concerns about its proximity to nearby forests and wetlands (see boxed text, p320)

Orientation

Alexandroupoli's grid system of streets, created by Russia in 1878 during the Russo-Turkish Wars, is simple. The main streets run east-west, parallel with the waterfront, the eastern end of which is called Karaoli Dimitriou, the western, Megalou Alexandrou. The town's two main squares are Plateia Eleftherias and Plateia Polytehniou, both one block north of Karaoli Dimitriou.

The train station is on the waterfront south of Plateia Eleftherias, next to the local bus station. They are 100m east of the port, where boats leave for Samothraki and other islands. The main bus station is at Eleftheriou Venizelou 36, five blocks inland.

Information

All major banks have ATMs along Leoforos Dimokratias.

Internet Station Meganet (☎ 25510 33639; cnr Dikastirion & Psaron; per hr €2.40; ☎ 24hr)

Kassapidis Exchange (☎ 25510 80910; Leoforos Dimokratias 209; ☎ 8am-9.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-2pm Sun) Changes 87 kinds of currency, including all the Balkan ones; does Western Union money transfers.

Municipal Tourist Office (☎ 25510 64184; Leoforos Dimokratias 306; ☎ 7.30am-3pm) The helpful staff at the town hall give out maps and accommodation and transport information.

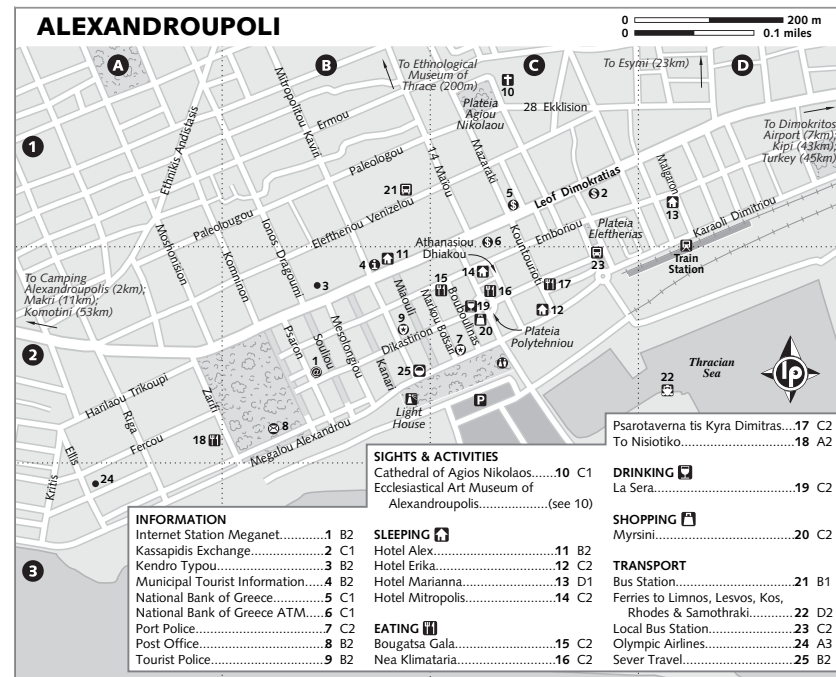
Port police (☎ 25512 26468; cnr Megalou Alexandrou & Markou Botsari)

Post office (cnr Nikiforou Foka & Megalou Alexandrou)

Tourist police (☎ 25510 37424; Karaiskaki 6)

Sights & Activities

The traditional customs of old Thrace come alive at the **Ethnological Museum of Thrace** (☎ 25510 36663; www.emthrace.com; 14 Maiou 63; adult €3; ☎ 10am-2pm Tue-Sun & 6-9pm Tue-Sat). Housed in a mansion built in 1899, the museum is divided into rooms, each devoted to a specific topic, ranging from traditional costumery and



musical instruments to oil presses, a dye-room and sweet-making equipment. The accompanying texts will tell you, among other things, how many silkworms it takes to make 25g of silk and which Greek sweet is made by slamming the ingredients against a wall. If you are travelling further in Thrace, the friendly staff can outline the most interesting sites. There's a small café out back.

Priceless icons, many brought by refugees from Asia Minor and Turkish Thrace, are exhibited at the **Ecclesiastical Art Museum of Alexandroupoli** (☎ 25510 82282; Plateia Agiou Nikolaou; adult €3; 🕒 9am-2pm Tue-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat). The museum, which also boasts early printed Greek books, is in the grounds of the **Cathedral of Agios Nikolaos**, which itself houses a miracle-working 13th-century icon of the Panagia Trifotissa, brought from Aenos (Enez in Turkish) on the other side of the River Evros. The story goes that by praying before the icon, villagers whose eyes had been damaged by the glare of sunlight reflected on the salt marshes around Aenos had their vision restored.

Sleeping

Camping Alexandroupoli (☎ 25510 26055; fax 25510 28735; Leoforos Makris; camp sites per adult/tent €5/4.50) This large camping ground, located 2km west of town, is a clean, well-run site with good facilities. Take local bus 7 from Plateia Eleftherias.

our pick **Hotel Mitropolis** (☎ 25510 26443; Athanasiou Dhiakou; s/d/t €30/40/50; 🍷) Don't be put off by the dated sign out front – the Mitropolis is a clean, handsomely appointed hotel, not only the budget traveller's first choice but a good bet for anyone who wants to be close to the water and the town's best restaurants and cafés.

Hotel Alex (☎ 25510 26302; Leoforos Dimokratias 294; s/d/t €35/40/50; 🍷) Up on the main road, this decent budget option has good though cramped rooms and the necessary amenities. Ask for a back room to minimise noise.

Hotel Marianna (☎ 25510 81456; fax 25510 81455; Malgaron 11; s/d €45/60) This friendly downtown hotel has well-equipped rooms and a colourful breakfast area. Between them, hospitable owners Georgios Hrysohoidis and his Italian wife Patricia speak English, Italian, French, Spanish, German and Greek.

Hotel Erika (☎ 25510 34115; www.hotel-erika.gr; Karaoli Dimitriou 110; s/d €70/85; 🍷 📺 📺) Opposite the port, and 100m from the town's lighthouse

landmark, the Erika has tasteful rooms with all mod cons and waterfront views. A buffet breakfast and free wireless internet are provided. The hotel organises tours to Dadia Forest Reserve (p320) and several islands.

Eating & Drinking

Fish tavernas are best; Ieforos Dimokratias has bars, while cafés lines the waterfront.

Bougatsa Gala (☎ 25510 32386; Emborou; bougatsa €2) A friendly breakfast nook of long standing, this nameless hole-in-the-wall place serves up flaky cream pies (*bougatsa*) as delicious as its décor is humble.

Nea Klimataria (☎ 25510 26288; Plateia Polytehnou; mains €5-8) This heavy-duty, popular place on the square is not setting records, but it does have tasty prepared dishes, good roast chicken and big salads.

our pick **Psarotaverna tis Kyra Dimitras** (☎ 25510 34434; cnr Kountourioti & Dikastirion; fish €5.50-11) Although Kyra (Ms) Dimitra's Armenian grandfather originally came to Alexandroupoli for railroad work in 1875, from 1915 the family business became this little blue-and-white taverna. Choose from the daily catch, set out on ice at the front; *tsipoura* (sea bream) is tasty and only €20 per kilo, while a plateful of crunchy *koutsomoura* makes for a scrumptious lunch. Come in summer, when the amiable Kyra Dimitra might bring you a plate of ripe watermelon for a complimentary dessert.

To Nisiotiko (☎ 25510 20990; Zarifi 1; fish dishes €7-12) Over on the waterfront's western side, To Nisiotiko is an upmarket fish taverna with ambience. Its hybrid architecture combines pebble stucco walls, nautical décor and cane chairs.

La Sera (☎ 25510 38765; Plateia Polytehnou; 🕒 10am-3am) This smooth bar near the water, popular with students and lit by little red candles, has cool music and even Guinness Export Stout.

Shopping

Myrsini (☎ 25510 31205; www.silkyhouse.gr; Plateia Polytehnou) The shop that brings Soufli's famous handmade silk products to you, Myrsini is a family-run business with items running the gamut from silk table runners (€15 to €100) and ornate raw silk scarves (€20) to enormous silk spreads embellished with a Byzantine double-headed eagle and floral motifs (€807). Owner Dimitrios Kyriazis gladly explains Soufli's tradition of silk production and the secrets of how it's done.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Alexandroupoli's Dimokritos Airport is 7km east of town near Loutra.

Olympic Airlines (☎ 25510 26361; www.olympicairlines.com; Ellis 6 & Koletti) is downtown; **Aegean Airlines** (☎ 25510 89150; www.aegeanair.com) is at the airport. Both offer four daily flights to/from Athens (€75, 55 minutes). Olympic also has three weekly direct flights to Siteia, Crete (€80, 1¾ hours).

BUS

From Alexandroupoli's **bus station** (☎ 25510 26479; Eleftheriou Venizelou 36) buses travel frequently northeast to Feres (€2.30), Soufli (€5, 1½ hours), Didymoticho (€7.20, 1¾ hours) and Orestiada (€8.70, two hours). Another bus terminates at Kipi on the Turkish border (€3.30, three daily).

One daily bus serves Athens (€58, 12 hours), and six go to Thessaloniki (€25.30, six hours). Buses to Kavala (€12.90, three hours) go via Komotini (€5.20, 70 minutes) and Xanthi (€9.10, 1¾ hours).

FERRY

In summer, two or three ferries daily make the two-hour trip to Samothraki (€11 per person, per car €45). Get tickets and departure details from the portside SAOS kiosk or from travel agencies like **Sever Travel** (☎ 25510 22555; sever1@otenet.gr; Megalou Alexandrou 24). SAOS also serves Limnos once weekly (€14.90, five hours).

Alexandroupoli is connected with the Dodecanese by Agoudimos Lines. The ferry leaves Mondays at 11am, stops at Limnos, and continues via Lesvos (€20.90, 11¼ hours), Chios (€27.20, 15¼ hours), Samos (€33.50, 18¼ hours), Kalymnos (€38.50, 23¼ hours), and Kos (€39, 24½ hours) to Rhodes (€44, 28¼ hours). A ferry retracing this route backwards leaves Rhodes every Saturday at 11.45pm.

Summer hydrofoils usually serve Samothraki, but are unpredictable; check locally.

TRAIN

From the **train station** (☎ 25510 26395) six daily trains serve Thessaloniki (€9.70, seven hours); one continues to Athens (€25, 14 hours). Trains also run northeast to Dikea (€3.80, 2½ hours, seven daily) via Pythio, Didymoticho, Orestiada and Kastanies, where there's a Turkish border crossing.

Bulgaria

From Alexandroupoli a daily train leaves at 5.30am for Svilengrad (€5, four hours), with connections to Plovdiv and Sofia.

Turkey

The OSE bus to İstanbul leaves at 8.30am (€15, six hours) Tuesday to Sunday. A direct train with sleeper cars to İstanbul leaves nightly at 1am (€36.60, seven hours). Two trains originating in Thessaloniki also pass through en route to İstanbul.

Getting Around

Only the camping ground or out-of-town sights require a bus or taxi. For the airport, take a Loutra-bound bus from Plateia Eleftherias, or a **taxi** (☎ 25510 28358) for about €6.

EVROS DELTA ΔΕΛΤΑ ΕΒΡΟΥ

The Evros Delta, 20km southeast of Alexandroupoli, is one of Europe's most important wetlands, with some 188 sq km of bird-watching heaven comprised of coastal lakes, lagoons, interior rivers, sand dunes, swamps and reed beds. More than 330 bird varieties have been recorded, including several endangered species. More than 200,000 migrating waterfowl winter here.

To go, call the **Evros Delta Visitor Centre** (☎ /fax 25510 61000; evroswet@hol.gr; 🕒 8am-4pm) in Loutra. The delta's western segment is always open, though motorised transport is restricted along the southern littoral. Visiting the delta's most fascinating part, the eastern section near the Turkish border, requires a permit from the Greek police and army.

Fortunately, the Visitor Centre arranges your permit for free: fax or email them your name and surname (as written on your passport), the passport number and date of expiry, plus your birth date and year. Apply 12 to 14 days before you plan to go. Along with your permit, the Visitor Centre provides maps. It also conducts guided tours (€10 per person) and organises minibus and boat trips around the delta.

ALEXANDROUPOLI TO DIDYMOTIHO ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥΠΟΛΗ ΠΡΟΣ ΔΙΔΥΜΟΤΕΙΧΟ

Two routes lead from Alexandroupoli northwards to Didymoticho, the western one and the main eastern one, which hugs the Turkish border. The western route passes through

PIPELINE POLITICS

By the end of 2010, Greece plans to have a brand-new attraction in eastern Thrace, though hardly a touristic one; the Burgas–Alexandroupoli oil pipeline, spanning some 279km from Bulgaria's Black Sea coast to Greece's northeasternmost mainland port. First conceived in 1994, the pipeline will transport up to 35 million tons of Russian and Caspian oil annually at an estimated cost of €1 billion.

Although speculation had been rampant that Burgas–Alexandroupoli would never happen, things seemed more solid after Russian president Vladimir Putin showed up in Athens in March 2007 for an inter-governmental signing ceremony. Greek and Bulgarian companies got a 49% share in the pipeline, while the Russians took 51%.

Unusually, supporters of Burgas–Alexandroupoli have cited the environment as a reason for building the pipeline: with tanker congestion in Istanbul's Bosphorus Straits at an all-time high, any major collision or other accident there could be catastrophic for the city and seas. Therefore, any pipeline project that would lessen Turkey's load would seem positive.

However, the Burgas–Alexandroupoli pipeline just reroutes the tanker spillage problem to Greece, rather than eliminating it, and potentially threatens the Aegean islands that depend on tourism and fishing. Indeed, Alexandroupoli locals fear that even mention of the word 'oil pipeline' will cause tourists to flee. In Bulgaria's Black Sea municipality of Sozopol, itself now becoming a popular tourist destination, like-minded locals have held vociferous public protests against the pipeline.

However, Greeks in Alexandroupoli and throughout the Evros region also see the pipeline positively as a job-providing investment that might also buy protection from their potentially hostile eastern neighbour; with politically influential energy multinationals owning a stake in the pipeline, the thinking goes, Turkey would have to think twice before invading Evros. Simultaneous pledges by the Greek Cypriot government to drill for offshore oil have attracted the interest of such companies and also angered Turkey, as the Eastern Aegean 'Great Game' intensifies.

Greek politicians are clearly revelling in their newfound importance. At the March 2007 signing ceremony, Minister of Foreign Affairs Dora Bakoyanni enthused that the pipeline will 'strengthen the international positive role of our country in a sector of international diplomacy – energy diplomacy – that is of ever-increasing importance in the international strategic environment'. Only time will tell whether the natural environment, on the other hand, could fall victim to Greece's grandiose ambitions of becoming a 'player' in the global energy game.

tranquil, rarely visited villages like Esmi, Megalo Derio and Mikro Derio; some 10km west of the latter is the village of Roussa, site of **megalithic Thracian tombs** dating from the 9th century BC and decorated with mysterious rock carvings.

The eastern road winds together with the train line and the River Evros along the Turkish border. This part of Thrace is all rolling hills, punctuated by storks' nests on phone poles and great fields of wheat and sunflowers. Although the occasional sign prohibits photography, there's no danger and little sight of the (obviously well-concealed) military. All of the following destinations are on the main bus and train routes and have many connections daily to and from Alexandroupoli.

The first interesting village, following the river route, is **Feres**, 29km northeast of Alexandroupoli, which boasts Thrace's most

impressive Byzantine sacred site, the **Church of Panagia Kosmosotira**. Built by Byzantine royal Isaac Komnenos in 1152 as a miniature of Constantinople's great Agia Sofia, it survives miraculously intact and is signposted.

Bird-watchers will love the **Dadia Forest Reserve**, home to 36 of the 38 known species of European raptors (birds of prey), some quite rare. To get there, continue north from Feres for 30km, then take the signposted turn-off west 7km. The park includes a protected inner zone (7290 hectares) and a buffer zone (35,170 hectares). Dadia is on one of Europe's two main bird migration routes. Visit either in May, before migration begins, or in autumn, when baby vultures hop curiously out of their nests.

The helpful **Ecotourist Centre** (☎ 25540 32209; dadia@otenet.gr; 🕒 10am–4pm Dec–Jan, 9am–7pm Mar–May & Sep–Nov, 8.30am–8.30pm Jun–Aug) has detailed bilingual

wall displays, an educational film about the forest and even minibuses service to a well-constructed bird hide (€3). You can also take the one-hour hike up a trail, marked orange on the way up and yellow coming down, for free. The hide offers binoculars, a telescope and a tripod for photography buffs.

For overnights try the **Ecotourist Hostel of Dadia** (☎ 25540 32263; dadia@otenet.gr; s/d/t €30/43/50), next to the Ecotourist Centre. There's a café next door. In Dadia village, 1km from the Ecotourist Centre, the **Traditional Family Taverna** (☎ 25540 32481; mains €4–6) near the church serves Greek fare. For real forest ambience, however, drive to **Katranzides** (☎ 25540 32489; mains €5–7.50) 8km inside the forest's outer zone. Take the right-hand road upon entering Dadia to get there. It's popular on weekends, but may not be otherwise busy, so call in advance.

Soufli, some 38km north of Alexandroupoli, boasts attractive Turkish wattle-and-daub houses, but is best known for silk. The area's prevalence of mulberry trees, upon which silkworms feed, made it a centre for the silk industry since the time of Alexander the Great. In the past century, however, the industry suffered several blows; the creation of modern Turkey in 1923 cut some farmers off from their former lands and, more recently, numerous mulberry trees have been chopped down to make way for crops. Nevertheless, small-scale production continues.

Although Soufli's unique **silk museum** (☎ 25510 23700; Eleftheriou Venizelou 73) remained closed at time of writing, it may have reopened by the time you get there. For atmospheric accommodation try **Koukouli Inn** (☎ 25540 22400; fax 25540 22441; Olorou 14; s/d incl breakfast €45/55), built in 1850 for harvesting and screening silkworm cocoons. Located opposite the town hall, it has clean, inviting rooms. Soufli also has ATMs.

After Soufli, next up is rough-and-tumble **Didymoticho** (dih-dih-mo-tih-ho), a military outpost and site of the area's most significant historical ruins. Aside from them, however, Didymoticho is fairly sleepy, as opposed to a place where you would want to sleep, and thus makes for a better day trip or drive-by than an overnight stay. Didymoticho has ATM-equipped banks, pharmacies and other services.

The town's name derives from its once-magnificent double walls (*didymo* 'twin', *tihos* 'wall'), the remains of which are still the most impressive site in its upper town. From the time it was founded in the late 8th century

as a hinterland fort guarding entry to Constantinople, Didymoticho was an important Byzantine town. Numerous eminent figures were born here, and in 1341 Byzantine Emperor John Kantakouzenis was crowned here. When the Turks took it in 1361, Didymoticho briefly became the capital of Murad I, before he relocated it in 1365 to Adrianople (modern Edirne, Turkey).

The sultan first left his mark, however, with a huge, pyramid-roofed mosque, finished in 1368 by his son Bayezit, sometimes called **Bayezit's Mosque**. It was the first in Europe, and the biggest that the Ottomans would ever build there. You can't enter, as the structure lies in forlorn disrepair, its minaret topless, windows smashed and walls crumbling.

A steep walk up the hill from the main square, where the mosque is located, brings you past Ottoman-style timber-framed houses and into the upper town. Near the **Church of Agios Athanasios** are well-preserved sections of the town's **Byzantine walls** and strange catacomb-like side structures. If you're thirsty, stop for lemonade at the iconic **Café Zamantha**, which has impressive views over Didymoticho's traditional roofs as far as the rivers. Ask kindly old Leftheris, the owner, to point out the symbol of Byzantine noble Tarhaniotis, engraved in the wall above his café's garden.

From Didymoticho the main road continues 20km to Orestia, Evros' last major town. However, if you want to hug the river (or are travelling by train), it's around 35km between the two.

ORESTIADA ΟΡΕΣΤΙΑΔΑ

pop 20,000

If you're looking for a last bout of Hellenism before crossing into Bulgaria or Turkey, or are just intrigued to see what lies at the end of the road, then Orestia is the place to go. Although it has none of the birds of Dadia and none of the historical attractions of Didymoticho, Orestia is nevertheless the largest town north of Alexandroupoli, a place with reasonable amounts of shopping, social life and services. It makes a good base for day trips to unique and totally unvisited villages, and is also a jumping-off point for trips to Bulgarian Thrace or nearby Edirne in Turkey. The town is also a good base from which to visit the **Ardas River Festival** (☎ 25520 81140; www.ardas.gr), held over four days in late July near Kastanies (see boxed text, p309).

Orestiada was built in 1923, during the population exchanges between Greece and Turkey. Unlike most of the ragged refugees, however, the dignified residents of the new Orestiada chose to come as a group from their homes on the Turkish side of the river and resettle in an organised way. Like other border towns, Orestiada has a robust military presence, though actual uniformed soldiers are much less noticeable to tourists than are the suited visiting businessmen on army-related contracts.

Orientation & Information

From the train station walk uphill on Vasileos Konstantinou; at the intersection with Athanasios Pantazidou, you face the central square. Turn left on Pantazidou for the Hotel Elektra, cafés, restaurants and post office; turn right for the tourist information and internet café. Several ATM-equipped banks are around the main square. Shops are on Konstantinopoleos, parallel with Pantazidou on the square's opposite side. The bus station is also on this side of the square; follow Vasileos Konstantinou two blocks and turn right on Adrianoupoleos. **Hatzigiannis Tours** (☎ 25520 25666; cnr Konstantinoupoleos & Emmanouel Riga) Sells aeroplane, boat and train tickets.

Post office (☎ 25520 22435; Athanasios Pantazidou)
Web (☎ 25520 25012; Athanasios Pantazidou 64; per hr €2; 📧 24hr) A large internet café opposite the tourist information office.

Sights & Activities

The humble **Folk Museum** (☎ 25520 28080; Agion Theodoron 87; 🕒 11am–1pm & 7–9pm Tue–Sat) has traditional Thracian furnishings and costumes, old weaponry and, intriguingly, a fragment from the original Lausanne Treaty, which stipulated the Greek-Turkish population exchange.

The **Metropolitan Church of the Saints Theodoros**, located west of the central *plateia* on Konstantinoupoleos and Orfeas, is an old and unusual red-brick structure that contains some nice icons.

Almost 3km from Orestiada on the Didymoticho road, **Cataract Water Park** (☎ 25520 28922) has various pools and rides for keeping cool in summer and Mojito, a popular disco on summer nights.

Sleeping & Eating

Our pick **Hotel Elektra** (☎ 25520 23540; www.hotel.elektra.gr; Athanasios Pantazidou 52; s/d €38/50; 🍷) The

bright B-class Elektra is a friendly and well-kept hotel in a restored neoclassical mansion. The lobby décor may be a bit gauche, but considering the cheap attic singles (€32), the Elektra offers the best combination of value and upkeep available. Helpful owner Ismini Diamanti can assist with local trip-planning.

Hotel Alexandros (☎ 25520 27000; fax 25520 29632; Vasileos Konstantinou 10; s/d/t €45/58/65; 🍷) Just a tad fancier than the Elektra but pricier too, the Alexandros has good-sized balconies and airy rooms near the train station.

For hearty meat dishes in a simple, friendly setting hit **Taverna Pefinos** (☎ 25520 22071; Lohagou Diamandi 3; mains €4–7). The popular **Safran** (☎ 25520 29088; Vasileos Konstantinou; mains €5–7), just down from the Hotel Elektra, does more international cuisine.

Drinking

Orestiada's cafés line Emmanouel Riga, between Konstantinoupoleos and Athanasios Pantazidou. Popular places include Café Café, Bel Air and Social. Other cafés are on the square. There are even a *bouzoukia* and a nightclub or two; ask in your hotel for details.

Getting There & Away

From Orestiada's **bus station** (☎ 25520 22550), hourly buses go to Didymoticho (€1.60, 30 minutes), many continuing to Alexandroupoli (€8.70, two hours). Change in Alexandroupoli for buses to Komotini, Xanthi and Thessaloniki.

Buses also go northwards to Dikea (€4.90, four daily) and the Bulgarian border at Ormenio (€5, two daily). The Turkish border crossing at Kastanies is served five times daily (€1.40).

From the **train station** (☎ 25520 22328) trains head south to Alexandroupoli (€3.20, three hours, seven daily) via Pythio, Didymoticho, Soufli and Ferres; five of them continue from Alexandroupoli west to Komotini (€4.70, four hours, seven daily), Xanthi (€5.60, 4½ hours, seven daily), Thessaloniki (€12.30, 8½ hours) and Athens (€27.40, 15 hours).

Trains also go from Orestiada northwards to Dikea (€1.20, 35 minutes, seven daily), with four continuing another 10 minutes to the border at Ormenio. The train that leaves Orestiada at 8.07am continues to Svilengrad in Bulgaria.

Getting Around

For local transport, catch a **taxi** (☎ 25520 25025).

AROUND ORESTIADA

Some 18km southeast of town on the old road, which runs parallel with the River Evros and the train line, is the Byzantine castle of **Pythio**. Set on a tall bluff above a little village of traditional Thracian brick-and-wood houses, the castle has a commanding view of the Thracian plain and the dark trees of the River Evros. Built in 1347 by Byzantine emperor John Kantakouzenos, during a turbulent period of civil wars and Turkish invasions, the castle is Thrace's best surviving example of Byzantine defensive architecture. Renovations are ongoing, so it may be closed when you visit, but nevertheless you can get near enough to appreciate the castle's grandeur.

If you're hankering for pheasant, venison or wild boar, rustic **Pendalofos** 35km northwest of Orestiada, has a game restaurant, **Evrothirama** (☎ 25560 61202; mains €7–10). Since it's open only on weekends and is well off the beaten track, ask Ismini at Orestiada's Elektra Hotel to help book. She can assist with planning west Evros day trips also.

One such trip might involve driving west through **Valtos** to reach **Mikri Doxipara**, where recent excavations of a 1st-century-AD Roman tomb have unearthed five interred funerary carts with horses and harnesses.

From Mikri Doxipara, turn north to Pendalofos for lunch and then up to **Petrota**, the last Greek village in the northwesternmost corner of Evros near the Bulgarian border. Petrota has vineyards, traditional stone houses and the last living master dyer in Thrace (inquire at the Ethnographical Museum in Alexandroupoli). The road continues eastward along the border through **Ormenio** and **Dikea**, before heading south back to Orestiada.

In July, the **Ardas River Festival** (p309) brings notable Greek singers and Greek and international DJs for four days of camping and partying on the river, near **Kastanies**, 19km north of Orestiada.

Kastanies is also Greece's northernmost Turkish border crossing. If you're headed to **Edirne** (Adrianoupolis in Greek), this is your crossing; Edirne is just 9km after Kastanies.

EPIROS ΗΠΙΕΙΡΟΣ

pop 352,400 / area 9203 sq km

Time moves more slowly in Epiros, preoccupied as it is with the lofty, brooding Pindos Mountains that make up its inland mass. For thousands of years, these mountains have safeguarded civilisations and confounded invaders. Part of this towering expanse, centred around the stunning 12km-long Vikos Gorge – said to be the world's deepest – is now a national park. The park is filled out with leafy forests, waterfalls and ice-cold mountain lakes, and surrounded by immaculate traditional villages of stone and slate, known as the Zagorohoria.

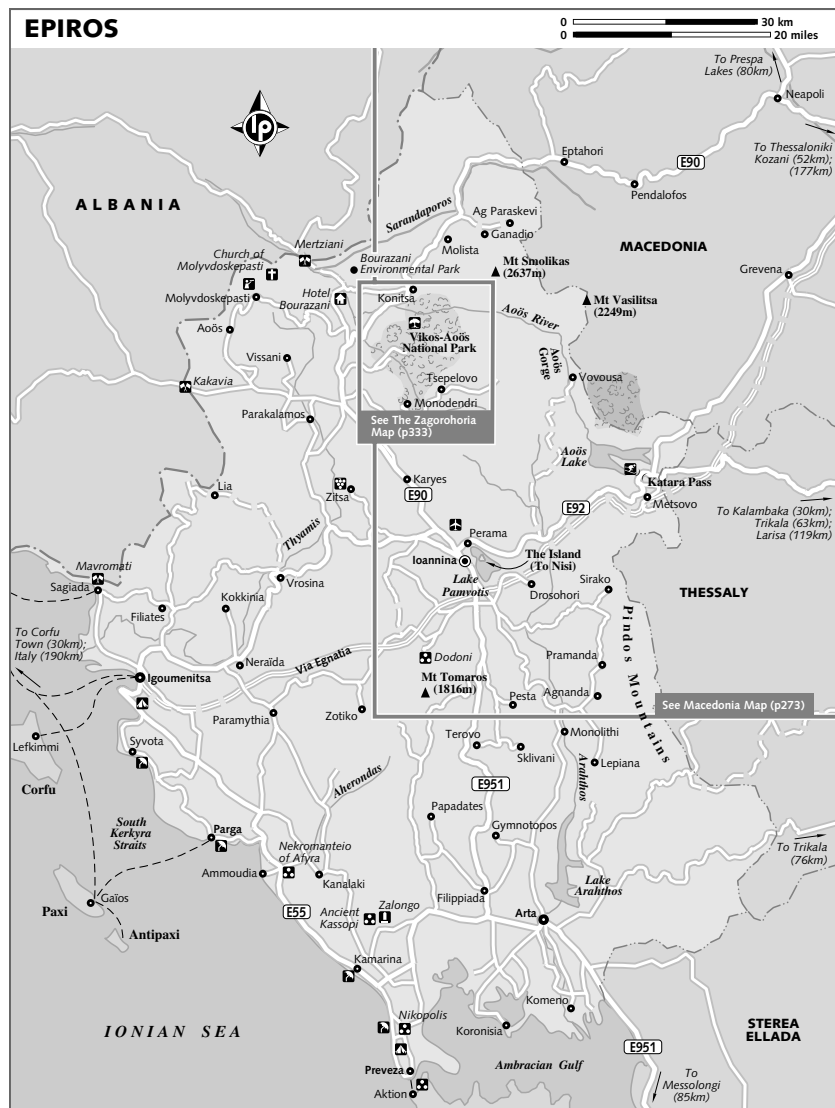
Compared with Epiros' mountains, the western coast is just an afterthought, though it is a lovely one with long stretches of sand punctuated by archaeological and historical sites. As with the Ionian Islands just opposite, centuries of Venetian rule have given the Epirot coast an Italian flavour, and in August voluble young Italians do indeed arrive to hit the beaches and bars of Epiros' microresort, Parga, with many other Greek and international partiers.

Getting to Epiros is an event in itself. The main road, whether it be from Kozani in Macedonia or from Kalambaka in Thessaly, winds up over the Pindos Mountains, except for when it cuts straight through them, inside the massive tunnels created for the Egnatia Odos cross-country highway.

Indeed, while Epiros has suffered millennia of isolation due to its geography, the completion of this grand project – expected by early 2009 – will make getting there easier. With capital city Ioannina flourishing, and the main coastal and mountain destinations attracting more international attention, it looks like Epiros' moment has finally come.

History

With the Dorian invasions of Greece (1100–1000 BC), three main Greek-speaking tribes emerged in Epiros: the Thesproti, the Chaones and the Molossi. The last won out and savvily married their princess Olympias to the powerful King Philip II of Macedon. However, this alliance created conflict with the rising power of Rome. The most famous Molossi ruler, King Pyrrhus (319–272 BC),



defeated the Romans in battle at Ausculum, but at a very heavy price; the event gave birth to a concept, the 'Pyrrhic victory', that remains with us today.

When the Roman Empire split in the 4th century AD, Epiros became the westernmost province of the Eastern (Byzantine) empire. Later, it was a vital stronghold of Hellenism

after Latin Crusaders overthrew the Byzantine Empire in 1204; refugees from noble Byzantine families took refuge in Epiros' impenetrable mountains and established a key Byzantine successor state there.

Although the empire was partially restored in 1261, stubbornly independent lords continued their infighting. In the 14th century

the expanding Serbian empire of Stefan Dusan briefly took over. Finally, in 1430, the Ottoman Turks conquered Epiros. When they invaded Constantinople 22 years later, the phenomenon of eminent Greek refugees fleeing to Epiros' mountain fastnesses was repeated.

Although the Turks allowed Epiros considerable autonomy, it was not enough for Ali Pasha. In 1778, the Turks made this Albanian lord pasha of Ioannina; however, the flamboyant Ali had bigger ambitions and proceeded to seize much of Albania and western Greece before being killed by Ottoman troops in 1822. Nevertheless, Ali Pasha had continuously worn down and distracted the Turks, tacitly assisting the Greek revolutionaries in 1821.

Epiros was engulfed in the Balkan Wars of 1912–13, when the new state of Albania got a northern piece of it. In 1940, Mussolini's invasion of Greece was repelled in Epiros, which became a stronghold for the communist resistance fighting the brutal Nazi occupation. The communists were defeated in the Greek Civil War (1946–49).

METSOVO ΜΕΤΣΟΒΟ

pop 3195 / elev 1156m

Just south of the magnificent Katara Pass, and east of the fabled Zagorohoria village region, idyllic Metsovo (*met-so-vo*) clings to a mountainside at 1156m. The village has an enviable existence as a tourist magnet for skiers. Traditional on the outside, luxurious on the inside, Metsovo is known for the heartfelt hospitality of its residents.

These locals are mostly Vlachs, historically a nomadic sheep-herding people who speak the Arromanian language. This dialect is closely related to Romanian and ultimately derives from Latin. The Vlachs, some believe, descended from ancient Roman soldiers sent here to guard the mountain passes.

The town's wealth, abundantly displayed in its churches and restored stone mansions, attests to its unique history; in Ottoman times, the canny Metsovitte shepherds were given extensive privileges in return for guarding the Katara Pass (1705m), the only route across the Pindos Mountains. However, in 1795 Ali Pasha abolished Metsovo's privileges, and in 1854 Ottoman troops damaged it considerably.

Luckily, many local Vlachs would soon make fortunes in commerce, industry and other non-sheep-related enterprises. Local luminaries Georgios Averof (1815–99) and Mihail Tositsas (1885–1950) in particular donated heavily towards restoring Metsovo's former glory.

Nowadays, the locals have turned their characteristic shrewdness towards tourism, transforming old mansions and stone cottages into boutique hotels and opening twee tourist shops, making the village perhaps a bit too precious for its own good. No matter, Metsovo is an invigorating mountain getaway with appealing traditional hotels. It boasts hearty home-cooked cuisine, good mountain-walking opportunities in summer, and skiing in winter.

Orientation & Information

Metsovo lies 1km below the main Kalam-baka–Ioannina highway. The main thoroughfare to the central square, where the bus stops, is lined with restaurants, hotels and shops. The village's lovely traditional houses are dotted around a maze of winding stone pathways.

The **police** (☎ 26560 41233) are on the right opposite the bus stop. The Commercial Bank, Agricultural Bank and National Bank of Greece are near the *plateia*; turning from it, the post office is on the right side of the main thoroughfare.

Sights

The restored **Tositsas mansion** hosts Metsovo's **folk museum** (☎ 26560 41084; adult/student €3/2; ☎ 9am–1.30pm & 4–6pm Fri–Wed), where a typical wealthy 19th-century Metsovitte household, with handcrafted furniture, artefacts and utensils, is recreated. Guided tours go every half-hour. It's signposted halfway up the main street.

The **Averof Gallery** (☎ 26560 41210; adult/student €3/2; ☎ 10am–6.30pm Wed–Mon), financed by Georgios Averof's three children, has a permanent collection of 19th- and 20th-century works by Greek painters and sculptors. Turn left at the *plateia*'s far side; the gallery's on the right.

The 14th-century **Moni Agiou Nikolaou** (☎ 8.30am–1.30pm & 4–6pm), set in a gorge below Metsovo, has post-Byzantine frescoes and a beautiful hand-carved wooden iconostasis. The 30-minute walk to get there is signposted from the square's west side.

Activities

Approaching from Kalambaka, Metsovo's **ski centre** (☎ 26560 41211; 🕒 9.30am-3.45pm) is on the right-hand (north) side of the highway, just before the Metsovo turn-off. The centre has an 82-seat ski lift, two downhill runs and a 5km cross-country run, plus a nourishing taverna. Rent skis in Metsovo.

Sleeping

Filoxenia Domatia (☎ 26560 41332; jsp@hol.gr; s/d €30/40) Still offering the best rates in town, and perhaps the best views, the Filoxenia has clean and comfortable domatia. It's just behind the central park area, close to the art gallery.

Hotel Galaxias (☎ 26560 41202; fax 26560 41124; s/d €37/49) The closest hotel to the bus stop, the Galaxias offers large, traditionally furnished rooms (some with fireplaces). The eponymous restaurant's here too.

Hotel Bitouni (☎ 26560 41217; www.hotelbitouni.com; d/ste €50/80; 📺) There's a ski-lodge feel to the family-run Bitouni, with its sauna, traditional fixtures and carved wooden coffee tables. There are 24 doubles, and seven suites; two of the latter have Jacuzzi. Internet is available.

Hotel Egnatia (☎ 26560 41900; fax 26560 41485; Tosi 19; s/d €50/60) The renovated Egnatia offers doubles and spacious studios with handsome bathrooms. The hotel's marked by its wood fixtures and friendly, knowledgeable owner, who provides info about outdoors sports and other activities. The hotel's mountain views are superb and its rates include breakfast. When approaching the central square from the main road, the hotel's on the right.

Victoria Hotel (☎ 26560 41771; www.victoriahotel.gr; d €60) The Victoria has 37 rooms with all the mods cons, including Jacuzzi and fireplaces in some. The restaurant serves local specialities, and there's an outdoor pool in summer. Best of all, however, is the staff's warm Metsovo hospitality. Find it 900m before the centre.

Eating

To Koutouki tou Nikola (☎ 26560 41732; mains €7-10) This wonderful family-run restaurant just beneath the post office cooks up hearty traditional dishes, from *pites* (pies) to traditional roast lamb and boiled goat soup (*gida vrasti*).

Restaurant Galaxias (☎ 26560 41202; mains €7.50-10) Despite being unassuming, this hotel restaurant is surprisingly good. Local specials include leek meatballs or spicy sausage, accompanied by the local red wine (Katoyi). The

rustic scene is enhanced by a log fire in winter and an ivy-covered balcony in summer.

Paradosiako (mains €8-11) Another traditional place, and especially strong on meats, the Paradosiako is located opposite the Hotel Bitouni. There are also good mezedhes and vegetarian options, though.

Getting There & Away

Direct buses leave for Ioannina daily at 6.30am, 10.15am, 3pm and 4.30pm (€7, 1½ hours) and for Trikala at 8am and 2pm (€11, 3½ hours). For a bus to Thessaloniki (€22), walk up to the main road and wave down the bus, coming from Ioannina.

IOANNINA ΙΩΑΝΝΙΝΑ

pop 61,629

The capital of Epiros and the gateway to the Vikos-Aoös National Park, Ioannina (ih-oh-nih-nah or yah-nih-nah) is fast becoming one of Greece's most happening cities. It's a bustling commercial and cultural centre, and home to 20,000 energetic university students who give it a fair amount of nightlife. Set on placid Lake Pamvotis and facing sheer mountains, Ioannina has an idyllic setting and an evocative old quarter (the Kastro) interspersed with narrow lanes and architectural wonders dating back to Byzantine and Ottoman times. The city is also becoming a real treat for epicureans, with plenty of fine food and drink on offer.

While the daunting mountains of Epiros have long kept Ioannina relatively isolated, the completion of the Via Egnatia highway, expected in early 2009, will reduce travel times significantly, making the city more accessible.

History

Ioannina was founded in the early 6th century by the great Byzantine Emperor Justinian, and became an important commercial and cultural outpost. In 1082, however, it was raided by the Normans during the first stages of an east-west antagonism that peaked in 1204, when Latin Crusaders sacked Constantinople and dismembered the Byzantine Empire. Numerous illustrious Greek families from the capital fled to Epiros, where an important Byzantine successor state developed under Byzantine nobleman Michael I Komnenos Doukas. The Greeks would remain in control until the Serbs arrived in the early 14th

century, followed briefly by more Latins and finally by the Ottoman Turks, who conquered in 1430. The *Tourkokratia* (Rule of the Turks), as Greeks gloomily call it, would last for the better part of five centuries.

However, things were not terrible during Ottoman times for Ioannina, which enjoyed special privileges and became one of the foremost cultural and artistic centres in Greece. Important new schools were founded, skilled craftsmen created intricate silver and gold jewellery, and through the 16th and 17th centuries, the 'Epirot School' of religious painting blossomed.

As Ottoman power began to ebb in the late 18th century, crafty opportunists like the Albanian warlord Ali Pasha (1741-1822) seized their opportunity. In 1789, the morally reprehensible yet oddly charismatic Ali made Ioannina the capital of his personal fiefdom, one which would soon encompass much of Albania and western Greece. Despite a penchant for cruelty that sickened that lover of Greece, Lord Byron, Ali enforced law and order, and Ioannina flourished. In 1822, trapped at the Agios Pandleimon monastery on the Island (To Nisi) in Lake Pamvotis, the 82-year-old Ali was finally liquidated by some very irritated Ottomans, who paraded his severed head through the streets of Istanbul.

Although Ottoman rule returned to Ioannina, it would become increasingly tenuous, and during the Balkan Wars of 1912-13, Ioannina was captured by the Greek army. The character of the city's population would change dramatically over the next 30 years; in 1923, with the mandated Greek-Turkish population exchanges, Muslim Turks were replaced with Anatolian Greek refugees, while in 1943 the occupying Germans deported most of Ioannina's centuries-old Jewish population to the Nazi death camps.

Orientation

Ioannina is large, though walkable; parking, however, is tough. There's a municipal parking lot (€2) off the main square, Plateia Pyrrou, and from here the main bus station is 300m away (Ioannina's other bus station is at Vizaniou 28). Most hotels lie between the main bus station and the square. Plateia Georgiou, down near the lakefront, also hosts several cafés.

Ioannina's major historic sites are in the old quarter, the Kastro, which is essentially resi-

dential, but has atmospheric accommodation. The airport is 5km northwest of town.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Newsstand (☎ 26510 23350; Pyrsinella 14) Sells foreign magazines and newspapers.

Papostiriou Bookstore (☎ 26510 64000; Mihail Angelou 6) Sells English-language books, excellent maps and Lonely Planet guides.

EMERGENCY

Tourist police (☎ 26510 65938; 28 Oktovriou 11)

INTERNET ACCESS

On-Line (☎ 26510 72512; Pyrsinella 4; per hr €2; 🕒 9am-6am)

Web (☎ 26510 26813; Pyrsinella 21; per hr €2.30; 🕒 24hr)

LAUNDRY

Self Service Laundry (☎ 26510 25542; Tsigiroti 3; full wash €8; 🕒 9.30am-2.30pm & 6-9pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-2.30pm Sat) Near the main bus station.

MEDICAL SERVICES

University Hospital (☎ 26510 99111) Eight kilometres south, inside the university campus.

MONEY

Plateia Pyrrou and Averof's southern end host the major banks/ATMs.

POST

Post office Octovriou (28 Oktovriou 3); Georgiou Papan-dreou (Georgiou Papandreou)

TOURIST INFORMATION

EOT (Greek National Tourist Organisation; ☎ 26510 41142; fax 26510 49139; Dodonis 39; 🕒 7.30am-2.30pm) Provides general information and hiking updates for the Zagorhorion or Vikos Gorge; very helpful.

Sights

The sublime **Its Kale** (Inner Citadel; 🕒 8am-5pm, 8pm-10pm Tue-Sun) of the Kastro rises from a long bluff overlooking the lake and mountain. A great place for a leisurely stroll, Its Kale also has a small café. The mixed history it represents includes the **Tomb of Ali Pasha** and the restored **Fetiye Cami** (Victory Mosque), originally built in 1611 to reassert Ottoman dominance, following a failed Greek uprising that caused Christians to be expelled from the citadel.

The best sight, however, is the **Byzantine Museum** (☎ 26510 25989; Its Kale; admission €3; ☞ 8am-5pm Tue-Sun), housed in two nearby buildings, which include Ali Pasha's former palace. The museum features early Christian and Byzantine art, pottery, coins and silverware, and even post-Byzantine icons and manuscripts. The priceless treasures include early printed Greek books from Venice and ornate silver jewellery boxes with cloisonné enamel. Textual accompaniments give a fascinating overview of Ioannina's history from the 4th to the 17th century, and divulge other unexpected facts, like that the Rome-based jewellery empire, Bulgari, was actually founded by humble Epirot émigré Sotirios Voulgaris in 1885; the Voulgaris

family is reportedly preparing to open a jewellery museum in Paramythia village by 2009.

The **Municipal Ethnographic Museum** (☎ 26510 26356; adult/student €3/1.50; ☞ 8am-8pm) stands at the Kastro's northern end in the **Aslan Pasha Mosque** (1619). Local costumes and photographs of old Ioannina are on display, as are tapestries and prayer shawls from the **synagogue** (Ioustini-anou 16) of Ioannina's once significant Jewish community. Similar items, including embroidery and cooking utensils, are on view at the **Folklore Museum** (☎ 26510 23566; Mihail Angelou 42-44; adult/student €2/1; ☞ 9am-2pm Tue-Sat, 5.30-8pm Wed & Sat).

The **Archaeological Museum** (☎ 26510 33357; Plateia 25 Martiou 6) remained closed for renova-

tions at time of writing. It contains finds from Dodoni, Vitsa and Efiria.

Activities

LAKE CRUISES

The relaxing one-hour **lake cruise** (☎ 69444 70280; tickets €5; ☞ 10am-midnight Mon-Sun summer, weekends only winter) departs from near the Island ferry quay.

HIKING

Serious hikers should do two things: first, get the map (Anavasi Mountain Editions; Pindus-Zagori 1:50,000), available for €8 from local **periptera** (street kiosks) or at **Papasotiriou Bookstore** (☎ 26510 64000; Mihail Angelou 6), then get apprised with current conditions at the **EOT** (☎ 26510 41142; fax 26510 49139; Dodonis 39; ☞ 7.30am-2.30pm) and/or **EOS** (Greek Alpine Club; ☎ 26510 22138; Despotatou Ipirou 2; ☞ 7-9pm Mon-Fri).

Trekking Hellas (☎ 26510 71703; www.trekking.gr; Aravantinou 16) specialises in hikes, rafting and canyoning.

Robinson Expeditions (☎ 26510 74989; www.robinson.gr) organises hiking and other outdoor sports in remote areas.

Sleeping

Perama, 10 minutes by bus around the lake, has cheap *domatia*. Most Ioannina hotels are near the noisy central *plateia*; for tranquillity and atmosphere, stay inside the Kastro.

Limnopoula Camping (☎ 26510 25265; Kanari 10; camp sites per adult/tent €8/4; ☞ Apr-Oct) A breezy lakeside camping ground 2km northwest, Limnopoula has fine facilities, including a kitchen, laundry, and nearby restaurant.

Filyra (☎ 26510 83560; fax 26510 83567; Andronikou Paleologou 18; s/d €45/55) The best place to stay, considering price and location, this flower-bedecked boutique hotel has five spacious self-catering suites on a quiet Kastro side street.

Galaxy Hotel (☎ 26510 25432; fax 26510 30724; Plateia Pyrrou; s/d €55/70; ☎ ☞) This friendly hotel on the lake side of the main square has clean, sunny rooms and even mini-bathtubs. However, the singing elevator loses its charm quickly and the breakfast is meagre.

Hotel Kastro (☎ 26510 22866; Andronikou Paleologou 57; s/d €65/85; ☎ ☞) This restored Kastro mansion overlooking Its Kale is all about atmosphere: antique brass beds, stained-glass windows and a tranquil courtyard create a feeling of romantic seclusion. Service is friendly and prompt.

Olympic (☎ 26510 22233; www.hotelolymp.gr; Melanidhis 2; s/d €80/110; ☎ ☞) Management recommends booking two weeks in advance at the Olympic, Ioannina's poshest digs. Rooms have the amenities and great lake views, and there's even a red carpet; shame then that there's little seclusion or tradition in this noisy central spot.

Politeia (☎ 26510 22235; www.etip.gr; Anexartias 109; s/d/ste incl breakfast €85/100/170; ☎ ☞ ☞) This central place set around a quiet inner courtyard and café offers studios with kitchenette and all mod cons. Rooms are tastefully decorated and painted in soft tones. Internet is available.

Eating

Most of Ioannina's best places only open for dinner.

Mystagogia (☎ 26510 34571; Koundouriotou 44; mains €6; ☞ dinner) A popular late-night *tsipouradhiko* (place serving *tsipoura* – sea bream – and light snacks), the studenty Mystagogia has a good selection of nourishing *mezedhes* and good beef *keftedes* (meatballs).

Stoa Louli (☎ 26510 71322; Anexartias 78; mains €7-10) The Stoa Louli has been through many incarnations since being built in 1875; first it was an inn, later a trade centre for Jewish leather merchants, and even an Ottoman Bank. This tastefully lit place, fronted by grand arches, serves an alluring range of Greek favourites with a contemporary twist.

Es Aei (☎ 26510 34571; Koundouriotou 50; mains €7-11) This favourite haunt of local and foreign gastronomes combines an Ottoman flair with a unique, glass-roofed courtyard dining room. Its inventive dishes include *mezedhes* made from organic ingredients and Ioannina specials like grilled pork sausages.

1900 Café Restaurant (☎ 26510 33131; Neoptolemu 9; mains €10-15; ☞ dinner, closed Jul-Aug) If you want to wow a date – or simply enjoy a really good Italian meal – this is the place to come. Genial owner Miltos Miltiadis provides a warm welcome at this restored, two-floor mansion, a living lesson in style with thick-painted crimson walls, Latin music, worn wood floors and soft light. Everything is good, from the *penne* and *parmesan* to *Portobello* mushrooms with *marvrodafni* wine sauce.

Drinking

Frontzou Politeia (☎ 26510 21011; Lofos Agias Triadas; ☞ ☞ 9am-3am) Find superlative views of the city, lake and mountain opposite at this relaxed



café 2km up on Ioannina's western hill. Lean back in its plush, colourful couches and enjoy a cool coffee drink on a warm summer morning, or a mixed one by night.

Filistro Café (☎ 26510 72429; Andronikou Paleologou 20) For a splendid spot of tea or afternoon liqueur, drop in to this classic, vividly painted Kastro café.

Baccara Bar Restaurant (☎ 26510 33265; Plateia Dimokratias; ☎ noon-2am) A sure sign that a city has arrived is when it spawns fully formed temples to conspicuous consumption. The see-and-be-seen Baccara, with its cavernous interior, fusion menu and tropical fish tank that runs the length of the entire back wall, is such a place. There's no middle ground; you'll either detest it or be impressed.

our pick Presveia (Embassy; ☎ 26510 26309; Karamanli 17; ☎ evening only) True beer lovers, there is hope. Draught Guinness is relatively hard to find in Greece, as are the 100 or so other beers (€4 to €11) available at this cosy pub popular with students. Oh, and the food (mains €5 to €9) is really good too.

Ananta (☎ 26510 26261; Anexartisias & Stoa Labeji; ☎ 9pm-3am) With its shadows and a long bar set under an upward-curving, bare stone ceiling, the Ananta smacks of a Franciscan monastery – albeit one powered by rock music and alcohol.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Olympic Airlines (☎ 26510 26518; www.olympicairlines.com; Kendriki Plateia) has two daily Athens flights (€76 to €102) leaving at 10.30am and 5.30pm.

Aegean Airlines (☎ 26510 64444; www.aegeanair.com; Pysinella 11) has one Athens flight daily (€35 to €121) at 5pm.

BUS

From Ioannina's **main bus station** (☎ 26510 26404; Zozimadon 4) buses serve Igoumenitsa (€8.20, 2½ hours, eight daily), Athens (€33.30, 7½ hours, nine daily), Konitsa (€5.10, two hours, seven daily), Thessaloniki (€27.10, five hours, six daily), Volos (€20.30, five hours, two daily) and Metsovo (€7, 1½ hours, four daily). There are two buses daily to Trikala (€12.30, 3½ hours) and Kozani (€18.40, 4½ hours), and one daily in summer to Parga (€8, three hours).

From Ioannina's other **bus station** (☎ 26510 25014; Vizaniou 28) there are buses to Arta (€3.90, 2½ hours, 10 daily) and Patra (€19.70, 4½ hours,

two daily). Buses also leave here for Preveza (€8, three hours, six daily) and Dodoni.

Albania

From Ioannina buses go to the Greek border post of Kakavia (€4.40, one hour, nine daily).

Getting Around

TO/FROM THE AIRPORT

Ioannina Airport is 5km northwest on the Perama road. Bus 7 goes there every 20 minutes from the clock tower.

CAR

Budget Rent a Car (☎/fax 26510 43901; Dodonis 109) is at the airport, as is **Auto Union Car Rental** (☎/fax 25610 67751; Dodonis 66), which offers good deals.

TAXI

Taxis (☎ 26510 46777) wait near Plateia Pyrrou and the lake.

AROUND IOANNINA

The Island To Nisi

Just opposite Ioannina in the middle of Lake Pamvotis, The Island (To Nisi) makes a nice vehicle-free escape, while also boasting unique historical attractions. The Island's whitewashed village, built in the 17th century by refugees from Peloponnesian Mani, still has around 300 permanent residents (among them four schoolkids). The forested island has important monasteries decorated with very unusual frescoes, and some equally atypical fish and amphibians for lunch in its restaurants. The old, white-plastered houses have lovely flower gardens and shutters and there are numerous silver shops.

The Island's biggest claim to fame, however, was its chosen location for the last act in the long saga of Ali Pasha, the Albanian warlord who ruled Ioannina in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Ali's fickle allegiances and brazen challenge to Ottoman authority alarmed the Sublime Port, causing the Sultan to take out the 'Lion of Ioannina' in 1822. Informed that he would be pardoned, the elderly Ali Pasha withdrew with his guard to **Moni Pandeileimonos** on The Island, only to be trapped and gunned down by Ottoman troops.

You can still see the hole in the floorboard where the fatal bullet passed through in the **Ali Pasha Museum** (adult €0.80; ☎ 8am-10pm summer, 9am-9pm winter), in a building inside

ALI PASHA: THE LION OF IOANNINA *Will Gourlay*

Swashbuckler, tyrant, sadist, arch brigand, Ali Pasha looms out of Greek history as a larger-than-life character, but was probably not a very pleasant person to know. Ali was born in 1741 into a family holding the hereditary title of *bey* of Tepeleni in Albania. Ali's fortunes changed when his father, a man of mild disposition, was murdered. Ali's mother took to the hills to lead a group of bandits and the 14-year-old Ali followed. He proved to be a natural-born brigand and leader, eventually wresting control of Tepeleni and acquiring his father's erstwhile title. Then by stealth and cunning and with bucket loads of bravado, he won the confidence of the Ottoman sultan in Constantinople and was appointed pasha of Trikala in 1787 and Ioannina in 1788. Ali Pasha established his court at Ioannina, from where he ruled with an iron fist, securing the previously lawless roads and ushering in a period of economic prosperity and cultural flowering in all Epiros.

Ali Pasha was known for sadiistically doing away with insubordinates and enemies; he reputedly had a penchant for sexual deviance. His fame – or perhaps notoriety – spread throughout Europe. His court appears to have been as debauched and flamboyant as the man himself, attracting astrologers, poets and sycophantic diplomats. He dallied with Napoleon on his Dalmatian forays, consorted with Lord Byron, and over four decades he skillfully played off French, English, Russian, Venetian and Ottoman interests until his realm encompassed Albania, Thesaly and Epiros.

Ali eventually grew too big for his boots, incurring the wrath of the Ottoman sultan. He was besieged in the island fortress at Ioannina and beheaded by Ottoman troops in 1822. His disembodied head was sent to Constantinople but his fame lives on. In mountaineers' ballads he is remembered to this day as the Lion of Ioannina.

the monastery. There's a printed narrative (in English) of the heady events of Ali's last days, as well as various personal effects and etchings of the portly pasha in full repose, sitting fat and happy with his consort, beards and hookah. To get there, walk up the hill from the ferry dock into the town and take the main street left; the monastery is signposted.

Also of historical significance is **Moni Filanthropinon**, on The Island's western side. Built in the 13th century by the Filanthropini, a leading Constantinopolitan family who fled the rampaging Crusaders in 1204, the monastery boasts rare 16th-century frescoes of pagan Greek philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle and Plutarch, alongside more suitably Christian personalities. The expressiveness and pathos of these paintings, characteristic of the 'Epirot School' of art, has aroused great interest from art historians. Moni Filanthropinon was also a 'secret school' for Christians during the centuries of Ottoman Muslim domination.

Eating on The Island is an experience. Head for **Gripos** (☎ 26510 81081; mains €6-8), on the left of the ferry dock, or **Propodes** (☎ 26510 81214; fish €4-6), on the path to Moni Pandeileimonos. Both specialise in lake fish and other local creatures. You can't miss Propodes: its

eye-catching tanks outside, reminiscent of a Chinese market, are filled with wriggling eels, hopping frogs and crayfish all ready to be cooked up. Both are good, though Propodes is slightly cheaper and has a relaxing location under an awning above the water; go for the golden fillet of carp (€6).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Ioannina's ferry dock is just below the Kastro. Boats to The Island (€1.30, 10 minutes) go between 7am and 11.30pm in summer, and between 7am and 10pm in winter. In summer, the boat goes every 15 minutes, in winter, only hourly.

Perama Cave Σπήλαιο Περάματος

Perama Cave (☎ 26510 81521; www.spiliao-perama.gr; adult/student €6/3; ☎ 8am-8pm) Four kilometres from Ioannina, Perama is one of Greece's largest and most impressive caves, loaded with white stalactites. Locals hiding from the Nazis discovered it in 1940; later, it was explored by speleologists Ioannis and Anna Petrohilos. The enormous 1100m-long cave has three storeys of chambers and passages. There's an hour-long tour.

Buses 8 and 16 from near Ioannina's clock tower run every 20 minutes to Perama, 250m south of the cave.

Dodoni Δωδώνη

In a fertile valley beneath Mt Tomaros, 21km southwest of Ioannina, stands Epiros' most important ancient site, the **Theatre of Dodoni** (☎ 26510 82287; adult €2; 🕒 8am-5pm). This colossal, 3rd-century-BC theatre was built where an earth goddess had been worshipped from around 2000 BC. She spoke through an oracle, reputedly the oldest in Greece and the most venerated in the land (before the Delphic oracle took precedence in the 6th century BC). By the 13th century BC, Zeus was speaking through the rustling of leaves from a sacred oak tree to worshippers at the site. Around 500 BC a temple was built in his honour, though today only its foundations and a few columns remain.

Under King Pyrrhus, however, things took a dramatic turn and a theatre was erected. Now restored, the Theatre of Dodoni hosts Ioannina's Festival of Ancient Drama. On its north side, a gate leads to the **acropolis**, where remnants of its once-substantial walls remain. The foundations of the **bouleuterion** (council house) and a small **Temple of Aphrodite** lie east of the theatre. Nearby are the scant remains of the **Sanctuary of Zeus**, where once stood the top god's sacred oak and oracle.

Later, in the 6th century, a Byzantine basilica was built over the site's Sanctuary of Hercules.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Buses from Ioannina's second bus station, on Vizaniou, leave at 6.30am and 4.30pm daily, except for Thursday and Sunday, returning at 7.30am and 5.30pm. One other bus, on Sunday, leaves at 6pm and returns at 6.45pm.

A taxi costs around €20 return plus €2.30 per hour for waiting.

ZAGOROHORIA ΤΑ ΖΑΓΟΡΟΧΩΡΙΑ

A cluster of 46 providentially preserved mountain hamlets, the Zagorohoria takes its name from an old Slavonic term, *za Gora* (behind the mountain), and the Greek word for villages (*horia*). These villages are tucked into the folds of the Pindos range and are filled with inexhaustible local legends and with marvellous houses, ranging from humble cottages of stone and slate to grand, fortified mansions made of the same hardy materials. These remote villages were once connected by paths and old stone bridges. Today, you'll see the bridges arching over riverbeds and

valleys, though paved roads now connect the villages.

Although time and emigration have left some villages mostly uninhabited, shed no tears: the rise of boutique and environmental tourism has led savvy locals to prosper by converting the Zagorohoria's old mansions (*arhontika*) and smaller traditional homes into lovely and unique guesthouses (*xenones*) very popular with Greek and foreign solitude-seekers. Encompassing the magnificent Vikos-Aoös National Park, the Zagorohoria is a top destination for nature photographers, hikers and climbers.

History

The Zagorohoria's historical significance can be experienced in its exquisite Byzantine and post-Byzantine churches. After the dismemberment of Byzantium by the Latin Crusaders in 1204, and the Turkish capture of Constantinople in 1453, numerous important Greek families fled the capital for the mountain fastnesses of Epiros. The fortress-like Zagorohoria would safeguard Greek artistic and literary culture; churches in more vulnerable, low-lying parts of Greece suffered widespread damage from the Turks, who were particularly keen on gouging out the eyes of saints in frescoes.

However, the Ottomans also gave the region privileges and autonomy for guarding the mountain passes. This, together with the remittances and gifts sent from the large Epirot diaspora abroad, funded the creation of the matchless Zagori villages and their great churches, in whose lavish decorations we can appreciate what the holy shrines of Byzantium would have looked like in their prime.

Vikos-Aoös National Park

Εθνικός Δρυμός Βίκου Αώου

The literal and figurative centrepiece of Zagorohoria is the spectacular Vikos-Aoös National Park. This is a paradise of pristine rivers and forests, flowering meadows, and shimmering lakes reflecting jagged mountains and endless blue sky. The park is home to almost one-third of Greece's flora, some endemic, as well as endemic fish, foxes and chamois, rare hawks, river otters and brown bears. The park is dominated by the Tymfi Massif, part of the north Pindos Mountains, with numerous ear-popping peaks like Mt Trapezitsa (2022m), Mt Astraka (2436m)

and Mt Gamila (2497m). To top it all off, there's the 12km-long Vikos Gorge, said to be the world's deepest.

While most people you encounter will be fellow hikers or their local hosts, you can still find semi-nomadic Vlach and Sarakatsani shepherds, taking their flocks up to high grazing ground in summer and returning to the valleys in autumn.

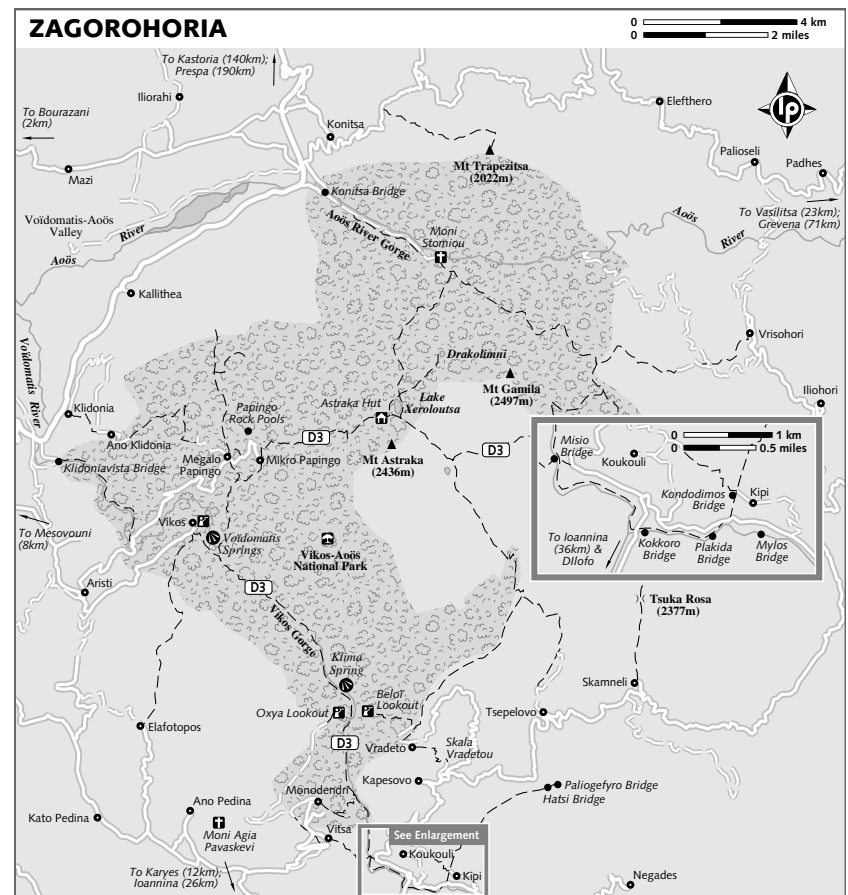
Dilofó & Negades Δίλοφο & Νεγάδες

Coming from Ioannina, the first Zagorohoria village is enchanting **Dilofó**, 5.7km northeast of Asprangeli (a total of 32km from Ioannina). Unlike the larger and more visited villages, tiny Dilofó has only very recently awoken from its slumber and thus remains absolutely

still and unchanged. Its jumbled slate-roofed houses tucked into the side of a mountain are highly evocative and there's a great view across the valley to Koukouli.

This view is part of the explanation for the enormous, 13.5m-high **Loumídi Mansion** you will see on the left-hand side when entering Dilofó. The story goes that after a young woman from across the valley was wedded to a Dilofó man, she became so homesick that she wanted to return to her village, Koukouli. The father of the groom instead ordered the erection of a house tall enough for the woman to see her parents' house – and so it was.

Dilofó's small central *plateia* is crowned by an enormous, 400-year-old plane tree and has a card telephone and taverna. There are



limited, though excellent, accommodation options, and those craving a romantic respite from the outside world could do worse than settle in here for a few days.

In the upper part of town stands the thick stone **Church of Kimisis Theotokou** (Dormition of the Virgin), which has an intricate, hand-carved wooden iconostasis and nice icons. It's open for Sunday liturgy; to see it at other times, track down village doctor Giorgos Triandafilidis, who has the key.

Although it's less well known than the one in Monodendri, Dilofos also has a hiking trail that leads to the **Vikos Gorge** (opposite) – if you're a glutton for punishment and want more walking, then start the hike here.

A nice excursion from Dilofos takes you 13km east to **Negades**, a stone-housed village with very little tourism. The 20-minute drive from Dilofos involves superb views of delicate stone bridges spanning densely wooded valleys and imposing cliffsides.

Negades has a very impressive post-Byzantine church, the **Church of Agios Georgios**. It's not always open, so plan in advance with Giorgos Kontaxis at the EOT in Ioannina. Built in 1792, the church is sumptuously decorated with exquisite icons and a gilded, hand-carved wood iconostasis, and lined with wall-to-wall frescoes, including rare paintings of pagan philosophers Aristotle and Plutarch. Don't leave without seeing the church's back section, where women once had to stand behind a grill to observe the service. The persuasive frescoes here, apparently created for purposes of moral edification, include a depiction of Judas being devoured by a sea monster, and a scrawny devil apparently riding and beating a bedded husband and wife who were too lazy to get up for church.

Monodendri, Vitsa & Ano Pedina

Μονοδένδρι, Βίτσα & Άνω Πεδίνα. **Monodendri** is the Zagorohoria's main settlement, thanks to its proximity to the Vikos Gorge. To get there, turn right off the main Ioannina–Konitsa road near Karyes and follow the signs. While there's considerable traffic in hikers and sightseers, and all of the support services that go with them, Monodendri is still a reasonably relaxing getaway.

The monastery of **Agia Paraskevi** here has spectacular views into the gorge. According to legend, local lord Mihalis Voevodas Therianos

founded the church in 1413 to thank God for healing his daughter of an incurable illness. Some of the church's frescoes also date to the 15th century. A second Monodendri church, the cross-domed **Church of Agios Minas**, stands near the square. It dates from the early 17th century, as do some frescoes inside.

South of Monodendri is **Vitsa**, which is less visited but more aesthetically pleasing. In Byzantine times, it was called Vizitsini, and was a significant settlement. Vitsa also has a cross-domed church built concurrently with Agiou Mina in Monodendri, the **Church of Agios Nikolaos**.

Most intriguingly, between Monodendri and Vitsa, archaeologists have discovered an **ancient Molossi settlement**. Ancient Epiros was ruled by the Molossi and King Pyrrhos. The site dates from the 9th century to the 4th century BC. Parts of ancient houses and graves from here are in Ioannina's Archaeological Museum (p328).

From Vitsa, drive 7.2km west-northwest to reach **Ano Pedina**, more touristy but a good base for exploring the central Zagorohoria. The village has many guesthouses, some quite striking.

Aristi to the Papingo Villages

The most memorable Zagorohoria experience for many is the drive up the vertiginous, ribboning northern road to **Megalos Papingo** and **Mikro Papingo**. If you're coming from Vitsa or Ano Pedina, the secondary road will join the main road running up from Ioannina. After heading west through **Kato Pedina**, follow the main road northwards until it branches after 4.1km; take the right branch to get to Papingo.

Aristi, the last village before Papingo, features the lovely **Monastery of Panagia Spiliotissa**, located on the side of a boulder by the **Voidomatis River**. Built in 1665, this narrow arched church is lined with frescoes. The monastery's philanthropy helped build schools in Zagorohoria during the Ottoman centuries.

After Aristi, the paved road hugs the river and opens onto increasingly spectacular views. It's all white-knuckle driving as you ascend a tight succession of 15 hairpin turns up to the ledge where the Papingo villages nestle under the looming hulk of Mt Astraka. If you're not too busy concentrating on staying alive, look right to see superlative views of the Vikos Gorge.

Megalos (Big) Papingo lives up to its name, with enormous stone formations known as 'towers'. It also gets the bulk of the tourists, whereas Mikro (Small) Papingo has remained quieter. In the latter's old schoolhouse, there's a **WWF information centre** (☎ 10.30am–5.30pm) with an excellent exhibition on the area's unique wildlife and fauna.

Along with limitless hiking opportunities, the Papingo villages have wonderfully refreshing **rock pools**, good for a revitalising dip on a hot day. They're reached via a 300m path from a bend in the road connecting the two villages.

Vikos Gorge Χαράδρα του Βίκου

At the very centre of the Zagorohoria is the 12km-long, 900m-deep Vikos Gorge; according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*, it is the world's deepest, though gorge lobbyists elsewhere contest the claim. Either way, there's no denying that Vikos is a truly awe-inspiring natural feature.

The gorge begins near Monodendri (1090m) in the south and runs north until the Papingo villages. You can tackle it from either end, but if you want to return to where you started, you'll have to arrange transport back via the long road route.

The Ioannina EOT (p327) or EOS (p329) can advise on current weather conditions and provide maps and other information. You'll need water, stout walking boots and some endurance; the hike takes around 6½ hours.

If you start from Monodendri, walk to the 15th-century monastery of **Agia Paraskevi** for a spectacular view over the gorge. You can descend here, on a steep, marked path between the village and monastery. From there, it's a four-hour walk to the end, from where a trail up to the right leads to Mikro Papingo (2½ hours). The larger Megalos Papingo is a further 2km west, but the track splits into two at the base of the climb. The **Klima Spring**, about halfway along the gorge, is the only water source.

You can also terminate your hike at **Vikos**, south of the Papingo villages, where the owner of the *kafeneio* (coffee house) on the square will drive you back to Monodendri for €35 (a taxi would cost double). Located 5km north-east of Aristi, Vikos also has accommodation and excellent views, and is a nice place to spend a night.

Stunning views of the gorge can be enjoyed from the **Oxya Lookout**, 5km on a good dirt road beyond Monodendri. Opposite on the eastern side, there's another jaw-dropping peer into the abyss at **Beloi Lookout**. To get there, drive 9km on a winding road or go to **Vradeto** from the signposted turn-off near Kapesovo, and then hike 1.5km along a marked trail at the end of the dirt road; you can also drive, but it's bumpy. Vradeto is another evocative village, with a striking position along striated limestone cliffs. The Beloi Lookout is accessible on foot via a vertiginous rock stairway called the **Skala Vradetou**, signposted just outside **Tsepelovo**. This village makes a relaxing base for hill walking and hiking to northern Zagorohoria sites like the Drakolimnes (Dragon Lakes). It has a post office, cardphone, and good accommodation and eating options.

Activities

English-speaking **Alex Danelas** (☎ 6942 591685; www.pindostrek.net) is a very experienced and qualified local hiking guide.

Trekking Hellas (☎ 26510 71703; www.trekking.gr; Aravantinou 16, Ioannina) does rafting, while **Robinson Expeditions** (☎ 26530 71517; activities@robinson.gr; ☽ May–Oct) runs a mountain sports activity centre in Kipi.

Sleeping

The growing popularity of the Zagorohoria among Greek and foreign tourists has created an arms race of new guesthouses. While prices are high, many Zagori guesthouses are unforgettable and the location is, as they say, priceless.

Archontiko Zarkada (☎ 26530 71305; www.monodendri.com; Monodendri; s/d €25/35) These clean, snug rooms have balconies with gorge views. Some rooms have spa baths for nursing bruised hikers back to health.

Xenos Vikos (☎ 26530 71370; Monodendri; d €45–60; ☽ Mar–Dec) Located only 400m from the Vikos Gorge, next to the lower village square, this relaxed but lively *xenonas* (guesthouse) has a leafy courtyard for eating breakfast, and a communal kitchen and lounge.

Porfyron (☎ 26530 71579; fax 26530 71922; Ano Pedina; s/d €45/60) A 19th-century mansion recently converted into an inn, the red-painted Porfyron has considerable rustic charm, with antique furnishings and soft-coloured walls complementing the classic, wood-panelled ceilings. The ground-floor doubles have spiral

HIKING THE ZAGOROHORIA: THE GRAND TOUR

To see the Zagorohoria at its most spectacular, get off the roads and into nature. You don't necessarily need a guide, but get an update on conditions from the EOT (p327) or EOS (p329) in Ioannina first. And definitely get the map, Anavasi Mountain Edition's Pindus-Zagori 1:50,000 (€8), available in Ioannina, Monodendri, Papingo and in some guesthouses in other villages too, or on the Anavasi website (www.mountains.gr). Armed with this information and tough hiking boots, a compass, sunscreen, sticks and water, you'll be ready to go.

While the area offers plenty of rewarding day hikes, hardened hikers will be intrigued to know that it is possible to do a three-day 'grand tour', sleeping in guesthouses and mountain huts along the way.

One such hike goes from **Monodendri to Tsepelovo**. First, from Monodendri the trail leads through the stunning **Vikos Gorge** to the **Papingo villages** (6½ hours). From here it's another three hours to the **Astraka Hut** (☎ 6973223100; www.astrakaref.com; dm €10; ☞ May-Oct), up at 1950m. There's no phone or electricity, but the 52-bed hut is always open and has a warden, generator power and food.

From here it's only a 30-minute hike to the sublime **Drakolimni** (Dragon Lake), though coming back down takes 45 minutes. From Drakolimni, you can continue to the spectacular peak of **Mt Gamila**; this is a tougher hike, with many ups and downs, and takes four hours. Another five hours from Gamila brings you finally to Tsepelovo. Alternatively, from Gamila you can hike up to VrISOHORI, along the AooS River, with crystal-clear mountain springs.

staircases leading down to en suites. Owners Rita and Yannis provide local information and, if your room is one with a fireplace, will happily get you the wood.

Xenonas Dias (☎ 26530 41257; Mikro Papingo; s/d €45/60). This rustic *penzion* with 12 rooms and a tasty restaurant is a solid bet in the quieter Mikro Papingo village.

Xenonas Mikro Papingo 1700 (☎ 26530 41179; Mikro Papingo; s/d €45/60) Newly opened 1700 has five handsomely appointed rooms. It's a lovely choice with real character.

Papaevangelou (George's Place; ☎ 26530 41135; Megalo Papingo; s/d/tr/studio €50/65/80/110) Nice stone rooms and spectacular views, along with hearty homemade breakfasts. At the central square, turn left on the unpaved road. The hotel is on the right.

Hotel Agriogido (☎ 26530 42055, 6945364484; georgio@papingo.gr; Megalo Papingo; s/d/t incl breakfast €55/70/100) A relaxing guesthouse in a restored old Zagori dwelling. When entering Papingo, you'll see it on the left.

our pick Arhontiko Dilofo (☎ 26530 22455, 6978 417715; www.dilofo.com; Dilofo; d incl breakfast from €65) One of the most wonderful guesthouses in all of Zagorohoria, this 475-year-old restored mansion in placid Dilofo is ideal for anyone seeking total peace and natural harmony. Rooms feature traditional carpets, furnishings and ornate painted window shutters that, when closed, give you a feeling of being inside

the warm hold of a grand seafaring vessel. The Arhontiko has a lovely enclosed garden and scenic views over the village's cluttered slate rooftops. The friendly and immensely knowledgeable owner, Giorgos Kontaxis, happily speaks of the gold pipes, secret letters and other centuries-old mementos he discovered while renovating the mansion, inhabited since 1633. Greek, English, German and Italian are spoken here.

Primula (☎ 26530 71133; Ano Pedina; d from €70) Another restored 19th-century mansion in Ano Pedina centre, the romantic Primula has a captivating assortment of differently appointed rooms; the walls of some are stone, while others are well painted in mottled pastel tones. Billowing drapes add to the charm.

Mikri Arktos (Little Bear; ☎ 26530 81128; kittasth@otenet.gr; Tsepelovo; d from €70) This cosy guesthouse on Tsepelovo's *plateia* is named after owner Thomas Kittas' favourite constellation, one of many visible in the perfectly clear mountain sky at night. It's a friendly place where you can doze off in the shade of a plane tree, try the specials at the downstairs taverna, or cook for yourself in the kitchenettes found in each of the unique and vividly painted rooms.

Eating

Edesma (☎ 26530 81088; Tsepelovo; pites €3-5) Come here for *pites* or ready-cooked meals (*mayirefta*), right in Tsepelovo.

Ta Soudena (☎ 26530 71209; Ano Pedina; mains €4-6.50) A popular taverna at the entrance to Ano Pedina, Ta Soudena offers Greek vegetable *mezedhes*, *pites* and grilled meats.

Sopotseli (☎ 26530 22629; Dilofo; €4-7) This relaxing taverna along Dilofo's square serves up hearty portions of grilled Greek meats and very fresh salads.

O Dionysos (☎ 26530 71366; Monodendri; pites €5-6) Along upper Monodendri's main street, this is a good spot for a tasty *fakopita* (lentil pie) or other traditional Epirot pies.

Restaurant H Tsoumanis (☎ 26530 42170; Vikos; mains €6). Gorge yourself near the gorge at this iconic taverna in Vikos; wild boar, goat and other mountain creatures are recommended.

Spiros Tsoumanis (☎ 26530 12108; Megalo Papingo; mains €8-13) This hearty country grill at the end of Papingo specialises in local *pites* and roast lamb *sti gastras*, with fresh-from-the-garden *horta* (wild greens) salads.

Getting There & Away

From Ioannina, buses go to Dilofo (€3.50), continuing to Tsepelovo (€4.10, 1½ hours, 5.30am and 3.15pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday). Other buses serve Megalo and Mikro Papingo (€4.90, two hours, 5am and 3pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday, with the Wednesday bus calling in at Vikos in summer) and Monodendri (€3.10, one hour, 6am and 3pm Monday, Wednesday and Friday). All buses return to Ioannina immediately. On weekends, take a taxi: Ioannina–Monodendri fares are approximately €25 to €30, though you can negotiate.

KONITSA ΚΟΝΙΤΣΑ

pop 2871

Carved amphitheatrically into a hillside under endless blue skies, Konitsa (*ko-nit-sah*) is the gateway to the northern Zagorohoria. It's also a lively mountain market town in its own right, and one not without its share of rugged individuals. Kayakers, hikers and river explorers circle the wagons at night here, and Greek hunters too use Konitsa as a sort of cowboy depot. The town's only a few kilometres southwest of the Mertziani border crossing with Albania.

From Ioannina, Konitsa is 64km north on the national road; past it, this road arcs northeast on a magnificent route between the Grammas and Smolikas Mountains, to Kastoria in western Macedonia.

Orientation & Information

Coming from Ioannina, Konitsa is on the right-hand side of the national road, and sprawls up from it for some 2km. Konitsa's central square has pharmacies, a post office and a Commercial Bank with an ATM. The bus station is a short walk downhill from here. Konitsa also has a small hospital for first aid.

There's no EOT, but there is Ioannis Mourehidis at To Dendro Guesthouse, for over 30 years the independent traveller's first port of call in Konitsa.

Activities

The most appealing local walk is the 4.5km hike along the Aoös River Gorge to **Moni Stomiou** (Stomio Monastery), founded in the 15th century but relocated here in 1774 from its original location on Mt Trapezitsa. Start at the beginning of the town, where the river is straddled by the impressive **Konitsa Bridge**. This 20m-high, 40m-long single-arched stone structure was built in 1870 by a local master craftsman, using money pooled from the then-Ottoman town's Christian and Muslim citizens. After the Greek-Turkish population exchanges 43 years later, however, the latter would be sent to Turkey and replaced by Greeks from Cappadocia.

After the bridge, follow the turquoise waters of the Aoös River along the signposted trail. The first third is a drivable dirt road, but it soon becomes a narrow path between the water and a steep bank, and then barrels gradually upwards through dense vegetation. The last 1.5km is wider, but steep. The monastery might be open; even if it's not, the hike is worthwhile for the tremendous views over the Aoös River canyon. Spring water is available.

No Limits (☎ 26530 23777; www.nolimits.com.gr) organises mild to extreme river-based activities.

Anglers can enjoy **fly-fishing** along the Aoös River to the southwest, near Bourazani.

Sleeping & Eating

Kougias Hotel (☎ /fax 26550 23830; www.kougias.gr; s/d €35/45) If you'd like to stay right on the square, and try the owner's award-winning Cabernet Sauvignon, then come to the friendly though reserved Kougias. Rooms are well done, with a new upper floor of attic doubles offering excellent views.

To Dendro Guesthouse (☎ 26550 22055; d/tr €40/55; P) While a moustachioed man clad in leather and answering to the name 'Johnny Dendro' might not seem particularly auspicious to the first-time Konitsa visitor, seasoned travellers know that Yiannis Mourehidis will sort them out with clean, comfortable rooms and solid, money-saving travel tips. The charismatic Yiannis can organise trips to Albania and kayaking adventures, and also runs a spirited taverna. Entering town, look for the UN-like display of flags on the last bend of the road before the main square.

Grand Hotel Dendro (☎ 26550 29365; www.grandhoteldentro.gr; d/tr/ste €60/75/100; P) A different ambience pervades this, the upmarket sister hotel of the To Dendro guesthouse. With this new offering, Yiannis and his Cypriot wife Katerina have sought to merge the traditional with the luxurious. The attic suites, with hydromassage showers, spacious living rooms and fireplace, are reminiscent of a superior ski lodge, while the use of soft lighting and pastel colours lend a newlywed feel to the doubles. Excellent home-cooked Greek fare is served in the formal dining room.

our pick Konitsa Mountain Hotel (☎ 26550 29390; www.konitsahotel.gr; s/d/tr/ste incl breakfast €70/90/120/150; P) This grand new hotel 2km up the hill behind town offers spacious rooms and combines smooth marble, beautifully seasoned wood floors and, of course, breathtaking mountain views. Some rooms have large Jacuzzis and fireplaces. The hotel also has sauna, Turkish baths and a gym. Friendly owners Babis and Georgia, and their English-speaking son Apostolis, can advise about local activities. They also offer a mountain/sea two-week deal involving seven days at the Konitsa hotel and seven days at its sister hotel on Corfu island, transport included. To get there, follow the road behind the centre uphill for 2km or take a taxi from the *plateia* (about €2).

our pick To Dendro Restaurant (☎ 26550 22055; mains €5-7) Greek hunters and veteran travellers alike know that this, the taverna of innkeeper Yiannis Mourehidis, is the best place in town for wild boar in wine, pot-roasted lamb or delicious lake trout. Kick back with a beer and listen to Yiannis' stories about life in the Konitsa wilds, but whatever you do don't leave without trying the delectable hot grilled feta with chilli and tomato special.

Getting There & Away

From the **bus station** (☎ 26550 22214) buses serve Ioannina (€5.10, two hours, seven daily); change here for other destinations.

Buses go to the Albanian border at Mertziani (€1.30, 30 minutes, three daily) and to Bourazani (€1.20, 30 minutes, four daily). The Petrina Horia villages of Molista and Ganadio have twice-weekly buses (€2.30, 30 minutes). If there are passengers, an afternoon bus leaves three times weekly for Kastoria (€14, four hours).

AROUND KONITSA

Bourazani Μπουραζάνι

The **Bourazani Environmental Park** (☎ 26550 61283; www.bourazani.gr; adult/child €10/6; ☼) from sunset), 14km west of Konitsa, educates about Epiros' wild things. It takes up a whole mountain close to the Albanian border, and includes a conference hall for environmental education and feeding areas for boar, deer, kri-kri and moufflon. You can see animals feeding at dusk via a bus tour from the adjacent **Hotel Bourazani** (☎ 26550 61283; burazani@otenet.gr; s/d/tr €70/105/110; P), a good family spot that combines a hunting lodge ethos with a recreational centre (it has a pool, and tennis and basketball courts). The hotel's restaurant grills up the Environmental Park's unluckier inhabitants.

Molista & Ganadio Μόλιστα & Γαναδιό

To see some wonderful and totally unvisited traditional villages set amid lush forests, head north of Konitsa to the **Petrina Horia** (Stone Villages) of **Molista** and **Ganadio**. Molista is very quiet, with only a small number of elderly inhabitants living there year-round. The village's stone architecture and cobblestoned streets are aesthetically soothing and it also has the large **Church of Agios Nikolaos kai Taxiarches** (St Nicholas and the Archangels), created in 1864 on the site of a much older one. The church has a large belfry and an opulent wood-carved iconostasis, with fine detail work illustrating Biblical tales like Adam, Eve, and the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Its impressive icons date back at least 130 years. However, locals keep the previous church's icon collection under lock and key; no-one knows how old they might be, as the villagers are still waiting for the Ministry of Culture to send an expert.

Molista also has a humble but lovely guesthouse, the **Arhontiko tis Serafi** (☎ 26550 24090,

6945691216; s/d/t €40/60/70), run by the good-natured Vangelis Serafis. The rooms aren't spectacular but are intimate and do have some nice touches, antiques and the occasional vividly painted wall motif. There's central heating in the winter, and some rooms have fireplaces; however, you pay for the wood (about €10 per night). The hotel's ceiling was hand-carved in 1912. Downstairs, between stone arches, the *arhontiko* has a cosy restaurant specialising in homemade Epirot food such as *lahanopita* (vegetable pie) and grilled meats.

The second stone village, nearby **Ganadio**, has even more impressive stonework, but no accommodation. The village is over 450 years old, and taking a leisurely stroll along its cluttered old stone houses and flower gardens in the warm summer evening shadows is a real pleasure.

Ganadio also has a café where locals keep loose, and the grand **Church of Agii Taxiarches** (Church of the Holy Archangels) just opposite. It's not likely to be open, so ask someone in the café to find charismatic local priest Ioannis, who will be glad to show you around and, if you're lucky, have you over for a crisp distilled beverage on his patio. The stone church was built in 1870, and has unusual blue-painted walls. Its eclectic contents testify to the contributions of local artisans and the Epirot diaspora: the hand-carved wood iconostasis was made in Gjirokastër (Argyrokastro in Greek), just across the border in Albania, while ornaments from Bucharest, Russian icons and lavish wall murals attest to its diaspora funding.

The Petrina Hora are never crowded, though the summer **panigyria** (festivals) on 15 and 20 of August, celebrating saint's days with music, dancing and traditional food and drink, liven things up in Ganadio. Nevertheless, if you go in spring or autumn you'll be likely to have the place to yourself, and there are plenty of wonderful local walks to enjoy.

Getting There & Away

From Konitsa's **bus station** (☎ 26550 22214) there are buses to Bourazani (€1.20, 30 minutes, four daily) and to Molista and Ganadio (€2.30, two weekly).

It's better to drive to Molista or Ganadio than take the bus. From the entrance to Konitsa, head north on the national road (towards Kastoria) for 17.2km; a sign reading 'traditional stone villages' will appear. Turn

right here and follow the next sign to Molista (2km).

PREVEZA ΠΙΠΕΒΕΖΑ

pop 17,724

Set on a peninsula between the Ionian Sea and the Ambracian Gulf, Preveza (*preh-veh-zah*) is a small fishing and commercial port beautified by yachts in the harbour and painted houses in its narrow backstreets. Although it has a small student population and some holidaying Greeks, Preveza is more a waystation for nearby beach resorts and a destination for business travellers than anything else. Nevertheless, it's an attractive town with friendly locals, and worth visiting for a relaxing seafood lunch and for a wander through the old streets.

Orientation & Information

Coming from the bus station, 2km north of the centre, the major thoroughfare is Leoforos Irinis; the main sights are between it and the water to the east, hemmed in by the (closed) Venetian Castle of Agios Andreas on the north. Ethnikis Andistasis, roughly parallel with Leoforos Irinis and two blocks up from the waterfront, holds most of the banks, ATMs and shops. The street's prominent clock tower marks the centre; restaurants line the nearby alleys, while the waterfront has cafés.

An underwater car tunnel (€3) linking Preveza with Aktion to the south starts about 2.5km west of Preveza centre; there are no passenger ferries between Preveza and Aktion. **NetcaféAscot** (☎ 26820 27746; Balkou 6; per hr €3; ☼) 9.30am-2am) Check internet here.

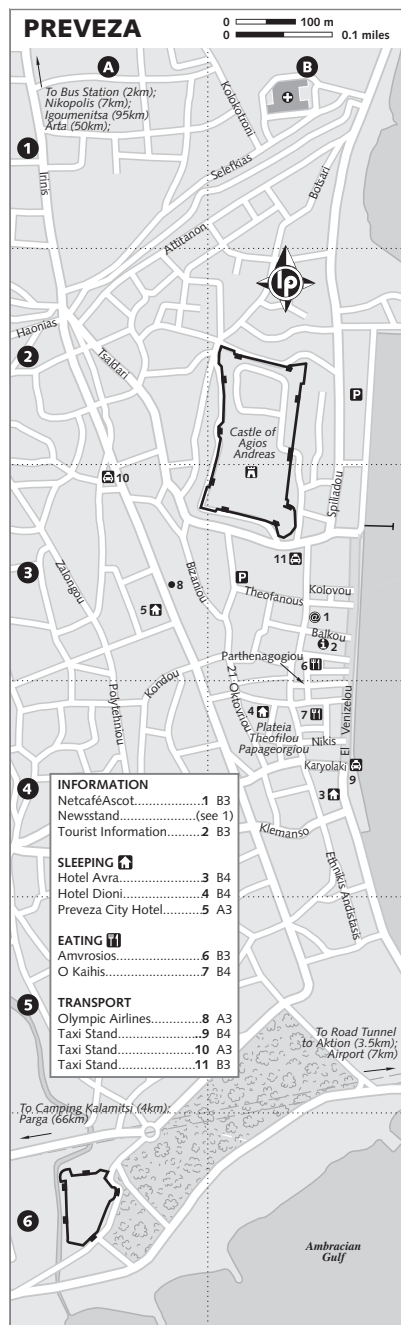
News Stand (☎ 26820 22370; Balkou 10) Stocks foreign newspapers.

Tourist information (☎ 26820 21078; www.preveza.gr; Balkou) Opposite NetcaféAscot.

Sleeping

Camping Kalamitsi (☎ 26820 22192; fax 26820 28660; Kalamitsi; camp sites per adult/tent €5/4; P) Preveza's best camping ground has 116 grassed sites with ample shade, a large pool, restaurant, and good services. It's 4km along the main Preveza-Parga road.

Hotel Avra (☎ 26820 21230; fax 26820 26454; Eleftheriou Venizelou 19; s/d €40/50; P) Avra prides itself on location and has clean, airy rooms, though no longer the town's most luxurious. Those with balconies overlooking the harbour have good views, but also street noise.



Hotel Dioni (☎ 26820 27381; fax 26820 27384; Plateia Theofilou Papageorgiou; s/d €50/80; 🏠) This former budget place will go upmarket following a renovation planned at time of writing. The hotel is set on a quiet street close to the main sites.

Preveza City Hotel (☎ 26820 89500; fax 26820 26454; Leoforos Irinis 69; s/d €50/80; 🏠) This new business hotel has taken the mantle as the town's best, though it also has a very businesslike location up on noisy Leoforos Irinis. Rooms are modern with all the expected amenities and service is brisk though friendly.

Eating

ourpick Amvrosios (☎ 26820 27192; Grigoriou tou Pemp-tou 9; mains €4-5) From sardines to swordfish, they have it all at this iconic fish taverna spilling out onto a flowering side lane by the waterfront. Everyone comes here, from confident cats to boisterous assortments of Greek students. Choose from the catch of the day, relax with a beer or wine and let the chefs get to work.

O Kaihis (☎ 26820 24866; Parthenagogiou 7; mains €5-7) This taverna, also on a side street a bit further south, takes a no-nonsense approach with its grilled meats and hefty Greek salads. Service is gruff but thorough.

Getting There & Away

AIR

At least five flights weekly serve Athens (€65, one hour). **Olympic Airlines** (☎ 26820 28343; www.olympicairlines.com; Irinis 37) has an office. Preveza airport, 7km south of the town, is sometimes called Lefkada or Aktion. Olympic Airlines operates an airport bus (€1.55). An airport taxi is €10.

BUS

From the **bus station** (☎ 26820 22213) buses serve Ioannina (€8.70, two hours, eight daily), Parga (€6.10, two hours, five daily), Igooumenitsa (€8.50, 2½ hours, two daily), Thessaloniki (€39, eight hours, one daily) and Athens (€32, six hours, five daily).

AROUND PREVEZA

Nikopolis Νικόπολη

In 31 BC Octavian (later, Emperor Augustus) defeated Mark Antony and Cleopatra in the famous naval Battle of Actium (present-day Aktion). To celebrate, he built **Nikopolis** (City of Victory; ☎ 26820 41336; adult €2; 🕒 8.30am-3pm). Octavian populated it by forcibly resettling people from surrounding towns and villages.

In the 5th and 6th centuries AD, Nikopolis was plundered by Vandals and Goths, but was rebuilt by Byzantine Emperor Justinian. Nikopolis was sacked again by the Bulgars in the 11th century, and that was it.

The original **Roman walls** barely survive, though the **Byzantine walls** and a **theatre** are better preserved. The site also includes remnants of a **Temple of Ares**, a **Temple of Poseidon**, an **aqueduct**, **Roman baths** and a restored **Roman odeum**. The enormous site sprawls across the Preveza-Arta road.

The site's **archaeological museum** (☎ 26820 41336; adult €3; 🕒 8.30am-3pm) also has ancient exhibits, while other finds are displayed in Ioannina's (currently closed) Archaeological Museum (p328).

Preveza-Arta buses stop at Nikopolis.

PARGA ΠΑΡΓΑ

pop 2432

An island that forgot it was attached to the mainland, Parga is the only true resort of the Epiros Riviera, and one that has something for everyone. Set inside a curving bay crowned by a Venetian castle and flanked by golden beaches, Parga is an aesthetic pleasure, with its exquisite aquamarine waters balanced by lush green olive-clad hills, little islets and white-plastered houses stacked on winding, flowery streets above a colourful waterfront whose cafés and bars come roaring to life in summer.

Indeed, Parga parties hard in July and especially August, when the Italians bear down in force on a town that was, like the rest of Epiros' coast, once a Venetian possession. Indeed, the dark features, accent and soft hospitality of the local Greeks show that this old Mediterranean spirit is alive and well here.

At the beginning and end of summer, Parga is a popular package-tour destination for Northern European tourists; nevertheless, its small size and sense of seclusion help preserve its intimate feel. It's a place whose backstreets are still full of scampering children, hidden chapels and the clothes of the locals hanging out to dry. Swimming season begins in early May, and unlike most Greek holiday resorts, there's a fine sandy beach with good swimming (perfect for kids) in Parga centre. The town makes an ideal base for excursions to Paxi and Antipaxi, and the mysterious Nekromanteio of Afya.

Orientation & Information

The main north-south road from Preveza to Igooumenitsa passes by Parga at its top; from where the bus stops on the east side of town, Spyrou Livada descends into the centre. A second road further west also leads into the centre; it connects to the 2km-long Valtos Beach just southwest.

Commercial Bank, Agricultural Bank and Citibank ATMs exist. The National Bank of Greece is up on Spyrou Livada opposite the church. Parga also has a small medical centre. **International Travel Services** (ITS; ☎ 26840 31833; www.parga.net; Spyrou Livada 4) Just down from the bus station, ITS is a very experienced and helpful starting point: it can find accommodation, book local tours, arrange travel tickets, provide general information and even sells international newspapers and magazines. A Budget Rent a Car office is within ITS.

Newsstand (☎ 26840 32714; Alexandrou Baga 16)

Sells foreign newspapers and magazines.

Parga.net (☎ 26840 32177; Anexartias 17; per hr €3; 🕒 8.30am-1.30pm & 5.30-11.30pm May-Oct) An internet café; also visit the Parga.net website itself for useful information.

Police (☎ 26840 31222; Alexandrou Baga 18) The tourist police are located here too.

Post office (Alexandrou Baga 18)

Sights

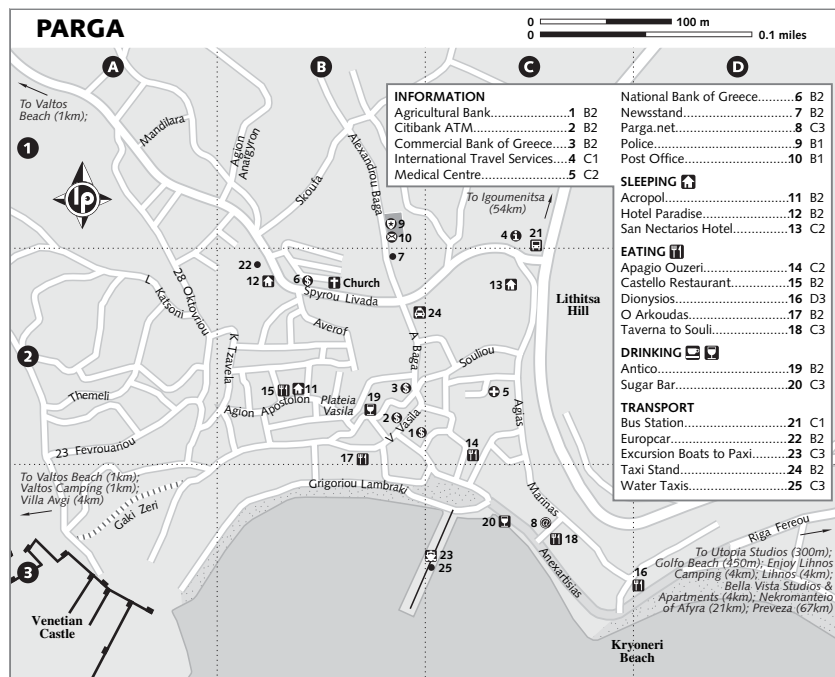
The cliff-top **Venetian Castle** (To Kastro) marks the western edge of Parga, and separates the town from Valtos Beach. Attesting to the 400-year Venetian presence in Epiros, the castle offers superb views of the coastline and town from its ramparts. The renovated central area has a **café** (☎ 26840 31150; 🕒 11am-late) in the former French armoury. Since the ramparts are partially unfenced, it's not a place for small children to go running around.

Activities

Visits to the Nekromanteio of Afya (p343), cruises on the Aherondas River, day trips to Albania or Paxi and Antipaxi are only some of what's on offer at **International Travel Services** (ITS; ☎ 26840 31833; www.parga.net; Spyrou Livada 4), the extremely informative travel agency across from the bus stop. ITS can inform about local hill walks and can even organise a one-day beginner's dive course for €35.

Sleeping

An excellent accommodation-finder for all budgets is International Travel Services,



located near the bus stop. Simple domatia are on Gaki Zeri, a narrow street with a view over Valtos Beach.

Valtos Camping (☎ 26840 31287; Valtos Beach; camp sites per adult/tent €5.20/3.90) This camping ground set amid orange trees at Valtos Beach, 2km west of Parga centre, has a restaurant. The 15-minute walk from Parga centre is steep, though you can also drive.

Enjoy Lihnos Beach Camping (☎ 26840 31371; www.enjoy-lihnos.net; Lihnos Beach; camp sites per adult/tent €5/4, d €55) This shady spot on a clean, sandy beach has a supermarket and restaurant; studios are also available.

Hotel Paradise (☎ 26840 31229; Spyrou Livada 23; s/d €50/65; 📺 📶 🚰) The friendly, central Hotel Paradise has a lovely courtyard pool and downstairs bar. Rooms are airy and clean, with all mod cons. A Europcar, bike rental and National Bank of Greece are all nearby.

our pick Acropolis (☎ 26840 31239; www.pargatravel.com; Agion Apostolon 4; s/d €60/90; 📺) The refined Acropolis, tucked midway up among Parga's little laneways, is an exercise in sophisticated seclusion. The 10 luxurious rooms have king-sized beds, hydromassage showers and

handmade Italian furniture. Some of the small balconies have views of the Kastro. The Acropolis is signposted from all over in town, so even if you can't see this hidden gem, you can't miss it. The Acropolis also hosts the discerning Castello Restaurant.

Utopia Studios (☎ 26840 31133; www.utopia.com.gr; Agiou Athanasiou; d/tr €60/90; 📺 May-Oct; 📶) These five spacious, sea-view apartments give the relaxing sense of being in a real house. The wood furnishings have an understated elegance, and the balconies are large and relaxing. Some of the bathrooms feature large hydromassage baths. There's a wi-fi hotspot too.

San Nectarios Hotel (☎ 26840 31150; www.san-nectarios.gr; Agias Marinas 2; d/t €65/80) The first hotel you come across when entering Parga, the San Nectarios' enviable hill-top location offers splendid views of the town, sea and castle. The rooms are clean and come with all amenities. There's also a wi-fi hotspot here.

Bella Vista Studios & Apartments (☎ 26840 3145; 26840 31833; Lihnos Beach; st/apt €80/100; 📺) If you want to peace out above Lihnos Beach, these very modern studios and apartments, set around an inviting pool amid citrus trees,

are a good bet. The 16 rooms are all recently renovated and kitchens are well equipped. The apartments sleep up to five and all the upper rooms have large balconies overlooking the beach and the olive-clad hills. You can walk downhill to the beach in five minutes; the management also offers deep discounts on weekly car rentals.

Eating & Drinking

Taverna to Souli (☎ 26840 31658; Anexartiasias 45; mezedhes €4-6, mains €6-9) This relaxing place does great mezehes, with a focus on local treats like grilled feta cheese with tomatoes and herbs (*feta Souli*). Try the oven-baked lamb or goat (*kleftiko*) for a filling main course.

Apagio Ouzeri (☎ 26840 32791; mezedhes €3.50-5) Parga's only *ouzerie* is tucked into a stair ed alley off the promenade. It's got unique homemade dishes like lamb in juniper berry sauce, and excellent draught Zitsa wine.

O Arkoudas (☎ 26840 32553; Grigoriou Lambraki; mains €5.80-8) Down on the waterfront strip, 'The Bear', as it's called in Greek, has good bay views, and tasty grilled calamari.

our pick Dionysios (☎ 26840 32775; Riga Fereou; 1 fish €7-10) Dionysios, Parga's best place for fresh fish, is on the waterfront just before the town beach. You can people-watch from the upper veranda, which has an excellent view of the beach and facing islet, while you wait for a marinated fillet of swordfish or sea bream.

Castello Restaurant (☎ 26840 31833; Hotel Acropolis, Agion Apostolon 4; mains €8-11) A creative fusion of French, Italian and Greek cuisine is prepared with style at the Castello. It has an elegant, relaxed feel—probably the only place in town where you can hear classic Miles Davis tracks playing during dinner, and definitely the only one whose wine cellar is visible through a glass panel beneath your feet. Service is prompt and attentive. Find it at the Hotel Acropolis.

our pick Sugar Bar (www.sugarbar.gr; waterfront; 📺 10am-late) While it might at first seem indistinguishable from the other cafés wrapped along the waterfront, laid-back Sugar has substance as well as style, serving 106 different cocktails; the loyal following, like the tunes, is both Greek and international.

Antico (☎ 26840 32713; Anexartiasias 4; 📺 10am-3am) You can't stop the rock at this cosy little bar tucked in an upper side street, walls lined with guitar posters. The friendly bartender is dedicated to a playlist strong on '70s and '80s

classic rock, with an occasional dip into the '60s back catalogue.

Getting There & Away

BUS

From the **bus station** (☎ 26840 31218) buses serve Igoumenitsa (€5.20, one hour, five daily), Preveza (€6.10, two hours, four daily), Thessaloniki (€39, seven hours, one daily) and Athens (€35.30, seven hours, three daily).

CAR

Hire a car at **Europcar** (☎ 26840 32777; Spyrou Livada 19) or Budget Rent a Car, located at **International Travel Services** (ITS; ☎ 26840 31833; www.parga.net; Spyrou Livada 4).

WATER TAXI

Water taxis go to Valtos Beach (€4, from 9.30am to 6pm), Lihnos Beach (€7, from 11am to 5pm) and Sarakiniko (€8, from 10am).

AROUND PARGA

Nekromanteio of Afyra Νεκρομαντείο της Αφύρας

The ancients feared it as the gate of Hades, god of the underworld; for visitors today the **Nekromanteio of Afyra** (☎ 26840 41206; €2; 📺 8.30am-3pm) is just the labyrinthine ruin at the end of a beautiful boat ride down the coast and up the Aherondas River.

To ancient Greeks, the Nekromanteio was an oracle: pilgrims made offerings of milk, honey and the blood of sacrificed animals in order to communicate with the spirits of the dead. The remnants of the structure were only discovered in 1958, and with them also the ruined monastery of **Agios Ioannis Prodromos** and a **graveyard**. The eerie underground vault is probably the place into which confused ancient visitors were lowered by windlass, thinking that they were entering the realm of Hades itself.

Parga travel agents offer a Nekromanteio day trip, which costs about €10. Otherwise, drive south towards Mesopotamos (19km), and watch for the Nekromanteio sign. The site is 1km off the main road.

IGOUMENITSA ΗΓΟΥΜΕΝΙΤΣΑ

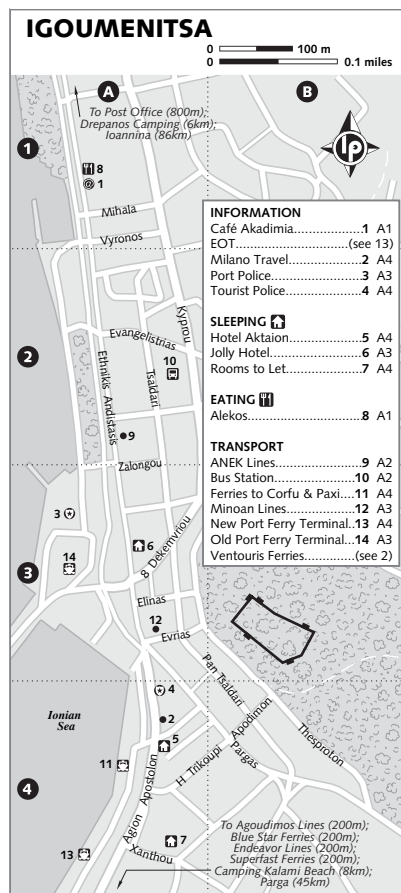
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Igoumenitsa (ih-goo-meh-nit-sah) is the end of the line for northwestern Greece, a busy, characterless port town 86km from Ioannina. It's where you take the ferry to Italy or Corfu.

Although Igoumenitsa is no tourist destination, the completion of the Egnatia Odos highway, linking Igoumenitsa with Istanbul, will enhance its stature as a leading cargo port.

Orientation

Ferries for Italy and Corfu leave from three adjacent but separate quays on the Ethnikis Andistasis waterfront. Ferries for Ancona and Venice (in Italy) depart from the new, southern port; those for Brindisi and Bari (in Italy) use the old port by the shipping offices; and ferries for Corfu (Kerkyra) and Paxi go from just north of the new port. The bus station is on Kyprou, two blocks behind the waterfront.



Information

Ethnikis Andistasis hosts currency-exchange machines and major-bank ATMs. The new port has more exchange booths. An EOT booth is outside the new port's arrivals area.

Café Akadimia (☎ 26650 29233; Ethnikis Andistasis 80; per hr €2.50; ☎ 8am–2am) Has internet.

Milano Travel (☎ 26650 23565; milanavl@otenet.gr; Agion Apostolon 11b)

Police (☎ 26650 22222; Agion Apostolon 5) Both the tourist and regular police are together on the main road near the port.

Port police (☎ 26650 22707) Beside the old port ferry terminal.

Post office (☎ 26650 22209; Izavelenas 2) Eight hundred metres north of town.

Sleeping & Eating

Igoumenitsa's identity as a merely functional town has rubbed off on its limited accommodation and eating options, but you probably won't stay long enough to let it depress you.

Rooms to Let (☎ 26650 23612; Xanthou 12; s/d €30/40) Proximity to the ferry is the major selling point for these plain, drab rooms.

Hotel Aktaion (☎/fax 26650 22707; Agion Apostolon 17; s/d €40/50) and **Jolly Hotel** (☎ 26650 23971; jollygm@otenet.gr; Ethnikis Andistasis 44; €55/65) are both waterfront C-class hotels with uninspiring yet quiet rooms.

Alekos (☎ 26650 23708; Ethnikis Andistasis 84; mains €4.50–7) This humble taverna serves *mayirefta* and grilled meat.

Getting There & Away

BUS

From the **bus station** (☎ 26650 22309; Kyprou 29) there are bus services to Ioannina (€8.20, two hours, nine daily), Parga (€5.20, one hour, four daily), Athens (€32.60, eight hours, five daily), Preveza (€8.50, 2½ hours, two daily) and Thessaloniki (€30.20, eight hours, one daily). Note these buses are less frequent out of high season.

FERRY

Corfu

Ferries to Corfu Town run hourly between 5am and 10pm (€6, 1¼ hours). Ferries also go to Lefkimmi in southern Corfu (€4.50, one hour, six daily) and Paxi (€7, 1¼ hours, three weekly). Agency booths opposite the quay sell tickets, and you can also call an English-speaking operator with questions about Igoumenitsa–Corfu ferries (☎ 26650 99460).

FERRY SERVICES TO/FROM IGOUMENITSA

Destination	Company	Duration	Fare	Frequency
Ancona	ANEK Lines	14hr	€70	daily
	Minoan Lines	14hr	€74	daily
	Superfast Ferries	14hr	€74	daily
Bari	Minoan Lines	9hr	€68	daily
	Agoudimos Lines	9½hr	€60	daily
	Ventouris Ferries	10hr	€64	daily
Brindisi	Agoudimos Lines	6½hr	€56	daily
	Endeavor Lines	6hr	€50	daily
	ANEK Lines	18hr	€70.50	5 weekly
Venice	ANEK Lines	18hr	€70.50	5 weekly
	Minoan Lines	18hr	€74.50	5 weekly

Hydrofoils to/from Corfu and Paxi usually run in summer; check locally.

Croatia

To get from Igoumenitsa to Croatia by boat, you must go to Italy first. Go to Bari to catch a boat for Dubrovnik, and to Ancona for ferries to Split, Zadar and Rijeka.

The table above refers to one-way, deck-class passenger ticket prices in high season (1 August to 6 September). Fares, and frequency, drop at other times. Return tickets are 30% cheaper than two one-way tickets.

Italy

For ferries to Italy, you can usually just show up in Igoumenitsa and buy an onward passenger ticket, though you'll want to book ahead for car tickets. Baseline vehicle sample fares include Bari (€40), Brindisi (€45) and Ancona/Venice (€136).

Boats generally leave mornings and evenings. Be at the port two hours before departure, and check in at the shipping agent's office for your boarding pass. On-board 'camping' is allowable on certain services for those with campervans.

Book tickets at portside agencies or through the ferry companies' offices/websites.

Agoudimos Lines (☎ 26650 22175; www.agoudimos-lines.com; Agion Apostolon 147)

ANEK Lines (☎ 26650 22104; www.aneke.gr; Revis Travel Tourism & Shipping, Ethnikis Andistasis 34)

Endeavor Lines (☎ 26650 26833; www.endeavor-lines.com; Eleni Pantazi General Tourism Agency, Ioniu Pelagous)

Minoan Lines (☎ 26650 22952; www.minoan.gr; Ethnikis Andistasis 58a)

Superfast Ferries (☎ 26650 29200; www.superfast.com; Pitoulis & Co Ltd, Agion Apostolon 147)

Ventouris Ferries (☎ 26650 23565; www.ventouris.gr; Milano Travel, Agion Apostolon 11b)

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