

Sea, land and myths.

Greece is a country with a rich historical heritage and mesmerizing natural beauty. As a land located at the crossroads between Asia, Africa and Europe, during its history Greece had cultural interactions with different civilizations. Classical Greek culture has influenced greatly the Western civilization as it was in Greece where the policy of Democracy, organized philosophical thought and theatrical genres such as comedy, tragedy and drama first appeared. Greek mythology was inspired by nature, the seas, the forests and the mountains and not unjustly, since the Greek landscape is truly awe inspiring. It is worth looking into the beauties of the Greek landscape through the prism of its history and myths.

Greece is the southernmost tip of the Balkan Peninsula where it dives deep into the Mediterranean splitting the Aegean and Ionian Sea apart. The astonishing number of 6000 islands, islets and rocks that surround the peninsula dramatically dot this part of the Mediterranean Sea, while connecting it via a busy network of ports, bays, cities and citadels, many of which remain in use since more than 5 thousand years back, as in the case of Athens that has been continuously inhabited for 5 millennia, being one of the oldest cities on earth. The Greek landscape, with the narrow land and the surrounding islands resulted to a strong seafaring tradition in the area, that remains unchanged until our times.

The biggest island of Greece, Crete, was once the home of the great Minoan civilization; an islandic society of skillful sailors and traders that managed to occupy a dominant position in international trade around the 2000 BC. When archeologist Arthur Evans discovered the Minoan city of Knossos, he assumed the Minoans were a peaceful civilization due to the rather uncommon lack of fortification. Later findings show that Crete, as the center of the Minoan civilization, was so active in sailing and trade, that the countless number of ships departing or reaching its ports, was what indeed kept the island safe from intrusions, testifying in this way, the Minoan's naval prevalence. Up to this day, and despite its economic decline, Greece owns the 3rd largest merchant fleet in the world, counted in absolute number of vessels, just behind Japan and China when the 58% of all EU-controlled fleet, is of Greek property. Well routed traditions, their expertise and the needs arising from the peculiar Greek landscape must have lead generations of residents of this land to specialize in navigation and invest in shipping.

No place in Greece can be further than a 137km from the shore, making it possible for everybody, anywhere in Greece to reach a shore, within 3 hours maximum. The Greek coastline is longer than 13.000 km with diverse beaches for all tastes and salt breathing, lively coastal cities with distinct architectures and styles.

The Ionian Sea is characterized by beaches that deepen quickly, the waters are cold and refreshing and typically, in stunning shades of Turquoise. The waters are cold since the deepest point in the Mediterranean, the "Calypso Deep", is in the Ionian Sea, 62km (about 38.53 mi) south-west of Pylos Island. It is one of the most seismic regions of our planet, as it is located at the point of convergence of the Eurasian, the African and the Apulian tectonic plates. The most catastrophic earthquake of the region occurred back in 1953 with a magnitude of 7.2 Richter followed by strong aftershocks. The islands Kefalonia, Zakynthos and Ithaca suffered massive destruction. Of the 33,300 houses on these islands, 27,659 were destroyed. Nowadays, all Ionian residences are built according to strict anti-seismic regulations.

In Northern Ionian Islands that remained intact from this catastrophic earthquake, one can witness the influence of the Venetians and French conquerors that settled to the complex of 'Eptanisa', leaving their mark to local architecture and the arts. The most emblematic example is Corfu, whose old town is a Unesco Heritage site, uniquely built in a Venetian style, with tall colorful houses built next to each other forming the charming small alleys, the 'kantounia' of Corfu is well-known for, whose aim was both to protect the locals from the winds but also from the pirates, who could easily get lost in the maze-like streets. The residents traditionally hang their laundry above the narrow alleys, in ropes secured between their walls, a practice commonly met in some regions of Italy.

On the other side of the peninsula, the islands of the Cyclades are densely located next to each other, therefore it is not uncommon to have a view of an Aegean Island when on an Aegean Island. Architecture in the Aegean tends to be minimalist, with white houses with blue windows, the colors that match the natural surroundings. The islands are rocky or even mountainous; the amount of water reservoirs on an island tends to define how rich the flora diversity of this island would be. It is typical for arid lands of the Cyclades to be abound with aromatic herbs, which since ancient times have been ritually used for healing purposes, as well as to enrich the aroma and taste of food. The island of Chios with its rich volcanic soil, is the only place where 'Mastic' is produced, a solidified plant resin with a delicate, sweet, fresh and spicy note that is used as a flavoring for foods and beverages.

Naxos, is the biggest island of the Cyclades and its mountain's 'Zas' peak is the tallest point of the Cyclades. Naxos has many springs and streams, and it's known for its rich vegetation – a rather uncommon feature for the sunburned and windswept Cycladic landscape. Animal husbandry is important in Naxos and their dairy products are considered among the best in the country, making Naxos one of the top culinary destinations in Greece. Approaching the port of Naxos it is impossible to miss the breathtaking archeological place of 'Portara', a massive marble door that leads to literally nothing, simply resembling a window with a view to the archipelago. It was originally created as a part of a temple to Apollo that never got completed. Despite 'Portara' being just attestation of an unfinished Greek old business, the captivating scenery it creates with its minimalist charm, is representative of Cycladic beauty and its minimalist architecture. Museums in the Cyclades complex typically feature minimalist sculptures, known as Cycladic figurines whose sculpting took place 5000 years back yet they look surprisingly contemporary in style, due to their frugality. Greece has the greatest number of archeological museums than any other in the world. All of them are worth a visit, but it must be difficult to find an archeological space, where the sunset is more beautiful than it is in Naxos, when looked through the 'Portara'.

The geographical position of the islands of the Aegean sea, at the south-eastern tip of Europe, close to Asia and North Africa, makes them a place with very interesting avifauna. Inhabited islands and many rock-islands in the Aegean are extremely important for migrating bird species. Birds, for example European Robins and halcyons, native to Europe's mainland migrate to the Aegean to survive the winters. From the opposite directions, species native to Africa and Asia such as typical Swallows and the Eurasian Hoopoe travel to the Aegean during springtime to build their nest and mate.

The Aegean operates as a refuge for sea creatures as well. The less well-known island of 'Piperi', a small rocky island with steep coasts and dramatic caves, is home to the largest seal population in the Mediterranean. In the caves around the island, the Mediterranean seals *Monachus monachus*, a rare protected marine mammal that is under the immediate threat of extinction finds refuge. The island of

Piperi, is in fact in the core of the National Marine Park and for this reason it is not allowed to be approached by any watercraft at less than 3 miles, so that animals can stick to their habits unbothered.

The Aegean cat is the only indigenous cat breed of Greece and first appeared in the Cyclades many decades ago. They have fluffy fur unlike shorthair European cats, their body is medium-sized, strong and muscular without a trace of fat. They are very social and friendly as long as they receive a pet. The presence of cats is loud in the Archipelago, and it is common for stray cats to welcome the passengers in big numbers in the ports. An example to put in perspective how big the cat population can be, is the charming little island of Iraklia, a hidden paradise that only locals are well aware of. The local population is only around 140 people, when cat population exceeds the 150. It is common for the municipality of Naxos to donate cat food to local settlers in order to feed the cats during winter, when locals and tourists spare less treats.

Greece has a rich naval tradition that remains an integral part of the Greek reality through the years and each of the islands is a small universe on its own that invites one to discovery. For those reasons, Greece is often identified with its waters. It is often overlooked that Greece consists by 80% of mountains. The country is split in the middle by its largest mountain range 'Pindos', which is the southern extension of the Dinaric Alps. Pindos begins at the Albanian border and continues all the way down to Peloponnese, thus influencing the climate of the areas on each side of its foothills. The mountain range stops the humid winds blowing from the Ionian Sea. The winds rise towards the tops of the mountains where the water vapors due to the cold temperature turns into raindrops. As a result, Western Greece has a more humid climate and more rainfalls. At the same time, Pindos does not allow the frozen northeast winds to reach Western Greece, making the winters there milder. Greece is estimated to have 250 days (about 8 months) of sunshine, but not all cities are equally sunny. For example, Ioannina city, located between Pindos and the Ionian Sea has 2250 hours (about 3 months) of Sunshine per year when in Attica Greece, located east of Pindos, the number reaches 2806, a total difference of 46 days or about 1 and a half months of constant rain.

In Pindos we can find the most important National part of the country, home to rare species. Among others, 10 species of amphibians, 21 species of reptiles, 133 species of birds and 24 species of various mammals find refuge there. The coniferous and beech forests are suitable habitats for large mammals such as the bear (*Ursus arctos*), the wild boar (*Sus scrofa*), the roe deer (*Capreolus capreolus*). The entire area of the Pindos-Valia Kalda National Park is perhaps the most important habitat of the brown bear in the country. In the dense riparian vegetation of Aoos and Voidomatis rivers, lives an aquatic mammal, the otter (*Lutra lutra*), a species that can be found only in very clear waters, which is why it is an indicator of water health. In the waters of the two rivers also live trouts (*Salmo trutta*) - that often swim against the current of rivers, that is yet another indicator of the purity of the waters. Campers in the area typically drink the water of the river just after a quick boil for extra protection.

Pindos is maybe the most important mountain mass in the Greek territory, but the tallest peak in the country is found elsewhere. Mount Zas in Naxos is according to some mythologies, the birthplace of Zeus, but Mount Olympus in central Greece is where he resides along the rest of the Olympian Gods. The summit of the mountain rises emblematically 2.917 meters above the Thessalian plain, the biggest plain mass of the country and it is only 18 kilometers (about 11.18 mi) far from the sea. The majesty of Olympus, the multiform and changeable charm of its nature, its high peaks, full of mist and low clouds that often bring storms, must have caused awe and admiration to the prehistoric man who lived at its foot, where

the archaeological shovel today reveals findings from iron age settlements. These first inhabitants of the area will create the legends that will later give rise to the Twelve Gods of the Ancient Greeks. Zeus was thought to reside at the second tallest tip of the mountain, today's 'Stefani' that through its history was called 'the throne of Zeus'. The tallest pick or else 'The Pantheon' todays 'Mytikas' was the meeting point of the gods and the place where Zeus would use to through a thunder down to the land. Amazingly enough if we look at the picks from the top, they resemble two balconies as if someone carved them in the rock, next to each other, overlooking the sea. The twelve gods would call home the gorges, "the folds of Olympus" as Homer calls them - where their palaces are located according to mythology.

Which aspect of Greece is more important after all? Is it the mountainous mainland or its island-wonders? The last story aspires to unveil what a Greek answer would be to that question. We said before that Crete is the biggest island of Greece, but this was only claimed after excluding a man-carved island. The Southern tip of the Greek peninsula, Peloponnese, is connected to the mainland via an only 6 km wide strip of land, the isthmus of Corinth. Evidence suggests that the residents of this territory since the 7 BC were very much frustrated that Peloponnese was not an island as well. The big and real complaint was the need to circumnavigate Peloponnese to get from the Aegean to the Ionian Sea of course with their vessels. Ancient Greek, Roman and Byzantine leaders all tried to carve the rock but failed the ambitious project, until modern technology and the state of peace we enjoy, finally allowed for the fulfilment of a 2 millennia dream. In 1893, Greece finally created more sea, as the isthmus of Corinth got finally carved and turned into the Corinth canal, which in practice makes Peloponnese an island. Today two road, two railway and two submerged bridges at the two ends of the canal connect the mainland side of the isthmus with Peloponnese. The technological advancements of our time have led the ships to grow bigger as well; as a result, they don't fit in the canal that is barely used for commercial purposes anymore. For land dwellers 2 millennia of waiting time was worth the view one gets from the top of the bridge to the waters of the two seas that seem as if they mix their turquoise and blue shades in a perfect new bright blue shade or happiness. The wild looks of the canal makes it an attractive place for adventure seekers to bungee jump. Would you, do it? Or will it rather make you wish it was still land?