

In a time of economic uncertainties, Greeks have continued to find spiritual succour in a place that has provided it for the past millennium – the Mount Athos monastic community. Yet even for the non-Orthodox, visiting the “Holy Mountain” (*Agion Oros*, in Greek), a richly forested, isolated peninsula embraced by the Aegean Sea, is a highly rewarding and relaxing spiritual retreat.

Mount Athos’ 20 monasteries (and numerous dependencies) grew under the patronage of Byzantine emperors, Russian tsars and other donors. Despite periodic fire, occasional attacks from pirates and deviant Crusaders, followed by Ottoman persecution, the monasteries have survived admirably. Indeed, the collective treasury of ecclesiastical art, architecture and manuscripts here make Athos vital to Christian heritage.

Athos today remains a place of living spirituality and tradition, preserving the contemplative practices of the ascetics who flocked to its craggy shores from the fourth century onwards. By 885, the Holy Mountain’s special status was confirmed in a chrysobull (gold-sealed imperial decree) issued by Emperor Basil I. Some 58 years later, its territorial borders were demarcated, and larger monasteries were built.

Legend asserts that the Virgin Mary visited Mount Athos; she was overwhelmed

# Holy stillness

Still the heart and soul of Orthodox Christian monasticism after 1,000 years, Mount Athos in Greece provides an ideal retreat for contemplation, writes **Chris Deliso**

by its beauty, and it was thereafter to be “the garden of the Virgin”. Since the monks dedicated it to her, other women were not allowed. This provision, still upheld, was confirmed in a 1046 chrysobull of the Emperor Constantine IX Monomachos.

Mount Athos’ storied legacy has long attracted scholars of Byzantine history, palaeography and art. However, with advance preparation, any male pilgrim over 18 can visit, and participate in the daily worship practised by the 2,000 or so monks present today. Although not expected to perform any labour, visitors can attend twice-daily liturgies (approximately six hours a day), and join the monks for sparse but healthy meals, all at no cost.

Over centuries, Athonite fathers have contributed to evangelism in countries like Serbia, Bulgaria and Russia, and to Orthodox theology. Particularly significant was the Athonite compilation of the most important Christian work that Western Christians have never heard of: the *Philokalia*.

A voluminous compilation of the Eastern Church fathers from the fourth to the fifteenth centuries, the *Philokalia* (“love of the beautiful” or “the good”) was compiled in Athos, and published in 1782. Translations from the Greek into Old Church Slavonic and other languages followed. The work’s recurring theme is the importance (and practice) of interior prayer, mindfulness and transcendence of vanity and ego. The *Philokalia* is considered the cornerstone text for Hesychasm. In Greek, the word *hesychia* means “stillness” or “quietness”. The Hesychastic concept of constant prayer and awareness of God derived originally from St Paul’s challenge to “pray without ceasing”. The most revered Hesychast prayer, known simply as “the Jesus Prayer”, is thus: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

Over the past 14 years, I have been lucky to visit Athos several times. While every visitor’s experience is unique and individual, I have always found it a wonderfully peaceful retreat from the “outside world”, a place where you can enjoy solitude, but also engage in earnest discussion with thoughtful people. On Athos, you also participate in the rituals of Byzantine civilisation; through this, perhaps, one can even get a glimpse into that bygone world.

Along with the Holy Mountain’s awe-inspiring historicity, visitors often find – the singularity of an Orthodox liturgy

extraordinary. Decidedly more free-form than a Catholic Mass, the experience is marked by polyphonic chant, pungent incense and candlelit icons. The spiritual atmosphere of the church is enhanced by the wild nature, mountains and seascape. While some motorised transport is available, monasteries are also connected by forest footpaths and cliff-top trails affording stunning views; walking between them is thus a great pleasure. Along with the chatter of birdsong from the thickets, you may hear a passing monk absorbed in rhythmic recitation of his prayers.

I received another unexpected gift more recently, when I met an Athonite monk – out of respect for his privacy, I shall not mention his name – considered particularly charismatic and spiritually wise by Greeks today. This happened due to a lucky coincidence. While dining with a friend in Thessaloniki, I wondered aloud to what extent Athos still hosts “old-school” eremitic monks, living in isolation, rather than in organised monasteries. To my boundless surprise, he then phoned up another friend – a nephew of the above-mentioned monk.

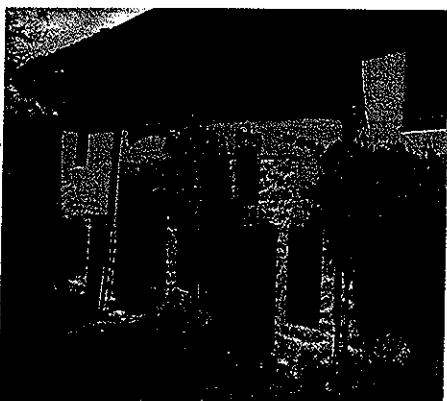
The friend arrived, and began diligently examining my large-scale Athos map; despite its admirable degree of detail, the monk’s isolated cell was nowhere indicated. “Must be somewhere around here,” the nephew said, pencilling in a dot. “His house is in these woods, and there’s no phone, nor electricity.”

Armed with nothing more than a name and a map, I thus resolved to find this enigmatic elder. After days of monastic tribulations marked by freezing rain, exhausting, nine-hour nightly vigils and meagre meals, the sun finally emerged. Following successive enquiries, I found myself walking a narrow, cobbled woodland path, still wet with the morning dew, animated by the chatter of songbirds and resplendent with the first hesitant flowers of spring.

I was fortunate it was a Sunday; the venerable monk only saw visitors twice weekly. This was because, I had been warned, I should expect up to 50 pilgrims waiting to meet him. Yet arriving at a simple cottage early in the morning, I found I had beaten everyone – even the monk!

“Please sit here,” said a courteous brother, pointing to a chair in the white-plastered waiting room. “He will see you after he wakes up.”

After about an hour, two Greek pilgrims –



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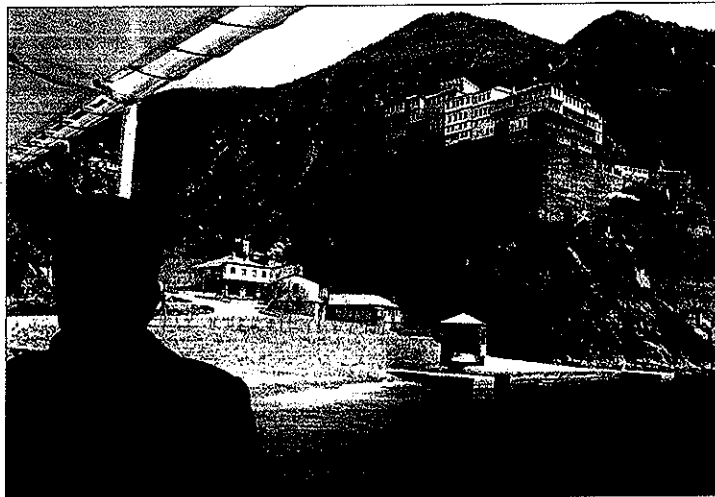
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businessmen from Athens – joined me. They were incredulous that a random American should have foreknowledge of the monk, whom they regarded as a sort of state secret. They were further surprised that I was speaking to them in Greek. “How on earth did you get here?” asked one, saying that he was on Athos specifically to visit the famous monk. “He cured my cousin’s cancer with his prayers,” added the other man.

Other Greek pilgrims soon joined us. Finally ushered into the inner sanctum, I was greeted with a kind smile by a man in his mid-fifties, of slender build, with a thin greying beard. He invited me to sit, and apologised for not speaking English, but we managed in his own language. We spoke, generally; I had no grave problems requiring miracles. Throughout our 20-minute conversation the monk often nodded, almost shyly, seeming to look not at me directly, but somewhere slightly above my right shoulder. There were no attempts at profundity, no special instructions, but you could feel that he did have a certain charisma. I asked him to bless a couple of icons I had bought at a monastery shop. He did so. “I will pray for you,” he said softly. “And please – pray for us.” I thanked the monk and left, sending a conspiratorial wink to the waiting Athenians.

Back outside, I set out down the peaceful wooded path, now dazzling in the fullness



A monk returning on the morning ferry contemplates one of Athos’ famous cliff-side monasteries

of the morning sun. There was stillness, somehow, amid the motion and colour of the breeze, flowers, birds and flitting butterflies. The world around me seemed almost like a page from the *Philokalia*. It was, I thought, a very nice way to start the day.

#### VISITING ATHOS

Daily visitor numbers are limited; for summer visits and major Orthodox holidays, book up to six months in advance (in other seasons, less notice is usually needed).

First, phone or email the Thessaloniki-

based Mount Athos Centre to enquire about available dates (the permit-getting process is outlined on its official website, [www.agioritikiestia.gr](http://www.agioritikiestia.gr)). The UK-based charity Friends of Mount Athos is a useful resource ([www.athosfriends.org](http://www.athosfriends.org)).

Although women cannot visit Athos, they can enjoy daily tour boats, which follow the coast, taking in the most visually stunning cliffside monasteries.

■ Chris Deliso ([www.chrisdeliso.com](http://www.chrisdeliso.com)) is a travel writer who has covered Mount Athos in several Lonely Planet guides to Greece.

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