

# Road less travelled

From countryside drives to coastal routes, the winding roads of Greece and Cyprus are ideal for independent road trips, finds **Lina Molloholli**

**T**here's nothing quite like hitting the open road on Greece's mountainous mainland. With the windows down and the wind in one's hair, evocative mandolin music on the radio and lunch stops in tranquil villages, a road trip is a great way to get under the skin of this beautiful country – and with so many off-the-beaten-track spots, clients won't see too many cars, or even people.

Cyprus shouldn't be left by the roadside either, as the island offers sun, sea, sand, scenery and driving on the left, making for easy-breezy motoring. Got your client's attention? Here are three routes they can try on their next Hellenic adventure.

#### PRISTINE PELOPONNESE

Flying into Athens or Kalamata, clients can pick up a hire car and head to mystical Mystras, Greece's best preserved Byzantine settlement. This once-thriving city

is spread across a hillside, peppered with medieval palaces, houses, frescoed churches covered in images of the saints, plus the remains of a formidable castle.

From Mystras, Sparta is a 10-minute drive away. Not much remains of the ancient city, but the archaeological museum is full of statues and treasures. Meanwhile, the Museum of the Olive and Greek Olive Oil displays ancient presses and even fossilised olive leaves.

Heading south for 90 minutes, clients will reach Monemvasia, a fortified town on a rocky outcrop. The lower town, with winding alleys and stone houses, is a delight, while the climb to the upper town is rewarded with panoramic vistas at Agia Sofia church. Recommend staying in Monemvasia for a night or two, as there are a handful of trade-friendly boutique hotels.

A two-hour drive along the rugged Mani Peninsula leads to Cape Matapan, where a cave nestled ➤



# DESTINATIONS

## GREECE & CYPRUS | ROAD TRIPS

### TOP tips

- When visiting churches and monasteries, remind clients to dress modestly and check before taking photos, as some religious sites prohibit photography.
- Ensure car rental packages come with comprehensive insurance – including damage waivers – for total peace of mind.
- As the internet connection can be patchy in remote areas, adding a satnav to car hire is a smart choice.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Meteora monastery in Thessaly; typical Greek taverna in Makranitsa; church in Kardamyli  
PICTURES: Shutterstock/Vera Petrunina, Nataliya Nazarova



among deep forests is said to mark the entrance to Hades' underworld. Heading back towards Kalamata, suggest a pit stop in seaside Kardamyli to cool off. Should clients want to continue their adventure, a detour north leads to Olympia, where the Olympic Games began in 776BC – and where the modern Olympic flame is lit. Another option is to visit the beautiful city of Nafplio, and if clients are feeling adventurous, they can clamber up 857 steps to the castle for stunning views of the Argolic Gulf.

**Book it:** Inntravel offers the 12-night Peloponnese Journey with Olympia from £1,810 per person based on two sharing. Includes breakfast, car hire and flights to Athens from London for departures in October. [inntravel.co.uk](http://inntravel.co.uk)

### INLAND ADVENTURE

Just over 100 miles from Athens on the spectacular roads of Mount Parnassus, the archaeological site of Delphi has an aura of intrigue. The sacred precinct was home to the Pythia, a female oracle who delivered prophecies believed to

“Agios Stefanos, Meteora's only nunnery, features 14th-century frescoes and a perfect viewpoint for sunsets

come from the god Apollo. Suggest a full day wandering the ruins, from the ancient theatre to the stadium, while soaking in the views of the olive tree-strewn valley below.

The drive from Delphi to Pelion, the next stop, is three and a half hours, and drivers will need a head for heights to navigate the sheer, cliff-edge roads. Suggest plenty of breaks and photo stops en route.

On arrival at the Pelion peninsula, there is plenty to see: start with Makrinita, a village 610m above sea level known as the 'balcony of Pelion' and suggest refuelling with a thick, milky *trahana* (fermented grain and yoghurt) soup

for a tasty, traditional energy boost.

No journey through the Greek mainland is complete without visiting Meteora, where monasteries stand atop towering sandstone formations. Agios Stefanos, Meteora's only nunnery, features marvellous 14th-century frescoes and a perfect viewpoint for sunsets. Clients can spend a night in the valley after a day's hiking or driving between monasteries.

Heading west into the Pindus mountains, Metsovo is the capital of Greece's Aromanian population – an ethnic group centred around this highland terrain. It's as charming in winter as in summer, all wooden chalets and cobbled streets, while local delicacies include *batzina* (courgette pie) *kefalograviera* (smoked cheese) and red wines. Metsovo is also a gateway to the Vikos Gorge, one of the world's deepest canyons.

For a refreshing dip after days of exploring, recommend driving to the coastal village of Sivota, which boasts seafront tavernas, hidden coves and crystalline waters.

**Book it:** Audley Travel offers a

10-night trip from £2,470, based on two sharing. Includes breakfast, car hire, accommodation, excursions and flights, based on a September departure. [audleytravel.com](http://audleytravel.com)

### CAREFREE CYPRUS

For travellers new to road trips, a Cyprus itinerary offers a beginner-friendly alternative to the Greek mainland. Driving on the same side as the UK makes taking the wheel less daunting, while the island's compact size means clients can swap long drives for daily outings.

The Paphos region is a convenient base, combining plentiful accommodation and key sites such as Aphrodite's Rock. Within an hour's drive is the buzzing city of Limassol, the verdant Troodos Mountains and a handful of world-class swimming spots, including Coral Bay.

Also within one hour are the ancient ruins of Kourion, which provides a glimpse into the island's ancient Greek and Roman past, featuring bathhouses and breathtaking sea views ➤



### INSIDER insight

"Cyprus is a compact yet diverse island and having a car lets clients explore farther afield. Help your clients plan a clear route, so they don't miss special spots along the way. People forget that Cyprus is a year-round destination; in the shoulder months, the weather is still lovely, the roads are quieter and the landscape is lush. The Troodos Mountains offer such a different side to the island. It's great for hiking and biking, and in the winter, clients can even ski."

**Shelley Kingston,**  
reservations consultant, Olympic Holidays



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Aphrodite Beach, Paphos; Lofou Village, Limassol PICTURES: Shutterstock/kirill\_makarov, Tatiana Makotra

from the restored amphitheatre. Alternatively, should clients fly in to Larnaca, they can rent a car and take a trip into Nicosia – the world's only divided capital city. Explore the city's museums and galleries, wander along its Venetian-built walls or enjoy Ledra Street, full of shops and cafes serving Cypriot bites.

When clients are done driving for the day, they can look forward to a scrumptious dinner in the homeland of halloumi. Every meal should

be finished with a glass of commandaria – a sweet dessert wine made with grapes grown on the southern slopes of the Troodos.

**Book it:** Olympic Holidays sells seven nights at the Olympic Lagoon Resort Paphos from £1,343 per person, based on two sharing a Deluxe Room Inland View on an all-inclusive basis. Price includes car hire, flights from Gatwick and transfers, based on travel in November. [olympicholidays.com](http://olympicholidays.com) **TW**

# Handcrafted holidays to lesser-known places in Greece

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