

Eastern promise

The lesser-known side of Halkidiki offers a welcoming window into Greek culture, finds Alice Barnes-Brown

This is Greece as I've never experienced before," I remarked to a companion as we danced in a circle around the village square in Palaiochori, eastern Halkidiki, accompanied by a chorus of clarinets and cicadas. I have been a lover of Greece since I was 10 years old, but folk dancing at village fairs has never been my strong suit.

As I whirled, blurs of primary colour reeled across my vision: each house had hung a colourful handwoven rug from the window, showcasing one of this region's traditional crafts. For repeat visitors looking to make a deep connection with Greek culture without meeting many other tourists, this is the place to be.

Halkidiki is split into three peninsulas. Most British tourists stick to the westernmost, Kassandra, known for its family-friendly resorts such as Sani and Ikos; while the beach-filled middle one, Sithonia, attracts mainly Bulgarian, Serbian and

Romanian road-trippers. The eastern peninsula is mostly occupied by Mount Athos, a monastic centre where outsiders are largely forbidden. But the remainder of the Athos region, where I danced the night away, rewards travellers with ancient sites, fabulous food and a rare glimpse into rural Greek life.

A QUIET PLACE

The 90-minute taxi transfer from Thessaloniki airport to eastern Halkidiki gave me ample chance to practise my Greek with the driver. Looking out at springtime blooms of poppies and gorse, he said: "For me, there are too many cars and people in Kassandra. I like it here – it's quieter."

With a distinct lack of traffic, we reached the Eagles Palace resort in good time. As I walked to my room, the only sound was of chattering swallows. Palm trees lightly brushed my balcony and lined the paths towards the glassy Aegean Sea, adding to the zen-like feel of the resort. ➤

Eagles Palace in eastern Halkidiki



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Dancers in Palaiochori village; Agiou Pavlou monastery, Mount Athos; statue of Aristotle in Stageira, the philosopher's birthplace; a beach in the Mount Athos region **PICTURES:** Shutterstock/Panos Karas, Dmitri Ometsinsky, Alice Barnes-Brown

A six-minute drive away from Eagles Palace is the town of Ouranoupoli, aka 'sky city'. As well as being the site of a fascinating Byzantine tower with a varied history, Ouranoupoli is the base for cruises up and down the western coastline of Mount Athos, giving visitors a valuable opportunity to admire ornate monasteries, jaw-dropping cliffs and deserted beaches they will probably never set foot on.

This day cruise with Athos Sea Cruises is the only way to peek past the rigid boundaries of Mount Athos. A small number of religious pilgrims can apply for permits to visit, provided they are male, while women are banned altogether; and there's even a 500-metre exclusion zone from the shore that our ship, the *Captain Fotis*, must adhere to. Even the seagulls seem to respect the rules – they circled the vessel as we left the turquoise harbour at Ouranoupoli but dissipated as we journeyed down the holy mountain.

Among the peninsula's mysterious thickets of chestnut trees and steep slopes are 20 monasteries, inhabited by 1,400 monks. The beating heart of Greek Orthodoxy for the past 1,000 years, these monasteries are spellbinding to look at, even from afar. The first we came to, Xenophondos, was built in AD998 and is painted in blue, cream and terracotta pastels. The last, castle-like Agiou Pavlou, contains 12,500 books.

As we sailed back to Ouranoupoli, a small dinghy berthed alongside our ship, and three monks embarked. Without a word, one lay his cross-embroidered satchel on a table, and a crowd gathered to touch

top tip

The Kouzina festival, which highlights the bountiful produce of eastern Halkidiki, runs from May 15 to June 15 this year. Events will take place across the region, from wine tastings and cookery classes to dance lessons and special menus.

en.mountathosarea.org

and kiss the relics the monks unfurled. They also sell olive oil soaps and herbal blends, should visitors wish to take back some homemade souvenirs.

FORAGING AND FEASTING

The monks of Athos are also renowned for producing their own wine. This is offered on the menu of Ouranoupoli's Lemoniadis Restaurant, together with some Athos specialities, such as cuttlefish stew and citrusy white fish. Mussels also feature prominently, as this region has some of the cleanest seawater in Greece, and local mussel farms supply restaurants across the world. For foodie clients, Lemoniadis is the epitome of the Greek taverna, with generous portions and even a three-legged cat patrolling the vine-shaded seafront terrace, looking for leftovers.

For another meal, I dined at Bakatsianos restaurant, set in an oak grove just outside the village of Arnaia. It was cool and calm that night, so owner Dimitris Polyzos lit a fire and joined us for a wine pairing.

"Arnaia has many things cooked in honey – we're famous for it," said Dimitris as he presented a plate of feta baked in honey and thyme. "I like to highlight local products and home cooking." Abundant Halkidiki produce, from wild mushrooms to juicy black olives, means Dimitris can be creative with his menu. He worked in Michelin-starred restaurants across Europe in the 1990s but found the lifestyle unsustainable.

"It's not my thing. I wanted to have a life. Maybe one day I'll be a famous chef, but who cares?" he ➤

DESTINATIONS

GREECE & CYPRUS | HALKIDIKI



LEFT: Ocean one Bedroom Pool Villa, Eagles Resort; BELOW: Hotel Liotopi and owner Louloudia Alexiadis

PICTURES: Alberto Bogó; Alex Griffiths



pondered, swirling a red wine which, he proudly added, came from a vineyard just 10 minutes' drive away.

Palaiochori – where I lost myself to the rhythm of *Zorba the Greek*-style dancing – is the next village over from Arnaia. This sleepy little place was once home to miner George Zorbas, the inspiration behind *Zorba the Greek*'s colourful protagonist. I took a break from the dancing to wander the backstreets and see his old house. It's dilapidated now, but Maria Pappa, product and marketing manager for the region's tourism office, explained there are plans to transform the old house into a museum, with a digital exhibition dedicated to George Zorbas on the second storey.

HISTORIC DELIGHTS

Eastern Halkidiki officially goes by the name 'Aristotelis Municipality', as ancient philosopher Aristotle was born here in the town of Stageira. The seafront settlement prospered from the 7th century BC, its wealth coming from a nearby gold and silver mine, but that came to an end in 348BC, when Stageira was destroyed by Alexander the Great's father, Philip of Macedon, who saw the wealthy, educated town as a threat to his power.

Today, the ruins occupy a scenic headland jutting into the glittering Aegean, and clients can explore a stoa – where citizens met for public debate – as well as impressively preserved ancient walls. A deep voice emulating Aristotle's guided me around the site via an app, telling stories of Stageira. Best of all, both entrance to the archaeological site and the informative app are free.

Pausing at the edge of Stageira's Acropolis, I took in 360-degree views of this gorgeous region. Mount Stratonikos rose behind me, and underneath the forest canopy lay 62 miles of walking routes, including the Aristotelian Walk. This nine-mile route meanders from the heights of the mountain, down herb-lined gravel paths and past trickling streams to the sandy beach of Olympiada, a resort town flanked by only a few sunbeds and family-run hotels.

FAMILY VALUES

One of these hotels is the whitewashed Liotopi, which features on Sunvil and Ramble Worldwide itineraries.

Owner Louloudia Alexiadis welcomed us into her garden with iced camomile and mint tea, before opening a glass cabinet filled with homemade marmalade, jams, herbal honey and slices of cherry pie.

"This pie takes five minutes to make, and you can make it with any summer fruit, including apricots and almonds," Louloudia said modestly. Though I'm sceptical anything can be made in five minutes, she demonstrates her deftness in the kitchen with weekly cooking classes, which she tells me are a hit with British clients. Roughly 80% of guests at Liotopi are repeaters, lured by Louloudia's cookery and the promise of days spent swimming, hiking and feeling immersed in local culture.

As I nibbled on crumbly cake under the shadow of Aristotle's hometown, I could see why those in search of serenity and authenticity keep coming back to Athos – monk or otherwise. **TW**

ASK THE expert



"Blessed with the same excellent sandy beaches and wooded hills as the rest of Halkidiki, but without the crowds, the Athos peninsula boasts traditional villages, walking trails, archaeological sites and the 'monks' republic' of Mount Athos. No trip to eastern Halkidiki would be complete without an appreciation of the wonderful food; the mussels of Olympiada are recognised as among the best in the world and the area's wine is sublime."

Dudley der Parthog,
director, Sunvil

BOOK IT

Jet2holidays offers seven nights at the Eagles Palace from £1,619 per person, based on two sharing. Includes breakfast, luggage, transfers and flights from Manchester on June 5. [jet2holidays.com](https://www.jet2holidays.com)

Sunvil sells a seven-night holiday at the Liotopi Hotel on a half-board basis from £1,247 per person, based on two sharing. Includes transfers, luggage and flights departing June 2. [sunvil.co.uk](https://www.sunvil.co.uk)

Ramble Worldwide's 14-night Exploring Halkidiki holiday is priced from £2,549 per person, based on two sharing. Includes daily breakfast and dinner, two picnic lunches, ground transport and flights departing September 13. [rambleworldwide.co.uk](https://www.rambleworldwide.co.uk)