

As my horse begins to edge its hoof cautiously over what looks like a 90-degree gradient, I wonder at what point my gentle activity holiday morphed into an extreme sports trip.

Beginning our rocky descent, I close my eyes and grasp the saddle for dear life, praying we won't plummet into the rushing stream below. Our guide tells me to lean backwards as the horse

starts to scramble down the ravine.

After what feels like an age, we are back on safer ground and the horse, relaxed as ever, crosses the stream and rounds a corner.

Gratifyingly, the scene that greets me was worth the ordeal. Miles of flower-filled meadows stretch ahead, backed by emerald alpine forests and the majestic Kerkini Mountains.

A mere 29 miles from Bulgaria, the lush landscape of Lake Kerkini National Park is a far cry from the deckchair-lined beach

resorts and fairy light-bedecked tavernas long associated with Greek holidays.

▶ THE REALLY WILD SHOW

It is not just the landscape that sets northern Greece apart from the rest of the country and its islands. Dominated by the provinces of Macedonia and Thrace, these regions have been part of Greece for less than a century – a fact reflected in the food, architecture and customs.

But it's the rich scenic backdrop that really makes it special. Add to this its temperate climate and

remote setting and you have the perfect playground for active holidays on land and in water.

With tourism still in its infancy and just three hotels in Lake Kerkini itself, activities are directly arranged and run by accommodation in the area. Horse riding is organised by Ixnilatis Hotel, which also offers boat trips, fishing and archery.

Oikoperiigitis Hotel runs ecotourism and agritourism tours and arranges guided walks for groups staying in the region. Offering hikes for all levels of ability, the hotel's off-road vehicles are equipped to transport groups to mountain paths.

This region has an



Wild abandon

Clare Walsh swaps beaches and bikinis for a pair of boots in mainland Greece

TOP TIP
Suggest clients stock up on Greek foods in Nymfaio at Argyro's deli in the square selling artisanal produce
argyro.gr

→ abundance of hiking trails that have been cleared only in the past five years, making it ideal for clients keen to explore a less-discovered region. It's best aimed at those who want to avoid souvenir shops and tourist traps and step into a region that hasn't quite caught up with the rest of the world.

The real jewel of this area is Lake Kerkini itself. Located in the northeastern district of Serres and 60 miles from Thessaloniki, its impressive wetlands are among the most important in Europe, and home to more than 30 species of wildlife including the rare Dalmatian pelican and pygmy cormorant.

I was treated to one of the most theatrical and exhilarating displays of



LEFT:
Dalmatian pelican at Lake Kerkini



ASK THE EXPERT



Helen Nelson,
Greece product manager, *Ramblers Walking Holidays*

"The Macedonian region of northern Greece offers a very different view of a well-known country, with remote villages, stone bridges, wooded trails, pine and oak trees and cool, clear lakes. You'll find an abundance of flowers, herbs and wild strawberries in the spring, which give way to mushrooms, log fires and autumn colour at the end of the year. It's an area that welcomes nature lovers and people seeking a quieter holiday with a more traditional feel. You will probably taste some of the best food in the north with traditional recipes of home-cooked dishes featuring wonderful local wines and olive oil."

Where to stay

NYMFAES HOTEL, NYMFAIO

With luxurious furnishings and tasteful decor, this guesthouse features six bedrooms with dark wood fireplaces, rich velvet curtains and marble bathrooms. Exceptional breakfasts are included and feature local ingredients such as nettle and feta pie, buffalo cheese and lemon cake. It also features a spa and lantern-filled terrace that affords impressive views of the village below. Double rooms from £75 per night. nymfeshotel.gr

OIKOPERIIGITIS, LAKE KERKINI

Just 500 metres from Lake Kerkini, this traditional guesthouse is built of local stone and wood. Beamed ceilings, fireplaces and brick walls add to the authentic feel, and bedrooms have en-suite bathrooms and free Wi-Fi. Double rooms from £55 per night. oikoperiigitis.gr/en

CITY HOTEL THESSALONIKI

This centrally located four-star hotel (*pictured*) is ideally placed for exploring the city on foot. The spacious bedrooms feature green and white decor and the hotel boasts a restaurant, bar and complimentary Wi-Fi. Double rooms from £77 per night. cityhotel.gr



nature when around 3,000 pure white pelicans swooped and dived onto the glassy lake while we sailed across.

As I wondered if I'd been transported into the middle of an Attenborough documentary, the birds gracefully swooped, skimmed, dipped and dived around us. Not to be outdone, the next show was put on by a collection of pink flamingos and later by water buffalos sunning themselves on the water's edge.

▶ **ON THE TRAIL OF BEARS**

A three-hour drive brought us to the fairytale village of Nymfaio, which sits at an altitude of 4,400 ft in the densely forested Verno Mountains.

Despite its tiny population – now just 137 – the village was once one of the largest silversmith centres in the Balkans. This is reflected in the impressive stone mansions dotted throughout the cobbled streets. Its six guesthouses, all built in the style typical of the area, work together to accommodate large groups.

Like Lake Kerkini, the landscape here offers an abundance of experiences for lovers of the outdoors, and the connection between land, people and wildlife is just as strong.

Along an 11-mile walking trail, we collected enormous mushrooms for lunch with the help of an experienced forager, ate figs plucked fresh from the trees, and spotted rosehip, lemon thyme, berries and plants said to cure many an ailment along the way.

Hiking over varied terrain, we





LEFT:
Nymfaio

RIGHT:
The
Rotunda,
Thessaloniki



PICTURES: SHUTTERSTOCK ARCHIVES/AL HANPIS; THESSALONIKI TOURISM ORGANISATION/T NAZIRIDIS

→ passed a lake containing oysters and were treated to extraordinary views of Mount Olympus, known as the dwelling of the gods. It was this natural diversity and knowledge of the land that made the walk such a rich experience.

A second hike took us on the trail of bears as we battled

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The Nymfaio Bear Sanctuary rescues mistreated bears from zoos and circuses

through undergrowth and scrambled down hillsides toward a final stop at Nymfaio Bear Sanctuary. Here, mistreated bears rescued from zoos and circuses are rescued for rehabilitation.

Guided walks in the area can be tailored to the requirements of clients, with a six-hour walk costing about €50. It costs €6 to enter the bear and wolf sanctuaries and the ticket includes entry to the Brown Bear Information Centre in the village.

▶ **ANCIENT CIVILISATIONS**
Clients looking to exercise brain as well as body can take a 90-minute drive from Nymfaio to the impressive Vergina archaeological site. Home to royal tombs, it is considered the most important archaeological discovery in Greece of the 20th century.

A combined ticket costs €14 and includes the Museum of the Royal Tombs of Aigai, the Archaeological Museum of Veria and Byzantine Museum of Veria.

The country's ancient capital of Thessaloniki is two hours from Nymfaio and the closest airport for access to the region. Highlights include stunning Byzantine architecture, a vibrant bar-lined waterfront, great shopping and a youthful vibe from its large student population.

This lively city and the wild landscapes that surround it show that no matter how well you think you know Greece, there's always more to discover. **TW**



Cyplon Holidays offers an eight-day tour of northern Greece from £1,465 with half-board accommodation, flights and transfers. Starting in Athens, highlights include Mount Olympus, the Valley of Temp, Thessaloniki, the waterfalls of Edessa, Vergina and Pella. cyplon.co.uk

Ramblers Walking Holidays has a 10-night walking tour of Epirus and the Pindhos Mountains from £1,175 including Gatwick flights. The trip, available in spring and autumn, includes hiking the Vikos Gorge, and seeing the monasteries of Meteora and stone-built villages of Zagori. ramblersholidays.co.uk

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