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UNDISCOVERED GREECE: PILGRIMAGES AND TOURS WITH NICHOLAS KARELLOS

An invitation to pilgrimage through Greece with *Road to Emmaus* Greek editor Nicholas Karellos. For over twenty years, Nicholas has translated for the journal's on-site interviews, but few know that he also leads pilgrims and tourists on unforgettable adventures through Orthodox Greece. Now it's time to share him and Pilgrim's Way Tours with a larger audience.

RTE: Nicholas Karellos and I are sitting outside a beautiful taverna in the Athens Plaka neighborhood where shady trees, trellises of crimson bougainvillea, and an earlier era's wooden tables and rush-covered chairs fill the veranda. An old-fashioned iron street lamp gives off a warm evening glow. The taverna was built on the site of Nikos' grandmother's house, who lived here on the corner of Hatzimichalis and Angelos Gerondas Streets as a young girl. From her back window she looked onto the rugged cliffs of the Acropolis and, further up, onto a corner of the Parthenon itself. What more can you tell us about the family, Nicholas?

NICHOLAS: My great-grandfather was a palace guard during the royalist period and my grandmother recalled King George I stopping on his afternoon strolls through the Plaka to pick sprigs of jasmine from their yard. Another memory was of the "fine lady" Angela Hatzimichalis, the famous

Opposite: Nicholas Karellos.

folklorist, who would lean out her second-story window across the street to call out “*Kalimera*” (“Good day”) to neighbors and friends.¹ These scenes were part of daily life; in those days the Plaka was just a pleasant neighborhood near the palace, untouristed and peaceful.

RTE: It’s lovely to think that that was just a few decades ago. Can you tell us how you began leading tours and pilgrimages?

NICHOLAS: I acquired the urge to travel from my father who worked for Air France, so we were often abroad. Also, he liked to fish in quiet places, so as a boy I traveled around Greece to islands where often there wasn’t a dock or a port, and some were still without electricity. The ferry would stop close to the coast and a boat would come out to get us. We’d jump in and sail or row to the island. All of that influenced me and later I began exploring on my own.

My first job after high school was a position in the largest travel agency in Greece. This was 1979 and I remember a foreign couple coming in one day to ask about the island of Elafonisos. Now Greece has 6000 islands and islets, though only 227 are inhabited. My colleagues were urgently asking each other “Where is it?” They were embarrassed to have tourists requesting a destination they had never heard of, but I had actually been to this tiny island off of the Peloponnesian coast with my parents, so I jumped in, “Yes, I can tell you about Elafonisos.” I still wonder how those foreign tourists found out about the place.

Around this time, I started exploring Greek islands on my own and I’ve been to over seventy-five Greek islands and islets. Friends who wanted to go somewhere off of the tourist routes began to ask for advice, and when my Finnish wife, Marita, became Orthodox, I began exploring monasteries with her. She had been catechized by a nun and then baptized by the abbots of two Meteora monasteries and the bishop of Stagon and Meteora, so she was interested in monasteries.

RTE: No doubts about that baptism!

¹ Angeliki Hatzimichali’s neoclassical mansion in Plaka is now the Centre of Folk Art and Tradition, which displays handwoven Greek fabrics and embroideries, costumes and ceramics.

Opposite: O Glykis Cafe on the site of Nicholas’ grandmother’s house. Plaka, Athens.



ΚΑΘΕΝΕΙΟΝ

astralvarmes

NICHOLAS: (*Laughing*) Yes. I wanted to make sure.... So, we began exploring monasteries out of a desire to grow spiritually as well as our love of travel. We weren't one-sided, though. We enjoyed everything: monasteries, churches, historical and classical sites, ruins, museums, nature, as well as out-of-the-way restaurants, hotels, and tavernas. The spiritual life, of course, is central and everything revolves around that, but if these things are blessed, why not?

After about a year, I left the travel bureau to study graphics and advertising and then worked at an advertising agency overseeing campaigns for British Petroleum, Novartis (a Swiss pharmaceutical company), Gauloises (the French cigarette company) and the City of Athens. I oversaw these international accounts as well as smaller ones for twelve years from 1988 to 2000. I resigned, at least partially, because I was discouraged by the manipulation and lack of ethics I'd seen in advertising – for instance Gauloises insisted that their main target in Greece was thirteen- and fourteen-year-old children. Even when the product was benign, the work was stressful and you always had to deal with the anxiety of executives who were investing their money in advertising.

I had already been thinking of starting an Orthodox publishing and bookstore supply company to support church bookstores abroad who were having a hard time finding products and materials. I had begun supplying a few with church supplies and fascinating Greek Orthodox books translated into English or other languages; I worked on this on weekends as a hobby. I liked doing it then, and I still do.

RTE: So, you sacrificed your well-paying job for what essentially was a missionary endeavor.

NICHOLAS: Yes, and at first it was rather successful, but around 2008 the dollar was devalued and a little later the Greek economic crisis hit, so prices here went up about 70%. Translating, editing, printing and shipping books and supplies became so expensive that after fourteen years in business I lost my store and the entire publishing venture. To support my family, I began to concentrate exclusively on tours and pilgrimages. I call it Pilgrim's Way Tours.

First Guided Pilgrimages

My first guided pilgrimage was in the late 1990's with a post-Soviet Estonian group of forty pilgrims who had come to Greece by bus from Tallin – 3300 kilometers away. The priest with them, who had been with me a few years earlier when I took a group of Estonian priests to Mt. Athos, called to ask, “Can you please help us? The Archdiocese staff of the Church of Greece told me that if we came to Greece they would help us get around, but all they've done is to book us into a hotel ninety minutes from Athens. I know where we want to go, but I need help. Can you come with us?” So, I started making phone calls and joined them in Loutraki, near the Monastery of St. Patapios. That was my first involvement with an organized group of pilgrims.

Again as a volunteer I helped Finnish youth groups and choirs to travel within Greece, as well as individuals from different parts the world. The first organized paid tour that I did was for a group of pilgrims to Mount Athos, who spent two weeks clearing the overgrown footpaths between monasteries.

Other people followed from Finland, Estonia, Serbia, Slovakia, Australia, and the United States, as well as Greeks, of course. These were individuals, couples, or small groups at first, but later larger groups began contacting me, from twelve to forty-four people.

As I said, I volunteered for years before I went professional. Arranging tours is a great deal of work because I do not have a set program like most travel agents, who repeat their basic tours regardless of how small or large the group is or what they want to see. These agents almost always have contracts with big hotels, so they take Orthodox pilgrims on the very same itinerary as the classical tours, substituting a few churches or monasteries along the way. Unfortunately, these aren't always the most interesting or historical places but are easy to stop at. Another problem is that many travel agents have little knowledge about church life or the history of Orthodox sites and even less about the spiritual needs of a pilgrim or what to show people beyond the obvious.

Over the past twenty years I've led pilgrimages all over Greece, even combining different countries if people ask. For instance, I've taken people to Ephesus in Turkey and then by boat to the nearby Greek islands of Lesbos and Chios. I've also combined the Republic of Northern Macedonia with Greek Macedonia, or Bulgaria with Greece.



So, I worked my way into being a practical travel agent. Most agents are not licensed guides, and neither am I, as being a licensed guide is a separate profession. This means that I am not entitled to give talks inside state museums or archeological sites, but I wouldn't do that anyway as I prefer to have someone who has studied that particular place deeply to give the presentation. I do however give talks in churches and monasteries.

RTE: Don't you find that most people aren't interested in detailed lectures? They want a broad overview, some colorful interesting facts, and then they just want to look around.

NICHOLAS: Yes, sometimes I've hired new guides whose talks are too detailed, and they don't realize that people are getting tired or bored. I have to drop some hints for them to focus on the most important points. Unfortunately, the way mass tourism guides work nowadays is almost the opposite: they give an entertaining thirty- or forty-minute "performance," but they often omit the most interesting details.

Often, I do give my groups a brief historical overview before we get to an archeological site, although sometimes people ask for theological explanations. I'm not a theologian or a spiritual father but I try to give a balanced and correct view and then let them decide.

Specialized Pilgrimages

I also do specialized pilgrimages. One was for two nuns from the United States, one of whom was of Greek descent and wanted to find her roots. So, I drove them to the birthplace of her parents and grandparents in the Peloponnese where we found people who knew the family home. We also went to nearby monasteries, and because the name of the second nun was Galina, she wanted to find the relics of her saint who was a disciple of the third-century St. Leonidas of Corinth. Their relics are in a village near Epidaurus.

A few years ago, I had an Orthodox group that wanted to focus on iconography, so I chose well-known churches and museums with frescoes, icons, mosaics, and embroidery, but also many smaller out-of-the-way Byzantine churches with wonderful frescoes.

Opposite: Pilgrims at St. Patapios Monastery, Loutraki. Photo courtesy N. Karellos.

In planning this, I contacted the Athens Academy of Art, which has undertaken a massive study of these remote places. For example, when the academy sends a team to a small island, they go to every single church and chapel to evaluate what condition the church is in, what kind of architectural details and art (frescoes, portable icons, iconostases, church furnishings) it contains, and from what period. If it is old and has artistic value, they recommend that the building be preserved and the art restored. They take photos, scan, and do on-site evaluations of the art, and then return and compile their reports. This is too much detail for most tourists or pilgrims, but if there was a group interested in iconography, we could either do a general tour of many places or pick a single location, such as Naxos, where there are churches dating from the period of ninth-century iconoclasm, with decorative frescoes without human figures.

There are also individuals and groups who come regularly every year, and each time they want to visit something new. They may already have a place in mind, or I can suggest sites that I think they will like. Often, these are parishes or groups of friends that have something in common, so you make up a slightly different program that matches their interests, such as “Monasteries of Mt. Olympus,” “Monasteries of the Island of Lesvos,” and so on.

There are groups that are very focused on spirituality, so they ask me to take them mostly to churches and monasteries. I usually add extra activities in the program, as most churches and monasteries in Greece close for the afternoon. I might take them to a beautiful cave, for example, or to a nearby classical site. They may also want to spend time at the beach, go horseback riding, or take a cooking lesson.

For a group that doesn't have a budget for a longer trip, you can concentrate on one specific area with great success. One such group of pilgrims focused on Athens and the neighboring islands of Andros and Tinos, only a few hours away by ferry. On Andros, besides visiting the monasteries, we hiked to a beautiful stream in the village of Apikia. It's not far and the walk suited these older people. If we have younger people on the trip, they can decide if they want to go further. On that visit we also took cooking lessons and visited the Cyclades Olive Museum, so it was a combination of activities.

On the neighboring island of Tinos, besides venerating the famous Evangelistra (Annunciation) Icon of the Mother of God in the port church and

Opposite: Church of the Annunciation, Tinos.



visiting the Orthodox monasteries, I took them to the Museum of Marble Crafts, and also to a Roman Catholic monastery that is an important part of the local history, as Tinos has the largest community of Catholics in Greece. I can also arrange pilgrimages for Roman Catholics around Greece because I know their communities and we share all of our early church history.

Reconnaissance

RTE: What can you tell us about your reconnaissance trips?

NICHOLAS: Because I make unique plans for each group, before we met this afternoon I had already been to four monasteries for an upcoming pilgrimage. I try to pin down the details before I offer the itinerary.

RTE: And that usually means going to the site in person?

NICHOLAS: Yes, for instance, I didn't know that the first monastery was now open all day. At the second, it turned out that the day we will visit is the feast-day of the monastery. At the third, I had to ask if the spiritual father would be willing to give a talk to the group. For these kinds of things, it is better if you go in person first. I also have to review the roads to each place because driving somewhere in your own car can be totally different from taking a thirty-passenger bus. The bus might get stuck or people can become sick or dizzy from the winding roads. I need to think of all this and to estimate the time it will take to get there and back.

Hotels, Food and Transport

RTE: And you also find the hotels, hostels, and monasteries where the group will stay.

NICHOLAS: Yes, I have contacted hundreds of such places. As for hotels, I have met the managers and owners and have options ranging from four-star hotels or resorts down to the least expensive but still clean and decent choices. I give these options to the group when we plan the trip: "Would you rather have a new four-star hotel a few miles outside of Kastoria, from where we will take a bus into town, or an older one in the city with much smaller rooms but from where you can walk everywhere on foot?" They choose themselves.

RTE: How do you arrange for food?

NICHOLAS: On most tours, tour agents and bus companies have contracts with specific restaurants that give them discounts, and the tourists are taken there. These are often cafeteria style and quality, as if you are in the army. I try to pick a restaurant in a village with a nice view, or with unique food; for instance, if we are on the coast, a quiet taverna near the water that serves fresh fish. These are places where local Greeks go to eat.

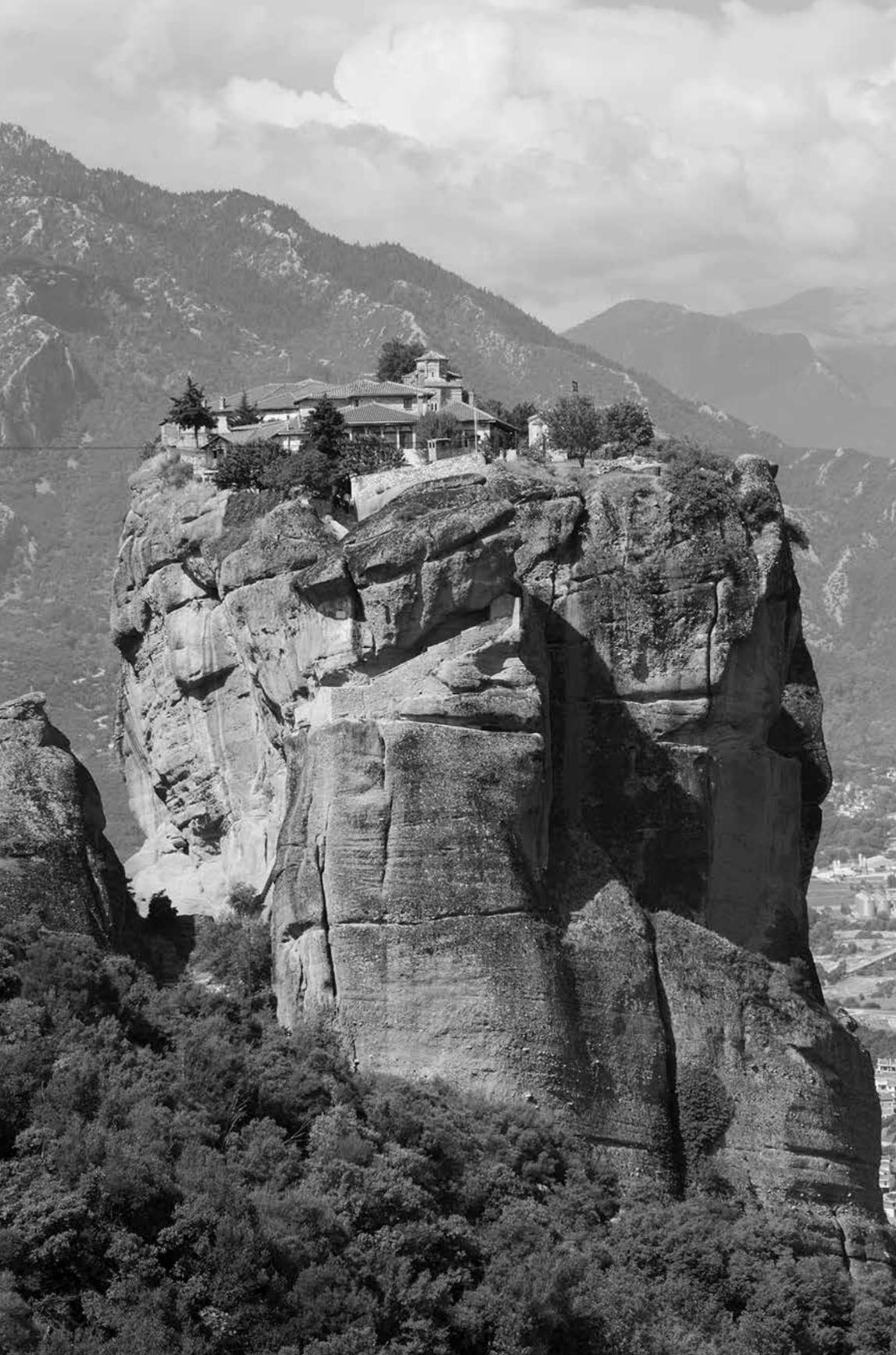
Also, in many places, there are wonderful family-run restaurants within a few kilometers of the sites we are visiting who are eager for customers. If you have a large group, you can call ahead and they will prepare a delicious meal, spread out on a veranda with a wonderful view or under a canopy of grapevines. Then the money spreads around to these small isolated villages. Seeing the owner's faces, I sometimes feel like a philanthropist. If we don't frequent these places, they will close down and part of the traditional culture of Greece closes down with them. Then all we will have left are city restaurants or cafeteria stops at the tourist centers.

RTE: How do you manage the transportation?

NICHOLAS: I can take up to five people in my own minivan and I am licensed to drive a rented mini-van with up to nine passengers. For larger groups that need buses, we rent a small bus that carries fifteen or twenty people or a larger one for up to fifty. Thirty to thirty-five is ideal for a group because, if you have a few empty seats, it's easier to move around. The larger the group, the more time you have to allow for visiting sites, eating, and so on, which slows the itinerary down. The rented buses come with a driver, of course, which makes it easier for me to give talks or to check on arrangements along the way.

Keeping up with bus transport is not easy. For instance, once I hired a bus from a company who was sure that they could reach a certain remote monastery, but I knew from my reconnaissance trip that the road was too narrow. They still insisted that they could manage, but once we turned onto the final narrow road, they understood that it was impossible. Anticipating this, I had prepared a list of local taxis. I went down the list, calling each one until I had the number of taxis we needed to get the pilgrims to the monastery.

Also, one year when we had reservations to go by boat from Ephesus, Turkey to the island of Lesbos, Greece, the Greek customs agents went on strike



and closed the borders. I prayed to the angels to help us, and suddenly, right before our boat was supposed to sail, they opened the borders for two days, then closed them again for a week. (*Smiling*) These are the kind of situations where I pray hard.

I also have a policy of renting buses from companies whose drivers I trust, and whenever these drivers change companies, I go with them. They drive well, know where they're going, and they can handle unexpected situations. I also treat them as part of the group. For instance, they eat together with us (on most tours they have to sit somewhere else). With this closeness, they quickly come to know the people in the group, and then we are like a team or even like a family. The drivers I work with have a sense of humor and are often willing to fulfill small out-of-the-way requests. However, if they feel that a tour director is just using them, there will be misunderstandings and problems.

The individuals and groups who hire me can also make decisions about transportation. For example, at Meteora, the famous rock pinnacle monasteries rising out of the plain of Thessaly, I give them the choice of taking a bus up to the monasteries with no walking except the final staircases, or they can leave the bus and walk down from the upper monasteries to the lower and then back to the villages of Kalambaka or Kastraki. Another option is to take the bus but then add some short walks to enjoy the views.

If we choose to walk down from the top on foot, there are beautiful bridges, old Byzantine chapels, and several abandoned hermit's caves or monasteries in the forest below the rock columns that are not on the tourist trail. Some years ago, an abbot resigned from one of the most famous and busy monasteries at the top to repair one of these abandoned ones. Only his spiritual children are allowed to visit, but we can walk to the canyon and view these old cells and hermitages from a distance.

One group was so enthusiastic about Meteora that we spent five nights there.

Timing and Choices

RTE: How great to take time to explore such a wonderful place. Usually, even on church-sponsored pilgrimages, you are rushed in and out.

Opposite: Holy Trinity Monastery, Meteora. Photo courtesy N. Karellos.

NICHOLAS: I can't tell you how sorry I feel for the unsuspecting tourists that are dragged to the monasteries as part of a package tour of Greece – especially at Meteora when they expect them to join these huge crowds on a hot day. On the other hand, when I see the tourists' behavior, I sometimes feel they deserve what they get. Most of them have absolutely no interest in what Meteora is about – they just chew gum, talk loudly, horse around, and take selfies on the edge of the cliffs. Sometimes there are hundreds of people milling around in a very small monastery on the top of these rock pillars and the monks and nuns have all they can do to keep a bit of order and sanity. I remember once seeing an African-American lady who was part of one of these mass tourism groups. She was so lost there, but you could tell from the way she was looking around that she wanted the walls to speak to her. I was about to abandon my own group and go say, "If there's anything you want to ask, please do."

RTE: The last time I was at the Monastery of St. Stephen in Meteora, a rainy day in May, I counted thirty-six tour buses parked outside the monastery. Inside, you could hardly move and there were long lines to get into the church and museum. There are about five nuns around in the public areas – the bookstore, the museum, the monastery – while the rest of the sisters carry on with monastic life behind closed doors during opening hours. I prefer to go in winter, even if it's cold, as there are so few visitors.

NICHOLAS: Yes, and by early June there are already huge lines of tourists all the way up the staircases. It is a martyrdom to be a monk or nun there. Having said that, Meteora is one of the most visited places in Greece, and there is a reason for that. It is a wonderful place, just not typical of most monasteries.

RTE: How do you determine the cost of a tour?

NICHOLAS: It depends on how many people are in the group, if they need to rent a mini-van or a bus, where they want to go and for how many days. Besides their own expenses, they pay for gas, for my room and food, and a daily fee for my services of planning, driving, translating, and so on. I plan each trip out cost-wise, so that they know what they are getting into.

Opposite: Milking a goat in Rhythmio, Crete. Photo courtesy N. Karellos.



Also, some people don't want a rigid schedule, but prefer to set out with a general plan and then take side trips as we come across opportunities. We do that also.

Alternative Tourism

RTE: What alternative tours have you led?

NICHOLAS: A few years ago, I hosted a group of professors who wanted to concentrate exclusively on sites of classical Greece. I also had a group of artists involved with traditional handicrafts such as wood-carving, carpet weaving, embroidery, jewelry-making and so on, who wanted to meet local people doing the same things. We found some unique contacts and locations.

I welcome these alternative tours because I see them as a challenge. It is a lot of work to create a brand-new itinerary and make connections with people they want to visit, as well as searching out hotels and restaurants. Once, I was asked by a group of European farmers from Estonia to take them to visit alternative farms in Crete where they grow things like avocados, carob, aloe vera, prickly-pear cactus, or make foods such as specialty goat cheese and local sausage. I made two preliminary trips around the island and up into the Cretan mountains to find these small individual producers before I planned the itinerary. (*Smiling*) Not all of my tours take so much preparation.

RTE: If someone was to contact you for a tour or a pilgrimage, what kinds of things should they think about before they call or write?

NICHOLAS: First of all, the approximate dates of the trip, how many people, and their budget. Second, they need to have a clear idea of the overall purpose or theme of their trip, such as: a general tour of Greece; pilgrimage to Orthodox churches and monasteries; classical and archeological sites, rest and entertainment, a special interest such as music, art, farming, and so on. They can tell me if they already know of specific places that they want to visit, and I can suggest other sites they might not know of.

Third, would they like to combine a themed trip – say an Orthodox pilgrimage or a tour of classical sites with stops that are more relaxing, such as a local museum, a half-day at the beach, exploring a local natural cave, or taking a short hike to a beautiful spot. For women especially, shopping in traditional villages and markets is always interesting.

I've found that if people trust me to choose these side visits, something very interesting often happens, and I take into account what they themselves most respond to once I meet them.

I've also been able to take small Orthodox groups on unplanned visits to out-of-the-way monasteries with an interesting Orthodox monk or nun, to a parish church with a special priest, or even a visit to an inspiring lay person where we can have coffee and a chat.

Near the classical site at Thermopylae, I've discovered a natural hot spring that runs from the mountains down to the sea. If we have our swimming suits, we can stop and have a mineral bath in the middle of nowhere. If we are in northern Greece on a hot day, we might take a rest at the famous waterfall in Edessa. People enjoy these unexpected side-trips.

RTE: You may be one of the only guides in Greece willing to do this.

NICHOLAS: My philosophy is that I want people to see something unexpected that I've found, a hidden gem. It's an inner urge to grab someone by the hand and share the beauty of these places. I very much enjoy traveling alone, but then after a while I get these thoughts, "Now, this is a place I need to bring people to." Whether it's my wife, a group from abroad, or convert pilgrims, I'm soon back with other friends.

Surprises and Challenges

RTE: What kinds of things have most surprised or challenged you on pilgrimage?

NICHOLAS: One lady with the group that spent five nights at Meteora, told me that she had just lost her 35-year-old son in a car accident. Her grief was so intense that she wanted to lock herself up in her house in extended mourning, but instead decided to come on the pilgrimage. We were all together at liturgy on the fortieth day after her son's death and we prayed as the priest commemorated him. At that moment I understood how important this work could be and the relationships it creates.

Another time, two women who had both recently lost their husbands told me that the pilgrimage had helped them to experience God's consolation.

A few years ago, a woman who was facing surgery for a breast tumor was with us on a pilgrimage to Evia, and in either St. David's Monastery or St.



John the Russian Church, she bought some blessed oil, anointed herself with it, and the tumor disappeared. When she went back to the doctor, they said she no longer needed surgery or chemotherapy.

A man with us on another trip had a problem with his ear and was quite sure it was serious. When we stopped to visit an old priest, Fr Nectarios Vitalis of Lavrio, he blessed the man's ear and said, "Don't worry, it's nothing." And the problem went away.

RTE: Have you ever had anyone who had a reaction you weren't expecting?

NICHOLAS: Once, a Finnish group that had been on a vacation tour with me that included a few churches, shared a bus from their last hotel to the airport with another group returning to the airport for the same flight. I took the microphone to give a goodbye talk to my group. Suddenly, one lady from my group stood up and started saying how thankful she was for the tour, for touching her soul, and for introducing her to Orthodoxy – in short, making a public confession that was so unusual for a reserved Finn that people from the other group were obviously amazed and probably felt that they had missed something. When you hear people making enthusiastic public statements about having received what their soul needed and you have just been lying on the beach, it must make you think. As for me, it was a reminder that you never know what is going to touch people.

I also have a funny story involving the nun who came to see her family village. The following year she called and said, "I'm sending you my Greek-American cousins who also want to see our village." They arrived, I escorted them to the village, and then took them on a side trip to a nearby monastery. They seemed to really like the monastery, but because I didn't want to repeat things that were probably very familiar to them, I started my talk by asking, "You are practicing Orthodox, like your cousin, aren't you?" They were quiet for a moment and then replied, "No, we are Mormons." I was so shocked and embarrassed, but I quickly collected myself and tried to remember what I knew about Mormons so that I could switch my explanation to their point of view. "So, you believe in the latter-day-saints." "Yes." Well, these are our latter-day saints.... And you believe that the spirits of the dead are alive in God?" "Yes, we do." "We believe this also, and we pray for them." They were very responsive and warm in their appreciation of the monastery. Neverthe-

Opposite: Visitors to the abandoned village of Vathia on the Mani Peninsula. Photo courtesy N. Karellas.

less, for me it was a shock that I had been taking Mormons around without having any idea. (As it turned out, after their Greek father and American mother divorced, she converted to Mormonism and raised the children in her new faith.)

Finding Grace

RTE: How do you deal with unexpected opportunities or obstacles that arise on the trip?

NICHOLAS: Generally, you plan everything and you also have to have a Plan B, just in case. But it's better if you don't strictly keep to the letter of your own law; that is, to the plans you've made. If you want to be carried by the Spirit of God you have to be a little flexible. Either you have to let God arrange minor details or acknowledge that if you stick to your plan no matter what, you are going to miss opportunities. If an abbot or abbess appears and starts talking to the group, it's always a challenge whether to say, "We need to leave now," so as not to be late, or to simply relax, take our time, and listen to what this person has to say.

Sometimes people think they need to go to famous monasteries to talk to monastics, but in many of them the monastics are so busy just trying to deal with the casual visitors that they may not have time for a talk. Of course, these places are often important for historical reasons and for the saints' relics you can find there, and they should be visited, but personally, I find more peace in a poor little skete with just a few monks or nuns.

If you take a side-road and try these places, you may receive that special attention that someone's soul particularly needs at that moment. The monastics might speak to you of their own experience of spiritual life, or of things that they have read, or of the history of their monastery, or stories of people they know. If a single monk or nun is living alone, then it's like meeting an anchorite or a desert-dweller. They might not be clairvoyant elders or elders, but they can relate to you and often have valuable experiences that they are willing to share with pilgrims.

This is not only a help for the pilgrim, but often it encourages the monk or nun who is sacrificing themselves to keep this small place open; it lets

Opposite: Novice in the garden of St. John the Theologian Monastery, Dimitsana. Photo courtesy N. Karellos.



them know that they are not sitting there in vain. They expect pilgrims and your coming is an encouragement. It is actually very rare to find a monk who wants to leave the world and be completely alone. Most welcome contact with secular people. They feel useful.

Also, when Greek locals see Orthodox people from other places showing up at their churches or monasteries, they are often interested in who you are and why you are there. You never know what is going on in someone's heart. On pilgrimages to, or cruises around, Mt. Athos I often tell people about my own experiences of God's providence on the Holy Mountain. People like to listen to such stories, especially when they come from countries where these things are completely out of their experience. You would be amazed at the number of foreigners who have never heard of anyone who has experienced a miracle or a direct answer to prayer.

I remember an atheist Greek Communist lady who was dying of cancer and had come many times to my wife's medical lab for tests, but looked worse and worse as the disease progressed, until the staff was sure they wouldn't see her again. Suddenly she reappeared, absolutely healthy. When her strength had almost gone, she had the idea to go as a pilgrim to venerate the relics of St. Ephraim of Nea Makri. She did, and she was healed.

Also, very pious people often crawl up the hill from the Tinos port on their knees to the church that enshrines the Evangelistra (Annunciation) icon, but I've also met seemingly sophisticated and worldly young women on pilgrimage who look as if they'd just stepped out of a nightclub, tell me that they have also come to do this to ask Panaghia's help for their sick children or family members. People always surprise you.

Traveling on One's Own

RTE: Wonderful. Would you say it is better to hire a travel agent, or to do the trip on your own?

NICHOLAS: If a group of friends or a parish are coming for pilgrimage, I definitely discourage them from looking for a random Greek travel agent. Most agents are locked into the Greek travel industry and are not church people, do not visit churches or monasteries themselves, and don't know church history or the services. They may not believe in miracles and might even look down on religious people and will just add a few random churches to a set

itinerary to get the job. If I can't help this group because of time constraints, I can find someone who can help them and who will respect their beliefs.

Certainly, individuals or a group of family members or friends can rent a car and get around by themselves. There are great benefits in traveling on your own, such as the ability to be completely spontaneous. However, you also might miss places you don't know exist, or won't get the full experience in churches or monasteries because you don't speak the language. You may not have the same opportunities for discussions with monks, nuns, or interesting lay people, who often won't speak English. Taking public transport and walking is certainly another option, especially for the young, but it takes more time and a certain amount of stamina.

RTE: How can you help people who would like to try?

NICHOLAS: If they want to do it on their own, I don't mind if they write me to ask a few questions, and I will be glad to help them with information. If they want me to set up a whole program with places to stay and so on, they can hire me for that. Or, for example, they might want to go around Athens by themselves, but they may also want to visit, say, a monastery in the Peloponnese for a few days, and ask my help with planning, transport, and translation. I can do that as well.

For these individuals and small groups, I can also offer an itinerary and cost estimate for the exact places they want to go, with or without guiding. I can also suggest two or three alternative itineraries that include their desired destinations and places nearby that they might not have thought of visiting.

RTE: I have to say that after having traveled in Greece for over twenty-five years by public transport, hiking, and occasional taxis, one of my favorite trips was the one I took with you and my godson. He hired you to drive us around mainland Greece for several weeks to historical pilgrimage sites, churches, and monasteries. We had an incredible trip. The cost of your gas, room, board, and the daily guiding and translation fee, was more than made up for by the time saved and the number of places we were able to see. It hardly ever felt rushed, but looking back we were amazed at the fascinating monasteries and churches you found. Something else I'd like to mention is your unique rapport with converts.

Pilgrimaging with Converts

NICHOLAS: Converts are usually wonderful, enthusiastic, open, and respectful, but occasionally they can be a bit naïve, which is normal because this is a foreign culture for them. I've encountered converts who came to Greece looking for spirituality, but are marginalized by their own choices. For example, some converts have unknowingly been caught up with Orthodox who are outside the limits of what good priests call "the Golden Mean of Orthodoxy." This would include clerics and monasteries who embrace not just traditional practices but a super-correct strictness that can harm the soul. For instance, I remember one such cleric who thought that he and his fellow pilgrims should not be laughing. This tension went on for weeks.

I know Orthodoxy in Greece and I also understand the mentality of converts from other places. My wife is one of these converts, so I know firsthand the process of becoming Orthodox. I have traveled to these countries, so I can guess the needs of the pilgrims and what they might be looking for. Sometimes converts feel a little insecure or clumsy with their new faith and are trying to find out what it means to be spiritual, so I present them with a range of Orthodoxy, both modern and traditional, parishes and monasteries, while discouraging the extreme positions on both sides. Of course, it is too ambitious to claim that I am the determiner of what is good and bad, but perhaps I can help them to maintain a balance.

RTE: Thank you. Any closing thoughts?

NICHOLAS: If I am right, the term pilgrim has more than one meaning in English. It is not something that has to do exclusively with what is obviously "spiritual" but also refers to a person wandering in search of truth or of the meaning of his own life. The term "spiritual" has been twisted, especially in America where even Orthodox consider some practices to be spiritual while others are worldly and secular. I don't believe this is the case.

A nice meal from natural ingredients prepared by a tavern owner in a small village who has an icon corner in his taverna and lights the oil lamps of the twelfth-century chapel next door every morning can also be spiritual. If the meal is made with love, this is spiritual. An unspoiled beach and a beautiful sunset can bring you closer to God than words. A fisherman on the dock mending his nets the old way can be a philosopher, as can a shepherd who spends most of his time in the mountains. The illiterate grandmother

knitting on her doorstep who offers you a glass of water is spiritual, as is the smell of incense in a narrow island street

A word that a priest or a nun might give you is spiritual as well, but telling jokes to make people laugh can be as spiritual as a reverent silence before sunset or seeing a miracle-working icon in a monastery. This spirituality that is woven into life has been part of our culture for ages. It is everywhere, like the icon hanging on a wall of a tavern, in a prison cell, or on the dashboard of a public bus. Spiritual is also enjoying life as God's gift to us, without guilt. Even something "worldly" can be spiritual if one has the eyes to see it that way.

This is what has kept illiterate Greeks Orthodox through the ages, under oppression and persecution. And it still keeps many of us joyful today despite our crushing economic problems. It is seeing God in every little thing, having the church as a battery charger and the monasteries for refuge. Keeping in mind the parable of the unworthy servant, I think that in Greece we should be ready to share what we have with others, rather than burying our talent in the ground.

RTE: Do you feel connected to your past visitors and pilgrims?

NICHOLAS: For good or bad, I am emotionally and spiritually bound up with these people. It starts as a brotherly connection, but I also feel responsible as their guide, particularly for the pilgrims who are searching for something. Many years after we have traveled together, I find myself wondering if someone finally found a spouse, a spiritual father, or a proper monastery; if they chose the right career or resolved their spiritual problem. Spending even a few days of your life with someone on such a journey is not superficial, and I often say a short prayer for someone I met fifteen or twenty years ago. God's grace keeps you connected. ✦

Interested in a pilgrimage or tour with Nicholas Karellos? Contact him at:

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