

TRAVEL EXPLORE

EDITED BY
CATHY WINSTON
cwinston@thejc.com

PHOTOS: DAVID GREVETT/REBECCA BARNES/PIXABAY



Naturally Greek

Think you know Greece? **Rebecca Barnes** discovers the country's best-kept secret in the diverse region of Epirus

As my car slices chaotically into the crystal-clear river, our guide Christos shouts, "You're supposed to paddle not stir the water, Rebecca!" But I soon hit my stride, giving my arms the best workout ever, to help power the inflatable raft downstream, slowing occasionally to scoop up the fresh water and quench our thirst.

Minutes later we're jumping into the icy — 4°C to be exact — waters of the Voidomatis river in Greece's Epirus region. After almost an hour of physical effort in the September heat, it's a real adrenaline rush. And it's just one of the surprises to be found in this under-the-radar region, in the north west of the country, on the border with Albania.

While sun, sea and UV are arguably the biggest attractions for UK

visitors to Greece, when you discover the many natural wonders on the mainland you'll wonder why it's taken you so long to venture there. For starters, everywhere you look there are vistas that demand you stop to drink them in — brooding mountains, traditional villages, ancient arched stone bridges and dense, green landscapes. It's a nature lover's dream and the perfect destination for active holiday-makers, as well as those looking to escape the crowds in the cities and on the popular islands.

It's best to factor car hire into your holiday plans: our road trip was in conjunction with the Thema Project, launched to introduce visitors to the area and three culture, wellness and gastronomy routes. In this age of social distancing, Thema's app is also ideal for self-guided tours around the region's many places of interest.

Our first stop is the region's capital city, Ioannina. Built next to the

second oldest lake in Europe, Lake Pamvotis, and with the traditional Zagori mountain villages on its doorstep, Ioannina is home to one of Greece's eight Jewish communities — the city has around 40 Jewish residents, along with a Jewish mayor who was elected in 2019.

The boutique-style Metropolis Hotel is our base here for a couple of days — ideal for exploring the old town and castle which was built in 528 and is a city within a city, with residential buildings and narrow cobbled alleys.

After dark, the streets come alive as many of the old stone buildings are transformed into uber-cool bars. We stop off for a reviving *espresso freddo* at a lakeside café, and grab a bite to eat at fashionable street food outlet Folk.

In Epirus, you never know what's round the corner: one afternoon driving along a winding mountain road, we come to a swift standstill as a large herd of wild goats trot

across the road in front of us. We also pass rows of colourful beehives, distant hilltop villages and mountains as far as the eye can see.

Food is taken seriously here and the region is blessed with abundant locally grown, organic produce with a farm-to-fork philosophy. One morning we pick up *bougatsa*, a local speciality pie containing sweet or sometimes savoury fillings, typically cheese or custard. It's deliciously simple and authentic, if rather indulgent for breakfast.

At lunchtime, sublime sustenance comes in the form of bowls of Greek salad containing the sweetest tomatoes and hunks of creamy feta cheese. We devour these under shady sycamore trees at the Achilles watermill restaurant, overlooking the Kalamas river.

You'll also find excellent wines from the Zagori and Metsovo areas, high-quality cheese made from



Looking down the Aaos river (left) from Konitsa bridge (above), Epirus is also home to the dramatic Vikos Gorge (above right), ancient Lake Pamvotis (right) and rafting on the Voidomatis river (below), plus seaside Parga (below left) and local culinary delicacies including *bougatsa* (below right)

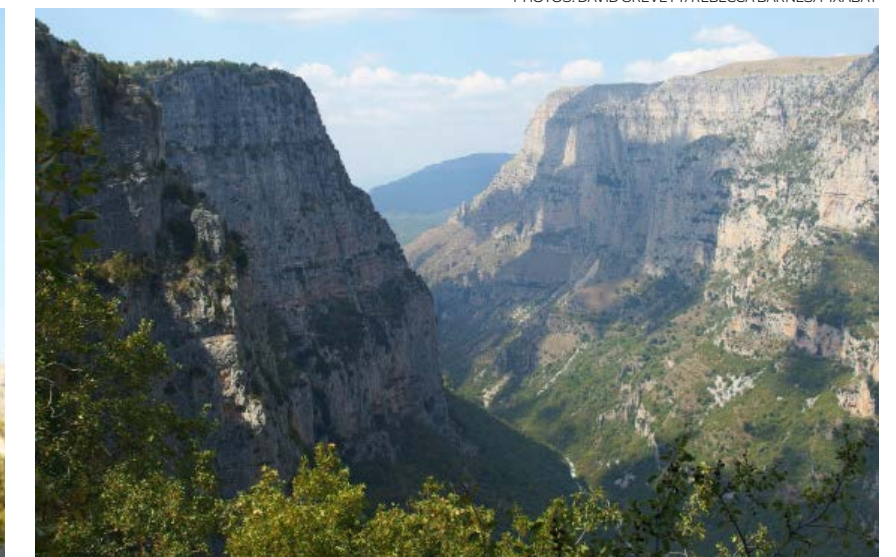


goat's and sheep's milk and even medicinal Greek mountain tea concocted from a plant growing at high altitudes in rocky soil.

At the highest point in Papigo village sits luxury hotel Mikro Papigo 1700, with panoramic views of the Vikos Gorge from its terrace, plus a small spa. The mountain hideaway is housed in a restored building dating back to 1700 and features 15 individually designed rooms and a handful of suites featuring fireplaces and jacuzzis.

We park in the village and our luggage is whisked up to the hotel in a buggy, leaving us to meander up the steep approach on foot. While this is undeniably the ultimate secluded location, it's perhaps not ideal for those with mobility issues.

The following morning, we visit Vitsa, one of the largest of the 46 Zagori villages, with a no-car rule and stone mansions built by well-to-do tradesmen in the 18th and 19th centuries. Wandering the traditional cobblestone streets, we forage blackberries, grapes, walnuts, hazelnuts and sweet cherry tomatoes along the way, before relaxing in the central square under the shade of the 600-year-old plane tree.



A short drive away is the region's biggest draw, the Vikos Gorge, said to be the world's deepest canyon. I'm thankful that my head for heights isn't too bad as our guide Tasos leads us to a lofty vantage point high in the Pindus mountains.

The Oxia viewpoint sits at an altitude of 1,370m, and we focus on hugging the stone wall and not looking down until we reach the end of the narrow ledge — where we are rewarded with stunning views of the gorge, the valley of Mega Lakos and some unforgettable photo opportunities. "If you stay a while you can see everything down there, including wild goats," Tasos tells us.

Vitsa is also on the border of the largest national park on the Greek mainland, Northern Pindos National Park, which was established to safeguard the region's natural points of interest including the Aaos Canyon, Voidomatis river and Vikos Gorge.

Along with the unspoiled scenery, you may spot one of the endangered mammals and birds residing in the park, including one of the 100 brown bears, the rare Balkan chamois — 50 per cent of Greece's chamois population currently live in the park — and

the Egyptian vulture, which is an endangered species globally.

Following one of the wooded hiking trails in the Unesco-listed Vikos-Aoos Geopark region, we climb the high arched Konitsa stone bridge and watch a herd of goats tumble down the riverbank to drink the Alpine water, presumably a welcome respite in the September heat.

If you feel no Greek holiday is complete without at least one beach, Parga is less than 90 minutes' drive from Ioannina. This seaside resort has that archetypal Greek island vibe with labyrinthine cobbled streets, bustling harbour and plenty of inviting tavernas and bars in which to while away an evening.

Climbing the wide steps in the old town up to the Venetian castle, we take in the views of the waves and harbour as the sun sets, bathing the town in golden light. And on the way back down we quench our own thirst at a terrace bar overlooking the harbour.

With so much to discover in this diverse region, take a tip from the laid-back atmosphere in Epirus — leave plenty of time to explore. This little-known corner of Greece is somewhere not to be rushed.



GETTING THERE

► **FLIGHTS TO Thessaloniki** cost from around £125 with British Airways and Aegean Airlines, around three hours from Ioannina. Flights to Preveza airport cost from around £60 with easyJet, around 90 minutes from Ioannina. Car hire is available at both airports.

A double room at the Metropolis Hotel costs from around £68. metropolishotel.gr
A room at 1700 Mikro Papigo costs from £100 (minimum stay two nights). mikropapigo.reserveonline.net

For more information on Thema Project, a programme funded by the EU, Greece and Albania, visit thema.eu.com