

Summit of the gods

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The Greeks put gods on Olympus and men aspire to the same beautiful perspective

By Joanna Kakissis, Globe Correspondent | July 17, 2005

MOUNT OLYMPUS, Greece -- I first saw Mount Olympus from another mountain in Greece, the mushroom-streaked peak of Vourinos in Macedonia. Low clouds ran like smoky currents over the villages below, and the clear morning illuminated the best of the craggy crests, which cover more than half the country.

The lean, sixtyish furrier who had led our mountaineering group to the summit of this 6,122-foot mountain stripped to his shorts and bellowed into the cool wind. Juxtaposed against his bearded profile and the supernatural echo of his voice was Olympus, the broad mass of 52 peaks where 12 powerful gods plotted the fate of ancient Greece. The ash-pale crest of Mytikas, the highest point in Greece at 9,570 feet, looked close enough to touch.

Greece has always evoked images of sea and sand thanks to its islands and modern coastal resorts, where most of its 13 million annual visitors go to swim, sun bake, drink, and dance to delirium. But as outdoorsy tourists increasingly seek pristine and blood-quickenning walkabouts in the rugged mainland, Greece's mountains -- particularly the storied Olympus -- are emerging as the newest landscapes in the country's tourist brochures.

"It looked like the Greece I wanted to see," said Kelly Hitchcock, 24, from Sydney, who was into her second week of a however-long-it-takes backpacking trip around the world. "I wanted to see something dramatic and authentic and old, someplace different than the whitewashed buildings and beach sand that I see in the movie-cut image of Greece."

She read about Olympus in a travel book over a sleepless night at the Thessaloniki airport in northern Greece. The passage described a forested paradise cut by the clear Enipeas River, which burst into waterfalls near an old monastery and reached over 9,500 feet beyond the clouds to the mythic throne of Zeus.

The next day, early last month, Hitchcock was on a train to Litochoro, a village at the foot of Olympus near the familiar blueness of the Aegean Sea. I was on my way there, too, driving the five hours north from Athens to find my own authentic paradise in the country where I was born.

Greece has always ached with a deep nostalgia for the old-world life. This feeling runs strongest in the mountains, where the impenetrable land cultivated fiercely traditional people. In 1802, the women of Souli in the Pindus Mountains threw themselves off the cliffs of Zalongo to avoid capture by the invading Ottomans. World War II resistance fighters carved the word "oxi" (Greek for "no") onto a mountainside in Epirus as an answer to Mussolini's invading army. Even today, Greek Orthodox monks live in monasteries teetering on the bare-rock pinnacles of Meteora in Thessaly.

Still, no mountain is more fierce than Olympus, cloaked in mist and myth and year-round snow. The gods chose it as their home. The Macedonians built a holy city, Dion, at its foot to honor Zeus and the other gods who lived there, and pagans still make pilgrimages to the mountain to celebrate the ancient gods amid the meadows and tall cedars.

"This is the home of the gods," said a beatific Kostas Mantzaras, 38, a physical education teacher from Thessaloniki, addressing a group of university students on a day trip to Olympus. "Notice how the air is clean and the water is pure like nowhere else in Greece."

They had stopped on this bright and hot June morning at the old monastery of Aghios Dionysios, near the holy cave where the old ascetic had lived, and forgone the swerving and beautiful four-hour walk from

Litochoro along the Enipeas Gorge.

The college students returned to Thessaloniki, but many hikers milling around the monastery went on to the rest stop of Prionia.

The last spot accessible by automobile, Prionia is where most hikers park their cars, motor homes, and motorcycles. A group of US servicemen in wide-brimmed hats were taking a group photo before the ascent. The goal was the Spilios Agapitos refuge, where hikers rest overnight before making the final climb to Mytikas.

The three- or four- hour route follows natural steps, and the mossy foliage scents and shades the journey. Twists in the winding trail open views of lush ravines against the blue Greek sea and sky.

Though the hike is scenic, it is also steep. Even well-exercised muscles burn after an hour or so. That's why when I heard the didgeridoo in the forest of black pines and firs, I thought I was hallucinating. Then I saw the Polish hippies sitting on a plateau in the shade of a giant tree.

A bearded young man sat on the ground, puffing into the long Australian wooden flute. Sprawled like a cat on a branch above him was a young woman strumming a hammer-size, single-string lute. Both college students from Krakow, they had sand-blond hair in dreadlocks and wore flowy, colorful tunics. His name was Cyprian Bus, and he was 23. She said her name was "only Basha," and she was 20. They were on a trip around the world, and they played music to earn money for food and cigarettes. Hikers already had filled their upturned Turkish fez with coins.

"I left Poland because I felt dead, and I am hoping to find something here on the mountain that is alive," Bus said during a break in their ethereal show.

He and Basha resumed playing when the four servicemen stopped out of curiosity. Meanwhile, the uphill climb continued, and the didgeridoo faded into the chirping of birds, the low hum of a quickening breeze, and the clicking hooves of mules and horses descending from the refuge, where they had carried supplies.

The Spilios Agapitos refuge was built on a natural balcony surrounded by Bosnian pines at an altitude of 6,890 feet. Run by a mountaineering family, the log-cabin-style house offers hikers bunk-style beds for about \$12 a night, warm comfort food, and a fragrant mountain tea made from Olympus herbs. Guests place their muddy boots on shelves in the lobby, and pad around in refuge-provided sandals.

By nightfall, a small crowd of tired and hungry hikers filled the two dining rooms, eating steaming plates of spaghetti with tomato-meat sauce and drinking beer and tea. Night had chilled the place, so hearth fires were blazing. The servicemen had arrived, and so had the young Poles. They were joined by Winfried Emmerich, a retired mathematics professor from Germany; a group of fresh-faced Serbian and Greek computer programmers; a team of lean marathoners training for the seemingly suicidal 26.2-mile race up Olympus later in June; and the world-traveling Hitchcock.

Everyone wanted to get to the top, and for their own reasons. Hitchcock had quit her job as a restaurant manager and sold her house to explore the world while she was still young and fearless. Bus wanted to find peace from the work-centered grind in Krakow that had spiritually worn down his parents. Emmerich wanted to see if he could, at 61, handle his second climb to Olympus as easily as his first, when he was 25. One of the servicemen, Robert Milie, 46, a civilian special agent, had admired the mountain from the nearby city of Larissa, where he had been stationed for two years, and wanted to see Olympus up close. Henk Niks, 43, a NATO officer from the Netherlands, wanted to see what it felt like to climb what he called a "real mountain," since the highest peak in his country is only 1,053 feet. Antonis Vouzaxakis, 32, a computer programmer in Athens, liked escaping from the city's smoggy chaos. His friend Darko Radojevic, 31, a Serb and also a programmer, wanted to sled down one of the mountain's lingering snowbanks.

So after a few hours of sleeping under layers of thermal blankets, the crowd at Spilios Agapitos rose at dawn to climb to Mytikas.

The hike took nearly three hours and got dramatically steeper and more strenuous closer to the summit. Just 30 minutes in, the lush forests disappeared, replaced by bare alpine rock. The Poles stayed at the peak of Skala, at 9,402 feet, and resumed playing their music. From there, the trail took on the uneasy name of

Kakoskala (or, roughly, "bad ladder"). Emmerich said the best way to handle this particularly dangerous part of the hike was to "not look down at the chaos below."

It was excellent advice. Getting to Mytikas would not be easy, as a thickening film of clouds began obscuring views. One Greek hiker turned around because he feared he would misstep and plunge to his death.

"I really wanted to go to the top," he said, resting in a shady crevice. "But I just didn't have the stomach for it today."

I went on, as did many others. Slowly and gingerly, with only an occasional and unwise glance at the chaos below, we reached Mytikas.

The misty crest of rock was pierced by a flagpole bearing a metal replica of the Greek flag emblazoned with the Star of Vergina, the emblem of Alexander the Great and Philip of Macedonia. Vouzaxakis, Radojevic, and Radojevic's brother, Ivan, jumped on the flagpole and snapped photos before Darko Radojevic descended to sled down a snowbank on a garbage bag attached to his backpack. Hitchcock and a companion screamed and leapt crazily over rocks, unafraid of the chasm below. Emmerich snacked on soy nuts as he and Niks, chewing on a long piece of sausage, marveled at the view.

The clouds rolled like currents below, and when they thinned to sheer, the craggy land looked small enough to hold.

"Now this is a mountain," said Niks.

"Yep," said Milie. "And this mountain is so much better up close."

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