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## A Living Rock in a Lost World

By JOANNA KAKISSIS

MONEMVASIA means “single entrance,” and as you cross the narrow bridge separating this fortified fist of land from the southeast tip of the Peloponnese, you can see why.

Distanced from the ancient glories that unite much of [Greece](#) in a dream life of classical antiquity, the cyclamen-swept milelong rock at first looks wild. But follow the thin road edging along Monemvasia’s cliffs, past a sienna-tinged stone hotel and the small cemetery holding the bones of one of Greece’s most popular poets, Yannis Ritsos, born in the town in the early 20th century. Soon you will come to a spiked door of a fortress wall, behind which is a resilient town, rich with remnants of its reign as a main port during the Byzantine, Venetian and Ottoman empires.

Although only about a dozen people live year-around in Monemvasia’s old city today, compared with perhaps thousands during its 12th-century heyday, the town remains both magnetic to visitors and stubbornly ensconced in its past. The rush of visitors begins with the Eastern Orthodox Easter in spring and lasts well into October.

For tourists in search of an authentic slice of post-antiquity Greece, now is the time to visit Monemvasia. Over the last three decades, this area has risen from modern obscurity to become a popular holiday destination for Europeans and Americans. Locals rely heavily on tourism, Greece’s most reliable source of income, and some longtime Monemvasiotes want to attract even more visitors to their rock.

So far, the development of hotels, bars and taverns has exploded across the causeway in the unremarkable newer town of Gefira. But Monemvasia, known colloquially as Kastro (castle or fortress), has resisted the urge to trade its tradition for the lure of modernization, which has trampled many charming places in this history-rich country. Consider the once-lovely Cretan village of Malia, home to a Minoan-era palace, now a bleak stretch of beach bars, fast-food joints and trinket shops for intoxicated 20-somethings on perennial spring break.

“We can’t change Monemvasia; it would ruin everything,” said Matoula Ritsos, who has lived there for more than 60 years and is, at 93, the oldest resident. “We weren’t supposed to last here, in isolation and cut into a cliff of rock. But here we are. Hundreds of years later, here we still are.”

Visitors usually fall for Monemvasia’s combination of nature and history, its serene view of the velvet-blue Mirtoon Sea, its collection of quirky, open-hearted locals offering a plate of amygdalota (almond cookies dusted with powdered sugar) or a glass of Malvasia white wine.

They stay in the rooms of renovated monasteries, swim in the clear water off the rocky beaches and hike through winding paths starred with crimson blossoms, past the ruins of churches and mosques, to the abandoned fortress at the crest of what historians called “the Gibraltar of the East.” Under glittery night skies, there’s usually a late dinner of octopus simmered in wine at one of the handful of taverns, followed by a swig of brandy, ouzo or a honeyed homemade spirit called rakomelo at one of the cliffside bars.

Monemvasia (pronounced Mo-nem-vah-SEE-ah) was most likely settled by the residents of Sparta in the late sixth century after they fled barbarian invaders. They built homes and churches on the far side of the rock along spiraling lanes, erected giant walls along the lower city and around the fortress on the rock’s peak and crossed to the mainland either through a wooden drawbridge or by wading through the shallow waters. By 1193, Monemvasia was a major city in the Peloponnesus. Ships sailing between Constantinople (now [Istanbul](#)) and what is now [Italy](#) stopped there, giving rest to aristocrats and high-ranking church members and loading Greek exports like olive oil and wine headed for the West. Monemvasia passed through Byzantine, [Vatican](#), Frank, Venetian and Ottoman hands before becoming part of modern Greece.

The upper town has been long abandoned. At turns luminous and menacing, depending on the brightness of the sun, it lies along the crests of the rock. A path of hairpin bends passes the ruins of once-majestic buildings and leads to Aghia Sophia (Holy Wisdom), a beautifully intact mid-12th-century Byzantine church with a sculptured door and marble reliefs. The highest peak in the upper town, accessible by climbing a trail of lush brush, is about 656 feet above sea level.

Meanwhile, Monemvasia’s inhabited lower town has churned for centuries, thanks to its merchants and artisans.

“I consider what we do now an extension of what the merchants before us did,” said Maria Liavakou, 33, who owns a wine shop called To Kellari, which specializes, of course, in Malvasia wine.

The lower town’s cobblestoned principal lane is lined with tall, slim earthy-stone houses with arched doorways and vaulted rooms. The narrower buildings have older foundations, while the wider buildings are newer, dating to the 18th or 19th centuries, and have modern touches like wrought-iron balconies. A bell tower is near the main square, which has the medieval Church of Elkomenos Christos (Christ Drawn to His Passion), a museum with artifacts from the town’s early years and an old cannon. Although merchants may have given Monemvasia’s lower town its immediacy, architects — namely a husband-and-wife team from [Athens](#) — helped save its identity. Since 1967, the couple, Alexandros and Haris Kalligas, who live here half the year, have been responsible for restoring more than half of the 160 properties on the rock. Their work on Monemvasia, which they are recording in a book, won them a Europa Nostra cultural heritage medal in 1980.

“One of the reasons we believe there are so many old buildings here is that they were very well-built,” said Ms. Kalligas, Monemvasia’s most noted historian.

ON a recent evening, Magda Alisafou, who owns a small tavern in the lower town with her sister Marianthi, after whom the tavern is named, fried thick-cut potatoes

and stirred a big pot of artichokes stewed with carrots and dill as she read the orders piling up on the counter. “When we first opened, there were only five people coming to the restaurant, and on many days the only voice you heard was the wind’s,” said Ms. Alisafou, who opened the tavern in 1970. At that time, the town was regenerating after losing most of its population during the Nazi occupation in World War II and the desolate years of the deeply divisive Greek Civil War that followed.

For now, the expansion of tourism-related development remains safely across the bridge in Gefira. With its back to the modern land, its face to the sun and the sea, Monemvasia thrives in its whimsy, alive in its lost world. “This place has survived on its identity, and once you see how real it is, you cannot forget it,” said Chrysafo Karkannis, a retired architect who was born in a nearby village but who grew up in [Buenos Aires](#). She returned five years ago to rent a small studio on the rock and paint images inspired by its landscape.

The poet Yannis Ritsos also never forgot Monemvasia, even after he left for literary success in Athens.

Jailed for his leftist beliefs before enjoying a resurgence in his later years, Ritsos was one of the most prolific poets of his generation. He died in 1990 and was buried in Monemvasia’s cemetery. His pompadoured bust stares at the sea from the courtyard of his childhood home in the lower town.

Ritsos’s verses, including the poem “Monemvasiotisses,” which was published in 1987 and is devoted to the town’s women, sometimes referred to his lonely rock with the single entrance. In its resilience, he celebrated freedom.

“So many years, besieged by mainland and by sea,” he wrote in his 1945 epic poem “Romiosini.” “They’ve all been hungry, all been killed, and yet — not a single one is dead.”

## VISITOR INFORMATION

### GETTING THERE

Olympic Airlines has flights to [Athens](#) from New York for just under \$1,000, but other airlines, like United, offer cheaper flights with connections. From the neighboring harbor city of Piraeus, you can take a hydrofoil to Monemvasia. If you decide to drive, take the new Attiki Odos highway toward Elefsina and then the national road to Tripolis and then Sparta. After that, you will take smaller roads to Monemvasia; there are signs in English and Greek to guide you.

### WHERE TO STAY

Inside Monemvasia’s fortress, try the Hotel Malvasia (30-27320-61323), or the Goulas House, (30-27320-61223), where rooms for two start at between 50 euros (\$64, at 1.31 euros to the dollar) and 70 euros.

Outside the fortress’s walls, on the tip of the rock toward the mainland, there is the rustic Hotel Lazareto (30-27320-61256), where rooms for two range from 135 to 380 euros. If the rooms on the rock are full, try lodging across the bridge in Gefira.

## WHERE TO EAT

Don't miss Marianthi's Tavern, located along the main cobbled path in the lower town near the main square. Marianthi's serves excellent stewed octopus in wine, fresh pitas (or pies) made with wild greens, and soutzoukakia (spiced meatballs simmered in tomato sauce). A meal for two people (with local wine) is about 40 euros.

Another option is Matoula's Tavern, open since 1947 and overlooking the rocky cliffs of the old town. Matoula Ritsos, Monemvasia's oldest resident, started the restaurant, which serves a variety of Greek specialties, including the area's fresh seafood. A dinner at Matoula's, now run by Ms. Ritsos's niece, costs about 40 euros for two.

For dessert, try one of the local amygdalota (almond cookies), available by the piece in cafes or in boxes of 12 in specialty food and wine shops. One of those, To Kellari, also has an excellent selection of wine from Laconian vineyards, including versions of the famous Malvasia wine made in [Greece](#) during the 13th century.