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EXPLORER

## Ottoman Whispers in a Secret Corner of Greece

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THE old men in skullcaps hiked up the cobblestone steps in the last bruised light of dusk. They passed Gypsy merchants draped in rugs that were for sale, engineering students on post-cafe strolls and children chattering in an acrobatic blend of Greek, Turkish and the Slavic language of the Pomaks. They didn't notice I was following them until they sat outside the mosque to wash their feet.

I had been in Xanthi, the centerpiece city in the northeastern Greek region of Thrace, for only a few hours, admiring the neo-Classical-style buildings and restored tobacco warehouses of the old town. I spotted the minaret shortly after I heard a muezzin's cry separating from the church bells and the cafes blasting Rihanna.

I'd never seen a mosque open for prayer in Greece. Almost all Greeks are Orthodox Christians, many of them fiercely attached to their cultural identity, and the church is as powerful as any political party. In Athens, where I had lived for four years, many Muslims are relative newcomers who must worship in rented basements until a mosque — approved by the Greek Parliament in 2006 — is built.

In Thrace, Islam has long been part of the landscape. But the area was not a familiar landscape to travelers until very recently. Just a couple of decades ago, Thrace was known mainly as an outpost for soldiers guarding Greece from a hostile Turkey and Communist Bulgaria. Today, thanks to much improved relations with both countries (especially Turkey), a spotlight is finally shining on northeastern Greece.

Travelers are heading to Thrace's homespun inns and eco-tourism centers and to late-Ottoman landmarks like Imaret, a former Muslim administrative and school complex in the nearby eastern Macedonian city of Kavala that's now one of the top luxury hotels in Greece. Surrounded by two rivers, the thickly forested Rhodope Mountains and the Aegean Sea, Thrace, which comprises three smaller prefectures, has its roots in the ancient kingdom of the same name, which also extended into Bulgaria, Turkey, eastern portions of Serbia and the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia. Along with the province of East Macedonia, Thrace makes up one of the 13 peripheries, or administrative divisions, of Greece.

I explored the region with a photographer, Yannis Kolesidis, on a five-day trip last year. Driving was easy and scenic partly because of the Egnatia Odos, a new highway through northern Greece inspired by the Roman-era Via Egnatia. Speaking Greek eased our way, too, though language would hardly be a barrier to travel in Thrace. Many locals speak a little English, and those who don't will show an old-fashioned warmth that's disappeared in more tourist-weary areas.

We based ourselves in a sunny bed-and-breakfast called Petrinos Lofos in Mandra, a village just outside the city of Xanthi that's bordered by olive groves and acacia trees.

Xanthi was especially vibrant. Each evening, the streets of its restored neo-Classical-influenced old town filled with arty young Greeks moving from cafes to tavernas to bars. We joined in, dining on soutzoukakia (cumin-spiced Smyranean meatballs in tomato sauce), drinking some outstanding tsipouro (a strong pomace brandy) and hanging out with the cool kids at Dili Dili, a packed bar named for a Greek children's story.

A Dili Dili bartender, Dimitris Mutafidis, who doubled as the cute drummer of a local rock band, handed a bottle of Vergina, a fruity Thracian beer, to one of the regulars, the folk-jazz fusion composer and double-bassist Vangelis Kontopoulos. "I can't believe you used to live in Athens," Mr. Mutafidis told him. "I know," said Mr. Kontopoulos, who relocated to Xanthi with his young family several years ago and is now deeply in love with the city. "Was I crazy?"

One of their friends, a young artist named Martha Apostolidou, had to laugh. She grew up in Xanthi and remembered when few wanted to visit, let alone relocate there. "And now, every year, I meet someone new — from Holland, France, Germany, Australia, America," she said.

She encourages visitors to explore the rest of the Xanthi prefecture, especially the long isolated Pomakochoria (Pomak villages) deep in the southern Rhodope Mountains. Border disputes with Bulgaria in its Communist era estranged the villages, which are built into some of the most stunning mountainous land in Greece, from the rest of the country until the mid-1990s. That's when the Greek government removed a cold war-era military barrier, called a barra, blocking the only road to the villages. To pass the barra, the Pomaks had been required to show Greek soldiers a special identity card.

The Pomaks, Muslim Slavs who speak a language called Pomakci, were victims of politics; Greece, Turkey and Bulgaria all claimed the people as their own. Now the Pomaks are cautiously integrating into Greek society, but their villages are still desperately poor.

We were greeted warmly when we stopped one afternoon at the hamlets of Pachni and Glafki, even if the villagers wondered aloud why we had picked their towns, of all places, to visit. “We don’t even have a taverna here,” said Pachni’s mayor, Homko Mustafa, who treated us instead to souvlaki.

When we pulled into Glafki, an old man strolling along the main road ran to greet us with handshakes and hugs. Later, as we walked through the village’s tiny alleys, children offered us ice cream, and curious grandmothers waved from kitchen windows.

Though we had flown from Athens to Alexandroupolis, a Balkan energy center that’s the biggest city in the lush, largely undeveloped Thracian prefecture of Evros, we spent only a day in that area. Evros, named for the river that largely marks Greece’s border with Turkey, is an eco-traveler’s paradise. Hundreds of endangered bird species migrate annually to the Evros Delta, and wild horses gallop in the nearby tamarisk forest.

The Thrassa Eco-Tourism Guesthouse in the tiny hamlet of Tycherio offers canoeing, horseback riding and hiking. When we stopped to check out the more spartan eco-tourism center near the northwestern Evros village of Dadia, we met a middle-aged German couple, both ornithologists, who had come to hike Dadia’s well-known forest reserve, among the last refuges for predatory birds in Europe.

After Evros, we drove to the Rhodope prefecture, in the heart of Thrace, where more than half of the residents are Turkish-speaking Greek Muslims and others are Gypsies (also known as Roma), Armenians and Pontic Greeks. We spent most of the day strolling around the raucous city of Komotini, eating fresh custard-filled pastries called boughatsas and checking out the central district that’s home to a famously energetic pazari, or market, on weekends.

We also stopped at the ierospoudastirio, or Muslim seminary school, the largest in Greece. Later I asked one of the students, a very bright 13-year-old girl named Seida, if she had struggled with reconciling her Greek and Muslim identities. “Sure,” she laughed, puzzled at my question. “But isn’t every person on this earth a work in progress?”

Many Greeks long associated Islam with the Ottoman Turks, against whom Greece fought a war of independence from 1821 to 1829. Afterward, most of Greece’s Ottoman history was left to languish. Of the few landmark buildings that have survived, the most impressive is in the eastern Macedonian seaport of Kavala. Built in 1817, the Imaret of Mohamed Ali Pasha is a seminary complex that once held madrassas, a mosque, libraries, hammams and administrative offices. By the 1960s, it had fallen into decrepitude. Thirty

years later, the Kavala tobacco heiress Anna Missirian financed its restoration and reopened it as a luxury hotel in 2004.

I wanted to spend my last night in northeastern Greece at Imaret. I'd already heard about it from friends in Athens, who raved about its elegance and historical intrigue. Imaret's stunning grounds have archways capped by more than 100 domes, low-lighted gardens and a reflecting pool. The rooms (some are former dorms of madrassa students) are soothing and intimate. My room had sensual lighting, muslin drapes and a sunken marble bath where I could have happily soaked for the rest of my life. I also indulged in hand-picked first flush Darjeeling and rose pouchong at Imaret's tea salon as well as truffle risotto at the restaurant overlooking the port.

After I checked out, I took a sunset walk along Kavala's seaside promenade. I stopped near some fishermen who were darning their nets to photograph a panorama of Imaret, its domes tucked into the old city. One of the men stopped working and stood up to take in the view, too. Although he was Egyptian, his boat had been docking in Kavala for years. Yet he said he had never paid attention to that bit of history etched in its skyline. He was still gazing at the dusky tableau when I walked away, his hands clasped behind his back, the Arabic song on his cassette player melting into the husky Greek voices of the crowd.