After 35 years in living Greece it takes quite a lot to make me stop in my tracks, but a recent visit to the Eastern Peleponnese did just that. It was breathtaking.

At the very north east of the Peleponnese is the always impressive Corinth Canal. I always marvel at the construction of this steep-sided, 6.4km excavation, several attempts over centuries to carve this canal between the Gulf of Corinth and the Saronic Gulf, succeeded with its opening in 1893, but at a cost to the lives of hundreds of men. With pick axes they perched on 19th century scaffolding as they worked on the mammoth task and the evidence of those individual strokes is still etched into the soft limestone rock, embedded with shells from the days when this whole area lay under the sea. Watching vessels navigate the canal is a sight not to be missed and an experience that many yacht owners and their guests enjoy every year.

Corinth was an area in the past world-famous for currants, the name actually coming from the name Corinth. During the 19th century the entire Greek economy hinged largely on currants, raisins and tobacco which were basically the only agricultural exports from the area, demand falling as production elsewhere increased and more fresh fruits became available. Vines have since been pressed into service for wine making which is now a very significant activity in this area, producing excellent results and adding to the Greek wines that are being increasingly exported as the world wakes up to its quality.

Across the bridge into the Peleponnese, you enter a landscape full of agricultural cultivation from vines and fruits to the olive trees which yield the famous Kalamata Olives. As you enter the Peleponnese—proper however the landscape becomes altogether more interesting as the flat and fertile landscape...
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slowly gives way to the backdrop of impressive mountains and in more central areas amazing areas with breathtaking canyons and valleys beside towering craggy mountains that have trees and vegetation clinging to their steep rock faces to soften the view but render it no less impressive.

While here in the north it might be of interest to stop and visit some of the very fine vineyards for which this area of Nemea is famed. One of the most notable is that of Domaine Skouras which makes some of the finest Greek wines, wines which have achieved International recognition. Simple visits and wine tastings are possible as well as more elaborate meals and events at the vineyards in the area, each visit of course, revolving around the wines.

Epidauros is the site of one of the most important ancient theatres, Pausanias, the Greek traveller and geographer of the second century AD, found it to be beautiful in its symmetry and elegance as well as huge, seating up to 14,000 people, and where productions are still presented each summer. Also, in antiquity Epidauros was the most important centre for healing in Greece. People came from far and wide to attend the Asklepieon where they would be healed by the god Asclepius who spoke directly to the sick to let them know how they could overcome their problems.

The new Epidauros is a small town in a charming bay with a small marina that is worth a visit for those seeking the enjoyment of small, natural and charming Greek villages. This is a convenient place from which to visit the theatre, the wine region of Nemea and Mycenae.

Mycenae, an important city mentioned by Homer as ‘well built Mycenae, rich in gold’ has been inhabited since the Neolithic times of the 6th Millennium BC and features large in Greek Mythology. Allegedly built by Perseus and then passed down to Agamemnon, its story a mixture of fascinating myth and history.
Today there are significant remains to be seen including the palace with its Great Court and the many private rooms of the ruler, the throne room and reception hall. Mycenae is a significant archaeological site of great historical, mythological and social interest.

Travelling south along the easternmost coast of the Peloponnese peninsular you will find Porto Heli with its large natural bay, now surrounded by some of the most exclusive developments of weekending Athenians. A pleasant stop in an area which, like the rest of the Peloponnese, is being discovered and developed in a more sympathetic way than perhaps elsewhere. The nearby Aman Resort is one of the recent projects here which displays both the confidence that investors have in such enterprises and the interest in this area that is recently burgeoning. This wonderful resort is truly breathtaking, built sympathetically with the countryside of local stone, it fits wonderfully with the landscape, still offering luxury and attentive service from the discrete staff, an aura of calm and well being permeates the whole resort, taking this from its surroundings and amplifying it for the guests staying there. It is possible for yachts to anchor in the bay, by the beach club, access to which by prior arrangement can be made available to non-resident visitors.

The islands of Spetses and Hydra are both compellingly interesting and attractive, offering themselves too as anchorages from which this region of the Peloponnese can be experienced.

It is perhaps worth the trip north to Nauplion, a pretty town well endowed with a long quayside and an old quarter of traditional style where it is pleasant to wander and enjoy the large number of cafes and restaurants as well as small shops. But the main attraction is the castle of Palamidi that sits on the hill above the town and which as well as being of historic interest offers a breathtaking view of the town and surrounding area including the small fortified island of Bourtizi in the middle of the bay, both built by crusaders to strengthen the defenses of the town.

This whole central Peloponnese is however dominated by the central Mani Peninsula, also sometimes known as the Morea, which is locally divided into the outer and inner Mani. For generations this was an area defiantly defended by its inhabitants against all comers. Here a feudal system developed in the fourteenth century and inhabitants settled disputes with traditional blood feuds. You will find many small, fortified
enclaves with high towers built to facilitate good views that enabled the inhabitants a short time to prepare their defense from attackers. Feuds were orchestrated with church bells that would signal the commencement of a siege-like battle which could see each group keeping to their tower for months, years and sometime decades. Women were not encompassed in the feuds and they were able to bring in provisions to their men. The Maniots reputation as pirates was not undeserved either and the seas nearby were notorious.

The inhabitants were, like the area, wild and rugged and rather wisely most invading forces left them well alone preferring, in many cases, to negotiate terms rather than to attempt an invasion of the area as they might have done elsewhere. The leaders of the Turkish occupying forces preferred to create a local Bey to whom they gave power to control the area for them, which worked well until the 1821 war of Independence when Mavromichalis, who was the Bey at the time, used his power in favour of Independence to help oust the Turkish invaders.

The Maniots claim direct decent from the Spartans; at one time the most influential and respected citizens of the Greek world and certainly the toughest of ancient Greeks. By definition Spartan men were soldiers. Male children found to be less than able were left on the hillsides to die, considered unacceptable in the society of the day whose motto was ‘return with your shield or on it’. From seven years of age they went into 13 harsh years of training for battle and were not dismissed from service until they were 60!

The Spartans had an underclass of Helot slaves who were viewed with suspicion and even when they gave up their 2,000 finest men to fight alongside the Spartans in one battle, assuming that they would all become free Spartan men after the battle, all were executed to ensure the continued subjugation of their class.
There were also Trophimoi, who were non-Spartans who came to train under the Spartan regime as well as Syntrophoi, from the Helot population who were sponsored by Spartans and, if successful, were given Spartan status.

What is commonly unrealized is that there were also Perioikoi; free local residents who came into none of these categories who were largely left to their own devices.

All that remains now of the Mani’s feudal system are the odd towers, fortified mansions and houses, even less is left of the Spartans. They built few fortifications, living as they did, surrounded by three high mountain ranges which were themselves perfect defensive structures.

Mystra, the next nearest town to Sparti, however is steeped in history and has much of interest to see. A World Heritage site just seven kilometers from Sparti, Mystras had been one of the most important artistic and intellectual centres of the...
THE EASTERN PELOPONNESE

Byzantine Empire and was at one time virtually its capital, making it possibly the most important historical centre of the Peloponnese. The captivating ruins of the upper town retain evidence of churches, palaces, fortresses and libraries and lead you to the lower town where much is well preserved in the way of monasteries, churches and mansion houses. A lovely area to visit, pleasing to historians and to the casual visitor alike.

Gythion, the ancient port of the Mani Peninsula and of Sparta, is a small but elegant fishing village which can be used as a gateway, as it has been for centuries, to the beautiful hinterland.

Monemvasia is a romantic and unique medieval village perched on the sea side of a huge rock set on an island 400 meters from the Peloponnese coast from which it was separated by an earthquake in 375 A.D., giving it a remote and isolated splendour. Founded by the Byzantines in the sixth century it is totally fortified against attack and accessible only by a narrow causeway and one entrance – the name Monemvassia meaning ‘single entry’. The islands characteristic bulk in the sea is visible from the road many miles away even though the town is not immediately visible, but visitors find its winding streets, small local shops, interesting restaurants, ancient walls and sudden, unexpected sea vistas totally compelling. Monemvasia was an important centre in Byzantine times, second only to Mystras, exporting amongst other things its well known Malvasia wine.

It is possible to anchor in the bay by the Monemvassia causeway for access to this lovely site.

When I last visited we stayed in a fortified mansion, just near Monemvasia. The Kinsterna Hotel & Spa has been completely refurbished from a ruin and is an impressive and very comfortable boutique hotel today affording a serene and wonderful views. The strange thing is that it is not visible from any road and was, we were assured, built in that specific location for that reason, helping the lord of the manor to avoid unpleasant surprises by stealth, as few could work out the the exact location of the house until they came upon it.

Kardamili on the far western side of the Mani and its southernmost border is a small village with olive trees and firs lining the water’s edge in an area sometimes perhaps fancifully known as the Greek Cote d’Azur. Wonderful landscapes with interesting stone mansions new and old and a pretty village was seductive enough to entice the late traveler and writer, Patrick Leigh Fermor, to build a home in which he lived until a few days before his recent death.

Elafonissos is a small island off the south coast of the Peloponnese which is famed for its wonderful pink sand beach (billions of broken sea shells) which makes it well worth a visit. A small islet between Elafonissos and the mainland also protects the city of Pavlopetri, at approximately 5000 years old it is the most ancient sunken city in the world. In relatively shallow waters this World Heritage Site has many complete buildings, roads and many other remnants of human habitation.

There is so much more to see and more to tell about this area but perhaps it is best kept for visitors to discover on their own. Served by its own airport in Kalamata and another near Patras in the north, as well as by Athens airport, there are increasing options in the area. The Peloponnese is a very rewarding and as yet a fairly undiscovered area of the country which has a fascinating history and a dramatic topography which cannot fail to captivate even the most seasoned of travelers.

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