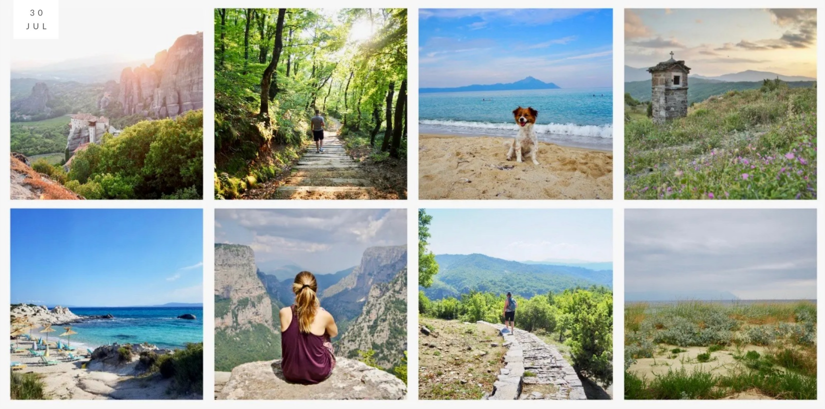


30
JUL

IN EUROPE, GREECE

Traveling During a Pandemic: Our Road Trip through Northern Greece

As we approached the Bulgarian/Greek border crossing checkpoint, I pinched the wire around my nose and tightened the mask's loops around my ears. The border security guard walked from car to car, collecting passports and motioning for people to park or to join the socially-distanced queue to get tested for COVID-19.

Luke and I held our breath as we handed him our registration, Romanian IDs and passports, strategically placing my American identification at the bottom of the pile. He gave us both a stern look and had us park next to the station.

As we awaited our fate, I looked out the window at the line of cars, then the line of people sitting in chairs in front of nurses dressed in blue disposable scrubs, gloves, and face shields. Temperature guns were pointed at foreheads, long cotton swabs were placed in noses. I could see the sweat soaking through most of the tourist's t-shirts.

The officer came back with our documents, asked if we had QR codes to prove our hotel bookings (which thankfully we did, thanks to my anxiety-induced hyper planning), took a quick look at our phones, and told us to enjoy Greece.

My stomach flipped as I watched the strange scene become smaller and smaller in the rear view mirror. We removed our masks and audibly exhaled. It was time for vacation.

Here's a look at our road trip through Northern Greece–two weeks in an often overlooked part of the country, boasting beautiful beaches, mountains, and very few tourists (even without the pandemic).

HALKIDIKI: 4 NIGHTS IN SARTI

The wild Sarti Beach terrain, with Mount Athos looming in the background.

From top, clockwise: An empty Sarti Beach; A Sarti Beach with a Charlie dog on it; Kavourotripes Beach (a 5-minute drive from Sarti).

Fresh sardines and octopus (restaurant recommendation below).

Admittedly, I had never heard of Halkidiki before our road trip. Having always dreamed about Greece's postcard islands of the south, I was consumed with the idea of staying in the idyllic white washed town of Santorini, in a cave hotel overlooking the deep blue Mediterranean Sea (which Luke and I did last October, and it was amazing).

The peninsula south of Thessaloniki doesn't get much international attention, but is a popular option for Greek and religious tourism. (If you don't know about the monasteries of Mount Athos, click to read up on the interesting history. Unfortunately, only men are allowed to visit.) The peninsula is made up of three "fingers": Kassandra, Sithonia (where we stayed), and Athos (where the monasteries are). The entire area is lush with dense forests, olive trees, grape vines, sandy beaches and clear Aegean water.

We stayed on Sarti Beach for four nights, but could have stayed much longer. The town itself was small and sleepy, but with enough restaurants and bakeries to keep things interesting. We chose the Sithonia area of Halkidiki for its reputation for being quiet and low key. It did not disappoint.

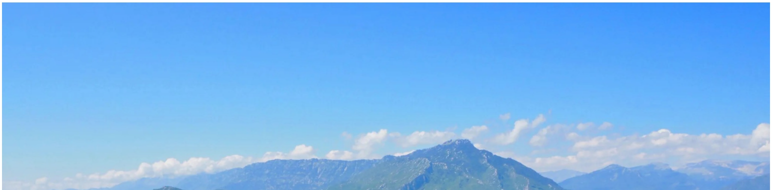
Where we stayed: The owners of House Kostas on the Beach offered us a studio in their new apartment complex next door, called "Privilege Luxury Studios." It was right on the beach and only set us back 80€ a night.

Where we ate: Honestly, we ordered gyros for lunch most days from the hotel owners' beach bar. Breakfast was from a great bakery around the corner called ΑΡΤΟΧΩΡΑ (Artohora), which served excellent handmade pies, baklava, and bougatsa (a sinful phyllo-custard dessert topped with cinnamon and powdered sugar). We tried a seafood restaurant called Blue Senses, which had great service, view and octopus, but I'd skip their prawns and 'Blue Senses Salad.'

METEORA: 2 NIGHTS IN KASTRAKI

A view of Meteora at sunset from a popular lookout point (search "Meteora Observation Deck" on Google Maps to easily find it).

Exploring the six (of an original 24) Eastern Orthodox monasteries built into the area's spectacular clifftops.



The view of the area from the Holy Monastery of Great Meteoron.

ROOMS TO LET
ENOIKIAZOMENA
ΔΩΜΑΤΙΑ
BATALOGIANNI

The empty B&B where we stayed in Kastraki (more information below).

The drive from Sarti to Kastraki was an easy 4.5 hours of coastal country road and smooth highway. We stopped for lunch at a place called Aiolos Fish Tavern on Plaka Beach in Litochoro (the starting point for most Mount Olympus hikes), and it was well worth the slight detour–for the sardines alone (pictured above).

When we got to Kastraki it felt like we were driving through a movie set–only the extras had gone home for the day. Majestic sandstone rocks jutted from the earth and hung over the charming red-roofed village below. We checked in to our charming B&B (also empty) and got a small pitcher of their house red wine to enjoy on the patio.

Kastraki is the smaller of the two towns (the other is called Kalabaka, also spelled Kalambaka) which serves as a starting point for exploring the area called Meteora–a word that means “hovering in the air” in Greek. I would definitely recommend staying in Kastraki, as it’s much quieter than Kalabaka and within hiking distance from the monasteries.

The locals told us the area has gained more attention in the last few years, thanks to Instagram, but the shop owners we spoke to were worried they wouldn’t make rent the following month, despite the 800 Euro stimulus check from the Greek government. I sincerely hope they receive an influx of local tourists in August, when most Greeks have their summer break.

The entire landscape is magical–dating back to the 11th century when monks settled to build monasteries atop the large stone pillars. There were once 24, but now six remain, and have been declared a UNESCO World Heritage site. We drove around to see all of the exteriors, and toured the inside of the Holy Monastery of Great Meteoron, which I highly recommend. Just make sure to bring a sarong or skirt if you’re a woman and note that the building is closed on Tuesdays during summer months (Tues-Thurs during winter). The fee is 3€ per person and there are several staircases to climb to reach the entrance.

Where we stayed: Guesthouse Batalogianni in Kastraki. This small, family-run B&B is actually a restaurant that rents out a couple of rooms. The owner and her mother (the cook!) were warm and welcoming, the room was comfortable, and had a great view of the rocks. Sixty euros per night includes a filling breakfast.

Where we ate: We mostly ate at the guesthouse (see above for a look at half the giant breakfast we were served). All the food was made by ‘yia-yia’ (grandmother) and was just what you think it was: heavy, comforting, and delicious. Another great find was a cafe called Qastiro, which we happened upon while exploring the village. The owner actually opened two hours early for us and gifted a cheese and olive plate to go with our beer and wine.

ZAGORI: 3 NIGHTS IN FRAGKADES

Our B&B, along with the owner's homemade pie made with garden greens and yogurt, oven potatoes, and a bottle of local wine.

The Zagori region of Greece is known for its stone bridges, built in the 1800s, to connect the area's 46 stone villages. The white horse? Well, it was right outside our hotel room. Truly a fairy tale come to life.

Hiking from town to town was fairly easy, but finding the starting points was a bit difficult. One of the easiest, most rewarding hikes, begins beneath the Bridge of Kokkoros (pictured above) and continues to a town called Dilofo, which has a wonderful restaurant overlooking the stone roofs.

I honestly cannot believe I didn't know about Greece's Zagori region before planning this road trip. I mean, there are 46 cobblestone villages dotting dense green mountains, peppered with grass-covered stone bridges. Hawks soar above canyons and sheep are the most common source of traffic on the mountain roads. Oh, and did you see the white horse?

Our trip from Kastraki took a little over two hours–one on a highway with lots of tunnels, and one on a very, very windy mountain road. On the way, we stopped in the picturesque ski town called Metsovo to have lunch at Το Κουτούκι του Νικόλα. The tavern was surrounded by traditional shops selling colorful handwoven rugs, whittled wood carvings, hot pita bread, local cheeses and wine from the village's famous winery, Katogi Averoff. We sat in the corner, closest to the open entrance, slurping homemade goat soup, dipping bread in buttery beans, and listening attentively as the owner explained the local dialect, "more similar to Romanian than Greek."

When we arrived to our B&B in Fragkades (Eastern Zagori), Luke and I could not stop smiling–or exploring. The old stone mansion, passed down from the owner's family, stands proudly at the edge of the small village, overlooking the Mitsikeli mountain range. Antique knick-knacks decorate the guesthouse's wooden walls. Weathered chess sets sit on side tables, a gramophone record player, empty perfume bottles. The handsome wooden bar holds homemade tsipouro–aged in the sun, flavored with cloves and fruit from neighboring trees. We spent the afternoon on our balcony, listening to the bells swaying from sheep roaming the grounds, and eating some of yia yia's famous green pie.

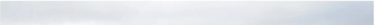
The next two days were spent hiking and taking in the fairy tale-like scenery. We drove to a few of Zagori's famous 18th and 19th-century stone bridges, covered in grass, arching over large rocks (which lie beneath rivers in the wet season). There are quite a few hikes connecting villages, but finding information on where to start is somewhat difficult. Look for the trail beneath the Bridge of Kokkoros and you'll find enough hikes to keep you occupied for a few days. Since we had the dog, we chose some easier walks–our favorite being to a town called Dilofo.

Where we stayed: Petroto, as you can gather from my description above, is a quirky option that quickly felt like home (that is, if we had a huge stone mansion on the edge of a mountain). It's a 20-minute drive from the bridges or popular hikes, but we loved how remote and quiet it was. Plus, the food and hospitality was top notch, and it was a steal at 40€ per night, including breakfast.

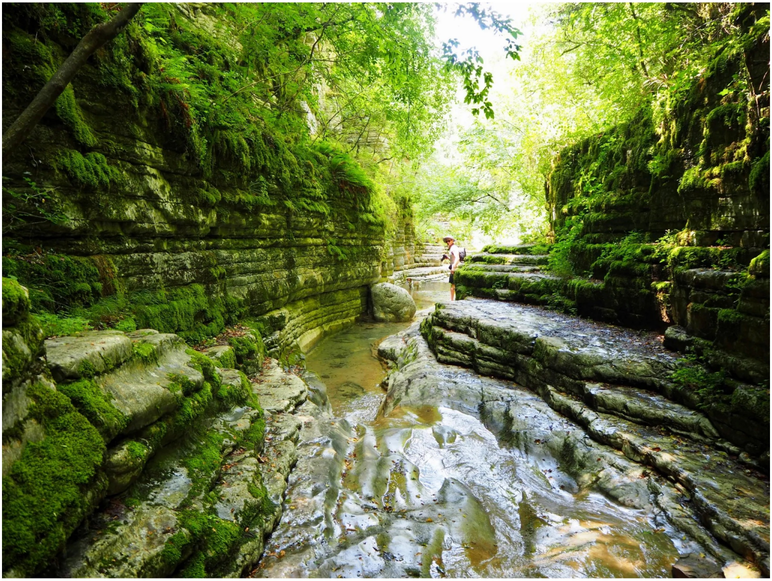
Where we ate: Breakfast was always at our B&B and was a collection of homemade phyllo pies, cheese, eggs, bread, preserves and coffee. Dinner was whatever yia yia had in the oven. Lithos in Dilofo was brilliant for lunch; just ask for whatever is, again, "in the oven." Another lunch stop was Ο Μιχάλης in Kipoi (also spelled Kipi). It was a basic local stop, but had a good Greek salad and great coffee.

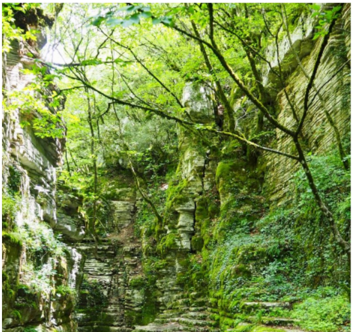
ZAGORI: 2 NIGHTS IN MIKRO PAPIGO

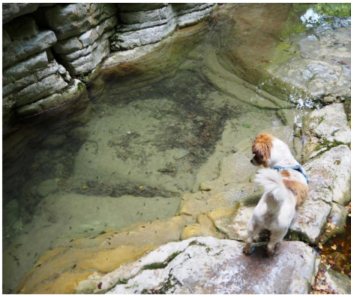
Vikos Gorge, located in Vikos–Aoös National Park, is a must-see. The best vantage point is from Beloi Viewpoint–an easy 30-minute hike from the town of Vradeto.



Exploring the beautifully preserved town of Mikro Papigo.







The Papingo Rock Pools are a popular summer destination for locals looking to cool off (although I was the only one taking a dip while we were there).

Originally, we had planned to return to Bucharest after our time in Fragkades, but Zagori was just too wonderful. We decided to stay in the western part of the region to see the famous Vikos Gorge and the Papingo Rock Pools (both pictured above).

The drive from Fragkades was only an hour-and-a-half, but we stopped at the gorge on the way. Driving up the steep, narrow, often blind curves to get to Vradeto made me glad to have Luke at the wheel–and thankful that I don't get car sick. We found parking at the edge of the town and walked the gentle green path to Beloi Viewpoint, where the Voidomatis river flows through the mountain range. During the hour-long hike (there and back), we saw two other people, and had the lookout to ourselves–the rare opportunity to marvel at a natural wonder–in complete silence.

On the way to our hotel, after a series of particularly bendy turns down the mountain, Luke and I decided to stop for lunch in a small village called Kapesovo, where we found a quaint cafe in the center, under a large plane tree (every one of the Zagori villages has this set up). The restaurant, called Καφενείο Στέφανος, has been run by the same couple for decades–now well into their 70s. They didn't speak English, and didn't know how to work their credit card machine, but they were happy to serve us–the only patrons–olive oil-coated omelettes and espressos.

The rest of the drive took us through emerald valleys and several slate stone towns. We stopped in the larger village of Papigo (also spelled Papingo or Papingko), Megalo, for some handmade desserts at an eclectic cafe called Stérna, where we tried wild mushroom and black walnut liqueurs.

Mikro Papigo, along with our B&B at the start of the town, was charming (I know I've used this word already in this post, but I've struggled not to use it as the descriptor for nearly everything in Zagori). It's a popular starting point for many hikers wanting to reach Dragon Lake (or Drakolimni in Greek) in Vikos National Park–a challenging 8-hour hike (round trip) on a mostly stone and pebble path, with a stunning reward. We only hiked an hour up and back, just to get a feel of the walk, and to get in some more nature.

The Papingo Rock Pools was a real highlight–a 5 minute drive down the hill from our hotel–and once again, completely void of people. We spent about two hours there, walking the smooth limestone trail, swimming in the glacial baths, and watching Charlie chase tadpoles.

Where we stayed: Papigo Towers, which is located right at the entrance of Mikro Papigo, is traditionally constructed with sweeping views of Vikos Gorge. The restaurant serves an (almost) impossible to finish breakfast, and the owner went above and beyond to make our stay memorable–even delivering a bottle of wine to our room, with a complementary cheese platter. We paid 50€ per night, which included breakfast.

Where we ate: Breakfast and dinner both days were at our hotel, which used all local ingredients–mostly from their own garden. We had a great lunch at Astra in Papigo, which incorporated fresh picked zucchini and wild foraged mushrooms. Stérna, down the road, was a neat place to enjoy a coffee and dessert, or to try one of the local liqueurs (try the mushroom variety!).

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The truth is, I probably wouldn't have made it to Northern Greece if it hadn't been for the travel restrictions. Luke and I were supposed to be in Australia visiting family this summer, and were extremely reluctant to even do a road trip.

We feel extremely lucky to have been able to get out of the apartment for a couple of weeks and to experience some of the world's most breathtaking landscapes. All of the people we met in Northern Greece were welcoming, hospitable, but struggling–like most everyone in the travel industry right now.

Hopefully this small look into the areas of Halkidiki, Meteora, and Zagori will inspire you to plan your own road trip through northern Greece once you're able. Let's hope that's sooner than it seems.

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12 Comments

Brenda Gladd POSTED AT 15:02H, 30 JULY

Jennifer, your great gift for descriptive writing is phenomenal! I do credit genetics as Bill and Shine are also brilliant! I love traveling through your eyes and appreciate every adventure. You and Luke have an amazing life. Enjoy!!! Brenda

Jennifer Stevens POSTED AT 15:59H, 30 JULY

Thank you so much for the compliment, Brenda. Wanted to make sure I got all the details down before we go back to online teaching in a couple of weeks! Hope you're staying safe and healthy.

Karen Nicolai POSTED AT 01:21H, 31 JULY

Jennifer, I just love your Blog but now with the COVID-19 stay at home situation, I am living through your adventures. I have never heard of this area of Greece but now really want to go there. Someday!!!!
Please keep writing. You are the new Rick Steves!

Jennifer Stevens POSTED AT 09:30H, 31 JULY

Thanks, Karen. I would love to be the new Rick Steves! We're heading to a vineyard for two nights next week, so stay tuned…will be writing about wine country and wine culture in Romania. Stay safe and healthy!

Jeannie Mills POSTED AT 00:58H, 01 AUGUST

Love your descriptions of Greece. They were so incredibly vivid, I feel as though I was in your backpack.

Jennifer Stevens POSTED AT 09:39H, 01 AUGUST

Thanks so much, Jeannie! We feel so lucky to have had that experience.

Patty Blank POSTED AT 08:49H, 01 AUGUST

Thanks for the inspiration! I have been to Greece and did some travel on the mainland, but your story with photos has put Greece back on my "life list".

Jennifer Stevens POSTED AT 09:40H, 01 AUGUST

Where have you been in Greece? There's so much to see!

Linda Young POSTED AT 16:11H, 03 AUGUST

Jennifer, I love your travel blog and your attention to detail through northern Greece. You've shown me parts of the world I won't be fortunate enough to visit, but seeing the world through your eyes has been uplifting! Enjoy your adventurous life! .

Jennifer Stevens POSTED AT 16:19H, 05 AUGUST

Thanks so much, Linda! 🙂

Candy Barron POSTED AT 04:14H, 25 SEPTEMBER

I have enjoyed your adventures for years since my friend Shine Stevens connected my cell to your blog. My son's wife is from Seoul, and Ihave 2 half-Korean granddaughters. I have been to 22 countries, including Santorini and other Greek islands. This blog is my favorite, and I wish I could experience what you did, as well as a return to Santorini!! I hope you saw the excavation there of the town from 1600 BC!!

Jennifer Stevens POSTED AT 12:54H, 18 OCTOBER

Thanks so much, Candy. I also loved my time in Santorini, and love that we share the Seoul connection! Thanks for reading. I plan to catch up with some Romanian posts over winter vacation. (I'm in desperate need of a break from online teaching!)