

TIPS & ARTICLES

Play in the Peloponnese: top 10 experiences



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The ravishing and rugged Peloponnese offers an inexpensive, off-the-beaten-path chance to immerse yourself in rural Greek life. Explore widely, from aqua seafronts to snow-capped mountains and the sites where many of the major events in Greek history have played out. Travel on tiny lanes curving between handmade stone walls to excellent dive sites and lush lagoons, ancient wonders such as Olympia and exquisite towns like Venetian-influenced Nafplio.

1. Soak up Nafplio's past and present



Nafplio's colourful old town © Alexandros Petrakis / Shutterstock

Historic Nafplio is tucked into an azure bay fronted by a small island fort and topped by an enormous stone fortress. The town itself is a cascade of elegant buildings constructed under Venetian rule. Festooned with crimson bougainvillea, they're filled with creative boutiques and galleries and restaurants serving Italian-influenced cuisine. The Fougaro Cultural Centre fills a slickly renovated factory and provides a programme of visual and performing arts throughout the year. Lodging is a breeze, with boutique hotels in renovated mansions throughout the old town.

2. Shipwreck dive in the Bay of Navarino



The lagoon of Voidokilia in the Bay of Navarino © Nick Pavlakis / Shutterstock

The waters in and near the Bay of Navarino offer a rare chance to play underwater archaeologist. The 1978 shipwreck of the tanker *Irene Serenade* is one of the largest accessible wrecks in the world. Dive further back in history at 19th-century shipwrecks including three Ottoman ships sunk by allied British, Russian and French forces during the 1827 Battle of Navarino. This was the last major naval engagement fought entirely with sailing ships, and a significant moment in the Greek War of Independence. A site near Methoni, 12km south of Pylos, has the barest remains of ancient wrecks and some of the artefacts that were on board, such as a carved sarcophagus. These dive sites are slated to become part of official marine parks. Ionian Divers is a good local scuba-diving operation.

3. Get dramatic at the Theatre of Epidavros



The ancient Theatre of Epidavros © S-F / Shutterstock

The World Heritage-listed Theatre of Epidavros is one of Greece's true wonders. Beautifully preserved and situated amid pine groves and rolling hills, this enormous ancient Greek theatre seats 14,000 spectators. Taking in a performance during the annual Athens & Epidavros Festival is an incomparable experience that sweeps you back to the origins of Europe's theatrical tradition. Epidavros can also be visited by day, when you shouldn't miss the adjacent Sanctuary of Asclepius. These are the ruins of an important healing centre from the classical age, dedicated to Asclepius (god of healing). It used to host both musical performances and athletic competitions.

4. Go birdwatching at the Gialova Lagoon



A flock of birds in the Messinia region of the Peloponnese @ courtesy of costanavarino.com

Between September and March birdwatchers flock to the lush Gialova Lagoon to take in the migration of 271 bird species. Just north of the Bay of Navarino, this lush lagoon is the southernmost major wetland in Greece and an important stopover on the migratory route between Africa and Europe. About 20,000 birds including flamingos, ibises and herons take up residence in this protected area during the season.

5. Ride the vintage Diakofto–Kalavryta Railway



The steam locomotive of the Diakofto–Kalavryta railway © K.Krallis / CC BY-SA 3.0

In the north of the Peloponnese, the tiny rack-and-pinion railway between Diakofto and Kalavryta takes travellers on a dazzling ride through dramatic Vouraikos Gorge. Sienna cliffs surround the train as it climbs the canyon, clinging to a narrow ledge with rushing rapids below. The line zigzags through leafy canopies of plane trees and passes through seven curving tunnels along the way to the quaint hamlet of Kalavryta, before descending back to the coast.

6. Party at the Patras Carnival



The night parade at the Patras Carnival © sieta_vidas / Shutterstock

The bustling port city of Patra (Patras) hosts not only ferries to Corfu and Italy, but also one of Greece's pre-eminent Carnival celebrations. Greek Orthodox Easter includes a Carnival similar to the Mardi Gras festivities that precede Catholic Easter. Patra's festivities see giant floats rolling raucously through town, accompanied by throngs of costumed locals and visitors. The date changes every year and usually differs from the date of the Catholic Carnival, but it's worth planning your trip around.

7. Clamber around the rock castle of Monemvasia



The Church of Agia Sofia on Monemvasia © Inu / Shutterstock

Slip out along a narrow causeway, up around the edge of a towering rock rising dramatically from the sea, to reach the exquisite walled village of Monemvasia. Enter the *kastro* (castle) – separated from mainland Gefyra by an earthquake in AD 375 – on foot through a narrow tunnel, and emerge into a stunning (and carless) warren of cobblestone streets and stone houses. Signposted steps lead up to the ruins of a fortress, built by the Venetians in the 16th century, and the Byzantine Church of Agia Sophia, perched precariously on the edge of the cliff. The views are spectacular and wildflowers are shoulder-high in spring. Beat the throngs of day trippers by staying over.



Greek dishes with mandatory olives © gorillaimages / Shutterstock

Greece and, in particular, the Kalamata region in the Peloponnese are well known for olives and olive oil. To find out more about this essential element of Greek cuisine, head to the modern Museum of the Olive & Greek Olive Oil in Sparta, which has displays on the history, cultivation and use of olives through the ages. Then step outside and sample some of the locally cured delicacies in the restaurants and markets of the Peloponnese.

9. Cross the Corinth Canal to the Nemea wine region



A boat crossing the Corinth Canal © Alexander Tolstykh / Shutterstock

What makes crossing the Corinth Canal into the Peloponnese even more worthwhile is knowing that on the other side awaits the Nemea wine region. The construction of the canal was started by Roman Emperor Nero and completed centuries later. Today as you cross you can see the locks far below, and the brilliant teal waters plied by passing ships. Then you reach the Nemea region, in the rolling hills southwest of Corinth, one of Greece's premier wine-producing areas. Nemea is famous for its full-bodied reds from the local *agiorgitiko* grape and a white from *roditis* grapes. Wineries such as Skouras, Ktima Palivou and Gaia Wines offer tastings.

10. Ruin-hop from Ancient Greece to Byzantium



Rows of columns in the sanctuary of Zeus, Ancient Olympia © Inu / Shutterstock

Any tour of the Peloponnese isn't complete without stops at some of the spectacular World Heritage-listed ancient ruins dotting the land. Ancient Olympia in the west is the birthplace of the Olympic Games, which were held there from 776 BC to AD 394. The site comprises a giant stadium and many of the ruined buildings of the games complex, while the excellent Archaeological Museum holds monumental sculptures such as the Hermes of Praxiteles. The fortified citadel at Mycenae was home to the mythical king Agamemnon; for 400 years it was the most powerful kingdom in Greece. Fairytale Mystras is an evocative tumble of Byzantine palaces, churches, libraries and strongholds spilling down a spur of the Taygetos mountains, 7km west of Sparta. It was the last great capital of Byzantium before its overthrow by the Ottomans.

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