

GREECE SPECIAL 2018

Our expert guide to the Peloponnese

The mainland's attractions include warrior palaces, sleepy villages and dreamy beaches

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Tourism



Voidokilia is the best beach in the region
GIORGIO FILIPPINI

Islands, shmislands. It's time to explore the Peloponnese, that giant mulberry-leaf peninsula dangling from the mainland. Riddled with ancient myths, it's where you'll find the real Arcadia: bucolic woodlands, lakes, springs and ravines, and mountains towering over vineyards, emerald citrus groves and silvery seas of olives. Its key archaeological sites — Olympia, Mycenae, Epidaurus and Corinth — are, admittedly, popular coach-tour stops, but much of the Peloponnese is pure pre-mass-tourism Greece, where you can still have sleepy villages and a thousand little-known ancient sites to yourself.

To see it all would take weeks, so we're focusing on the Messenia and Laconia regions, in the southwest. You can fly straight in from the UK, and all the best stuff's here — including superb beaches — so no need to spend hours on the road.



The Assembly Hall at Messene

What to do Start on the Ionian coast, at the 19th-century port town of **Pylos**, once part of the Homeric kingdom of Nestor. The warrior's hilltop home is the best-preserved Mycenaean palace anywhere, and the continuing excavations are the most exciting in Greece (entry £5; visit odysseus.culture.gr for details of all the region's archaeological sites). Navarino Bay offers superb diving in the sea caves of the islet of Sphakteria — go with Pilos Dive Center (dives from £44; pilosmarine.com).

Just over an hour northeast, **Messene** is the best-preserved ancient Greek city you might never have heard of. Its astonishing walls of exquisitely cut stone, built circa 369BC, kept out the Spartans, who wanted to enslave the inhabitants (entry £10).



Agia Varvara church, in Skoutari

Further east, in the foothills of Mount Taygetus, is **Mistras**, a ghost town nicknamed the Byzantine Pompeii. It was Constantinople's seat of power in Greece; its colourful frescoed churches reveal an artistic renaissance that ended when the town fell to the Ottomans in 1460 (£10).

Taygetus's spine tails off to form the **Mani Peninsula**, home to proud descendants of the Spartans (or so they claim) who were never conquered by the Turks. Drive down the wild west coast, which is scalloped with sandy coves, sprinkled with tiny, frescoed Byzantine churches and punctuated by tower fortresses: Vathia and Kitta have some of the best. Stop near Areopoli for the phantasmagorical Diros caves, where modern-day Charons ferry visitors on a subterranean lake under enormous stalactites (£10). Eerie Cape Taineron, at the Mani's southernmost tip, is one of the mythical entrances to Hades.



Plain sailing: Finikounda
ALAMY

The beaches

Voidokilia, an omega of soft golden sand seven miles north of Pylos, is the Peloponnese's pin-up beach. Arrive early to see it before the crowds, then take the hour-long hike up to the 13th-century castle, the Paliokastro, for spectacular views of the beach and the adjacent bird-filled Gialova lagoon.

You'll find **Finikounda** at the bottom of the region's westernmost prong, between the handsome old Venetian fortified ports of Koroni and Methoni. Of its several beaches, my favourite is Anemomylos — two miles of sand shelving gently into the sea. It has windsurfing boards for hire, sunloungers and bars, but also plenty of space just to flop on a towel.



Pure shore: Skoutari
ALAMY

Or try **Skoutari**. Sheltered in a deep bay on the Mani's quieter east coast, its sand and pebble coves are safe for kids, and unadorned except for a pair of tavernas and a 10th-century Byzantine church.

Where to eat

In Mistras, find a table on the garden terrace of **Taverna Pikoulianika** for a panoply of Greek classics to share — calamari, tzatziki and juicy grilled lamb chops, with pitchers of local wine (mains about £10; tavernapikoulianika.gr).



A leisurely lunch in Pylos
HOLGER LEUE

Elia, on the lively waterfront of Gialova, near Voidokilia, has daily specials using ingredients rarely seen outside Greece, such as tangy *sfela* cheese and *apaki* (Cretan smoked pork). Specialities include orzo with seafood and saffron (mains about £12; elia-gialova.gr).

The little port of Limeni, on the Mani's west coast, is a dreamy swimming, seafood and sunset spot. Waterside **Teloneio** has superb cocktails, and its excellent menu of updated Maniot classics includes homemade sausages with grilled peppers, and seafood so fresh, they serve it as sushi (mains about £15; teloneio-limeni.gr).



Where to stay

North of Pylos, the **Costa Navarino** is the top luxury resort in the Peloponnese, with five pools, a water park, a spa, two golf courses, 20 restaurants, and two five-star hotels: the Romanos, for couples (doubles from £258, B&B); and the family-orientated Westin (rooms sleeping four from £150, B&B; costanavarino.com).

Within walking distance of pretty Kardamili, the traditional **Kalamitsi hotel** overlooks olive groves and a small pebble beach. A week here starts at £705pp, B&B, including flights and car hire (realholidays.co.uk).

The mountains are a great place to be from spring onwards. Below Mistras, in the village of Anavriti, the **Arhontiko Guesthouse** has five charming rooms in a 19th-century doctor's house. The owners offer guided walks and cracking traditional meals (doubles from £62, B&B; kaneltrekking.gr).

James Villas lists a dozen properties concentrated in the Mani; from £529 a week for two (jamesvillas.co.uk). For Pylos and Stoup, try Sunvil (sunvil.co.uk) or Villas du Monde (villasdumonde.com).

Getting there

EasyJet flies to Kalamata from Gatwick from March to October. BA has flights from Heathrow and Thomas Cook from Birmingham, Gatwick and Manchester.