

A small group of Eastern Orthodox monks from upstate New York revived the Holy Skete Prophet Elias at Mount Athos in Greece. (Dave G. Houser, Universal Press Syndicate)

Tuscany estate — the kind you can rent for \$5,000 a week. But it costs us nothing to stay here.

A life immersed in prayer

To an outsider, especially a non-Orthodox, there is much about Mount Athos that seems secretive and spiritual. Upon entering a church here, I'm dumbstruck by the mysticism and motion — monks bowing, praying, prostrating, swinging their censers, kissing icons, chanting and singing — during services that go on for hours every evening.

Even the system of timekeeping on Mount Athos is out of sync for the outsider. Clocks here run on Byzantine time that begins the day at sunset. Dates are calculated according to the Julian calendar of ancient Rome, which varies by 13 days from the modern Gregorian calendar used in most of the world. The monks of Mount Athos are sworn to an ascetic

life of chastity, obedience and poverty. They believe their monasteries should remain cut off from the affairs of the world. There is no radio or television. In fact, most monasteries have no electricity, relying on petroleum lamps or candles for lighting. The monks seek to live, pray and die just as their predecessors have done for more than a thousand years.

Central to much of the secrecy shrouding Mount Athos over the centuries is the vast hoard of Byzantine art, icons, relics and manuscripts, some displayed but most cloistered in monastery vaults. It has been said that much of the wealth of Constantinople was secreted away to Athos as the Byzantine Empire began to crumble.

The quality and extent of the collection was unveiled in part to the public in a year-long exhibit, "The Treasures of Mount Athos," staged from 1997 to 1998 at the Museum of Byzantine Culture in the

nearby port city of Thessaloniki. It took nearly 10 years to organize, but 16 monasteries agreed to lend 600 items for the first-ever public showing in more than a thousand years of some of the world's most important religious art.

Most visitors are hopeful of viewing art collections at monasteries where they stay. Some monasteries allow it, and some don't, but there's less secrecy surrounding the treasures since the 1997 exhibit.

Meals with the monks

Monastery meals are served family-style, and guests are invited to sit in. Dinner this evening at Prophet Elias consists of a thick, hearty lentil soup, dark multigrain bread, sliced tomato and cucumber, and black olives. Served with it is a suitably dry and very drinkable white wine, said to be a variety of muscat, locally grown for centuries.

This is not a feast, nor is it much of a social affair. The monks eat quickly and sparingly, and there's little conversation. I'm learning to go for larger initial servings because there are seldom any seconds. I suppose that it is best not to be sated for evening services.

I'm awake most of the night. Aris and I have been assigned small cells like those occupied by resident monks. A pad no thicker than a small-town phone book tops a narrow wooden bunk. There's a sink with a pewter basin, next to which sits a bucket of water. It's a combination that suffices as a shower. A solitary candle offers what light it can, but not enough to read by.

It is the call to early liturgy service that jars me from a cheeseburger dream.

The fact is that Prophet Elias is a monastery, not a resort hotel or a Tuscany estate. Through the centuries, the monks of Mount Athos have extended hospitality at no cost, offering at least a day's board and bread to any and all visitors. But as unique and fascinating as it is, Mount Athos is not a tourist destination. It is a refuge for men who are deeply dedicated to their religion.

Out of respect for the monks, I won't be returning, content to dwell for my remaining days on those rare, one-of-a-kind memories of a trip out of time.

sport Emmanuel's on the ball

ZILKA GROGAN

EMMANUEL Grigorakis has a flair for several sports but, as the youngest member of his under -12s team, he admits basketball is his favourite.



The 10 year-old Ashbury resident was chosen for the Bankstown Bruins under-12 division 1 representatives in March.

"I think it's more competitive", he said. "It's faster, it's more fun".

But Emmanuel, who started playing basketball when he was five years old, hasn't limited himself to just one sport.

The tall youngster also has a yellow belt in both tae kwon do and karate.

And while he currently plays Australian Rules football for wests at Croydon Park he is planning to start cricket this summer.

His father, John, said Emmanuel applied himself to all of his sports.

"At the age of 10, he's pretty focused and trains for basketball five days a week", he said.

"He has a passion for Aussie Rules but it's really basketball that he is focused on. He's pretty dedicated".

On top of his busy training schedule, Emmanuel also referees basketball games on Monday evenings.

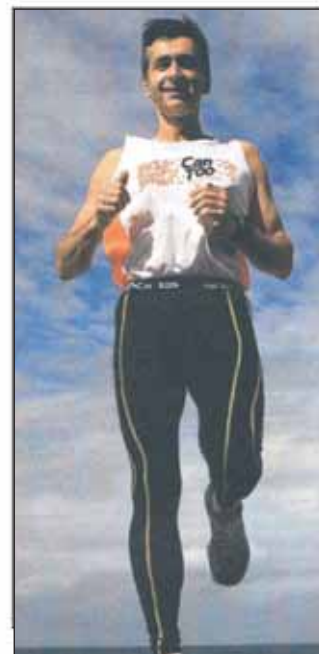
"It's fun... you get to watch other ages that you haven't seen play before," he said.

"You learn a lot from that".

Emmanuel was last week's nominee for the Inner West Weekly Junior Sports Star of the Year Award.

He is in the running to win a medal and \$1000.

Middle-aged Can too get fit for charity



NOT many people would use the excuse of being middle-aged to get fit and raise money, but Emmanuel Pertsoulis has decided to take on the challenges. Dr Pertsoulis 45, who owns Maroubra Family Dental, is training for the Blackmores Sydney Running Festival on September 21. To prepare for the 21.2 Km half-marathon, he is completing a 14 week training program with Can Too, a non-profit program that raises money for Cure Cancer Australia by supporting people to run or swim in endurance events.

Dr Pertsoulis said since he completed the City2Surf two years ago, he had wanted to run a half marathon but felt uneasy about attempting it with a weak knee and no background in athletics. "I was going through a bit of a midlife challenge you could say, and wanted to get myself fit and Can Too provides the training advice and support, so I'm confident I will get there" he said.

"My mother died of pancreatic cancer and I know many others who indirectly have been touched by cancer, so I would like to start raising money to help Australian doctors and scientists research a cure for cancer". Dr Pertsoulis will give 50 per cent of his income earned on Sunday, September 20 to the foundation and his staff will give their wages for the day. Raffle tickets are also available with prizes including teeth bleaching, a dental cream and check-up and an electric toothbrush. To book an appointment or buy a ticket phone 9344 4888 and to give money visit www.cantoo.org.au

Article from the Southern Courier-photo ERIN BYRNE

Article from the Inner West Weekly