

Vancouver's Olympic torch arrives in birthplace of skiing

METSOVO, Greece - Vancouver's Olympic torch came to what some might call the independent republic of Metsovo this weekend.

A cliffside town in the Pindos Mountains of northern Greece, it holds the title as the birthplace of skiing in a country more known for its islands, azure blue waters, pungent retsina wine and the highest per capita country with shipping magnates.

Metsovo also brags as being the home of one of Greece's national team members, cross-country skier Fafalis Eleftherios, who will race in Vancouver. But Metsovo is more than just a town of 4,500 that has two working ski resorts and a third nearly complete. It is a place where immensely local politics and being able to say you are from here count for almost everything.

An agricultural town reborn out of post-war poverty, Metsovo diversified its economy so well that it has survived everything, from drought years on the ski hills to being ignored by Greece's national government to even profiting from the recent recession. It has survived and prospered in spite of everything that has happened to it.

Metsovo has always been a rich place in some ways, according to Tolis Bitounis, a local hotel owner. "This was a town that had everything to do with milk. Cows, sheep, goats," he said. "Before Greeks were making money with shipbuilding, the money was in milk."

While milk still plays a big role in Metsovo, it is now known mostly for its tourism, and ski tourism at that. In winter, the town swells to double as people flock to Karakoli, three hours north of Athens the first resort built in Greece. Every little hotel with extra beds is filled to capacity.

That Karakoli and its neighbor resort of Profitis Ilias even exist is in large part due to a single man, Evangelos Averoff, a man so revered in Metsovo that many people keep a photograph of him in their home. A local politician who fought to help Metsovo rebuild out of the devastation caused by the invading German army, Averoff in 1969 argued for the construction of Karakoli, after

he'd already helped broaden the town's economy.

"He really helped us. He built the ski resort, he built the first cheese factory, the wood factory, the school. He was our benefactor, and nobody has forgotten that," Bitounis said.

"He didn't give us money, but he did everything to help us help ourselves. That is why Metsovo is so strong now."

That strength showed itself Saturday night when the Vancouver torch came to town. Hundreds of people gathered in the central square to watch as the last of the day's torchbearers came down the narrow cobblestone streets. As 16-year-old Ioanna Koutelida passed the flame on to her school mate Lampros Papis, 17, a burst of applause rang out and flashes went off. Then Papis carried on into the main square where another torchbearer took the flame up to a broad cauldron standing at the top of a grassy knoll.

"We are very proud of the torch coming here," said Kassaros Stergios, a town councillor. "We were the first ski town in Greece. There are a dozen now, but we were the first. For us this is a very important day because we are now part of Vancouver's Games."

Throughout the night as the cauldron burned on the steps, people would come by to watch. That evening, the town put on a big feast in the main hall that featured its local wines, hard salty Metsovo cheese and lamb.

Metsovo isn't exactly Whistler, but in some ways it could be mistaken for it. Well-appointed boutique hotels line the streets, and everywhere it's easier to walk on foot than drive a car. There are the inevitable gift shops where one can buy products local only to the area, including the shepherds' walking sticks with their ornately carved handles. Tourists filled the cafes and restaurants.

But the town also has a strong streak of independence. People here look after their own because of the privations caused by war. "We are a very traditional village," said Stergios. "Everyone knows each other. We have no crime. We care for each other."

That independence has so strong that when the Greek government took land nearby to build a new highway,



The first torch bearer was Greece's Giant Slalom skier Vassilis Dimitriadis. The Olympic Flame will travel throughout Greece, winding up on October 29 at the ancient Panathenian Stadium in Athens where, in a ceremony, the Flame will be turned over to the Organisation Committee of the Winter Olympic Games "Vancouver 2010" for the next leg of the journey.

Metsovo insisted on a trade that would allow them to build a new ski resort, Anilio, higher in the mountains. The town itself owns the resort, and when it asked the government to help, Athens said "do it yourself," Bitounis said. Eventually the central government contributed to building an access road, but the town likes the idea that Anilio is its own creation, a place to compete with the more popular resorts closer to Athens.

But for all the mountains around here, snow does not come as easily for Metsovo as it once did. In the last 10 years, the two working resorts have had only had three full winters of operation. "It used to be we would have two metres of snow outside our windows," Bitounis said. "Now, the last time was two years ago."

Ironically, that was when runners for the 2008 Beijing relay showed up. On Sunday morning, there was little to show that the Olympic torch had been here. The square where the cauldron had sat was empty. The only sign that Vancouver had been to Metsovo was the Canadian flag hanging limply on one of three flagpoles at the top of the square's steps.

Miller to unleash Mad Max Fury on NSW

Australian film director George Miller says pre-production work will start next week on the latest Mad Max film, which will be produced in New South Wales.

Thirty years after the release of the original Mad Max, Miller is preparing to head out west to shoot Fury Road, the fourth instalment of the popular franchise. Filming on Fury Road will begin in New South Wales in August 2010. And casting for the lead role is already underway, with the big question being whether Mel Gibson is set to return as the star.

Miller is staying tight-lipped about who he would like to take the lead, however it is rumoured Australian Sam Worthington and South African actress Charlize Theron will star.

"It could be Mel, it could be anyone, in fact I'm looking around at these faces to see if anyone's quite interesting here," Miller said.

NSW Premier Nathan Rees was even offered the role.

"What about you do you want it? Sorry, you'd have to get your hair cut," Miller said to Rees.

Even though he might not get that star role, Mr Rees is quick to add the



project is an important boost for the state's economy, as well as the local film industry.

"The Mad Max films are iconic and the latest instalment Fury Road will be made right here in NSW," he said.

"In the hands of director George Miller, we will see one of the largest and most ambitious live action films ever made in Australia."

Mr Rees says the production is an important boost for the state's economy, creating around 540 jobs over two-and-a-half years. "Times have been tough for our local industry and I am

pleased that our assistance from the Film and Television Industry Attraction Fund helped secure this film for NSW," he said.

'Like football'

Miller launched his career with Max Max in 1979, and has since gone on to direct box office hit Happy Feet and produced Babe. He says this is an important step for the Australian film industry.

"Hollywood has cut its production in half. Big movies like Fury Road and Happy Feet are rare and competitively

sought after in all the filmmaking regions of the world," Miller said.

"The production agreements have been a long time in the making and Premier Rees and his team have worked like Trojans to ensure this substantial investment comes into this country.

"These are complex and challenging films and funding them is a big leap of faith by Warner Bros. Not only does it help fuel the local economy but it means many talented people get a chance to practise their craft and lift their skills.

"Making movies is like football. How can you achieve excellence if you get to play only once in a blue moon?"

CarriageWorks, based in Sydney's Redfern, will be used for development work on Fury Road, as well as a motion capture studio for Miller's upcoming Happy Feet 2. Around 30 weeks of the filming of Fury Road will take place in and around Broken Hill.

The original Mad Max was filmed in Victoria, Mad Max 2 was filmed around Broken Hill and the third Mad Max was shot in Coober Pedy, South Australia.

Article from ABC