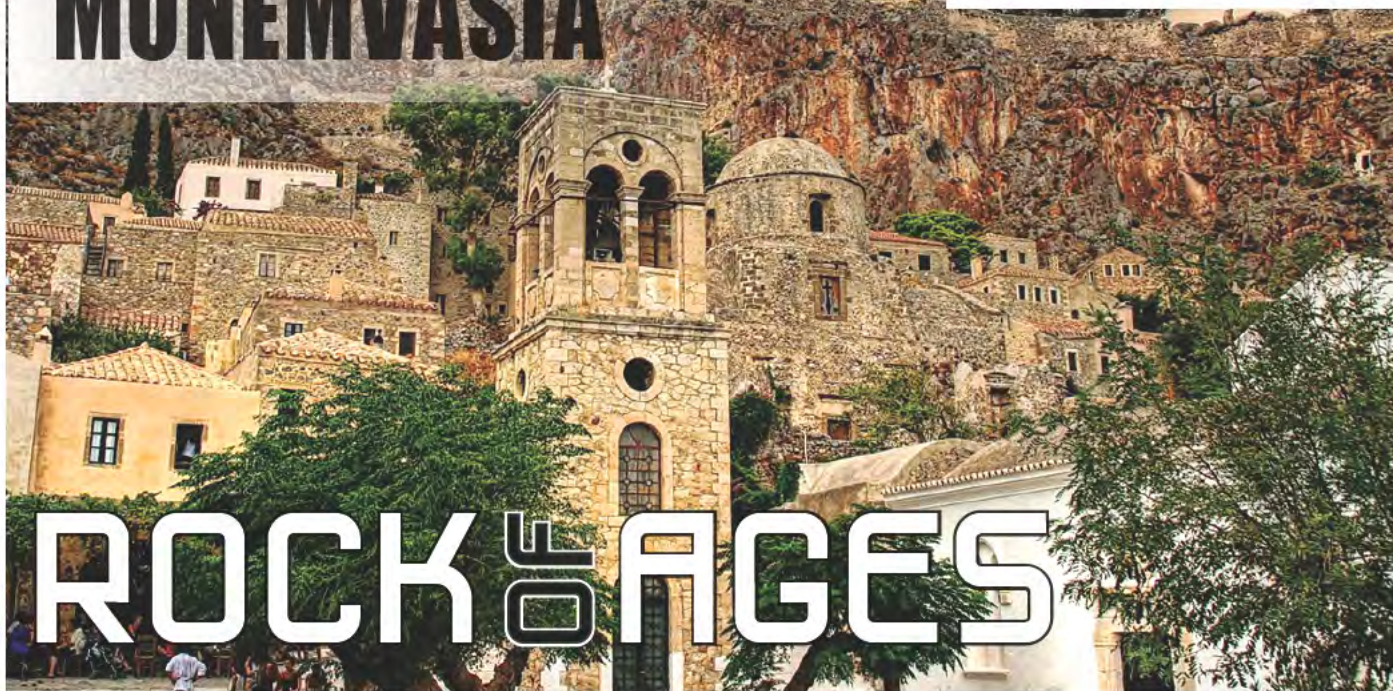




MONEMVASIA



ROCK & AGES

The southeastern tip of the Peloponnese, part of the Laconia region, is a beautiful but rather ignored area, with the exception of Monemvasia – a medieval fort on the rock dubbed the «Gibraltar» of the eastern Mediterranean, which rises some 300 meters above the sea. Monemvasia derives its name from the words «moni» (sole, only) and «emvasia» (entrance), aptly describing the narrow access pass from the mainland. It is an imposing, wild and rocky offshoot from the eastern coast of the Peloponnese, known as Akra Minoa in antiquity – probably after a naval station of Crete's King Minos. According to the earliest historical records available, it served as a refuge for those fleeing Slav invasions during the 6th century.

Only the western end of the fortifications is visible from the mainland. The town is divided into Pano («Upper») and Kato («Lower») Poli («City»). Pano Poli (also known as Kastro or Goulas), is full of Byzantine and Venetian ruins and uninhabited today.

At Kastro Square visitors can see signs from the time of Venetian ruler Sebastian Renieri – his coat of arms and the date 1511 are carved on the marble opening of the cistern. On the western side, built on the edge of the rock and seemingly ready to drop off, is Aghia Sofia,

considered one of the most beautiful 14th-century Byzantine churches and the highlight of Monemvasia's antiquities.

Its design is almost identical to the Church of Dafni, on the western outskirts of Athens. And on a more contemporary note, one of the houses just inside the gate was the childhood home of poet Yiannis Ritsos.

Monemvasia's atmosphere is so powerful that one feels obliged to speak in hushed tones. The fortification walls, the castle gates, the narrow cobblestone streets, the arches the houses form above the street and the many Byzantine churches take the visitor back to another age. Kato Poli, which is inhabited, has been largely restored and is surrounded by an open rectangular-shaped wall with two entrances, east and west, and a small exit to the sea.

After the gate, you will find yourself on the central cobbled street -- «tis mesis» of Byzantine times -- which leads to the square with the canons, dominated by the Church of Elkomenos Christos and the Venetian bell tower with two imperial marble thrones inside.

The Easter bier that is taken out of the church on Good Friday goes down «tis mesis,» exits the gate, is carried through

FACT FILE

Monemvasia is a town and a municipality in Laconia, Greece. The town is located on a small peninsula off the east coast of the Peloponnese. The peninsula is linked to the mainland by a short causeway 200m in length. Its area consists mostly of a large plateau some 100 metres above sea level, up to 300 m wide and 1 km long, the site of a powerful medieval fortress. The town walls and many Byzantine churches remain from the mediaeval period. The seat of the municipality is the town Molaoi. The town's name derives from two Greek words, mone and emvasia, meaning «single entrance». Its Italian form, Malvasia, gave its name to Malmsey wine. Monemvasia's nickname is the Gibraltar of the East or The Rock.

the dimly lit narrow alleyways to the Church of Chrysafitissa and returns to Elkomenos Christos. All the while, the lit candles carried by the procession create a captivating atmosphere. Easter mass outside the church includes the burning of an effigy of Judas, complete with pockets full of gunpowder. Kato Poli has

many attractive hotels and guesthouses, shops, cafes (unfortunately quite expensive) and restaurants housed in restored medieval buildings.

Southeast of Monemvasia, on the eastern coast of the Laconikos Gulf, is Neapoli, the southernmost town and port in mainland Greece. Though the town appears nondescript, it exudes an attractive and warm ambience, perhaps due to its long, pretty waterfront and its welcoming people, or perhaps resulting from the aroma of octopus being grilled as early as 6 or 7 in the morning.

The road south of Neapoli in the direction of Cape Maleas («Cavomalias») will bring you to the little port of Profitis Ilias and a nearby petrified forest with tree trunks millions of years old, as well as fossilized seashells that compose a natural mosaic.

Northeast of Neapoli is the village of Kastania and a nearby cave, 3 million years old and comprising 18 chambers with colorful stalagmites -- a must (tel 27340.23623). West of Neapoli there are some fine beaches -- with occasional sightings of loggerhead sea turtles -- and lagoons included in the Natura 2000 list of natural habitats. Across the bay is the island of Elafonisos -- a beach paradise.

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