


**TRAVEL GUIDE**

## MANI

# RUGGED LAND OF TOWERING SPIRITS

Southern region adheres to tradition and keeps alive memories of centuries past

MANI, the district in the middle of the southern Peloponnese - and mainland Europe's southernmost promontory - is one of Greece's wildest and most distinct areas.

Arid mountain slopes, rocky shrubland strewn with tower houses, gray stone chapels and a rough coastline mark the landscape of southern - or "inner" - Mani, giving it a distinct, austere feel.

The rugged and infertile yet captivating terrain, formed by the southern extension of Mt Taygetos into the sea, is often linked with the local people's turbulent social history and fiercely independent spirit, to which the ubiquitous fortified family towers bear testimony.

It is argued that economic need fostered social antagonisms, producing frequent armed clashes between families, placing high stakes on the notions of pride and honor and giving rise to the custom of blood feuds in a strictly male-dominated society.

It was for such characteristics that Mani, although without much in the way of archaeological interest, became a favorite subject for inclusion in foreign travel writings in the early 19th century. Yet Patrick Leigh Fermor, in his 1958 book "Mani: Travels in the Southern Peloponnese," wrote about "the green and gold and gentle shades" of the rustic landscape, where the dominant olive tree apparently had no influence on peace, often

leading people to resort to piracy or emigration to survive.

Mani includes includes some 110 villages - 98 of which are listed traditional settlements - more than 1,000 Byzantine and post-Byzantine churches, seven castles and a plethora of other attractions that leave no room for boredom. Spring, especially, is a time when the austerity of the landscape is mellowed by wild flower beds and the air is filled with the scent of sage and daisies. But the mildness of the climate has given rise to the exaggerated claim that Mani has, in fact, four springs.

Areopoli, named after Ares, the ancient Greek god of war, is the usual entry point to inner Mani. It lies on a rocky plateau at 250

meters, with a superb view to the Messeniakos Gulf to the west. It retains a strong traditional character, with narrow alleyways and several historic tower manors and churches, including the Cathedral of Taxiarches, where some claim the first flag of the revolution against the Turks was raised on March 17, 1821.

The next attraction, on the road along the western coast south of Areopoli, is the impressive Diros Caves. Gerolimenas, a picturesque village on the water, is ideal for a stop at one of the fish tavernas. From here, it is worth going for an afternoon hike on the nearby Tigani peninsula with its magnificent lunar terrain, abundant natural salt ponds and ruins of medieval fortifications.

Travel to MANI with  
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