

GODS' COUNTRY IS THE PLACE FOR A
HEAVENLY BREAK


PICTURE PERFECT
... hillside
villages and clear
waters



Magical mythtery tour

BETTER FETA ...
Dave gets a
cookery lesson



GREECE has much more to offer than kebabs, beaches and white-washed churches.

Take a tour of the Peloponnese and you'll be walking in the footsteps of gods.

Its rugged mountains are littered with legends, ancient ruins, caves, gorges and charming villages.

Our odyssey took us to Homeric palaces, historic temples, frescoed churches and restaurants that serve much more than souvlaki.

This southern peninsula's summer climate is less oppressive than more-popular holiday islands.

The mountains tumble down to the blue Aegean Sea, making for a perfect mix of culture, activities and relaxation. Easyjet has caught on and launched a cheap twice-

weekly service to Kalamata. A lively resort is springing up along the hilly coastline to the south of the city.

We stayed at the Elite City Resort which had chic, modern rooms and a pool you don't want to leave.

But we dragged ourselves away to explore the narrow streets of the historic old town. Looming above is a 13th Century castle which offers spectacular views from the battlements at sunset.

You get more authentic Greek cuisine in these parts, too.

We tucked into a superb selection of home-made dishes not only cooked but grown and reared in the garden where we ate it.

This really is gods' country and it is rich with well-preserved monuments built in their honour 2,500 years ago.

We drove to the Temple of Apollo the Healer – Apollo Epikourios – sitting 3,700ft up Mount Kotylion.

It was built by Ictinus, architect of the Parthenon, and experts say this hidden gem eclipses even the famous Athens masterpiece.

History, myths and wildlife

While the temple is off the beaten track, there are plenty of picturesque mountain villages to explore.

An overnight stay at Stemnitsa is a must.

Set on a winding mountain road, this tiny village is full of surprises at every turn – pretty houses, churches, shops selling home-made preserves, and inviting cafes.

The stone-built Trikolonion Country hotel blends perfectly

in its hillside setting, with well-furnished rooms overlooking a breathtaking landscape outside.

It's a great base from which to explore the magnificent Arcadia region.

Take a trek along the magnificent Loussios Gorge for a perfect blend of history, myths, wildlife and natural beauty.

At the foot of this steep ravine runs the river where legend has it Zeus bathed himself, while high above ancient monasteries cling to the vertical rockface.

It's a short drive to the picture postcard mountain town of Levidi, where we stayed at Villa Vager – an oasis of luxury, nestled in rustic surroundings.

The rooms have been furnished with immaculate attention to detail, with stone walls, oak-beamed ceilings, flat

screen TVs and beds that will give you the best night's sleep ever. Marina Vager is a dab hand in the kitchen and taught us how to make Greek dishes such as spinach and feta pie.

Her former banker husband Nikolas took us on a spin up the Mount Menalon on his quad bikes.

Then we enjoyed a glass of wine in our hot tub.

Taking a trip to the nearby Spiropoulos vineyard is great too. Just be sure to go by taxi because the hosts are extremely generous with the samples.

If you're heading back to the coast, take a detour via Mystras on the outskirts of Sparta, once the home of the greatest military power on earth. There you can visit the ruins of a 13th Century fortified town. You

could spend an entire day wandering around the walled hillside, filled with houses, mansions, palaces, churches and a castle on top.

We returned to the coast for a few days, staying in Kardamyli where the film *Before Midnight*, starring Ethan Hawke, was shot. The southern

tip of the Mani Peninsula is the end of the world, according to legend.

Tainaro is home to the Gates of Hades where the Grim Reaper came to take lost souls off in a boat to the underworld.

You can find out if you'll be making that journey soon by popping into the tiny stone shrine known as the Death Oracle of Poseidon.

We opted for a hearty lunch at a restaurant overlooking the scene.

With heavenly views like that, we decided to give Hell a miss for the time being.

DAVE WOODING

GO: GREECE

GETTING THERE: Easyjet provide an affordable twice-weekly service from Gatwick to Kalamata, with prices from £23.74 one way. Call 0843 104 5000.
STAYING THERE: Villa Vager has rooms from £100 a night. See villavager.gr. Elite City Resort Hotel, Kalamata has rooms from £67 a night. See elite.com.gr. Trikolonion Country Hotel, Stemnitsa has rooms from £85 a night. See trikolonion-country.gr. **OUT & ABOUT:** For guided treks or rafting visit trekking.gr. For more information, visit mythicalpeloponnese.gr.