

Beyond the Mountains

In the far north of Greece, where the Hellenic landmass meets the Balkans, is the little known and staggeringly beautiful region of Zagori. **Chris Fitch** visits the stone forests and dramatic gorges of a once strategically crucial land

Geologically, this place is a baby,' says local guide Apostolis

Demertzis, waving his arms around emphatically. 'What you see in this area is the outcome of the last two million years. This is why it's so impressive.'

Impressive is quite the understatement. Popular imaginations of Greece are unlikely to conjure up anything that looks at all like the dramatic Vikos gorge, a sharp glacial splinter running through the centre of this rugged limestone landscape. With a width-depth ratio of almost one-to-one, it holds the official Guinness record for the 'world's deepest gorge in proportion to width'.

The name Vikos is Slavic for 'echo', and the foreboding cliffs either side of the gorge are aptly capable of bouncing sounds back-and-forth, the ensuing reverberation steadily disappearing upwards into the heavens. Tentatively leaning over the edge at the narrowest point, the cliff plunges down over a kilometre, to the thin stream just visible flowing far below our feet.

'We're talking about an extremely deep and narrow gorge,' continues Demertzis, holding his palms close together to illustrate the tightness of the rift that the ledge we're standing on is within. 'But it's not a geological fault. Approximately 15 million years ago, all these mountains started to come out of the surface of the sea. During the ice age, huge amounts of ice gathered in the mountains. When the ice age ended, this ice was melting. Limestone is penetrated by water, and the water makes cracks. This crack was enlarged and enlarged over the last two million years.'

CULTURAL VIEWPOINTS

Perhaps surprisingly, around 80 per cent of mainland Greece is mountainous, thanks to the collision of the Eurasian and African tectonic plates many millions of years ago. Most dominating is the long Pindus mountain chain, which stretch more than 100 miles up the country's spine, from the Peloponnese in the south, to the Albanian border in the north. Here, the landscape is dominated by towering peaks such as Smolikas - at 2,637m, the second highest mountain in Greece - and the 2,497m Tymfi, part of the plateau which is home to the Vikos gorge.

This region, a short drive from the regional hub of urban Ioannina, feels essentially defined by its geology. Instead of the bright, blue-and-white houses made famous by Mykonos and Greece's other famous Mediterranean island hotspots, you'll instead find roughly hewn buildings and undulating bridges of grey limestone, carved

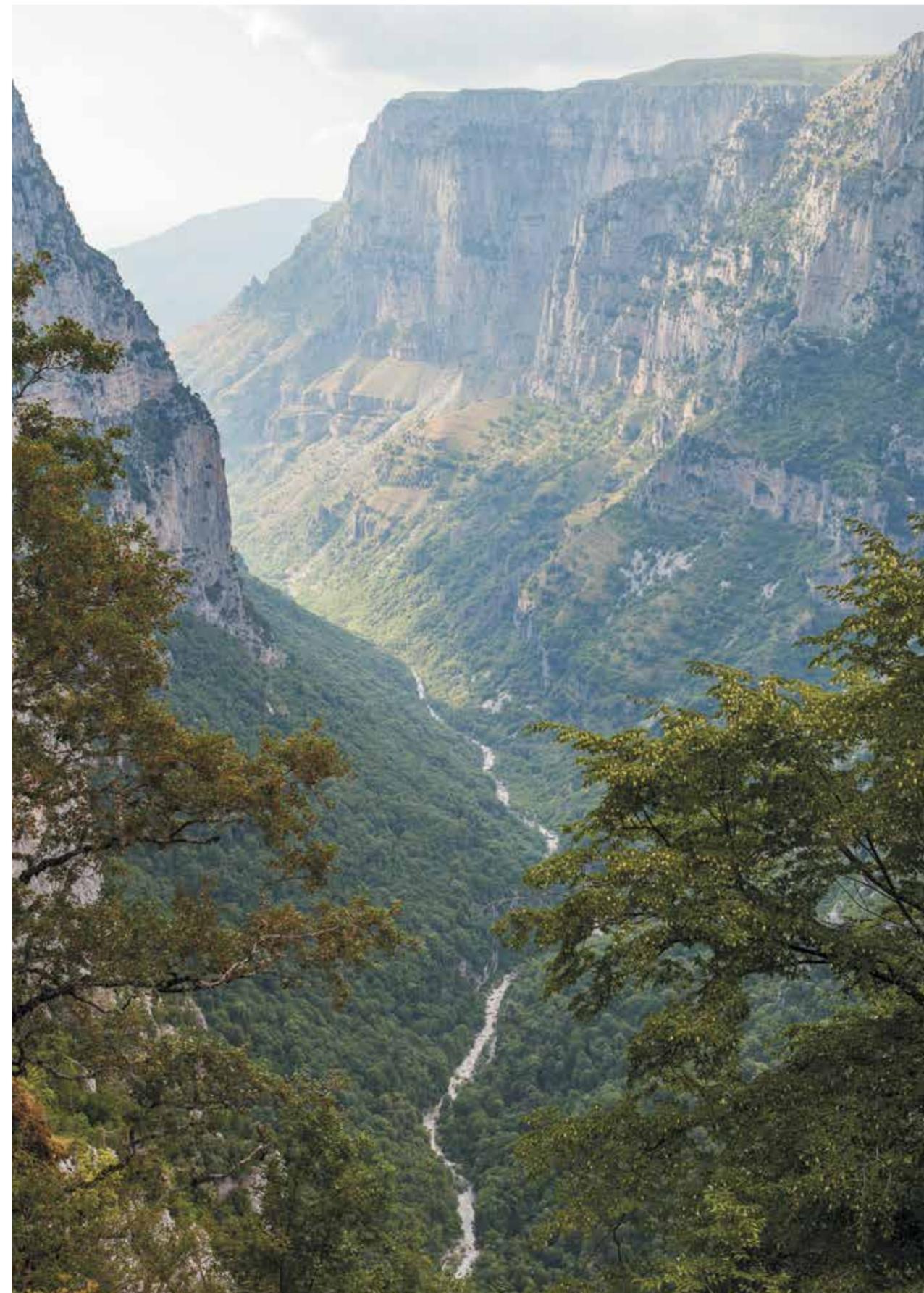


ABOVE: The 'stone forest' of Zagori - layered pillars of limestone; **RIGHT:** Vikos gorge is the most dramatic part of Zagori's landscape and is considered the world's deepest

from the steep and craggy mountains and shadowy ridges which emerge dramatically from the earth, rippling all the way to the horizon. This terrain implicitly gives the region its name: 'Zagori', translating as 'the place beyond the mountains' (a Slavic name, combining *za* - 'beyond' - and *gora* - 'mountains').

Even the drive up to the key vantage point for Vikos gorge, probably Zagori's most dramatic focal point, is populated by a never-ending series of eye-catching features, such as the so-called 'stone forest'. These entirely natural layered pillars of limestone, appearing like large pancakes stacked atop each other, have been left behind by the melting of the annual snowfall which collects on the summit of this karstic, plateau-like structure. As it percolates through the ground, leaving these striking natural monuments in its wake, the water eventually reappears at lower altitudes, helping form such waterways as the Voidomatis river - deemed the cleanest river in Greece (and one of the cleanest in the entire European Union).

These unique geological characteristics have had significant cultural consequences for Zagori. Even more than the rest of Greece, the region's sovereignty has waxed and waned over millennia, with borders shuffling back and forth across southeast Europe in line with the conquests and revolutions of the period. Most pertinent was its historical relationship with the Ottoman empire, which held imperial rule over almost all of Greece for several centuries, ever since conquering the >





ABOVE: Aristi, in western Zagori, is one of several villages that have begun to embrace tourism as a method for arresting the decline that has seen many others in the region become little more than 'ghost towns'; TOP, LEFT: The Northern Pindos National Park has been tentatively selected to receive official UNESCO World Heritage status

country in the 15th century by driving out the weakened Byzantine forces.

Unlike their compatriots, Demertzis explains, the Zagorians held firm against the Ottoman invaders, their tough and relatively inaccessible physical environment allegedly central to their ability to resist conquest for over 200 years. Living in this part of the world has historically been a very tough existence, with locals required to negotiate the heat of Greek summers with the freezing, snow-ridden temperatures of high altitude winters. A few Turkish soldiers venturing into the mountains, far outside their comfort zone, wasn't a challenge likely to ever cause them too many problems.

'This was the gate to the Ottoman Empire!' announces Demertzis, directing my attention towards one end of the Vikos gorge. A single tree, situated at the forking of some ancient trails, and shaded by an imposing shadow cast by the steep northern ridge, marks what became essentially the border between Zagori, and the vast, sprawling Ottoman world which surrounded them. Having failed to defeat the tough Zagorians, the Ottomans were forced to the negotiating table, and eventually struck a deal whereby residents of Zagori would receive special 'privileges', granting them a level of autonomy and freedom to travel that was unknown to the rest of conquered Greece.

The few villages that embraced tourism are experiencing a boom

'To understand Zagori, you should ask, what were these privileges?' ponders Thede Kahl, Director of the Institute of Slavic Studies and Caucasus Studies, and Professor for South Slavic Studies at the Friedrich Schiller University in Jena, Germany. 'It sounds a bit ironic, because the Ottoman empire was a period of suppression, but the mountain people profited from this. They had advantages, because they had a separate economy, and they had liberty to go and to trade - with Egypt and Wallachia [a region of modern-day Romania]. This freedom to travel and trade led to the subsequent emigration of many young Zagorians, ambitious individuals who would one day return and shower the region with great wealth, knowledge, and prosperity, quite the juxtaposition from much of the rest of the Balkans. 'They had an elite situation,' explains Kahl.

However, these special conditions began to waver following the death of infamous Ottoman commander Ali Pasha in 1822, and finally came to a halt in 1868, when revolutions that had started

in the Peloponnese half a century earlier finally reached the region. 'When the privileges were stopped, it was a disaster for the Zagori economy, and it is key for understanding the decline,' says Kahl. This 'decline' saw the long, drawn out demise of the local population, what Demertzis repeatedly calls the 'decay of civilisation'. Accelerated by the construction of asphalt roads in the latter part of the 20th century, which enabled the young to escape to more fast-paced lifestyles in Ioannina and Athens, the modern-day population now numbers around only 2,000 people, which, as Demertzis is keen to point out, is less than ten per cent of that from the mid-19th century.

The prosperity of the days of the 'privileges' feels a very long time gone when compared to standing in most of the villages today, now home to only a handful of residents - almost entirely elderly retirees - and some with no permanent inhabitants at all. 'When the old people pass away, nothing will be there,' Demertzis says with an air of melancholy.

WIDER RECOGNITION

However, rising awareness of the dramatic Zagori landscape is changing the narrative on this decline, drawing tourists from around the world. Key sights such as Vikos and the neighbouring Aaos gorge, coupled with the unique cultural history and traditional infrastructure of the wider natural landscape of the Northern Pindos National Park, appear to be increasingly attracting people to this remote location.

In Monodendri, the Zagorisan village which acts as the main stopping point for visitors hiking up to Vikos gorge, a man known simply as 'Akis', who runs the local restaurant *I Pita Tis Kikitsas* ('The Pie of Kiki'), has noticed a significant change in his clientele since he started in 1996. 'This is the first time that people started coming from outside Greece in winter,' he whispers, nodding at couples dining a few tables over. 'We've had a lot of people, from different countries. From France, Germany, the Netherlands, Israel, Scandinavia, United Kingdom, and the United States.'

Contrary to the wider story of decline, the few villages which have whole-heartedly embraced the opportunities tourism provides - including Monodendri and the nearby resort hotspot of Aristi - are experiencing something of a boom. According to Akis, the visual spectacle of Vikos gorge and the surrounding landscape is a key component of this transformation, as modern technology enables more and more of the world to find out about Zagori's existence. 'Now information is spreading on the internet,' outlines Demertzis. 'We're trying to say to the world, Greece is not only the islands. Come to visit other parts of Greece, even in winter! This effort, after all these years, is beginning to show feedback.'

Such a process may well ramp up further, given that the Northern Pindos National Park is now on the tentative list to become a fully-fledged



UNESCO World Heritage Site. 'No similar mixed cultural and natural sites in the wider Balkan area, with a corresponding geomorphology, are inscribed on the World Heritage List,' reads the application from the Permanent Delegation of Greece to UNESCO. Highlighting the strong linkages between the landscape, and the corresponding culture which evolved within the Ottoman empire, the application claims that the uniqueness of the region, 'lies in the imprint of their particular cultural and historical journey through time, as it is apparent on both built (anthropogenetic) and natural environment.'

Regardless of whether World Heritage status ever does come to pass, the UNESCO brand is already proving beneficial. In recognition of its unique geological circumstances, the UNESCO Vikos-Aaos European Geopark was established in 2010, and upgraded recently to become a Global Geopark, one of only 127 around the world. Such a designation deems the 1,200 sq km area to have 'geological heritage of international value', particularly noting its 'wonderful gorges, rock towers, rivers, stone bridges, traditional architecture and thermal baths'.

'Recognising the region as a UNESCO Global Geopark adds new dynamics to the development here,' explains geologist Panagiotis Paschos, scientific associate at the Vikos-Aaos UNESCO Global Geopark. 'Until now the area was known

ABOVE: Restaurants in Zagori villages such as Monodendri are noting that visitor numbers from outside the country are on the rise, most drawn by a new awareness of the landscape's vistas

because of the unique beauty of the landscape and attracted alternative tourism visitors. Now there is a new interpretation of the area, creating favourable conditions for sustainable geotourism.'

Certainly, Paschos is keen to espouse the merits of properly managed tourism in the region, especially from budding geologists. 'Sustainable geotourism will have a double effect,' he explains. 'On the one hand it will strengthen the local economy by attracting visitors and providing new products. On the other, it will contribute to the popularisation of geological science, to understand how geological processes influence in biodiversity, the landscape, the people and the culture.'

Ultimately, this collaboration between ancient geology and contemporary culture and tourism is looking to reap rewards for the entire region, a physical-human success story that is putting this part of the world firmly on the map. It may even nudge enough imaginations to make people aware that Greece is a lot more than just picturesque islands. 'You are in Zagori now,' proclaims Demertzis. 'This is the real Greece!' 

The trip was supported by the Greek National Tourism Organisation. For more details, see visitgreece.gr. Additionally, for an account of hiking along the ancient trails of Zagori, visit geog.gr/zagori-hiking.