



BACK IN TIME:
The ancient village of Monemvasia. Right, Cape Tainaron on the Peloponnese Peninsula.



Greece's Best-Kept Secret

Unspoiled Mani, rich in beauty and ancient history, takes its first steps into the luxury arena. Discover this gem before the word gets out.

BY ANDREW SESSA
PHOTOGRAPHY BY CHRISTOS DRAZOS

PICKING THROUGH SCRUBBY ground cover and avoiding limestone rocks cropping up like petrified coral or bleached lava, I know I should keep my eyes on the narrow cliff-side path marked only by the footprints of those who have come before me. But I can't help sneaking peeks at the view: A long arm of land thrusts forward, sheering down to deep-blue waters on either side. Above, skies just lighter than the sea blur the horizon, and behind me, pale-green hills cut by a winding road disappear in the distance.

I'm making my way to the 19th-century lighthouse crowning the Peloponnese Peninsula's Cape Tainaron — the southernmost point in mainland Greece — in the largely unknown region of Mani. The ruins of an early Christian church, reputedly built atop a temple to Poseidon, rise beside the trailhead, and nearby I spy fragments of Roman mosaics. Carved into the cliffs below, I've been told, lies a sea cave the ancients believed was an entrance to Hades. For long stretches of the windy, two-hour walk, not a sign of civilization, ancient or modern, scars the cinematic scenery.

Mention Mani to even the most well-traveled of Mediterranean-lovers, and they'll likely have little idea what you're talking about. But those who do



know it will have one word to describe it: wild. It's the sort of wild that intrigues and captivates, seducing you with the magic of its unspoiled, untamed scenery and the legends of its storied past. For a long while, it was also the kind of wild that kept most luxury-minded folks away. There just wasn't anything here for them. These days, however, Mani's many wonders are becoming more accessible to sophisticated travelers than ever before, as the first stylish stays in and around the region have slowly opened up and come into their own.

When I finally reach Tainaron's tip, I descend a few steps to the lighthouse terrace and stare out at the crystal-blue sea, now nearly surrounding me. I imagine diving in and "swimming through the heart of a colossal sapphire," as the late Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor — one of Greece's great 20th-century chroniclers — described it in his 1958 travelogue, *Mani*, which serves as my literary companion for this trip. But I content myself to stand still, simply absorbing the vibration of this place: a spot where sky, sea, and earth seem to meet, where the characters of ancient mythology are said to have once walked on the same striking landscapes still seen here today.

Dramatically rocky and dry in its desertlike southern stretches, more lush toward its north, Mani brims with rolling hills and precipitous cliffs, expanses of silver-green olive forests and fuchsia cactus fruit, ancient abandoned ruins and centuries-old villages of towering stone houses. Its powdery sand beaches — a Mediterranean rarity — open onto coves whose warm aquamarine waters lap gently at the shore, teeming with the abundant seafood you will find cooked to perfection at casual tavernas up and down the coast.

While many Med destinations can seem indistinguishable from each other, Mani remains true to itself — even as it

INTO THE BLUE: The island of Elafonisos, which features some of the Peloponnese's best beaches

has started to go luxe — as authentic and surprising as Sicily at its most unadulterated. And just as Sicily was long separated from Italy, so too was Mani disconnected from Greece, by geography, history, and, even, choice. Protected to the north by the Taygetos Mountains, and on all other sides by the sea, it inhabits the bottom of the central finger of the glove-shaped Peloponnese, clear across the country from the artifice of the cookie-cutter blue-and-white villages of the eastern Aegean's oft-overcrowded Cyclades islands. The region's proud people trace their lineage to the notoriously tough ancient Spartans and the Byzantines who came after, and they stand among the only Greeks who achieved some independence during Turkish rule. "This deviation from the main flow of Greek history has produced many divergent symptoms," Fermor observed, from Mani's harsh but beautiful landscapes to the specific characteristics of its people, architecture, and food. On this trip, I experience it all.

My guide — besides Fermor's *Mani* — is Elena Papanicolaou, a 40-something former corporate executive who last year founded Fly Me to the Moon, a luxury bespoke travel company



devoted to her native Greece. With her kohl-rimmed eyes, high cheekbones, and dark hair, Elena resembles a Byzantine icon, but her iPhone, iPad, and digital Rolodex of insider contacts give her away as decidedly 21st century. She similarly mixes old and new for our itinerary, intercutting stops at ancient ruins and primordial caves with stays in such of-the-moment spots as the enlightening, eco-conscious agritourism-focused Eumelia and the boutique hotel Citta dei Nicliani. Both host an international array of in-the-know sybarites and culture-seekers who have recently tuned in to the area's surprising delights.

We begin in Sparta, slightly north of Mani, and then explore the finger of the Peloponnese just east, to witness the wonders one finds along the way: the palaces, frescoed churches, and ruins of the 13th-century hilltop Byzantine city of Mystras, a UNESCO World Heritage Site; Elafonisos, a small island off the finger's tip where the white sand and turquoise waters at Simos make for some of the best beaches in the Peloponnese; and Monemvasia, a mind-bogglingly steep fortified monolith jutting up from the sea, where restored terra-cotta-roofed, golden-stoned buildings climb the rust-colored cliffs.

We have also taken this slightly circuitous path en route to Mani proper in order to stay at Eumelia, an organic farm and guesthouse that has ushered a new era of agritourism into the area. Athens-born, New York-raised Johns Hopkins graduate Frangiskos Karelas lovingly established this 50-acre vineyard and olive grove a few years back, on land once owned by his great-grandfather, quietly opening this eco-chic stay. It has now become one of the area's most special, with ultrasoft, all-natural mattresses from the sought-after Greek bedding company Coco-Mat, and a modernist barnlike living and dining room

PAST AND PRESENT: Clockwise from left, lunchtime in Monemvasia; "FROUTALIA," a local comfort food made with eggs, potatoes, cheese, and siglino; inside a Mystras church; a sign reading "café" in Greek

where guests gather on cool nights around a fire and chat about the day. Eumelia has expanded its offerings of late, welcoming visitors for yoga retreats, working farm forays, or just R&R. Its vines now turn out a light-red blend, and its 1,000 olive trees produce a sweet, grassy oil. Frangiskos also cures olives, makes tapenade, and preserves fruit, selling it all from a just-opened gourmet boutique and posh little tasting room in the property's barrel-vaulted 15th-century stone cistern.

Over a farm-to-table dinner of local specialties — sauteed wild greens, orange-spiced pork sausage, and fava bean puree — Frangiskos whets my appetite for my trip's main course, which begins the next day: "Mani is very peculiar," he entices, "full of extreme, rugged beauty."

The following morning, we drive south toward Mani's Kotronas Bay, hugging the white-and-gold seaside cliffs. The beauty of the sweeping waterfront vistas, while indeed often rugged, rivals that of the Amalfi Coast or Pebble Beach. Placid inlets dig into the landscape like fjords; low, red-roofed stone villages scurry up from the sea, dotted with

cacti whose pinkish-red prickly pears glow like rubies; endless olive groves climb rolling hills, growing not in organized rows but a scattered array.

Over lunch on the shores of Kotronas, at Gefseis En Plo, an upscale nautically inspired spot run by chef, cookbook author, and TV personality Mary Panagakou, we savor signature dishes typical of the area, salads topped with the regional cured-pork called *siglino*, say, and other specialties, including tender roasted goat with wilted fennel fronds and artichoke hearts. We talk of old Maniot ways, most now changed with the times: women who wore black because they lost sons or husbands in family feuds; locals who left for Athens and then set down roots in the most challenging terrain they could find there — because it felt like home.

Later that day, we visit a hauntingly beautiful vestige of those feuds: Vathia, a now-empty hilltop village that's among the best preserved of Mani's towered towns. During the feuds, these hamlets, Fermor wrote, came to be "scattered across the mountains like scores of hornets' nests," built higher and higher, not only to compete with neighbors but to provide strategic vantage. Approaching at golden hour, we find Vathia just as Fermor described it, its towers poking out from a ridge "like the spikes along an iguana's back." Before leaving, we look back at the city, now set aglow in sunset's amber-hued light. I think of Fermor again, writing that these tower-towns "had the hallucinating improbability of a mirage."

Here, he referred to Kitta, where we now head to stay at the 3-year-old boutique hotel Citta dei Nicliani. Its rooms occupy a series of these towers, all with stunning views of a valley filled with olive trees, villages, and limestone cliffs. The oldest of the hotel's buildings date back 1,000 years, but they hardly look their age, plushly appointed in French



BY THE SEA: Clockwise from above, a fresh catch in Limeni; a seaside table at Takis; the deserted, but preserved towered town of Vathia

country-house-inspired furnishings, with Guy Laroche linens covering the deeply comfortable beds.

The next day begins with that spellbinding walk to Tainaron's lighthouse, but rather than descending to its sea cave, we depart for nearby Diros instead. There, a boatman-guide paddles us through water-filled caverns whose impressive, otherworldly white-stone formations look like the arching entrances to tower-houses in some places, its stalactites like crystal chandeliers in others. We emerge into the light of day soon enough, for a late lunch in harbor-side Limeni. At the seafood taverna Takis, whose tables sit on a stone terrace overlooking the clearest turquoise cove I've ever seen, a cook lightly fries our just-caught red mullet after cleaning it in a bucket of saltwater pulled right from the bay. We savor the fish's pure flavor along with marinated anchovies, garlicky *tzadiki*, and a feta-filled salad, then return to Citta dei Nicliani once more.

For our final day in Mani, Elena has arranged a series of special-access entrees. We begin in Kardamyli, where we visit the former home of Fermor himself. Upon his death in 2011, the famed author left the grand waterfront stone villa he built here to Athens' Benaki Museum, which now plans to create a research and cultural



Citta dei Nicliani



Gefseis En Plo



Chromata



Eumelia

Essentials

GETTING HERE

Mani begins about 175 miles southwest of Athens' international airport, or about 50 miles southwest of Kalamata's.

SLEEP

In Mani
Citta dei Nicliani: Owned by the charming Sepsas family, the seven French country-chic rooms here occupy centuries-old tower-houses in Kitta. Breakfast features fresh cheese, omelets, and creamy yogurt; and dinner is highlighted by *youvetsi*, a traditional Greek dish of tomato, beef, and orzo. The extensive wine list offers 300-plus choices, 80 percent of them Greek and the rest international vintages, with some procured at Sotheby's. Nearby, a tower-house with a private pool can be rented as a vacation villa with bedrooms sleeping four and lofted sleeping nooks to accommodate more. From \$85 (hotel), \$425 (villa). *011-30-27330-51827; cittadeinicliani.com*

Beyond Mani

Eumelia Organic Agrotourism Farm & Guesthouse: This family friendly stay near Gouves offers as much immersion as you'd like on its organic farm, and the wonders of the southern Peloponnese. Its five modern, cozy bungalows, with kitchens and fireplaces, easily sleep four, and 70 percent of its hearty food is grown on-site. From \$105. *011-30-21303-69814; eumelia.com*

EAT

In Mani

→ **Gefseis En Plo:** This maritime-feeling spot on Kotronas Bay turns out perfect local fare (savory pies, fava topped with charred octopus) from celebrity chef Mary Panagakou, a Greek hybrid of the Barefoot Contessa and Ask Heloise. *Kotronas Beach; 011-30-27330-22900*
→ **Takis:** Perched against the aqua waters of Limeni's port, this simple seafood tavern bedecked with plaid-cloth-covered wooden tables and off-white chairs,

hosts casual diners looking for the freshest of fish. *Limeni Port; 011-30-27330-51327*

Beyond Mani

→ **Chromata:** Just outside Mystras, with views of the ruins, this indoor-outdoor restaurant makes elevated versions of local delights such as *kagianas* — scrambled eggs topped with tomato and local smoked-pork *siglino*. *011-30-27310-23995; estiatoriochromata.blogspot.com*
→ **Matoula:** This 65-year-old taverna proves most popular among those that line cliff-side Monemvasia's main path. Fried fish, marinated anchovies, and *saitia* (phyllo stuffed with greens) pair perfectly with vintages from the local Monemvasia winery, whose nearby tasting room is called **Byron's Wine Kamara**. *011-30-27320-61660; matoula.gr*

HOW TO BOOK

Custom **Fly Me to the Moon** itineraries in and around Mani start from \$3,700 per person for five days. *011-30-21068-28926; flymetothemoontravel.com*



center. Walking among his books and maps, looking out to sea through the property’s cypress and olive trees, I feel his presence intensely, half expecting the copy of *Mani* I’ve been constantly carrying to start crackling like a literary Geiger counter.

A few hours later, we leave our final stop, the sprawling, remarkably well-restored ancient city of Messene, where the site’s chief archaeologist led us on a private tour. Sunlight glints off the ruins’ columns, porticos, and pediments, all nestled in the low bowl of a mountain-



rimmed valley opening to the Ionian Sea, and I’m reminded of Fermor one final time.

REMAINS OF THE DAY:
Ruins in the ancient city of Messene.

“A spell of peace lives in the ruins of ancient Greek temples,” he wrote. “As the traveler leans back among the fallen capitals and allows the hours to pass, it empties the mind of troubling thoughts and anxieties and slowly refills it, like a vessel that has been drained and scoured, with a quiet ecstasy.”

In Mani, not just the ruins, but their setting in one of the world’s most natural, untouched areas, heightens the majesty of these moments. As Fermor observed of the local landscape in his book’s last pages, “Nature becomes supernatural; the frontier between physical and metaphysical is confounded.”

Of Mani, I think, truer words could never be written.