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7 Reasons This Little-Known Region In Greece Needs To Be At The Top Of Your Travel List



The Peloponnese region from Monemvasia Rock
PHOTO CREDIT: REBECCA HALL

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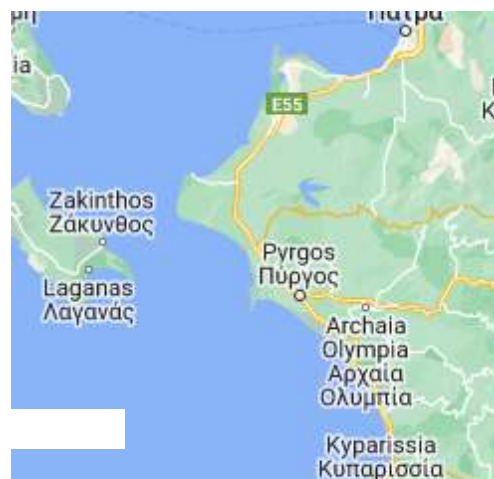
On the southern side of Greece's mainland lies a geographical region that's probably one of the most important in the country.

The Peloponnese — thought to be named after the hero Pelops who conquered the region in ancient Greek history — can be considered an island within the mainland as the peninsula is surrounded by water on all sides and linked to the mainland at two spots: the Corinth Canal and the multi-span cable bridge at Rio Antirio.

Don't miss out on visiting this region. From award-winning blue flag beaches to ancient castle towns and historical sites, the Peloponnese needs to be at the top of your travel list. Here I share with you some examples of the ancient sites the region is famous for.

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Site of Ancient Olympia
PHOTO CREDIT: REBECCA HALL

1. Ancient Olympia

Located in the Western Peloponnese, only a 3.5-hour drive from central Athens and probably the most famous site in the region, [Ancient Olympia](#) is the birthplace of the Olympic Games in the 8th century BC. Although earthquakes have taken their toll and not much remains of the actual site, you can still see the running track and stadium where you can imagine the crowds cheering and the Temple of Hera, a Doric-style temple built in 590 BC to honor Hera, the queen of the Gods.

The small town of Olympia itself has a long street with flags of the nations that now take part in the modern Olympics and several tourist shops and tavernas.



Tiers of the Epidauros Theatre
PHOTO CREDIT: REBECCA HALL

2. Ancient Theatre Of Epidaurus

Just a 2-hour ride from Athens brings you to the famous Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus. It's actually at the southeast end of the medicinal sanctuary of this region that was constructed to honor the Greek god of Medicine, Asclepius. The theatre was built over time from the 4th to 2nd centuries B.C. in an amphitheatrical style and rises over 55 rows, seating over 14,000 people.

Its wonder comes from the fact that it's possible to hear whispered words, or even a coin dropped on the stage below from the top tier. The scientific explanation for this is that the theatre is constructed from limestone, thought to suppress low-frequency noises yet reflect back high-frequency ones.

Every summer there is an [Athens and Epidaurus Festival](#) where theatrical performances and dramas are enacted. It's well worth visiting for a performance or staying locally to make a long

weekend of it.



Beach where the Sunken City of Epidaurus is located just offshore

PHOTO CREDIT: REBECCA HALL

3. Sunken City Of Epidaurus

A half an hour's drive away from the theatre brings you to Kalymnos Beach. It's remarkable because you'll literally be able to swim amongst history as 7 feet offshore and only 4-6 feet deep lies an "ancient trading post" from the 12th century B.C. It's possible to see ancient tombs, walls, paths, and the foundations of an old villa.

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A rudimentary sign from the beach points you in the right direction, and it's possible to kayak out to it too.

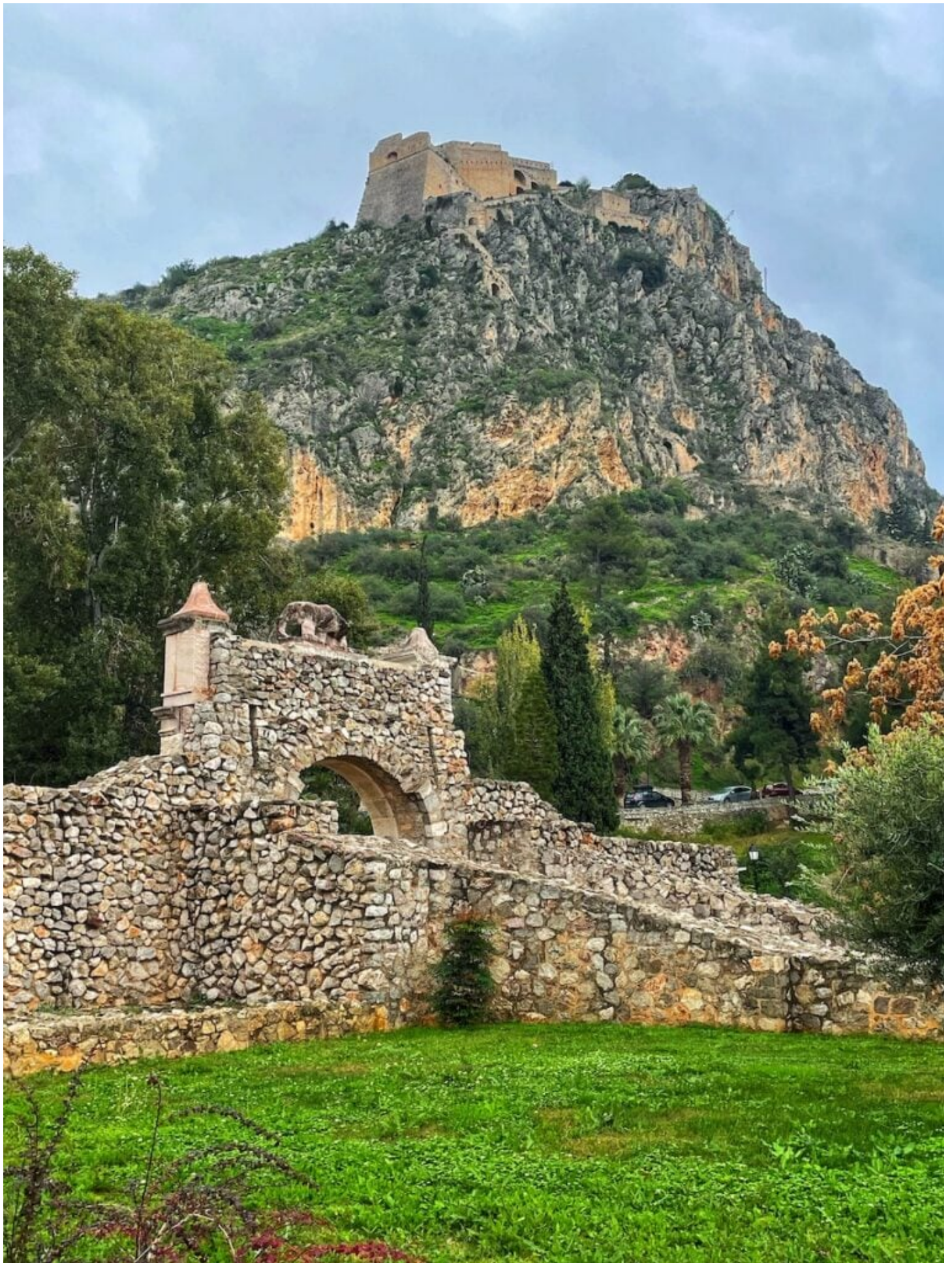
3. Nafplio

Ancient Castles And Fortresses

Located just under 2 hours away from Athens by car means you can visit the original capital of Greece — Nafplio — as a day trip, but it's well worth spending a weekend in this coastal town.

Walk along the seaside promenade of this popular weekend retreat for Athenians, nestled against a backdrop of mountains and the Argolic Gulf sea. Sit at a beachside cafe, sipping coffee as you watch the sun set. The cobbled, bougainvillea-laden streets of the Old Town lead to Syntagma Square, the most historically important platia of the town. It's also where, in 1826, a speech was delivered under the plane tree that dominates the square by Georgios Gennadios, known as the Teacher of Greece, to persuade people to give up their money and possessions in support of the Greek Rebellion against Ottoman Rule.

Aside from its many boutique hotels, cafes, and tavernas with its beautiful backdrop, Nafplio is guarded by beautiful castles to explore.



Palamidi Fortress above the town of Nafplio

PHOTO CREDIT: REBECCA HALL

Fortress Of Palamidi

Palamidi is the main fortress in Nafplio standing 216 meters above the town, keeping a watchful eye. Built by the Venetians in the early 19th century, it has eight bastions and the chapel of Agios Andreas within the central one.

Throughout its years, the fortress has been used for a variety of purposes, the main one being a prison in the 1800s. One of the leaders of the Greek Revolution, Theodoros Kolokotronis, was imprisoned here in 1833 and charged with high treason. Their punishment was to undertake hard manual labor.

If you want to walk up to the castle, it's 999 steps, so take it slowly. These were built as one of the hard tasks assigned to the prisoners. I'd suggest taking a taxi up from the Old Town, taking in the sweeping views, then walking down.

Bourtzi Fortress

By contrast, Bourtzi Fortress is a Venetian castle built on an island just off the shore. Built in 1471, it used to be the home of the executioner of the prisoners imprisoned in Palamidi Fortress. For 40 years — from just after World War II to the '70s — the fortress was made into a boutique hotel. Nowadays it's possible to take a boat trip from Nafplio around Bourtzi and in the summer it often hosts music and cultural festivals.

When you're in Nafplio, be sure to spend a long weekend in this beautiful [luxury rustic lodging experience](#).



Monemvasia Rock
PHOTO CREDIT: REBECCA HALL

4. Monemvasia

You can't miss a visit to this *Game of Thrones*-esque medieval castle town on the southern shores of the Peloponnese peninsula, just under 4 hours from Athens.

Homes carved into a large sea rock jutting out from a causeway weren't visible from the mainland, meaning locals could avoid enemy attack. Monemvasia is one of Europe's oldest continually inhabited castle towns as people still live and trade within its walls.

After you cross the manmade causeway and stone bridge, enter through the castle gate and lose yourself amongst the cobbled alleyways and visit the Byzantine churches and the Church of Agia Sophia located at the top of the rock with sweeping views across the sea. The best view of the rock town is from the sea itself. The small harbor by the causeway on the mainland has boats that can take you around.

It's a perfect couples' and honeymoon destination, so base yourself at this nearby [luxurious mansion](#) for a romantic break.



The Moon rising over the valley surrounding Mystras

PHOTO CREDIT: REBECCA HALL

5. Mystras

UNESCO Byzantine Castle Town

This UNESCO-awarded Byzantine castle and archaeological site with several monasteries lies a 2.5-hour drive away from Athens and is nestled in the beautiful Taygetos Mountain range. It's thought to have been the second most important town, after Constantinople, during the last decades of the Byzantine era.

At the site's highest point, explore the remarkable 13th-century Palace of the Despots — a collection of two or four-story mansions. Marvel at the typical architecture of that era with its high arches, attics, and chambers, all well preserved.

The Monastery of Panagia Pantanassa is one example of the beautiful churches with its tall bell tower and ancient frescoes inside. The site overlooks the village of Mystras with traditional buildings, tavernas, and several quaint accommodation options.

Mystras is a 10-minute drive from the town of Sparta. Be sure to stop here and visit what's left of the archaeological site — once the stronghold of where this warring society developed and raised some of the fiercest soldiers of the ancient Greek city-states.

If relaxation is more your bag, one of Greece's most luxurious spas can be found in Mystras: the Euphoria Spa and Retreat, where Eastern and Western methods combine holistically to provide a unique package, or where guests can simply unwind in a peaceful atmosphere with those gorgeous views.

The E4 Trans European hiking route runs through Mystras, so you have some beautiful hiking paths through the surrounding villages, gorges, and pine-clad forests. The icon shop in Mystras sells hiking maps to help orient you.



Foundations of the ancient archaeological site of Mycenae

PHOTO CREDIT: REBECCA HALL

6. Mycenae

Forget the Acropolis of Athens; Mycenae is thought to be one of the most famous archaeological sites in the country. A half-hour drive from the coastal town and original capital of Greece, Nafplio (see above), the Mycenae was a military civilization that flourished from about 1600 to 1000 B.C. and was said to have very little interaction with other cultures in the region or country.

Mycenae was home to King Agamemnon — leader of the Greeks through the Trojan War. The huge walls around the site (the remains of which can still be seen, but not at their full height) were said to have been constructed by Cyclopes, the one-eyed monsters. The most famous part of the site is its massive Lions Gate entry point, where the worn figureheads of two lions can be spotted on the archway. King Agamemnon's tomb is located approximately a 5-minute drive away.

I suggest staying in Nafplio and visiting what's left of the site and museum in the morning or afternoon.



Semeli Winery in the Nemea region of the Peloponnese
PHOTO CREDIT: REBECCA HALL

7. Nemea

Wine Routes And Ancient Stadium

A 45-minute drive from Nafplio brings you to a region of the Peloponnese that wine connoisseurs will love. Nemea, located in the northwest of the peninsula, has fertile soil and is home to one of Greece's most celebrated varieties of grapes — the Agiorgitiko, which is produced into rosé and aged in oak. There are several wineries to visit in the region, one of the best and spread out amongst beautiful countryside with views down to the sea is that of the [Semeli Estate](#). Book a wine-tasting tour and sample several cheeses too.

Nemea, like Olympia, has an ancient stadium where the Nemean Games were hosted every 2 years; 1 year before and 1 year after the Olympic Games. Only males could partake. Since 1994, the games have been re-enacted.

As you can see, there is so much to do in the Peloponnese region that it should be top of your list when visiting Greece. My advice? Rent a car from Athens airport so you can head straight out on the national roads and not navigate the central city's traffic and enjoy a week-long break exploring these beautiful destinations.

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Rebecca is a British travel writer and author who lives in Greece, gaining inspiration from the beauty of the country, people, and gastronomy. In addition to maintaining her own website, [Life Beyond Borders](#), she is also a guidebook updater for Rough Guides and Lonely Planet — updating...

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