

Mount Athos – visit to a holy mountain

"Daphne!" shouted the pilot of the launch as he brought us alongside the small wharf. Mount Athos. The ancient and mystery enshrouded center for the Orthodox faithful. I had traveled so far and long to get here. There was the northern Greek port of Salonika, where I had to spend several days obtaining the necessary documents from the foreign ministry and American consulate. Then I had to spend another long day on a bus crossing the rugged countryside of Thrace. And then there was the night in the small, coastal fishing village of Oranopoli, and the rising at dawn the next morning to meet the boat that would carry us over the remaining 30 or so miles to the community.

It seemed as if I had been drawn to this place without knowing why I should want to go to all the trouble it required. Already, even here in the most accessible part of Mt. Athos, the mood and feeling of the land had changed dramatically. Fascination mingled with fear as I viewed the scene before me. Everything from the narrow, cobblestone streets and the low weathered, ancient-looking buildings to the appearance of the full-bearded and unshorn monks, in their long black robes and flat hats suggested a timelessness that is rare in our world. To an outsider such men appear unfathomable and foreign, and their own slightly suspicious stares at visitors do little to narrow the gulf between us.

The monks challenged their modern visitors from the minute they stepped off the boat. There was a monk with a pair of scissors waiting for us as we disembarked. This man with shoulder length hair was there to trim the hair of any of the youthful guests that he thought needed a trim. One young, long haired American immediately turned around and rebounded the boat in disgust. I only laughed as I presented myself for a trim, or should I say "tonsure."

I knew that many of the monasteries had centuries- old traditions and that a few could trace their beginnings back to the tenth century. And this fact intrigued me. What power had enabled these people to maintain such a long, unbroken tradition of faith?

I had only a few minutes to reflect on it all before I was caught up in the flow of people and supplies on their way into the interior of the peninsula via the one single road capable of truck or bus traffic. The bus carried us up a steep, bumpy, winding route through the barren, rocky

landscape with its low, dense vegetation. The road ran about 12 miles and ended in the administrative center for Mount Athos, the town of Kariae.

I had met several other English- speaking visitors during the long bus and boat journey here. In the late afternoon of that first day an American architect, a young Netherlands doctor, an English- speaking Greek student and myself sat together in the town's single, small dimly lit cafe. We ate bean soup and large hunks of coarse white bread as we talked about everything but Mount Athos, and occasionally gazed out the window to see if the slightly chill rain that had been falling all afternoon showed any sign of letting up.

Each of us had to make some kind of decision about where to go next. Our letters of authorization approved a seven day stay. We had maps of the peninsula showing all of the monasteries scattered along the coast and back along miles of winding foot trails on the rugged slopes of the mountains. The monasteries were required to feed and shelter us during our stay. So it was simply a matter of deciding which monasteries we wished to visit and which trails to take in order to reach them.

I had pretty much decided upon the route I would follow. Then, the architect, who was a bit older and represented more authority and commanded somewhat more respect in our group, proposed that instead of going our separate ways that we all go together back down the mountain on the afternoon bus. Since the rain could continue for days, it might be better to visit only the more accessible coastal monasteries by boat. Unspoken was the suggestion that we could also avoid or succeed in insulating ourselves from the powerful, and so far quite unsettling influence of this foreign environment. He even proposed to pay the boat and bus fare for the poorer among us.

Though I declined the offer, my companions joined him, and they prepared to leave together. Our architect friend looked over at me and said, "Good luck, I guess there's something you'd like to find on your own here."

Then, I was left alone. At that moment I wasn't exactly sure that I didn't want to run after them while I still had the chance. Another hour passed and the rain let up as much as I thought it would. So I slung my small duffel bag over my shoulder and pushed my hat down on my head and began following a trail that would eventually lead me to the Greek Monastery, Stavronikita.

Several hours later, soaked and exhausted, with steam rising from my collar and trickles of sweat pouring down my temples and forehead and into my eyes, I arrived at the gate of the monastery. Darkness was beginning to fall. The rain had increased, accompanied by a strong

wind and the continual sound of waves crashing against the rocky cliffs that rose precipitously over a hundred feet above the restless waters of the Mediterranean. The monastery itself was perched precariously on the cliffs' edge, as if it wished to lean out over the churning cauldron to crane and see as far up and down the jagged coast as possible.

The entrance to the monastery was a tall, stone archway with an enormous rough hewn, heavy timber door. A thick, rust-coated sheet of metal covered the wood, punctuated by countless large, round iron rivets across the surface. The thick grey stone walls of the monastery rose perhaps thirty feet with only an occasional narrow black slit of a window and topped with the characteristic block toothed pattern of a fortress. This design was certainly no accident, since the monastery had suffered many attacks through its long history by bandits and both Christian and Moslem armies lured by the tales of riches that the monks were said to have accumulated and stored behind those walls. Little must have changed in the appearance of the monastery since those grim days of the Middle Ages when it was built.

The sound of the small bell passed through the door and on into the courtyard beyond to be quickly lost again in the powerful roar of the sea. Yet, some kind of sound must have reached those within. A tall, slim, dark form soon appeared at the gate. A hooded monk silently and politely invited me into the waiting room just inside the gate. He then disappeared as mysteriously as he had arrived. Several minutes later he returned with a small piece of Turkish delight on a tray and set it down in front of me with a cordial, somewhat solemn bow of his head. What mystery surrounded this man before me. His every gesture seemed to suggest ancient and unfamiliar customs and rituals long forgotten elsewhere.

Later, I was led to a dimly lit and slightly chill, damp sleeping room. It was clean though, and it contained warm bedding and simple austere furnishings. I sat there alone on the edge of the bed for some time before moving to change; a bit disoriented and overwhelmed by where I now found myself. Then I heard a sound I'll never forget. I would hear it often in the coming days. Over the dark, silent cobble stone yards, hallways, and chambers the sound echoed mysteriously above the muffled roar of the wind and waves outside. I was thoroughly captivated as it penetrated into some deep and, until then, untouched recess of my mind's past and swept me out of the twentieth century, if only briefly. Solid, clear, and heavy, it seemed to come from nowhere in particular.

Each day at certain times a monk would pound a wooden mallet on a length of sturdy oak board suspended at both ends on a short chain. The pounding was rapid and at even, measured intervals and lasted for several minutes. No other sound accompanied it or warned one of its beginning or end. It was the ages old call for prayer among the monks.

Later, another silent and solemn host led me to an ancient supper. We sat together, about eleven of us, at a long, heavy dark oak table. We prayed and then crossed ourselves and began the meal. The room was silent except for the low voice of a lone, standing monk, whose turn it was to read from the scriptures. He read in a solemn ritual tone of voice and in an archaic Greek tongue that was not lacking in its own subtle mystery and beauty.

The meal was served on simple wooden plates and included a small fish, a heavy piece of whole wheat bread, some Turkish halva, an apple, and a glass of wine. No dairy products, including eggs, or animal fats and meat were ever eaten by the monks. They would also engage in total fasts for spiritual purposes and as a cure for physical illnesses on occasion.

Their thorough adherence to the traditional monk's life here was soon apparent. Donkeys and the backs of men carried everything that reached the landlocked monasteries. They grew almost all of their food themselves. Wood stoves cooked food and provided warmth. Kerosene lamps and candles provided the only artificial light. Water came from hand dug wells, and toilets were simple latrines. No woman had ever been known to set foot on the peninsula in a thousand years.

The next morning, though the weather showed little signs of improvement, I felt the urge to keep going. I passed on out of the monastery and followed another narrow, rugged trail along the coast that led me to a second quite ancient Greek monastery, Pantokrotoros. The mood of the building and the nearby sea reminded me of the first. I presented myself at the door, much as yesterday, drenched and shivering slightly from the cold. I saw a monk and went over to him. He asked me where I was from in English. "American?"

"Yes," I said. He looked me over closely. Then he made a somewhat odd and obviously unfriendly laugh and walked off. This thoroughly disconcerted me. However, I was much too wet and in need to leave. So I searched around until I found a monk who treated me much as those I had met the day before.

The next morning I again set off on my planned route. The whole journey was beginning to feel more like a quest as I penetrated ever deeper into this mysterious land. Today, the path required my wading a cold, swift mountain stream and then climbing a steep, seemingly endless slope before finally, that afternoon, I arrived at the gate of the small Russian skete, a smaller community than a monastery, of Iliya. The old walled in colony itself was large and imposing, built on the very top of the ridge. Only four monks and several of their helpers lived here. I was greeted and led to a room and told that there was a service I might want to attend that evening. So I rested until early evening when I thought it might take place.

I walked over to the church quietly and cautiously. The building loomed before me dark and undefined in the remaining light. A faint glow was visible through the windows. The service had already begun, and I could hear the sound of chanting as I drew nearer. Suddenly, I was bathed in the mellow glow of candlelight. The front wall and altar appeared as if out of a dream. The radiant gold and silver painted wooden panels of the iconostasis, with its delicately shaped and carved swirls and gentle curling lines and circles, drew and held my attention. Those holy images, the candle-lit icons, portraying saints, hung suspended along the walls. The flickering yellow light deepened the mystery of those pale umber brown faces with the gentle, all-knowing eyes and silent, long-suffering expressions.

Magic seemed to live in the very walls and ceiling of this ancient room. Like some wizard or magician of old, dressed in the blazing white and gold robes of the priesthood, one of the monks then appeared, as if he were some holy spirit come to earth. Chanting in rich vibrant tones, he would appear and then disappear again behind the golden altar doors.

The smell of incense floated in his wake as he strode across the room. His censer swayed and glowed with orange and yellow embers of fire and shot gleaming lines of fiery light and sparks in all directions, accompanied by a rich metallic ringing of countless tiny bells as he passed. A chorus of hidden voices complemented his own as the ancient service unfolded. I now understood some of how those Ukrainian peasants must have felt upon visiting the great church of Kiev for their first time, several centuries past, when they would ask if they were now in heaven and had left the earthly realm. The long journey and the uncertainty all seemed worth it now. This enchanted land had revealed some of its most beautiful ancient traditions.

The next three days would yield many more secrets. I was to hear stories of miracles that had occurred on Mount Athos. I was shown the vaults where ages of skeletons were stored of all the monks who had come to the monastery in the past to live and then die there. Their remains were buried for three years to be later dug up and stored. It was believed that if a monk's bones had blackened, he had sinned seriously in his lifetime.

No less remarkable were the stories of hermit monks, regarded as exceptionally holy men, who lived in remote caves on the peninsula, and who were often sought after for guidance and advice. I was also advised to beware of the occasional monk who might not be friendly. Some were even known to physically attack the occasional visitor. Ancient knowledge and superstition seemed hopelessly intertwined here.

I left Mt. Athos deeply moved by my experiences. The ancient beliefs and rituals had challenged my pragmatic, modern consciousness. Though perhaps not a convert, I left with a greater respect for and understanding of the monastic way of life."

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