



Seven Days in Ancient Greece

David Jervis

This account of my travels through Greece during one week in September 2015 is dedicated to my wife Nicki and sons, Danny and Ryan.

I urge them to follow my trail whenever they can and embrace the remarkable stories from Greek antiquity, that fuse together great tales of fact and myth and serve to deepen the understanding and appreciation of the beauty and mystery of this ancient land.

David Jervis
Autumn 2015





This is a record of a trip through Greek history - for me, a voyage of learning and discovery.

Sadly, it did not start well and it would be wrong not to report - very briefly - something that impacted substantially on my enjoyment of the sites visited on the first day of this tour - Epidauros, Nafplion and Mycenae. While standing on a bridge over the Corinth Canal, just hours after leaving Athens, my wallet, containing all my cash and credit cards was stolen. An appalling moment but great help from the tour guide Antonious, representing the excellent Fantasy Travel Service of Athens, who organised the adventure, and from fellow travellers, enabled me to move on....and we did.

Lingering over the canal for a moment: for centuries, many people - including Emperor Nero - dreamed of a waterway to link the Corinthian Gulf with the Saronic Sea, thus eliminating the need to circumvent the Peloponnese by sea. It wasn't until the late 19th Century that the Corinth Canal was actually realised - an amazing feat. However, after all that effort, most modern ships are too big to use the canal.



Map of my journey

Some 2,500 years ago, Epidauros was 'base' for the healing God, Asclepius - God of Medicine and one of Apollo's sons.

The area contained an early 'hospital'. Those wishing to be healed would stay overnight and hope one of the God's sacred snakes, that lived in a crypt and were fed by priests, would slither out of their pit and lick the patients free of ailments.

The rod of Asclepius, a snake-entwined staff, remains a symbol of medicine today.

A tour of the extensive 'hospital' grounds, where many areas are being skillfully renovated, had to wait for another year.



But we did visit the museum and the magnificent theatre - one of the best preserved auditoriums in the Greek world with 55 layers of seats.

It is a tribute to Dionysus - God of the Theatre; God of Wine and a number of other things as well.

The theatre featured a crane that lifted actors up and over the stage and was called Deus ex Machina - God from the Machine.

An impressive, magical sight for the audience as the actors/gods floated over the theatre.

After a brief photo stop in Nafplion (a visit for another time), we arrived at Ancient Mycenae - a magnificent site featuring a number of interesting elements.

It was a major constituent of the most powerful area of Greece for a period in antiquity about 3,000 years ago, called the Argolid, based around the town of Argos.

Mycenae was described by Homer as a "strong walled" city "rich in gold". Items containing a total of over 30 lbs of gold have been discovered in the ruins.

The city was said to have been founded by Perseus, slayer of the viper-headed Gorgon. It was the home of King Agamemnon around 1200 BC. At the top of this ancient site are the ruins of the megaron, or great hall, where the King gathered many leaders together to plan the attack on Troy to re-capture his sister-in-law, the kidnapped Helen. So, the strategy for the Trojan War, which lasted 10 years, was set here.

There is much to impress at Mycenae including:

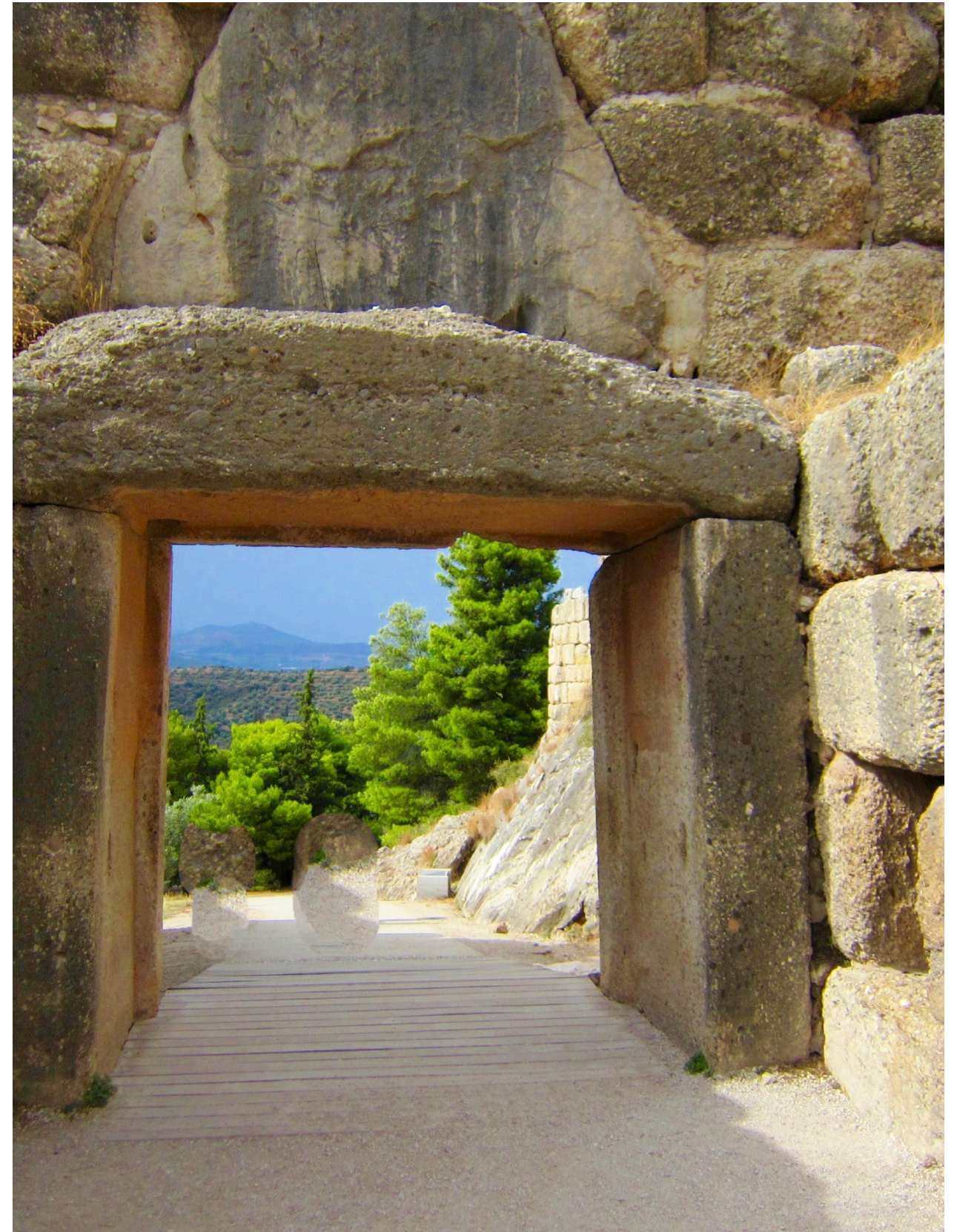
The Lion Gate - a massive entrance guarded by two lionesses on top with a column between them representing the old Gods of Minoan Crete.

The **shaft grave circle** in which 19 skeletons of a ruling dynasty were found, together with gold and other treasures. This huge grave was unusually within the city walls. Normally, burying your dead within the city walls would be regarded as bringing bad luck but to combat this the graves were surrounded by two parallel stone walls to control any difficult spirits.

Outside the city gates are more sites, notably a huge tholos (circular) tomb - rather like a massive beehive - called the **Treasury of Atreus** and believed to be the tomb of Agamemnon's father.



The Lion Gate



The Lion Gate from both sides : The stones are so huge that people couldn't understand how they were transported and lifted into place so they became known as the Cyclopic stones because only one of the giants known as Cyclops would be able to lift them.



The Treasury of Atreus : The lintel above the entrance is believed to weigh 100 tons.



Shaft grave circle (and two photos overleaf) : an astonishing amount of gold was uncovered in the graves, including masks still fastened to the faces of skeletons, daggers, swords, breastplates, boxes and a variety of other gold objects.





More views at Mycenae



After a pleasant journey across the Peloponnese, we reached our hotel with views towards Ancient Olympia - the home of the Olympic Games and favourite haunt of the Gods.

Ancient Olympia is a wonderful site and big enough to soak up a few coachloads of tourists and, with careful observation, it is easy to avoid most of them.

The Games, that began at Olympia in 776 BC, have impacted tremendously on our modern world. Even though the Romans stopped them in the early Christian era, they were restored in 1896 and the rest, so to speak, is history.

Originally, the Olympic Games were held as a form of worship to the Gods, mainly to Zeus and his wife Hera.

Olympia was basically the home address of the Gods when they were on holiday from Mount Olympus.

Two key, perhaps conflicting, elements of the Greek personality were present in the Games - love and also an admiration for *agon*, or contest, as the true measure of a person. The Games also embraced the idea of pan Hellenism - involving the whole of Greece.

The ancient site contains masses of interest ranging from athletes' changing rooms, temples, practice areas, accommodation for VIPs, the actual stadium and running track.

The site is grassy with many trees now but sometimes when tour groups are out of the way it is possible to sit and reflect on what it must have been like in the hustle and bustle of the Olympic Village.

Overleaf, I will mention a few elements of the site, illustrated with photographs, followed by some exhibits from the on site Archaeological Museum - a wonderful place.

The Greeks really know how to do museums - I visited a number on this trip and they were awe inspiring.

Excavations - at the entrance to the site, archaeologists are still busy excavating.

Palaistra - a square building with an inner central court surrounded by colonnade. It was a training area specifically for wrestlers, kick boxers, pentathletes and the pankratiasts - the all in fighters who fought to the death. Within there were areas for undressing, anointing the body with oil, powdering and bathing.

Philippeion - a circular (tholos) building donated by Philip 2nd of Macedon and containing his portrait, that of his wife Queen Olympias and his son Alexander (The Great). It was Philip's way of ensuring Macedon in the north made its presence felt in southern Greece - a piece of propaganda.

Nymphaion - a monumental fountain adorned with statues of Roman emperors.

Olympic flame - an area where in modern times the Olympic flame is lit and begins its journey.

Olympic Stadium - a wonderful entrance tunnel takes you to the stadium with its running track featuring in so many tourist photos. If an athlete was caught cheating, he would have to pay for a small statue to be built with his name on it to his eternal disgrace.

Temple of Zeus - the centre of Ancient Olympia - a huge building that contained a massive gold and marble statue of Zeus by the sculptor Phidias in the 5th Century BC. Nothing remains of this statue, which was classed as one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. A picture of what it may have looked like is in the museum. At one end of the temple is a triangular tower that once supported a statue of the Winged Victory (Nike) of the Messenians. This is in the museum.



Excavating today





The Palaistra



Even now, the Olympic Flame is lit at this exact spot and begins its journey to the scene of the contest.



Phillipeon

Nymphaion



Plinth for the statue
of Winged Victory
(Nike)



A huge expanse of rock and marble that formed the Temple of Zeus (left and right) is now being reclaimed from nature for everyone to visit and marvel.





Entrance to the original Olympic Stadium and (opposite) the starting line has stood the test of time.







Left and right, more views of this beautiful site of Ancient Olympia







In the Olympia
Archaeological
Museum, Theseus is
beating a centaur with
Apollo urging him on
(left and opposite)





Charioteer's horse



Roman noble



Winged Victory of
The Messenians
(Nike)

How the great
Statue of Zeus may
have looked



Another of the
Museum's huge
number of exhibits



A fantastic exhibit - like a child's toy set of animals and other objects but it is a little more serious than that - all these figures were recovered from the ashes of sacrificial fires.

Atlas was tricked by
Heracles to carry the
earth on his shoulder for
eternity (scanned
postcard)





This statue is of amazing quality. It shows Hermes holding baby Dionysus who grew up to be the God of Wine, Intoxication and the Theatre (scanned postcard)



General Miltiades donated/dedicated his helmet to Zeus at Olympia after his memorable victory over the Persians at Marathon in 490 BC (scanned postcard)



The museum at Olympia is well laid out and spacious but can be very busy



Leaving Ancient Olympia behind we set off to the north coast of the Peloponnese, just beyond Patras where we crossed the suspension bridge at Rio to central Greece and travelled through beautiful countryside up to Delphi in time to see the sunset from the Amalia Hotel



The suspension bridge at Rio crossing the
Gulf of Corinth





The Temple of Apollo at Delphi

Delphi - the centre of the Earth; domain of the God Apollo; the place where people flocked to learn the future and lived or died by their interpretations of the words of the Pythia from the Oracle.

Visiting Delphi was the main reason I embarked on my tour of Ancient Greece and it did not disappoint. For me it was the high spot of a trip featuring many high spots. It is a place of remarkable beauty set on the hillsides at the foot of the Mount Parnassus range. An amazing setting for one of the most important sites of the ancient world.

Walking up the hillside you follow the path trodden by many in ancient times - kings, queens, generals, philosophers and less feted people - having purified yourself in the Kastalia spring. You pass the Omphalos stone - the centre of the world. Zeus released his two sacred eagles from the opposite ends of the world and told them to meet in the middle and this is where they met.

On site is a replacement stone with the original sitting safely in the museum.

You reach the Temple of Apollo where the Pythia - a priestess of Apollo - sat on a tripod in the heart of the temple. Having purified herself in the spring and fasted for three days, she would breathe in vapours coming up from the rock of Mount Parnassus, thus entering an altered state and becoming a medium through which the God would speak.

Up and up you walk, past the theatre and stopping to admire the sensational views, until you reach the grand stadium - in many ways more impressive than the one at Olympia - where games were held in honour of Apollo.

So much to be said about this sacred place but time to let the photos do the talking.

Delphi footnote: The Pythia did not tell you the future, did not give you the answer to your question. The God Apollo, through his priestess, neither revealed nor concealed the truth, but gave you a sign.

As it said in a motto by the entrance to the temple - 'Gnothi Seaton' meaning 'Know Thyself'. You needed to know thyself in order to interpret the sign correctly.

The sign given could be ambiguous. Croesus was told that if he commenced war against Persia he would destroy a mighty empire. He did - it was his own.



The only photo of me during the tour - at the Temple of Apollo



The 'real' Omphalos - the 'belly-button' stone - the centre of the Earth

The Treasury of Athens - one of the buildings on the path as it winds up the hillside at Delphi



The 'fake' Omphalos stone - taking the place of the real stone which rests in the Museum, escaping the elements.

The theatre dedicated to the God of Wine, Intoxication and the Theatre, Dionysus, who ruled at Delphi during winter when Apollo was on holiday. A sort of celestial caretaker.



More views of
Delphi - this page
and opposite.





The Stadium - at
the top of the site -
where the games
took place as a
tribute to Apollo





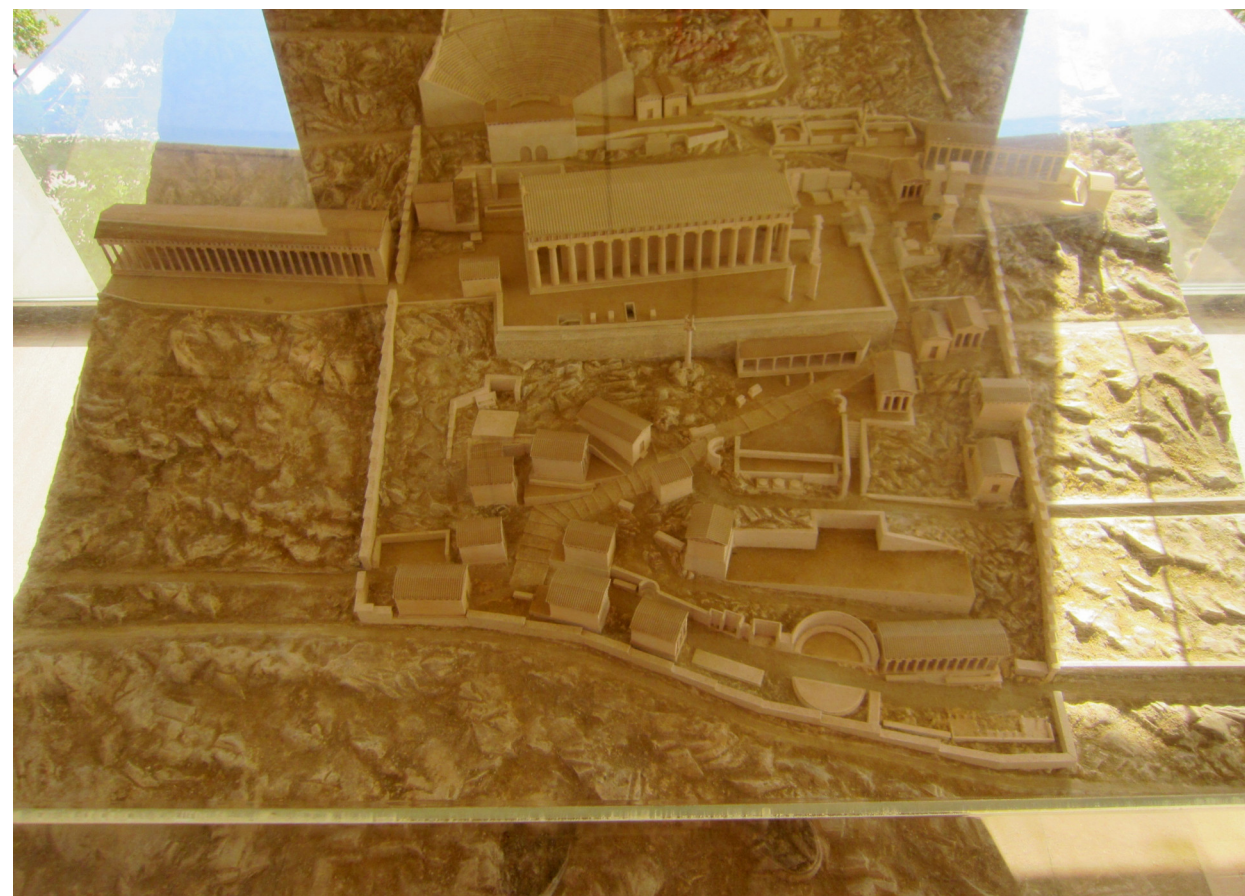
Although not a good photo, it is a full view of the magnificent stadium where the games were held

Delphi Museum -
looking out over
the hillside and the
mountains - I
wonder if there is a
better view from a
museum



Charioteer

Painting and model
of the site, placed
in the Museum to
enable visitors to
understand the
geography of
Delphi





Left, Plutarch, historian and one-time High Priest.



Above, a clearer image of the Omphalos stone from a scanned postcard.

More exhibits from
the Delphi Museum



Head of Gold - believed
to be of Apollo





Antinous (111-130 AD) - lover of the Roman Emperor Hadrian



Above - a ticket to the Delphi site

Bronze statuette of a
Kouros - Greek youth.
Made in Crete in about
620 BC





Bronze cauldron from the 7th Century BC. These were often decorated with attached heads of griffins and sirens.



A Kylix (drinking vessel) depicting Apollo, crowned with myrtle leaves, seated on a stool with legs in the form of lions' paws. He is holding a lyre and pouring wine. The crow represents his mythical love, Aigle-Koroni.

King Leonidas of Sparta, with his 300 soldiers, famously resisted the one million troops of Xerxes during the second Persian invasion in 480 BC.

Leonidas remained at the narrow coastal pass of Thermopylae with his brave troops and held off the massive enemy army for several days until betrayed by a fellow Greek.

The memorial to this celebrated event is on a main road south of Lamia. After leaving Delphi, we stopped here to take photos and admire the statue.





The Holy Monastery of St Stephan

The Meteora - surely one of the wonders of the world - a series of Greek orthodox monasteries perched precariously on seemingly inaccessible pinnacles of rock overlooking the town of Kalambaka, the plain of Thessaly and mountains beyond.

The word Meteora has a number of similar meanings - 'columns of the sky', 'middle of the sky; 'suspended in the air'. or 'in the heavens above'. I like them all.

To quote one description of this magical place: "The Holy Meteora is an imposing rocky monastic city that lies in the Greek plain of Thessaly. It has for centuries been suspended between the earth and sky with grandeur and majesty.

"It was on these untrodden peaks of the enormous precipitous and inhospitable rocks that the bold and determined monks set up their spiritual arenas with an unquenchable longing for a life in Christ, a longing to take the path which leads to the heavenly chambers and reaches the Kingdom of God."

This was my second visit to The Meteora and even more crowded with tourists than I remembered. You cannot expect, i am afraid, to have such a beautiful place to yourself.

The monasteries were built during the 14th, 15th, 16th centuries but exact dates are not known. They were continually developed over the years.

This time I visited two of the surviving monasteries - St Stephan's and Roussanou. Both contained beautiful churches with astonishing paintings and icons; attractive garden areas and breathtaking views.

Photography was not allowed in many places, so I have used postcards as well as photographs to illustrate the record of my visit.



Garden and wall painting in St Stephan





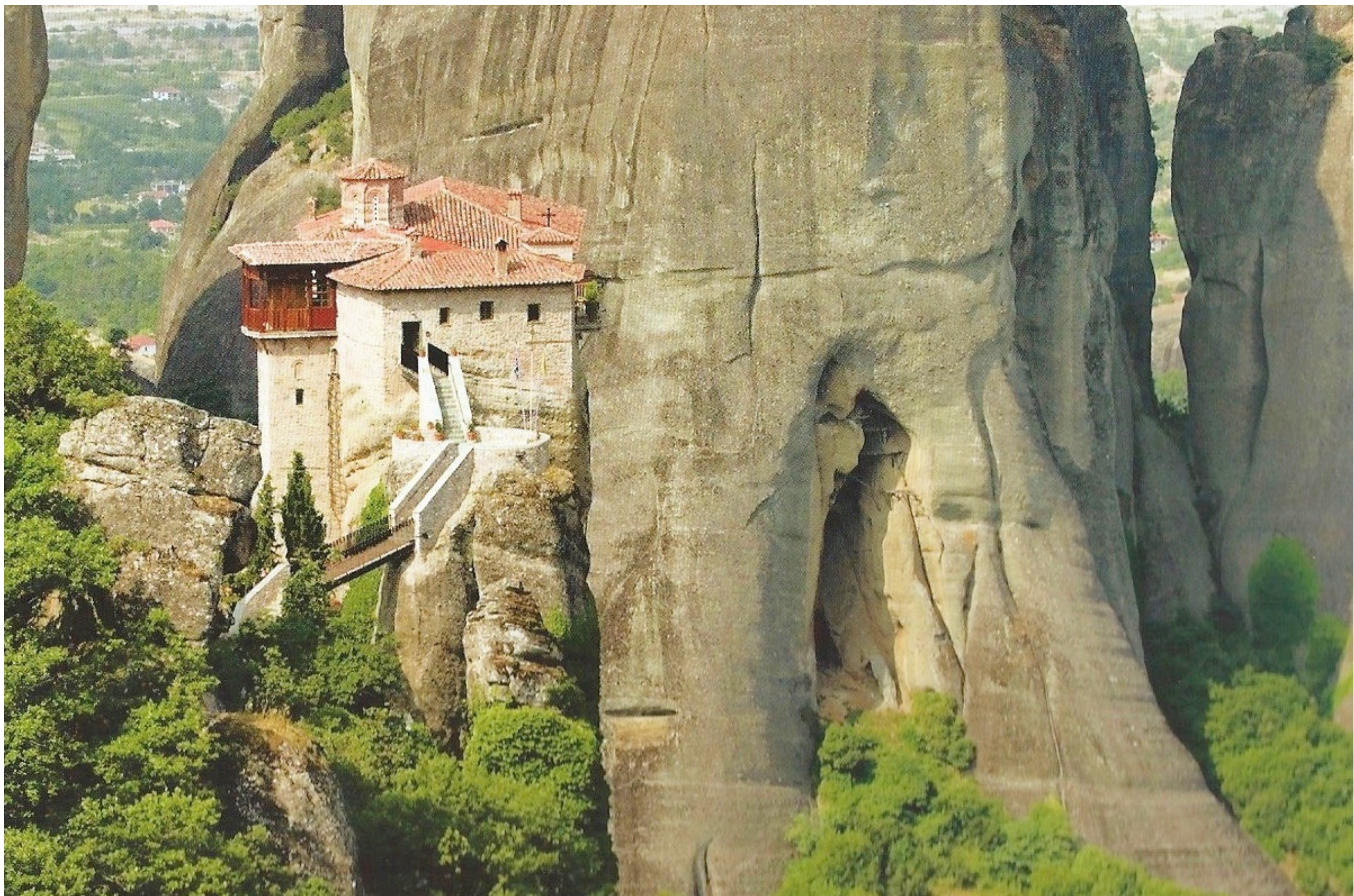
View of the dome in the church at the Monastery of St Stephan



The Nativity - a wall printing in the church at St Stephan



The 5th Day of Creation - creation of the animals - a painting in the church at St.Stephan



The Holy Monastery of Roussanou



The Martyrdom of Saints - a painting in the church at Roussanou



Christ in Glory - a painting in the church at Roussanou



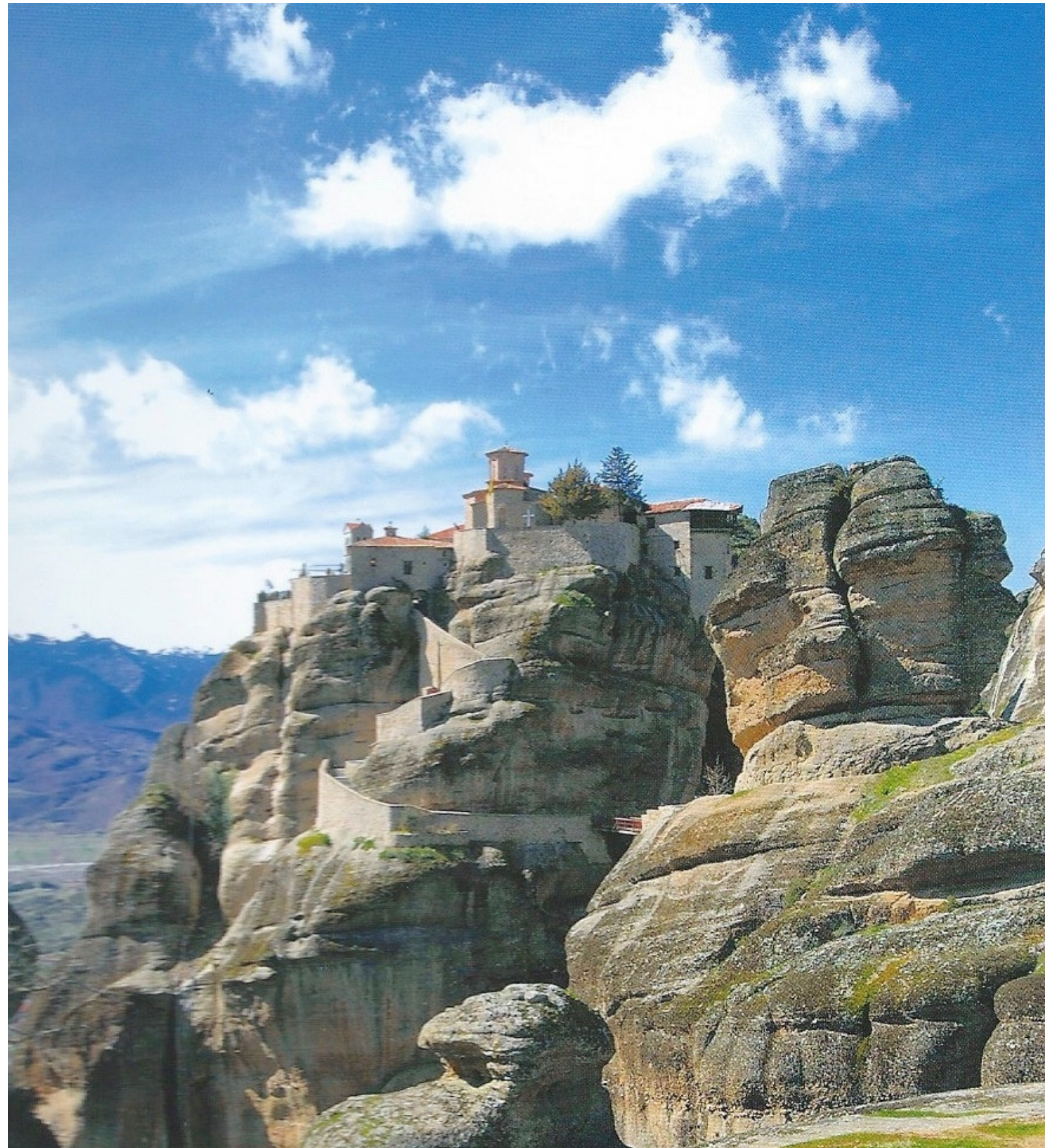
The Monastery of Aghia Triada (Holy Trinity) - notable not only for its amazing setting but also for featuring in the James Bond film 'For Your Eyes Only' in 1981.

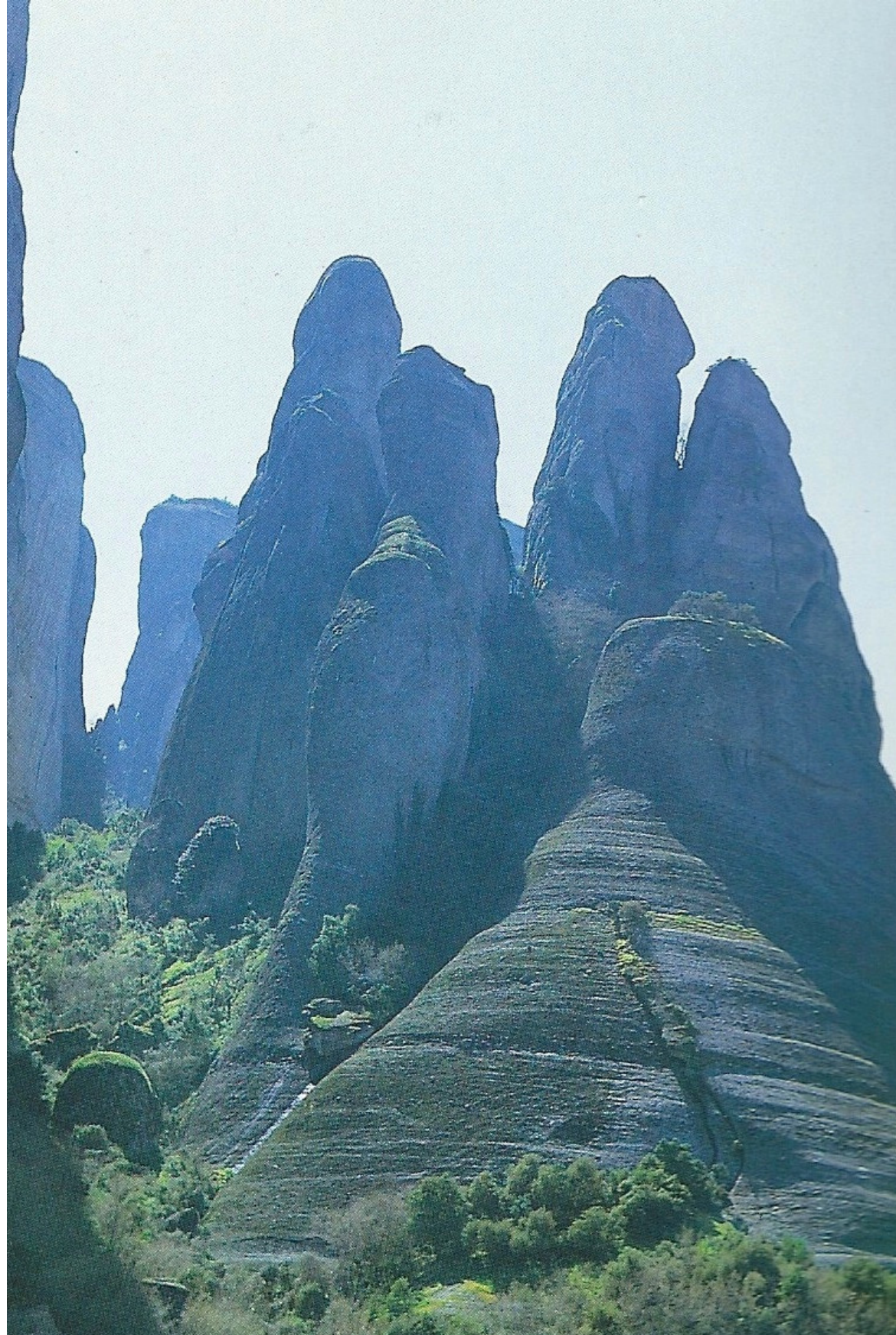


More views of the
outstanding Meteora



The Holy Monastery of
Varlaam



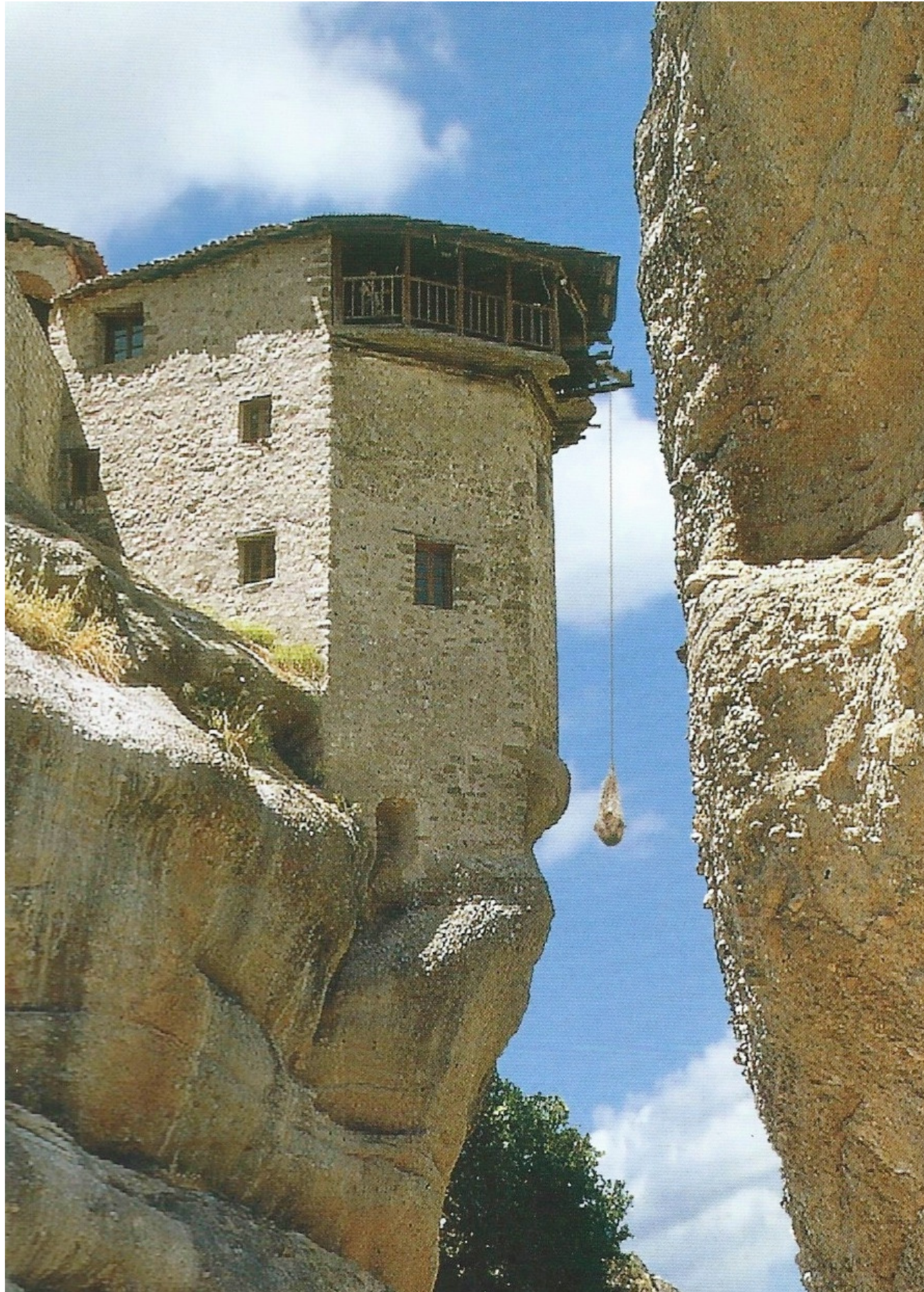


Left and right, magical,
mystical Meteora





The caves of hermits in the rocks at Meteora



Delivering supplies
at Meteora

Spot the
monasteries - four
in view



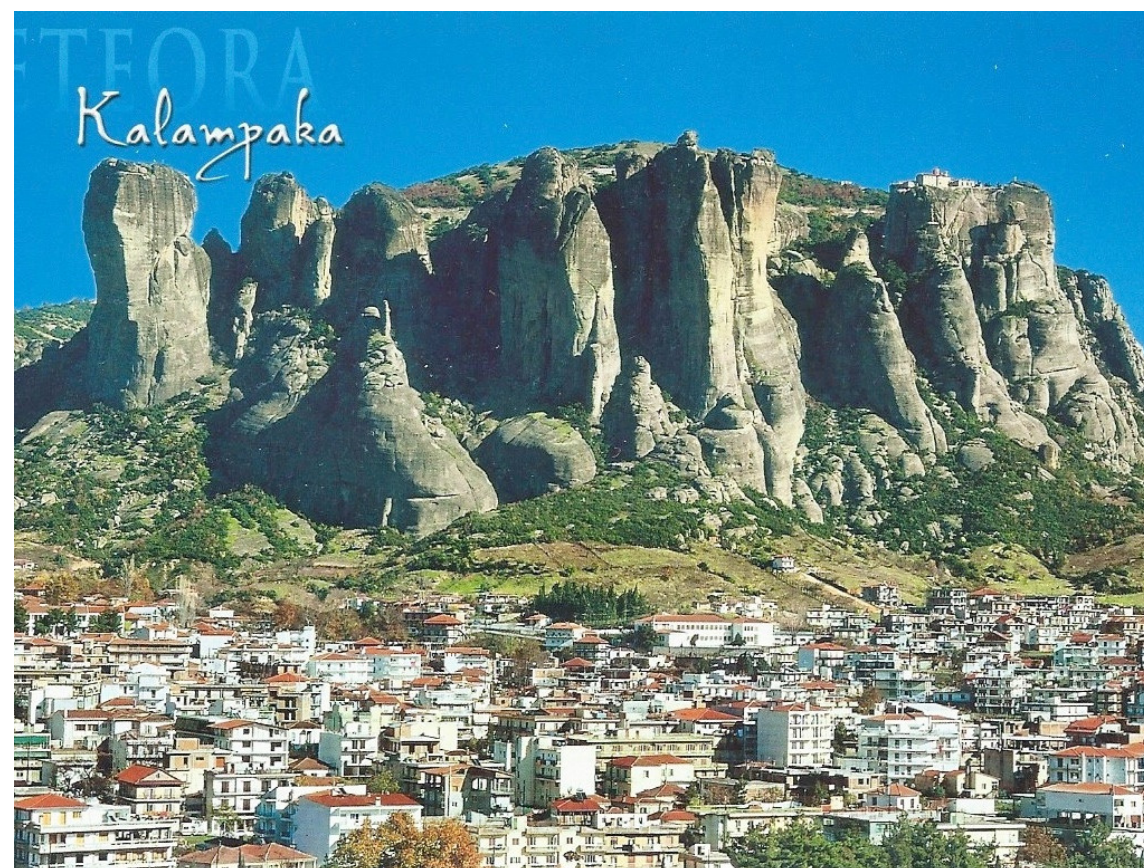
Monastery of St
Nikolaos Anapafsas



The Holy
Monastery of Grand
Meteora



The town of
Kalambaka at the
foot of The Meteora





After lunching in the town of Kalambaka, beneath the towering Meteora, we continued our journey north.

Veria has a mixed Jewish, Muslim and Christian heritage, notable as a place whose leaders welcomed St Paul as he toured the Mediterranean world preaching Christianity. It was a relief for him to arrive at Veria as he had experienced a difficult reception at Thessaloniki.

The monument above marks the spot where St Paul preached at Veria.

It had been a long day by the time we arrived at our hotel for a three-night sojourn in Thessaloniki - unpacking my case for the first time and not having to re-pack for a couple of days was quite a relief.

Thessaloniki is Greece's busy, bustling, beautiful second city with a wonderful and extensive sea front. A place to spend time.

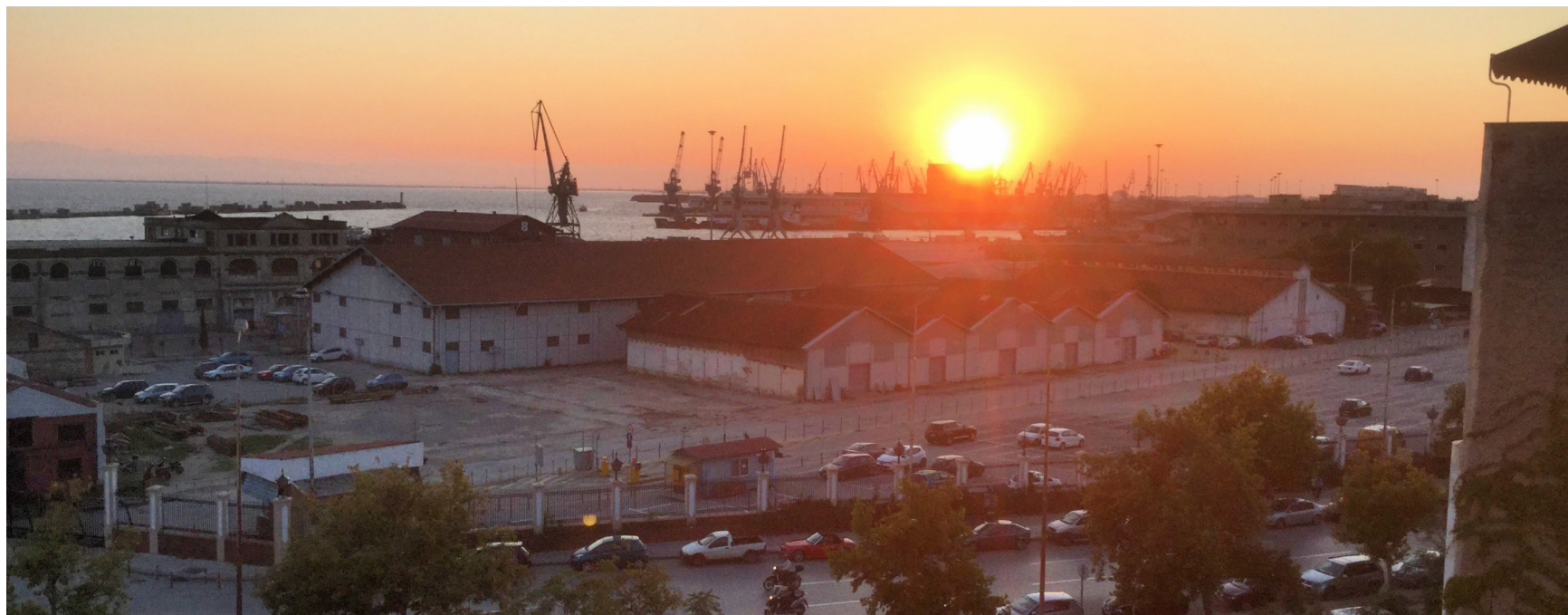
I was only able to scratch the surface of its treasures and massive history.

The city was our base for two full days - one was spent within Thessaloniki visiting various sites including:

- The Museum of Byzantine Culture - yet another outstanding Greek museum.
- The Church of St Demetrios - a very important church in the Greek Orthodox religion and regarded by the people as the city's cathedral. As you can imagine, a very atmospheric place - a 'working' church with devotees kissing icons, lighting incense, burning candles and praying, as an integral part of their daily lives.

As with other places, the story to my visit to this fine city is told mainly in pictures.

Below is a view of sunset over the docks from my hotel room.



Thessaloniki : A huge sea front and promenade.
The city was first established in 316 BC by Kassandros and named after his wife, Thessaloniki, half sister of Alexander the Great.
The name of this magnificent city means Victory in Thessaly.



The city
viewed from
the docks





The excavated Agora (meeting place). As you would expect, every time you dig down in Thessaloniki (anywhere in Greece for that matter) there are finds of archaeological value. It is these discoveries that have delayed the construction of the long-awaited Metro for some years.



The White Tower - symbol of Thessaloniki. This iconic building - housing a museum of art and history - was built in the 15th Century BC and at one time was a prison for insubordinate Janisaires - soldiers of the Sultan.





Church of the Coppermakers



Eleftherios Venizelos (1864-1936) - instrumental in the union of Crete with Greece and Prime Minister of Greece, 1910 -1920 and 1928 -1933. Described as the "Ethnarch" and regarded by many as the maker of modern Greece

The Church of St Demetrios - the most revered in Thessaloniki and the largest in Greece. First established in the 5th Century BC



A modern day hoover required to clean this ornate church

I joined a queue of worshippers in order to photograph the resting place of the bones of St Demetrios, who was murdered nearby





One of the several altar areas



St Demetrios



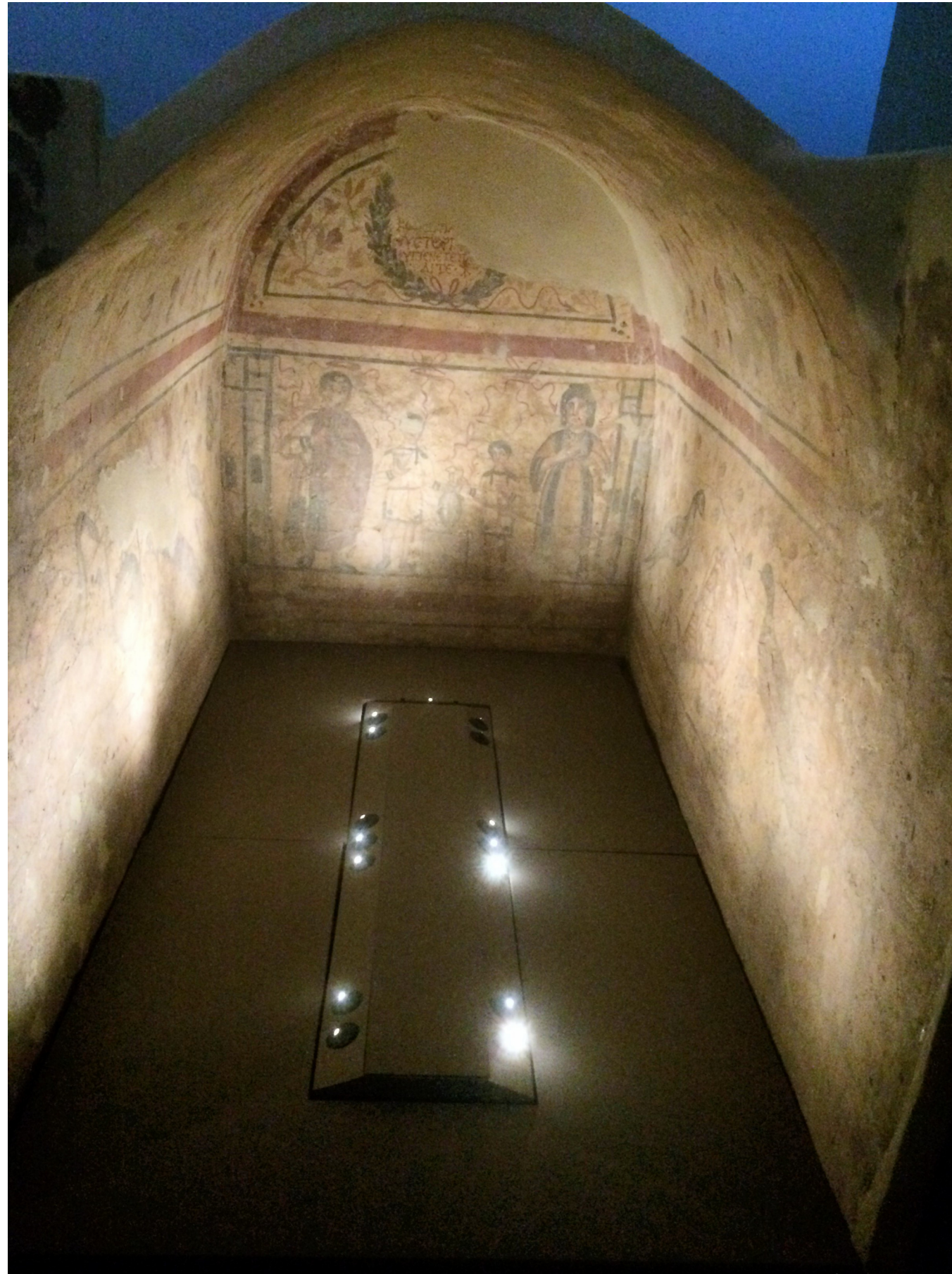
These two remarkable carvings were on the side of a christening font in the Church of St Demetrios





A view through the keyhole in the lovely Museum of Byzantine Culture in Thessaloniki, which was the second city of Byzantium, after Istanbul/Constantinople. The following few pages show some of the Museum's exhibits.

An ornate tomb



Mosaic floors



Storage vessels

As with most objects in museums, the camera does not do them justice. This is definitely the case with this shining cross.



A copperplate
printing of amazing
detail



Μικρογραφία του ευαγγελιστή Ματθαίου.
Miniature of St Matthew.

Ευαγγέλιο εικονογραφημένο, τέλος 11ου
Illuminated Gospel, late 11th-early 12th

A miniature of the book
of St Matthew from The
Bible

ονή Προδρόμου Σερρών, 1761, Βιέννη.
Monastery of the Prodhomos near Serres, 1761, Vienna.

26. Η Μονή Διονυσίου, 1780, Βιέννη.
The Monastery of Dionysiou, 1780, Vienna.



Ο ΑΓΙΟΣ ΜΕΓΑΛΟΜΑΡΤΥΣ ΓΕΩΡΓΙΟΣ.

ΑΠΟ ΤΗΝ ΕΙΚΟΝΑ ΤΟΥ ΑΓΙΟΥ ΓΕΩΡΓΙΟΥ ΠΡΕΣΒΥΤΕΡΟΥ ΥΠΕΡ ΤΩΝ ΧΡΙΣΤΙΑΝΩΝ ΤΟΥ ΘΕΟΥ ΤΩΝ ΑΓΙΩΝ ΤΩΝ
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Another example of
beautiful printing
from copperplate.

A busy day's outing from Thessaloniki featured visits to some remarkable places:

- Pella
- Edessa
- Naoussa
- Vergina

I will take them in the order of our visits.

We arrived at Pella early in the morning before any other coaches - a rare treat. Consequently, I recall it as a peaceful place with an exquisite new museum and acres of excavations.

Described by Livy as 'rising like an island on an immense earthwork', Pella was believed to be the birthplace of Philip 2nd of Macedon and his son Alexander the Great. It was the capital of Macedon, at least in the 4th and 3rd Centuries BC.

Still being excavated, the ancient town is laid out on a grid with broad streets and evidence of an excellent water and drainage system. Discovered in 1957, some of the many features uncovered included grand houses, probably for nobility, that have been given such names as 'House of the Lion Hunt' and 'House of Dionysus'. Beautiful mosaic floors and other artifacts can be seen in the museum and a number are pictured on following pages.

The quiet-looking modern village of Pella features a bronze statue of Alexander the Great on horseback but we had no time to capture that image.



A bust of Alexander the Great in the museum at Pella. This part of Greece is real Alexander territory - the place where he lived and planned his remarkably successful military campaigns before he died when only 32. At the time of his death (from natural causes), he was King of Macedonia, Pharaoh of Egypt, King of Persia and King of Asia.

With Pella at the top left, the grey/green area shows Alexander's battle campaigns.



One of the great houses excavated at Pella

Mosaic of the God
Dionysus on a
panther



Mosaic
showing
a brutal
deerhunt



A bronze eagle, probably an ornament from a table vessel or an item of furniture.



A Rhyton (drinking / libation vessel) in the form of a phallus

Aphrodite figurines
found in a kiln



Terracotta
figurine heads
excavated at
Pella



Above is a 'Burial Cluster of the Queens' - two ostrich eggs with painted decoration used as perfume containers and a perfume pot depicting a woman at her toilet. 430-420 BC.

Left, terracotta figurines of Aphrodite playing a Kithara



Resting in the museum at Pella

Edessa is a wonderful place of water.

It is beautifully situated on top of a steep cliff rising above the Axios plain. The waters of The Edessos flow down the cliffs in one of the most famous and dramatic waterfalls in Greece.

The numerous streams that cross the town unite to fall in cascades. The water drops 24 metres before flowing steeply to the plain.

Some see Edessa as marking a psychological boundary between the end of the calmly predictable agricultural landscape, giving way to the drama of the Balkans.



One of the
many streams
in the town of
Edessa



View from the
town of Edessa

In an utterly peaceful site near Naoussa lies the School of Aristotle where the greatest philosopher of antiquity taught the greatness of classical Greek thought and philosophy to the son of Philip 2nd, King of Macedonia - Alexander the Great - and other nobles of the Macedonian court.

Aristotle would wander around the green fields and streams, sharing his wisdom with his pupils.

Part of the school is an area called the Nymphaion - columns and caves - a wonderful place.

King Philip once tested his son, Alexander, with some general knowledge questions that the boy could not answer. Philip complained about this to Aristotle - "You are not teaching my son properly," he said. Aristotle replied: "I am not teaching him what to think, I am teaching him how to think."

Alexander once said of Aristotle: "I owe my being to my father and my well-being to my teacher."





Above and right, The School of Aristotle at Naoussa



Vergina is the site of ancient Agai - the original Macedonian capital before it shifted to Pella.

Philip 2nd (father of Alexander the Great) was assassinated in 336 BC, aged 46, and buried in what are now known as the Royal Tombs of Agai.

Archaeologist Professor Manolis Andronikos worked tirelessly with his team for years to look for the ancient city of Agai. In 1977 his work bore fruit and he uncovered an astonishing find.

Under a tumulus (mound) - pictured below - Andronikos located four tombs. Two had been looted. Two were preserved. One is almost certainly the tomb of Philip 2nd (a study of his remains lead experts to believe this). He is buried with his last wife, Cleopatra. The remaining tomb is believed to contain his grandson - a son of Alexander the Great.

The tombs and the recovered contents have become the exhibits in a remarkable underground museum, dark and mysterious, with lighting perfect to show off the gold exhibits to greatest effect.

Photography is not allowed in the museum so I have scanned postcards to try and illustrate the magic of this place.

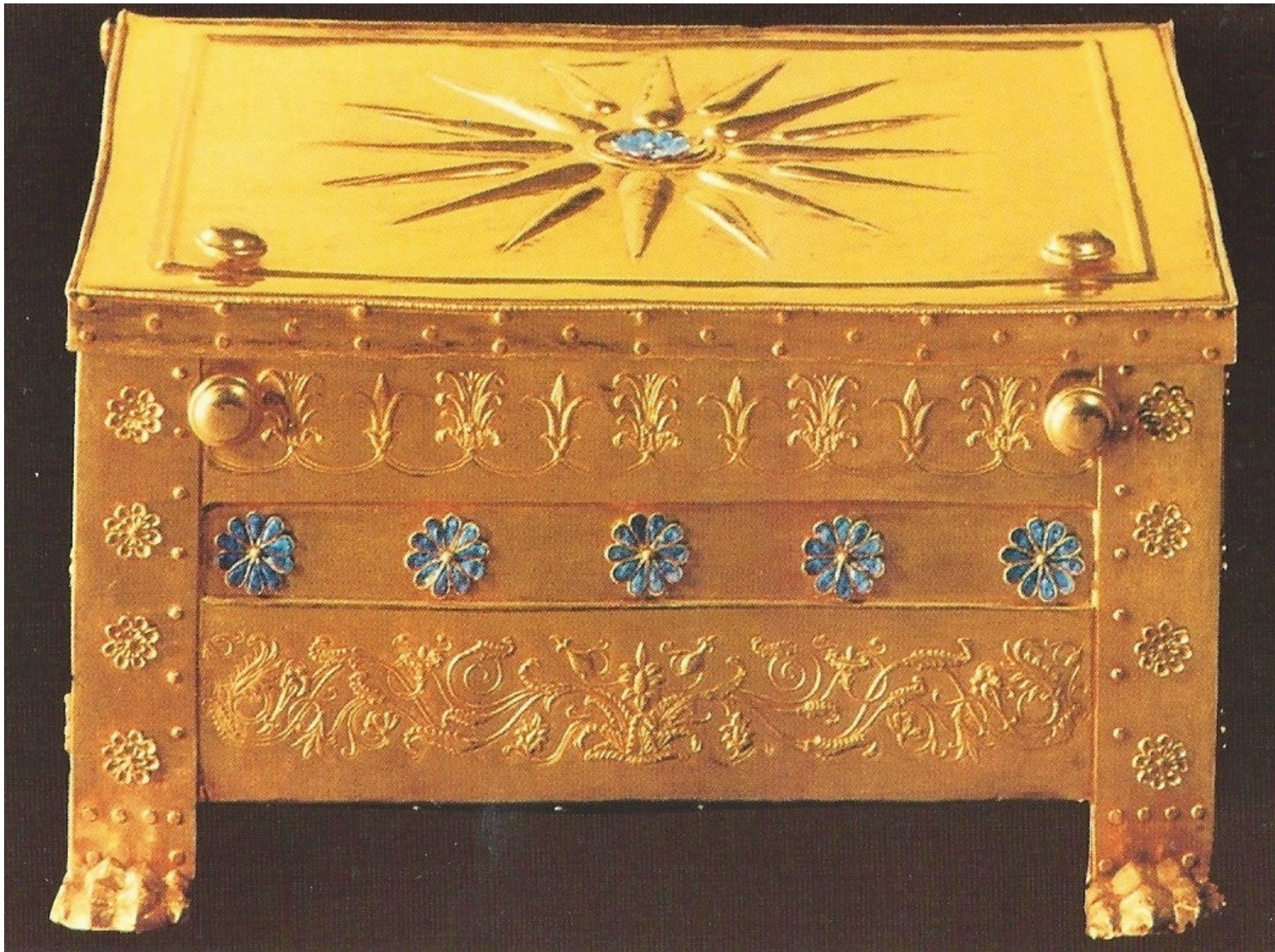




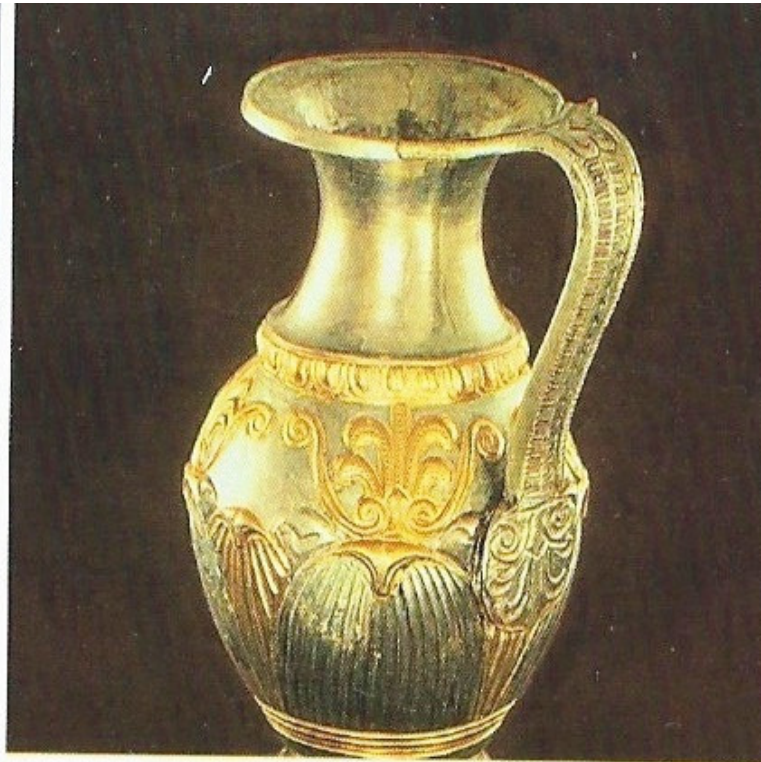
Entrance to one of the tombs at the bottom of a staircase in the museum.



'The Abduction of Persephone by Pluto' - a dramatic, well preserved painting across the top of the entrance to one of the tombs.



The gold Reliquary containing the remains of Philip 2nd.



Some of the remarkable exhibits in the Museum of the Royal Tombs of Agai



An ivory shield found in pieces in the tomb of King Philip 2nd

The final day of my tour was almost completely taken up with the long 500 kms coach journey from Thessaloniki back to Athens.

But we did make one final trip back into antiquity at Dion.

The Archaeological Site at Dion is described as Macedonia's sacred city and has been excavated since 1990.

The ancient site covers a huge area and lies not far from the foothills of Mount Olympus.

Maybe I was tired; maybe I was disappointed that my longed-for clear view of Mount Olympus - home of the Gods - was available for only seconds when the clouds allowed (as demonstrated below), but I was not over impressed with Dion. Yes, the excavation work was fantastic but it was spoiled on occasions by the placement of a statue or object that was clearly out of place.

However, an interesting site that i would have appreciated more without so many groups of clearly uninterested visitors.

Hopefully, I will return for another look, this time with a clear view of the residence of Zeus, Hera, Apollo, Aphrodite and colleagues.





Excavations at Dion

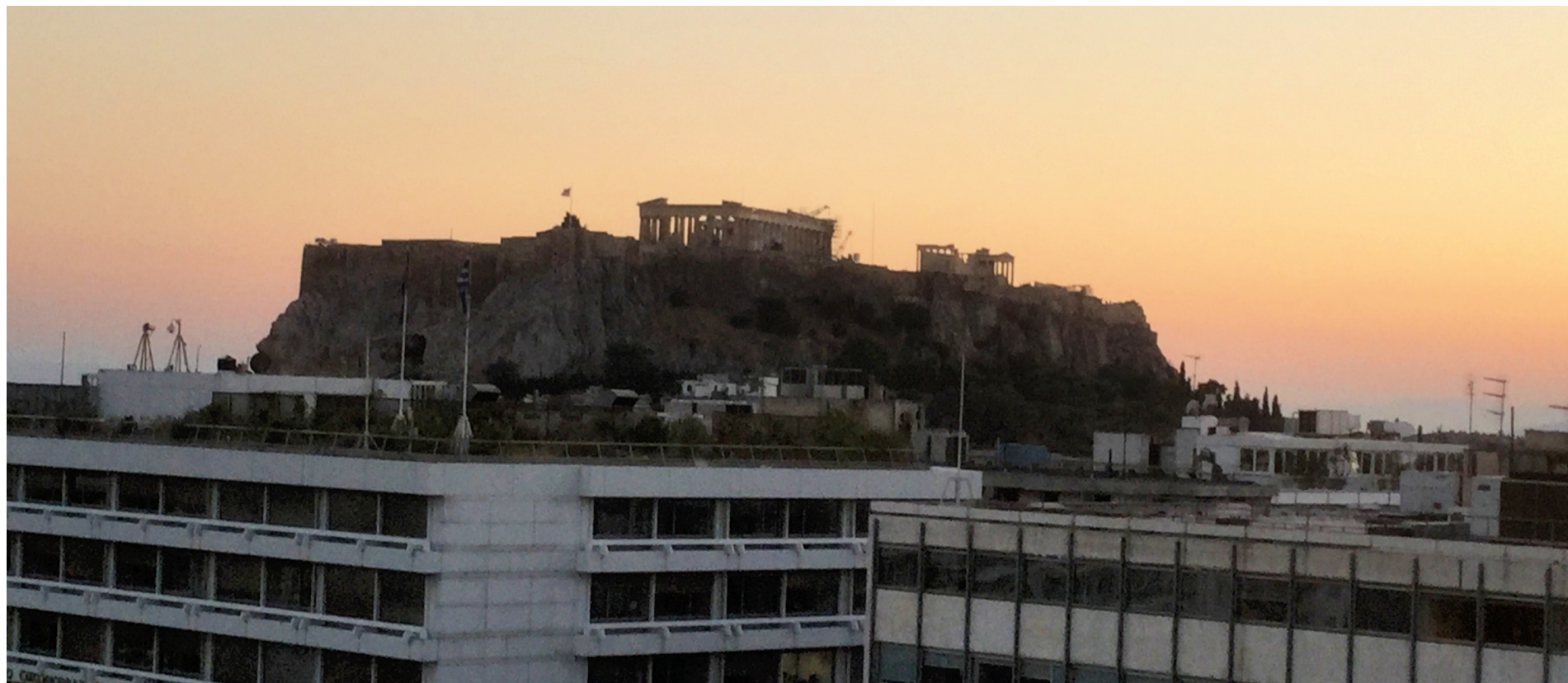


I arrived back in Athens in the early evening, seven days after my adventure began.

I had booked a room in an excellent hotel on the seventh floor with a balcony overlooking Syntagma Square. As I looked out, I enjoyed a view over the rooftops of the superb Acropolis on my right and the grand Parliament building on my left.

It was four days before the Greek general election on September 20 2015 and I was delighted to witness a very lively and noisy election rally by the KKE - Communist Party.

What a journey - from the special places of Ancient Greece to the centre of the Greek capital with the population carrying out what their forefathers invented - demokratia - rule of the people - democracy.



The hugely impressive Parliament building with a commanding view over Syntagma Square.



The noisy but good-spirited Communist Party election rally below my hotel balcony.



