

*The Mani, in southernmost Greece, is a land where myths were born,
gods once roamed, and the people are as proud and rugged
as the mountains they call home. Jim Yardley gets lost
in one of the last great undiscovered corners of Europe.*

photographs by **Martyn Thompson**

WRITTEN *in* STONE

Traditional
Maniot tower
houses in
the village
of Vathia.



Somewhere in the Taiyotos Mountains, I was driving

along a winding, two-lane road past thickets of prickly pear, navigating blind turns and pushing deeper into the Peloponnese peninsula of mainland Greece,

when the GPS device in my rental car suffered a fatal seizure. Big problem. I couldn't read the Greek road signs, and I didn't know the route to the stone tower house converted into a tiny hotel where I had booked a room. I was planning to spend five days exploring the Mani, one of Europe's most isolated and starkly beautiful regions, as well as the setting for several key scenes in Greek mythology. The ancient Greeks claimed it was here that Orpheus descended to the underworld; today, this primeval landscape remains largely undiscovered—meaning visitors will, in all likelihood, have it mostly to themselves.

That I was suddenly GPS-less seemed fitting, as reaching the Mani has never been easy. Over the centuries, Maniots have fought off invading Turks, slaughtered mercenary Egyptians, and



unleashed homegrown pirates onto ships plying the trade routes between Venice and the Levant. When they weren't fighting outsiders, Maniots fought among themselves, blasting cannons or firing rifles, one clan against another. More recently, they resisted the leftist politics that swept through the rest of Greece as the country struggled to recover from its economic crisis. The feuding ended long ago, but civilization did not immediately fill the vacuum. Man walked on the moon before a paved road reached southernmost Mani.

I kept driving and reached the town of Areopoli—named after Ares, god of war—where a gas station attendant directed me farther south, toward Cape Tainaron, the southernmost tip of the Mani. I passed a sign for the caves of Pyrgos Dirou, a local tourist attraction where, a

Above, from left: Fresh prawns at Takis restaurant, in the village of Limeni; the sea in Limeni.

half-century ago, the road linking the Mani to the rest of Greece came to an abrupt end. In Patrick Leigh Fermor's beguiling 1958 book, *Mani: Travels in the Southern Peloponnese*, the proprietress of a guesthouse near the caves notices Fermor's future wife writing a letter to a friend in England. "Well," the proprietress says, "tell them in London that you are in the Mani, a very hot place, and there is nothing but stones."

Soon enough, I came to the stones. The road cut through a sun-baked valley where olive groves were pinched between the sheer gray cliffs of the Taiyotos Mountains and the striking blue of the Mediterranean. Stone tower houses rose from almost every hilltop, medieval silhouettes against the sun of late afternoon. On a distant ridge, I could see the dome of a 12th-century Byzantine church. There was not a modern convenience in sight; it was as if the calendar had reached 1150, then stopped.

Here at continental Greece's arid and remote southernmost point, survival has never been taken for granted. Yet as the road traced the coast, I began to understand why the Maniots were determined to stick around. Evening was approaching, and the sun was beginning its descent into the water, leaving a liquid blue horizon where sky met sea. Beside me, the coastline was a rocky curlicue of hidden coves and empty beaches, fringed by a sea so clear a swimmer could look down through the glassy, green-blue waters and see his toes. The view was breathtaking.

The road delivered me to a sign: **LAST GAS STATION**. As in, last gas station—period. It was written in English, as fair warning to non-Maniots. I checked the tank; three-quarters full. Onward.

I'm not certain whether I kidnapped Kostas Zouvelos, or whether he kidnapped me, but he became my guide to the Mani. Zouvelos is an Athens-born architect who describes himself as a "Mani groom." Years ago he married a woman from the area, but being an outsider himself, he will never fully be a part of a region defined by male bloodlines and deep-rooted conservatism. Like me, Zouvelos studied the Mani with an outsider's eye—only I was leaving in five days, and he wasn't going anywhere.

In one of the most ruggedly beautiful places in Greece, Zouvelos had become an energetic, if solitary, apostle of small-scale tourism. In the 1990s, when he was visiting his bride-to-be, he came across a crumbling tower house overlooking Cape Tainaron, thought by some to be the site of the mythological entrance to Hades. The owner had painted **FOR SALE** on the rocks outside the tower. This was unusual, since local families usually hand down property to younger generations (who then often fight over it). In 2008, Zouvelos and

a partner began a five-year renovation that produced the Tainaron Blue Retreat, a three-room hotel that opened last summer.

The latest and most elegant in a series of Maniot towers to be converted into hotels, Tainaron Blue has turned a dusty stone fortification into a contemporary refuge with an infinity pool overlooking the Mediterranean. Zouvelos has also introduced a menu of regional delicacies like chylopites—traditional sheep-milk pasta—with olives, sun-dried tomatoes, and smoked cheese, and freshly caught fish prepared by his chef, Sakis Bellis. My two-story suite was at the top of the renovated tower, up a steep flight of wooden stairs. It had a small half-door leading onto a tiny wooden balcony, where Zouvelos had built a folding bench just big enough for one person to sit and gaze at the infinite blue of the sea. At night I watched distant ships garlanded with lights moving slowly along the water. The half-door had been a window, and I liked to imagine that some crazy Maniot had once used it to blast a cannon at another crazy Maniot one hilltop over, who, no doubt, had quickly blasted back.

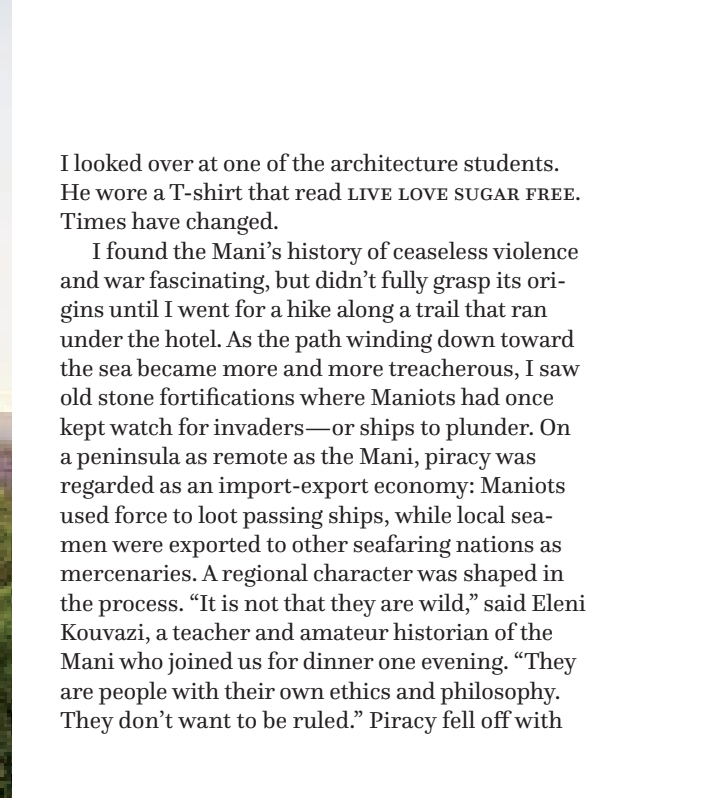
The first real Maniot I met was Stavros Androutsakos, a stern, thick-chested man who claims he can trace his ancestry back to the Niklians, an upper-class clan that once dominated this part of the Mani and demonstrated their social superiority through the size of their towers. Clans were so consumed with the idea that “Bigger is better” that the tops of towers were often left unfinished as a signal to neighbors that a new level might be added at any moment. Fernor described the limestone towers as “bundles of petrified asparagus.” I had seen several towers with stacks of extra rooftop stones thrusting upward. “Height meant power,” Androutsakos told me. “The higher you were, the more powerful. If you had a low house, you were not a Niklian.”

Androutsakos recently opened Fagopoteion, a taverna in the ghost town of Vathia where Zouvelos took me for dinner one night. A group of French, Italian, and Greek architecture students sat nearby, finishing sketches of local buildings. Vathia has only two year-round residents—a septuagenarian man and his octogenarian sister—but its towers and stone houses, perched on a cliff overlooking the Mediterranean, are among the best preserved in the Mani.

Androutsakos’s family arrived in Vathia about five centuries ago and gained property in typical Mani fashion: they fought with other families to obtain good, arable land; they fished; they dabbled in piracy. His relatives tied lanterns around the necks of sheep and led them onto the rocky coast, hoping the lights would confuse sea captains and prompt them to crash on the rocks—whereupon the Maniots would rush the ship and steal everything.



Clockwise from above: The view from Tainaron Blue Retreat; a 12th-century church in the village of Kita; a roadside wanderer near Marmari; traditional tower architecture in Kita; preparing seafood at Takis; a suite at Tainaron Blue Retreat.



I looked over at one of the architecture students. He wore a T-shirt that read LIVE LOVE SUGAR FREE. Times have changed.

I found the Mani’s history of ceaseless violence and war fascinating, but didn’t fully grasp its origins until I went for a hike along a trail that ran under the hotel. As the path winding down toward the sea became more and more treacherous, I saw old stone fortifications where Maniots had once kept watch for invaders—or ships to plunder. On a peninsula as remote as the Mani, piracy was regarded as an import-export economy: Maniots used force to loot passing ships, while local seamen were exported to other seafaring nations as mercenaries. A regional character was shaped in the process. “It is not that they are wild,” said Eleni Kouvazi, a teacher and amateur historian of the Mani who joined us for dinner one evening. “They are people with their own ethics and philosophy. They don’t want to be ruled.” Piracy fell off with



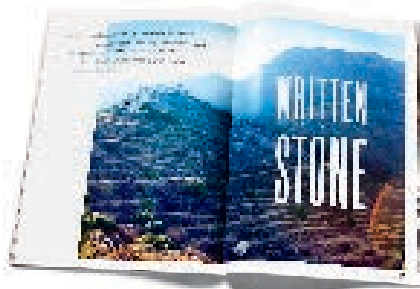
I inhaled the salt of the sea. I was at the end of Greece and seemingly at the end of the earth. It was pretty glorious.



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the advent of modern naval forces, and the Mani’s poverty and isolation deepened as a result. After World War II, life became so difficult that many people simply left, migrating to the United States or the Greek port city of Piraeus, near Athens. “The Mani went empty,” said Androutsakos, the only one of 10 siblings to live in the region today. “Life changed. People went to places where it was easier to survive. They couldn’t survive here.”

Not much of the old farming, fishing, and pirating economy could really thrive, either. What did remain was a region largely untouched by the modern world, with architectural ruins that resembled medieval castles and a stunning coastline peppered with idyllic spots to swim and sunbathe. Tourism began to arrive (Continued on page 134)



(Greece, continued from page 127) in the 1970s, and local entrepreneurs opened properties such as the Hotel Kyrimai, which occupies a 19th-century stone building overlooking the harbor in the village of Gerolimenas. I teasingly asked Androutsakos whether Maniots were capable of hospitality, given their bellicose traditions. His eyes clouded. "Of course," he said brusquely. Then he broke into a smile, just as a waiter arrived bearing plates of food. We had ordered simple salads, but Androutsakos had insisted we also try the orzo and a sumptuous dish of slow-roasted beef known as *stifado*. "We are known as wild people, tough people," he said. "But we have never behaved that way to people from other parts of Greece. Or to visitors."

We found the human skulls on my third day in the Mani. Zouvelos had called a friend in Areopoli who had connected us to Giannis Dimopoulos, an employee of a local museum. Dimopoulos is a tall, laconic man who keeps the keys to Mani's Byzantine-era churches, many of which are little more than ruins. Technically, they are under the protection of the Greek state, but the Greek state is flat broke. So for now, protecting the churches means locking them up, even though many are treasures of antiquity, decorated with ornate icons and frescoes.

Maniots were once pagans, worshipping Greek and Roman gods until Christianity arrived in the fourth century, at which point temples were gradually converted into churches. The museum in Areopoli has a fine gallery of icons and crucifixes removed from local churches, as well as a piece of stone carved with Byzantine reliefs. Two footprints had been carved into its underside; it had been used as a pedestal for pagan statu-

ary when the Romans ruled the Mani, then repurposed once the Christians took over.

Dimopoulos tossed his church keys into his backpack and we headed out, with Zouvelos at the wheel of his Mini Cooper. Clouds began pressing down on the valley as we drove. Suddenly, Zouvelos abruptly reversed the car. He wanted to show me a turtle on the roadside. Turtles are so common in the Mani that Zouvelos says on some nights you can hear the sound of clacking shells as they have sex.

For several hours, Zouvelos drove us happily through the Mani, passing tiny villages and so many ancient churches that he began a running commentary of "Old church, old church, old church." Many were in sad shape, with water-damaged frescoes and collapsing altars. In the village of Boularioi, Zouvelos again unexpectedly stopped the car, reversed and drove backward down a small lane, jumping out beside a stone ruin. It was a cistern built by the ancient Greeks; more than 2,000 years old, it pre-dates the Christian era. "I love this place," Zouvelos said. "I mean, look at it. An ancient cistern. This is Greece. The olive trees. The stones."

He and Dimopoulos were giddy now, as we wove through narrow farm roads and green olive groves, always with the startling blue of the Mediterranean visible nearby. Finally we came to the Church of the Archangel Michael, a slightly larger red-stone sanctuary. Dimopoulos unlocked the door and we stepped into the stale, cloistered air. One room had two marble crypts, one with a carved stone chest on top. And on top of the chest were two human skulls, placed side by side. We were momentarily startled. How long had they been here? Who were they? Dimopoulos said these crypts were once reserved for clerics, so we concluded the skulls had belonged to former priests.

It felt strange, chilling even, that someone had lined them up side by side in this crypt, where they had probably lain for centuries. Our mood now somewhat sober, we left the skulls, locked the door, and returned to Areopoli, where I said goodbye to Zouvelos and Dimopoulos and drove my rental car to the nearby port

village of Limeni. It was nearly sunset, so I took a table on the outdoor terrace at Takis, a taverna barely five feet from the water, where I ordered a plate of calamari and a Greek beer. Kitchen workers were cleaning fish at the edge of the terrace. As the sun began to set, the hillsides around me turned gold in the reflected light. I inhaled the salt of the sea. I was at the end of Greece and seemingly the end of the earth. It was pretty glorious.

On my final morning in the Mani, I set out for the underworld. Zouvelos had found a local fisherman named Vasillas Kourentzis who agreed, for a price, to take me to the cave on Cape Taínaron thought to be the entrance to Hades. It was here, according to legend, that Orpheus descended to retrieve his wife, Eurydice, who had been banished to Hades. She was freed on condition that neither of them look back until they had left the underworld. But Orpheus did look back, and Eurydice was lost forever.

Kourentzis brought his small, motorized boat to a cove near the cape and, as we set off, warned me that the water was especially rough that morning. I felt my stomach in my throat as the hull of the boat slammed against the waves. The sun was just rising when Kourentzis finally slowed down the boat and pointed to an opening in the cliffs.

"From the old people," he said, "I was told this was the cave of Hades." I wasn't convinced. In his book, Fermor described a larger opening, much like an open mouth. Kourentzis said the original entrance had been on land, but had probably collapsed into the ocean in an earthquake. It seemed he had no doubt there was an entrance to the underworld, but felt an urge to explain why this one seemed so unimpressive. "Everybody says that is the cave of Hades," he repeated.

I wanted to swim inside, but Kourentzis said the current that day made it too dangerous. The underworld would have to wait for calmer seas. We fought our way through the swells and back to land. Perhaps it was a fitting end. Mani is about myth, and fighting, and staggering desolate beauty, but also about resistance. Nothing comes easy. ■