

RETURN TO THESSALONIKI

By: DERICK McGROARTY

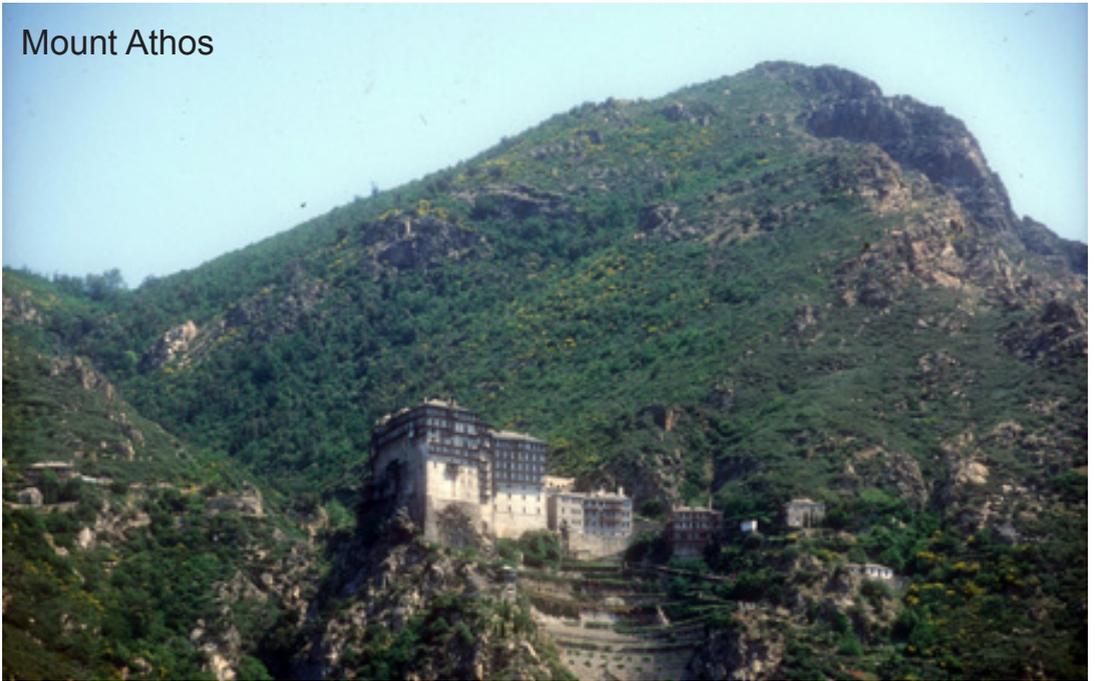
Derick McGroarty makes a return journey to Thessaloniki



I was eager to revisit Northern Greece. Before my first visit, like many travellers I had perceived this to be a rather distant cooler place compared with the many

sun drenched Mediterranean islands stretching as far south as Crete. In truth, it is further south than much of France Italy and Spain and appropriately Riviera

Mount Athos



Mount Athos

with superb beaches and long hot summers. A bonus is the backdrop of mountains, lakes and a wealth of history. In October there were constant blue skies and a comfortable 24 degree centigrade.

Thessaloniki is the centre not only of Northern Greece but of the entire Balkans serving as a major cosmopolitan crossroads. The Byzantine churches have been used as places of worship by Christians for centuries. Evidence

of Roman constructions and Muslim buildings spring up all over the city. There are many surviving monuments within the extensive city walls: the Trigonian Tower and Castra area, the ancient Agoro, Rotunda, the Roman Palace and Hippodrome, the church of Agia Osia Sofia, the crypt of Avhios Dimitrios, the Monastery of Latomos, Aristotelous Square, which have made the city a recognised UNESCO site. It is a harbour city in which the sea plays

Arnea



Greek Icon - Thessaloniki

Nea Fokea



Saint Sofia Church - Thessaloniki



an important part. The wall which runs east from the harbour for about 2 kilometres reaches the 15th century White Tower, the city's best known symbol. These walls are among the finest surviving examples of city fortification, comparable with those of Istanbul. In addition to the large modern shops there is a lively central food market bustling vendors and hawkers selling an endless array of fish, fruit and vegetables.

On my last visit, a decade ago, I was impressed by the site at Vergina of the Royal Tombs of members of the Macedonian Royal family. What especially took my eye in the tomb of Philip II of Macedonia was the golden crown. Shaped like a circle of laurel leaves it is said to have been as pristine gleaming when taken from the excavation as it is today. A tour of this ancient home of Alexander the Great includes the tombs and the site of Pella once the capital of

Greek Dancing



Macedonia.

In past years I have toured most of the historical sites but this time I based myself less than an hour's drive from Thessaloniki in Kassandra the first of Halkidiki's

peninsulas to combine sight seeing with longer periods of relaxation.. Halkidiki is a strangely shaped peninsula to the east of the Greek province of Macedonia. It can be likened to three legs



Buggy Ride



Iron Balcony -
Thessaloniki

trailing into the Aegean Sea; from the left they are Kassandra, Sithonia and Athos. It is an area of great natural beauty, with photogenic bays, fine sandy beaches, olive and pine covered hillsides, traditional villages, archaeological treasures and modern resorts. Once very remote and sparsely inhabited Kassandra Peninsula became the adoptive homeland of many Greeks who moved from Turkey after 1923.

I could not have made a better

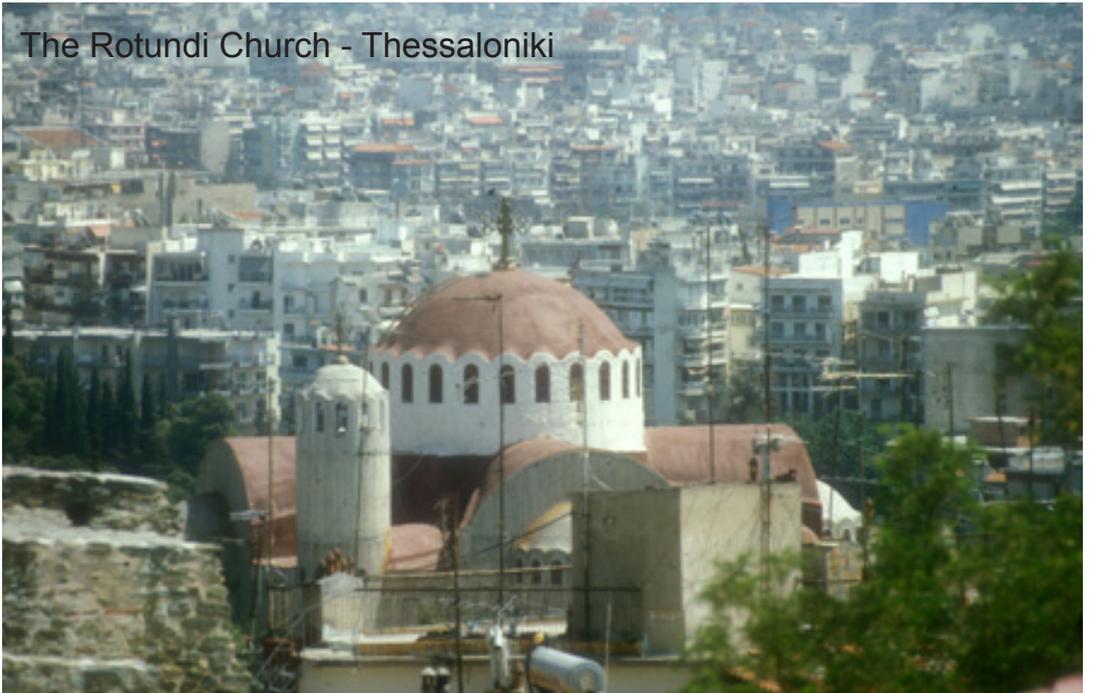
choice than the 5 star Oceania Spa Hotel Oceania Club. A natural bay gives views over the sea and ,on a clear day Mount Olympus. I was able to see it best from my balcony at sunset. There is a shuttle service to the nearby traditional Greek town of Nea Moudania which has a weekly local market

Within the hotel's spacious grounds there is plenty to do including an introductory course to scuba diving, bicycle hire, aqua aerobics, archery, table tennis,

Statue Alexander the Great - Thessaloniki



The Rotundi Church - Thessaloniki



darts, billiards and various water sports. All 290 rooms have balconies and, because of the crescent shape most rooms give sea views. All inclusive deals are the most comprehensive I have come across. In addition to the wide ranging buffet in the main Thalassa restaurant you can select one dining during your stay, without additional charge in each of the three a-la-carte speciality restaurants. Throughout the day there is no charge for snacks, ice-cream, alcoholic and non alcoholic drinks. In addition to a large

lagoon style infinity pool are other pools including one for children and a heated pool inside. There is a Spa for relaxed therapies. A library and small shop are in the main building. Suites are available but standard rooms are bright and spacious, well equipped with TV, DVD, tea making, safety deposit box, and a range of toiletries. The beach is down a slope and steps but a buggy is available. As at the surrounds of the pools, towels, loungers and umbrellas are provided. Evening entertainment includes live music and shows to

Greek Flag





Hotel Shop

supplement a cinema. Most important of all is the cleanliness and consistent helpful service throughout the hotel. Smiles everywhere, backed up to meet any request. This atmosphere makes a holiday much more enjoyable and I feel must be the result of good management by Timos and his team.

A tour of the Kasandra peninsula by coach or hire car is worth while to get an insight into the countryside

and people. However, if you have more time, then extend your trip to Arnea at the foot of Mount Holomontas, now an historical site. Arnea has a reputation for hand made textiles and honey. Weavers can usually be seen at work as can be bee keepers close to the streams of the mountain. We visited the recently restored Greek Orthodox Church of St. Stephanos on the site of two earlier churches. Destroyed by fire in 2005 it is now almost

Thessaloniki Sea Front



completely and beautifully fire.
restored. Areas of glass cover
parts of the floor to view lower
levels containing tombs and a
fresco excavated after the 2005

Within a half hour drive of our hotel
at the foot of Mount Katsika are
the caves of Petrolona well worth



Sunset

Kassandra



a visit.. Open to the public, we walked through vast caverns admiring the attractive formations of stalactites and stalagmites formed over thousands of years.

Reasonably well lit there are defined walkways with a number of steps. There is a small museum. A tour can be arranged to Mount Athos. For more than a thousand



Mount Athos

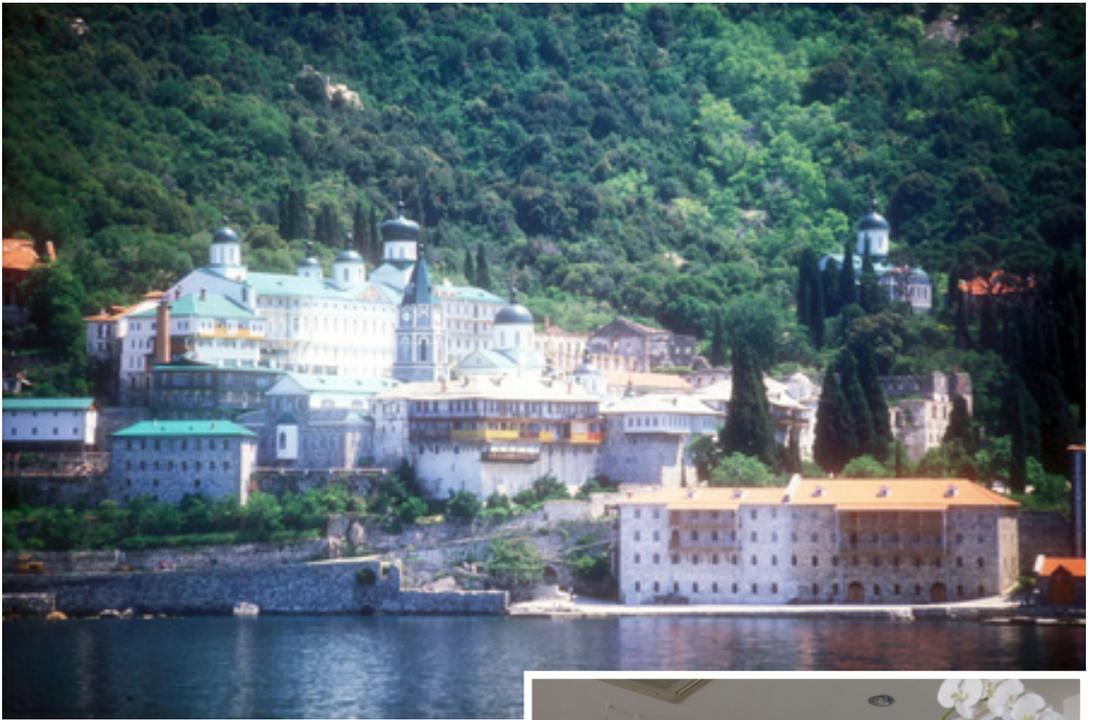
years the monasteries have set their own rules of life and religion. Originally there were 40 monasteries with thousands of monks. Today the number is much smaller peopled by less than 2000. Additionally there are smaller monastic residences. The actual mountain is 2030 metres high. To sail round Mount Athos is a very pleasing experience. Although mountainous it is virtually an island which has a magical appeal from the boat. Pristine monasteries are backed by or high on the mountain terrain and appear luminous when rays of the sun pick them out.

Landing on the island is totally forbidden to women and very limited, with a special government permit, to men.

Linked with Mount Athos and within a few kilometres of the hotel the Justinianus Centre for Bystantine Cultures is open to all. Built on the site of a monastery dating back to 1311 the buildings were subsequently destroyed by fire. Restoration of antiques, ceramics, and manuscripts is being carried out in a small rebuilt area where the public are able to watch the painstaking work by



Main Square - Thessaloniki

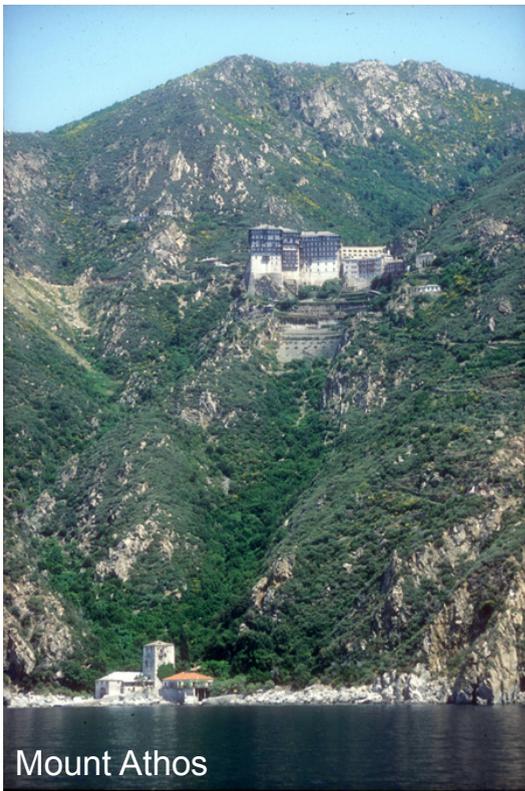


Mount Athos

Floral
Display

Shopping - Thessaloniki





Mount Athos

experts. An explanatory video was helpful.

Our flights with British Airways were comfortable and on time. Club class is available and whether you consider the supplement worth while for a flight of less than 4 hours is a personal choice. However it does include separate

CONTACTS:

- Oceania Spa Hotel..... www.oceaniaclub.gr
- Greek National Tourist Office.....www.visitgreece.gr
- British Airways..... www.ba.com



Restoration

check in, fast track through the airport, the use of an executive lounge (which is much appreciated if flights are delayed) and a full meal service in the separate Club Europe cabin.

The Greek National Tourist office will supply detailed brochures and maps free of charge.