

# A road trip in the Peloponnese



ANNA KAMINSKI  
*Lonely Planet Writer*

No other part of Greece combines stupendous mountain scenery and scenic hikes with deserted, pristine beaches and an incredible wealth of ancient sites like the Peloponnese. After all, this is where gods and heroes were said to walk the earth and the world's greatest sporting event was born.

Add to that terrific winery-hopping, boutique accommodation in historic stone towers and the unfailing hospitality of the locals, and you have the recipe for a memorable road trip.



View over Nafplio from Palamidi Fortress. Image by Pavel69 / CC BY 2.0

### Tour the Nemean Wine Route

The ideal place to start your Peloponnese road trip is the picturesque Venetian seaside town of Nafplio, set against the backdrop of a steep mountain topped with a fortress. An easy 45km drive north takes you to Nemea, one of the best places in Greece to get acquainted with local grape varieties. Greeks have been making (and drinking) wine for millennia; their ancestors even had a god, Dionysus, devoted to the tippie. While Greek wine is not as well known as its French or Italian counterparts, it's becoming more prominent on the world stage.

The Nemean Wine Route takes you past a cluster of excellent wineries nestled in the rolling hills southwest of Corinth. Half a dozen of these organise wine tastings for visitors – many free, some by appointment. Domains Piropoulos ([domainspiropoulos.com](http://domainspiropoulos.com)) has been cultivating grapes in its vineyards since 1860; the owner pioneers organic viticulture and wines to try here include Agiorgitiko, Syrah and the fruity Moschofilero. Gaia Wines ([gaia-wines.gr](http://gaia-wines.gr)) specialises in AOC (*appellation d'origine contrôlée*), unfiltered wines; its signature vintage is the dry white Thalassitis, made from the Assyrtiko grape. For the best of the region's reds head for the Lafkiotis Winery ([lafkiotis.gr](http://lafkiotis.gr)); their Moschofilero white is pretty terrific too.

Nafplio has perhaps the best choice of accommodation in the region, ranging from simple but comfortable guesthouses, such as Pension Marianna and Nafplion 1841, to stylish boutique hotels inside former mansions like Aetoma or Amymone.



Potnia Theron (Mistress of the Animals) painting, Ancient Mycenae. Image by Klearchos Kapoutsis / CC BY 2.0

#### Detour: Ancient Mycenae

Before reaching Nemea, take Route 7 south to Ancient Mycenae, the home of mythical Agamemnon who led the Greek heroes during the Trojan War. Walk up to Agamemnon's Palace at the heart of the fortified ruins, admiring the Cyclopean stonework of the immense Lion Gate on the way. Don't miss the Treasury of Atreus – an immense *tholos* (beehive-shaped tomb) a short walk from the main site.



Prodomou Monastery, the Lousios Gorge. Image by Franco Pecchio / CC BY 2.0

#### Hike the Lousios Gorge

East of Tripoli and the E65, a narrow mountain road snakes its way past medieval villages, high above Mt Menalon's most precipitous ravine – the Lousios Gorge. The Mylaon River runs through the lush valley at the bottom of the gorge, paralleling the most popular section of the 72.5km Menalon Trail ([menalontrail.eu](http://menalontrail.eu)) which connects the villages of Stemnitsa and Dimitsana.

You can descend into the gorge near Stemnitsa, to admire the Prodomou Monastery which clings to the rock face, and ascend on the opposite side, taking in the ruins of the Old Philosophou Monastery. Or begin your hike from Dimitsana, walking a mixture of footpaths, wooded trails and dirt roads through forests, past Byzantine fortress ruins and stone houses, over a mountain pass and through open countryside.

The villages of Stemnitsa and Dimitsana make the best hiking bases, with their concentration of tavernas serving typical mountain fare (game casseroles, bean soup) and comfortable guesthouses. Mpelleiko in Stemnitsa is a 17th-century converted house where you can sleep in the former 'donkey basement' and feast on organic produce, while Dimitsana's Amanites has elegant rooms with balconies high above the gorge.



Entrance to the stadium, Ancient Olympia. Image by Anna Kaminski / Lonely Planet

#### Detour: Ancient Olympia

From Dimitsana, take the scenic Route 74 which switchbacks through the mountains towards Ancient Olympia. Wander around the tree-shaded remains of the original Olympic Games site, place your feet on the starting line of the Olympic stadium and see where the Olympic flame is lit every four years. Find sacrificial cauldrons and marble statues from the site at the nearby archaeological museum.





Vathia tower houses, the Mani. Image by Anna Kaminski / Lonely Planet

### Explore the historic Mani

From Tripoli the E961 speeds south, past the snow-tipped Taygetos mountain range and through Sparta, before cutting west across the Mani – a wild, rugged region whose inhabitants were known for their fierce independence and murderous feuds for centuries. Take the serpentine road south of Areopoli, and you pass by the foothills of barren, forbidding-looking mountains and through silent villages bristling with stone towers – each a fortified family residence.

The most impressive towers stand in Kita and Nomia on the west coast, in Vathia, perched on a rocky spur, and in Mountanistika, reachable via an impossibly narrow road with a sheer drop to one side that requires nerves of steel to drive. At the tip of the peninsula, at Kokinogia, leave the car and have a dip in the aquamarine waters, or take the coast-hugging footpath to the remote lighthouse – the southernmost point of mainland Greece.

A number of historic stone towers have been converted into unique, luxurious lodgings. Just south of Areopoli, [Antares](#) is a lovingly restored family home with centuries-old vaulted ceilings and breakfast ingredients hand-picked from local suppliers. [Citta dei Nicliani](#) in Kita has engravings on its stone walls, heavy wooden beams and sumptuous beds. [Tainaron Blue](#), a lonesome stone tower en route from Gerolimenas to Porto Kagio, is a luxurious retreat with clifftop views from its infinity pool, three unadorned stone rooms and gourmet Maniot cuisine.



Byzantine-era church, Mystras. Image by Anna Kaminski / Lonely Planet

#### Detour: Mystras

Before taking the E961 from Sparta south to the Mani, turn off towards Mystras, once a stronghold of the Byzantine Empire, spread over a steep mountainside. Spend half a day ducking into ruined palaces and intact churches, hiking to the mountaintop fortress and visiting a working convent. Stay the night at the gorgeous Mazaraki Guesthouse in the village of Pikoulionika, where the organic breakfast is delivered to your door in a basket.



Mani lighthouse, the southernmost point of mainland Greece. Image by Anna Kaminski / Lonely Planet

### Road trip tips

A road trip in the Peloponnese is generally hassle-free: there's signposting in English, the petrol is inexpensive and the roads are decent and uncrowded. However, always allow more time for driving than you think you'll need. The only road you'll be able to cruise along at some speed is the E65 multi-lane highway which traverses the Peloponnese en route from Athens to Kalamata via Tripoli. Traffic is generally light, but local drivers have a tendency to tailgate at speed and underuse their indicators. Take it easy when driving the winding roads in the countryside and in the mountains. There are plenty of scenic stops where you'll want to pull over, but watch out for locals speeding around hairpin bends and cutting across your lane.

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