

GREECE

# Heavenly Halkidiki



**Eleanor Wilson** soaks up exquisite scenery, delicious food, traditional hospitality and the legacy of Aristotle in an unspoiled corner of Greece





# A

rusted, nondescript chunk of metal is lodged in the hillside. In this ancient country, it should come as no surprise to learn that it is in fact a 3,000 year old water pipe. With the blue Aegean sparkling far below, it still seems impossible that I’m looking at such a huge expanse of time.

I’m exploring Greece’s Halkidiki region, three prongs of land drenched in history and jutting into the Aegean Sea, south-east of Thessaloniki. On the easternmost finger lies Mount Athos, a living monument that has been self-governing for almost 1,000 years. Its 2,200 resident Orthodox monks live simply in monasteries clinging to the forested cliff-face, producing highly prized wine and refusing to allow any women on their land. As such, Mount Athos is off-limited to female tourists and men can only visit by special permission.

While the monks rigidly adhere to their traditions, Halkidiki’s north holds something even older: Stagira, the birthplace of the philosopher Aristotle in 384 BC. The old town sits on a hill near the fishing town of Olympiada, about 55km from Thessaloniki via winding mountain roads. Almond blossoms of vibrant purple and delicate white overhang the road and the gentle spring sunshine promises a sweltering summer to come. Little shrines punctuate the journey, sobering reminders of road accidents, each one decked out in bright colours with miniature, stained-glass windows. Olympiada itself is serene and pretty, and I’m gratified to find that my cosy room at boutique, family-run Hotel Germany has an uninterrupted view of the sea.

I’m eager for my first taste of home-style Greek cooking and I get my wish at Bakatsianos, a taverna nestled in an oak grove about 30km out of Olympiada. But first, a glass of tsipouro: a local brandy served freezing cold and flavoured strongly with aniseed. I soon learn that tsipouro is a ritual at every meal except breakfast and I begin to think of it as the price I have to pay for the feast to come. The salads are a delight, punctuated with soft, grilled halloumi. Roasted aubergine is drizzled with local olive oil and topped with sharp, crumbly, snow-white feta. A spicy pork sausage served with lemon juice provokes first suspicion, then wonder at the zing of vibrant flavours. Dessert includes vanilla ice-cream fried inside a ball of crunchy pastry in angel-hair strings, with a wild berry sauce. I do my best to digest it all but there’s more. Back at Hotel Germany, chef Louloudia Alexiadou, her hair in a punky orange pixie cut, plies us with pastries as we gaze out at the bay.

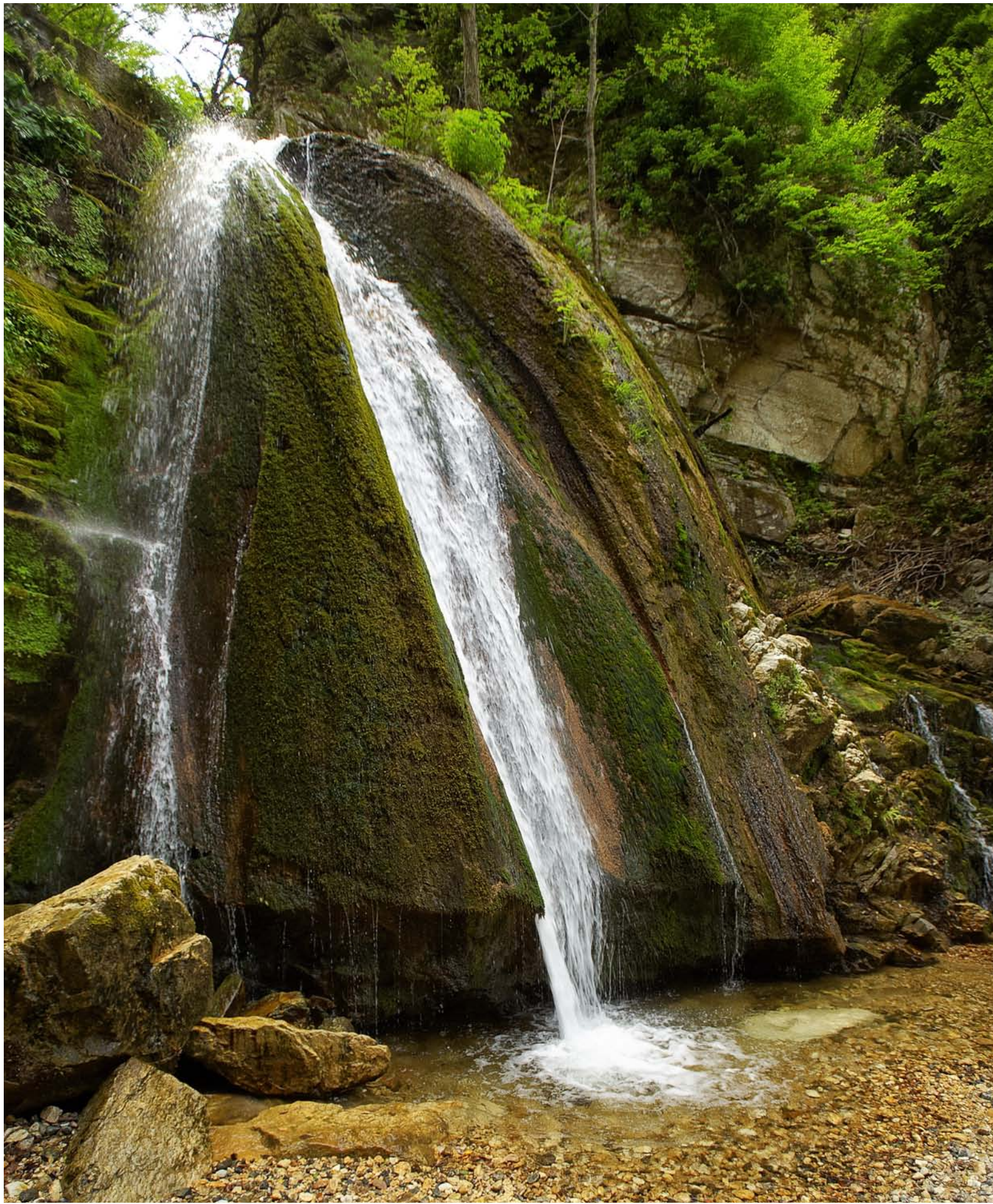
## SLOW PACE OF LIFE

Almost every ingredient is local. Herbs grow throughout the hills and Halkidiki’s bees feed on wild heather, pine and thyme to produce delicately flavoured honey. At one point, a wayward bee stings the tip of my nose, but on meeting beekeeper Aristides Tsanakas, I feel properly ashamed of the fuss I made. “I’ve been stung so many times that I’m immune,” he tells me. From behind a cloud of pine-scented smoke he adds, “People are changeable... the world is full of so many lies these days. Bees, they stay the same.”

Ancient Stagira, however, has changed. Once a bustling town, it’s now a set of interesting ruins which form the focal point of the Aristotelian Walks - part of a new series of historically focused walking trails introduced by the Mount Athos Area

**FROM TOP** Gloriously empty beaches; local rowing boat; a typical country pub; seal spotting





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**FROM TOP** Gloriously empty beaches; local rowing boat; a typical country pub; seal spotting

tourist board. It’s an enjoyable ramble as the sunshine mingles with cool sea breezes carrying the scents of sage and thyme. The central fortress and the amphitheatre are the most intact, their weathered stones still commanding.

Hikers can choose between a 1.2km stroll through the ruins and a more arduous trek of 27km, from ancient Stagira to its modern counterpart, some 8km away, complete with a statue of Aristotle. I visit the end of the longer trail by way of a white-knuckle ride down gravelled slopes, balancing in the back of a flatbed truck. The rains have swollen the stream and partially obliterated the track but our burly trail guide, Ioannis, is unfazed. He’s soon heaving rocks around to make a bridge and hacking at unruly branches. At the end of the trail, a waterfall roars in a cool, green gully. The pool at its feet is unrecognisable compared to a year ago, Ioannis says. Winter rains have washed away the sediment to expose giant boulders. It might be called the Aristotelian Walk, but to me, the little valley feels prehistoric.

In the evenings, Hotel Germany’s owner Dimitris Sarris presides over our table with a glass of tsipouro. Tall, greying and bearded with a confident stride, he’s adamant that this sincere hospitality is the only way to travel. “It has to be a conversation, back and forth,” he says. “I don’t understand the big resorts where people just eat and eat and never go out to

explore. Here, we take you in, we look after you, but you have to be open. You learn from us, and we learn from you.”

A few more glasses, and he drops some cultural knowledge on me. “The enmity between Greeks and Turks, it’s no longer raging. We have a lot in common. Souvlaki, souvlakh; tzatziki, tzatzikh.” Once, a group of Turkish high schoolers came to stay. “I sat them in a circle and sang a Greek folk song. They all joined in because they knew it, too. When they left, their teachers said to me: ‘What did you do? We’ve been trying to achieve this for years!’”

### SLOW PACE OF LIFE

Meanwhile, Louloudia wows us with honey-stewed octopus, sesame-seed pastries and delicately-flavoured mussels fresh from the sea. “Olympiada mussels are the best in the world,” Loulou assures us, and I’m fully prepared to believe it.

At nearby Mydia Anastasiou mussel farm, they grow in great masses of glistening black shells clinging to ropes suspended in the bay. Our bounty of shellfish is paired with homemade bread, fresh-grilled sea bass and a simple Greek salad. The Aegean sparkles and the mussel farmers join us, knocking back cans of Mythos beer. We eat from paper plates, sitting on wooden crates on the jetty in the sun. It’s a world apart from some of the better-known, more commercial parts of Greece and I wouldn’t have it any other way. ❶

### WAY TO GO

Overnight stays at **Hotel Germany** start from £57 for a double or twin room (+30 2376051255 / hotel-germany.gr). Bakatsianos Restaurant is open for lunch and dinner (bakatsianos.gr). A new, seven-night walking holiday in Eastern Halkidiki is available this year with **Ramblers Worldwide Holidays** (01707 331133 / ramblersholidays.co.uk), including flights, guided walks and accommodation at Hotel Germany’s sister property, Hotel Liotopi (+30 23760 51257 / hotel-liotopi.gr). For further information on Eastern Halkidiki and the Mount Athos area visit [mountathosarea.org](http://mountathosarea.org).