

The Unique and Raw Beauty of Mani

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The mountainous region south of Sparta, Peloponnese is named Mani. It is a rugged place filled with history and legends since prehistoric times. The length of Mani is 75 km and its area equals 1800 sq.km. It starts 4 km northeast from the city of Githion and its village Verga borders Kalamata. Mani stretches along the middle finger of Peloponnese and reaches the most southern tip of Greece at Tainaro.

On the West it is watered by the Messiniako bay and on the East by the Laconian bay. For centuries, its people were fierce warriors and shrewd merchants. The people of Mani are descendants of the ancient Spartans. They live on the land that was never occupied by enemy forces during the 400 years of Ottoman occupation. Maniates believed in freedom or death. They lived in a land of no law and had a rigid loyalty to their clans. Maniates were extremely protective of their lands, families, culture and honor.

It is hard to describe the raw-natural beauty of Mani's majestic mountains. The mountains are dotted with remote villages that sweep down through olive groves to a crystal-clear sea. It is a dazzling place filled with the pure aesthetic presence of stone in every village. The stones have been exposed for centuries and washed by the relentless sun rays day after day. It is a place that lets only the most resilient of life survive, and yet for those who live in its embrace, it becomes a protective stony shelter. Spring brings a burst of color as wild flowers and orchids fill the olive groves and mountain slopes in a stunningly beautiful display of nature's glory. In Mani the mountains come from north, pick up speed or so it seems, and dip majestically into the sea. The landscape of Mani has a unique character that shapes its inhabitants and marks its visitors for life.

As you walk through the meandering passages of Mani you will be unexpectedly surprised with its unusual architecture. High stone houses built like a fortress with tall watch towers that hang precariously high on the tops. Some are 20 meters high and have about 4 to 5 floors. They were used as residences and courtyards. The windows of the towers were purposely small that no enemy could use them to get inside. Towers had openings for guns. They were very carefully planned and used not only as residential places but as military objects for protection. The towers were equipped with loopholes, boilers for water and special places at tower corners for throwing stones at enemies. From time to time pirates, Turks and other enemies tried to occupy Mani, but all their attacks were in vain. Towers were also used as hiding and attacking places during different conflicts and clashes caused by a vendetta.

Indeed, the towers were an indication of the power of various families and clans and of their determination to safeguard what was theirs against all comers. There are about 800 towers and 6 castles in Mani. Today, the great majority of these towers have been abandoned and most villages are under populated. Walking through the

narrow passages the beauty and importance of these unexpectedly beautiful homes is evident. However, in recent years, many wealthy Europeans in search of exotic and rarely beautiful vacation spots are discovering Mani. They have bought such homes for retirement or summer holidays and have transformed their interior into a modern place with all the amenities.

Mani is the birthplace of the legend "Zorba the Greek". In 1917, a little-known writer called Nikos Kazantzakis arrived in Stoupa from Crete and established a small lignite mining business in the cliffs behind Stoupa at Prastova, Mani. He recruited an engineer from northern Greece to help him. So, Giorgos Zorbas came to Stoupa - and a legend was born. Kazantzakis was deeply impressed by Zorba's character that was full of life and creative spirit. A bronze bust of the author beside the road which also bears his name commemorates the time Kazantzakis spent in Stoupa and below this is, Kalogria Beach, where "Zorba the Greek" danced into legend.

"I had known much joy and many pleasures on that beach. My life with Zorba had enlarged my heart; some of his words had calmed my soul. This man with his infallible instinct and his primitive eagle-like look had taken confident short-cuts and, without even losing his breath, had reached the peak of effort and had gone even further." Nikos Kazantzakis