

A Special Trip

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There are places where you cannot help yourself from coming back again and again. The Niche's "eternal return" in this place of South Greece, Mane, that covers the middle peninsula of Peloponnesus, has nothing to do with nihilism.

On the contrary, you have at least 6 reasons to visit Mane:

- find peace in long, wide, pebble-dash beaches ;
- swim in a deep, crystal sea as in Cyclades without paying any expensive ferryboat ticket or suffer airport discomfort; you may go there by car or public bus within 3-4 hours from Athens
- experience the August-full-moon-sea mysteries from the terrace of a cosmopolite bar or sandy beach;
- take the chance to meet a "caretta-caretta" sea-turtle
- admire medieval stone-towers, upon the Venetian model
- low-cost vacations and meet French, Italian tourists as well as some of the most traditional Greeks.

Mane is a remote, rocky region, tough both for the wilderness of its landscape, as for the character of its traditional inhabitants. Though well defended against invaders, this area has a history of internal feuding between clans, which led them to construct the unique-architecture tower-villages. "Surprisingly, the same custom of 'vendetta' (deadly revenge for the death of one clan-member) exists also in Corsica, Crete and Mane" remarked an Athenian, of Mane descent, ex professor in Paris.

Therefore, many original families left Mane contributing to its depopulation; many Greek governments neglected Mane from their development programmes to the profit of the tourism. Still, whole stone-tower villages like Vathia or Areopolis have been carefully restored.

Moreover, Mane was the last part of Greece to embrace Christianity. It is from the 9th century that many Byzantine chapels were built. Additionally, Mane had never been militarily occupied by the Turks. Therefore, by the end of 15th century many Byzantine refugees had settled there. Turkish administration used to appoint a local chief to rule the country and collect taxes.

On the other hand, people participated in many resurrections against the Turks. Russia had tried unsuccessfully to support the rebels in the 18th century, before Napoleon exchanged secret messages with the local chief Grigorakis, during 1796-1797, to bring the French navy in Greece's help. The plan failed. Today, some bar-owners in Gytheio--the main port of Mane- prefer to talk about another plan: the successful one of Paris of Troy and Helen's (Homer-heroes in the mythical antiquity. Their relationship used to be the pretext for the Trojan War). Allegedly, they spent their first night together in Kranai: the islet at the Gythio bay.

So, get in your car; drive towards Tripoli of Peloponnesus; have a break at the rest area "Allea", just before Tripoli, to enjoy the panoramic view of mountain Taygetos. Next, steer to Sparta for about 57 km through the Tripoli-upland, passing closely to Lake Taka through the wild countryside. After Sparta, the 43 km road that reveals the

local farming (oranges, lemons, olives, wheat, cattle and goats) ends to the mountain-sheltered Gythio; the north-est gateway to Mane, one of the most attractive greenery costal towns in the Southern Peloponnesus. The 19th century-houses, are arranged amphitheatrically on the hill that declines abruptly to Gythion's quay. The heart of the town beats at Mavromichalis square. Men talk passionately about politics and the free-entrance local festival in August. Its programme ranges from theatre to rock and classical music.

I arrived there, as a bride. I assure you, modern customs jostle with the old ones. For instance, men, allegedly quick-tempered, prefer women to stay at home, silent. Nevertheless, the majority of the "self-made man" stories I heard there belong to widows-women. Besides, there is a strong potential for the first-time female candidate to win municipal elections in October 2006. Additionally, it was a stroller-crier who announced, through a megaphone, the subsidies that the government would attribute to farmers; "everyone who lost its production in olives and oranges in 2004 should come to the Town-Hall."

Nevertheless, as the old myth says, Gythio is the place where gods like Apollo and Hercules settled their difference about the Delphic tripod. Hercules had it stolen, because the priestess of the Delphi oracle refused to give him a divination.

Gythio has been inhabited in pre-historic times; yet, the earliest findings are ceramics of the 8th century. The ancient city, a Phoenician trading port, became Sparta's port in classical antiquity. Ancient theatre is the main attraction at the archaeological site.

Hopefully, you have many choices for your residence. Room-prices vary from € 45 to € 80 in August, not to mention discounts during other months. Every single piece of the quay is a place to drink or to eat depending on the style you like. Odile, lonely owner of a hotel -restaurant, lets the taste of her French nationality to compete with the oriental, the modern, and the traditional one.

However, the prestige of the 18th century renovated fortress of Grigorakis family that hosts today the Museum of Mane is unrivalled. The tower-museum lies on the islet Kranai that is connected to Gythio by a causeway. The main museum's exposition concerns the exploration of Mane since medieval times by Europeans notorious travellers and scientific societies.

Odile insists on our going 12 km south-west from Gythio, where stands the castle of Passava: "Its name stems from the French: "passe en avant" meaning "go ahead"; it was built by the Frankish de Neuilly clan, in 1254, to guard a military path in the area." Our Athenian friend, ex-professor in Paris and offspring of the Grigorakis family intrudes: "The Turks left the castle in 1780 after Tzanetbey Grigorakis revenged the murder of his uncle by massacring 1000 Muslims."

Though life for Maneots had often been harsh- to such extent that local funeral songs are considered as a treasure of the national matrimony- humor and open-heart talks are daily food for today people. For example, the following was written on a tavern's board: "Come and eat at your own risk. We serve: dirty fish, stale mousaka and souvlaki-kebab. We have bad service. But if you don't want to pay, look next"; next there is a gallows-tree; beneath, an abandoned rowboat; a few meters away, the tradi-

tional tavern and pub of Resbithas' family and all around the shingle Mavrovouni-beach.

“It is a 3 kilometers long and 70 meters width beach, to meditate upon the merest gleam of the sunset over the sea horizon” adds Fotini, 65, mother of 3 sons, who takes pride in her tavern on the sand. Mavrovouni lies 1 km south of Gythio. It offers romantic night life at beach-bars, campings, taverns, rooms to let and lavish bungalows.

However, as relentless hunters of natural beauties as we are, we continued our tour to the Pyrgos-Dirou caves. It is the largest and most colourful cave system in Greece. If you decide to follow our tour, remember also to visit Vathia and Areopolis, to the south, we mentioned before. It is the place where the Greek national revolution had been firstly proclaimed in 17 Mars 1821- that is a week before the official date (25 Mars 1821)- by Petros Mavromichalis; in memoriam, his family-mansion is designated a local landmark.

Other beaches: Skoytari, Porto kagio and the unforgettable Gerolimenas.

END