



Akrotiri Lighthouse on Santorini was built by a French company in 1892. It is one of the oldest lighthouses in Greece and gets its name from the nearby ruins of a Minoan town that was inhabited as early as 4000 BC.

Dolmades and diesel: a Greek odyssey

Starting in 2018, **Patrick** and **Marie Gurney** set out on an 18-month overland journey from France to South Africa. In Greece, they fell in love with mountain roads, rustic islands and epic historical sites.



Clockwise from the top: The Parthenon is a temple and part of the Acropolis – it towers over Athens. Made entirely out of marble, the Panathenaic Stadium is a construction marvel. Nightlife in the Athens suburb, Monastiraki. A guard stands outside the Greek parliament in front of the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, a war memorial to fallen soldiers.

It was late October 2018 when we left Bulgaria and entered Greece at the Makaza-Nymphaea border post.

“Kalimera, where are you going?” asked the customs agent. “Good morning.” He checked the Carnet de Passage for Kukuza, our Hilux, and smiled. “Enjoy! Greece is the best!”

We were looking forward to the next six weeks chasing the last rays of summer around Zeus’s backyard, on a fairly packed itinerary. As we dropped down the escarpment via the Makaza Pass, everything changed. Conifer forests were replaced by scrub bush. It got warmer. It even smelled different.

We had a two-day, 1 000 km journey to Athens where we’d booked a service for Kukuza. Arriving there, we checked into our Airbnb in the arty suburb of Exarcheia and set out to explore the 3 400-year-old city. It’s a sprawling metropolis with orange tree-lined streets and mostly cream-coloured buildings, many of which sport canvas awnings with either white and blue, or white and green stripes.

Nobody does laid-back better than the Greeks! It seemed as if Athens had absolutely no sense of urgency: a capital of restaurants, bars, coffee shops and people watchers. The Greeks love people watching so much, they have a special word for it: *peratzatha*.

The birthplace of philosophy, democracy, and home to the Acropolis and the famed Parthenon, Athens has that inescapable holiday feel that we thoroughly enjoyed. We explored Plaka, a busy historical district, and we drank ouzo at rooftop bars in Monastiraki, a flea market neighbourhood. In Kolonaki we gorged on *gyros*, a local type of shawarma, and battled to decide which amazing yoghurt dessert to choose next.

Wherever you are in the city, you can almost always see the Acropolis towering over the landscape. We wandered around the Temple of Athena and between the enormous columns of the Parthenon. We couldn’t miss a visit to Greece’s best-preserved theatre, the Odeon of Herodes Atticus. Built in AD 161 by the Romans and partially refurbished in the 1950s, this 5 000-seat theatre is still in use today.

Finally, we explored the Panathenaic Stadium, which was rebuilt (entirely out of marble!) on the site of ancient ruins, to host the first modern-era Olympic Games in 1896. It is perfectly sleek in design, an architectural photographer’s dream.

Kukuza, having covered 11 000 km since the start of our trip back in France, was in for a well-deserved spa treatment. Toyota Giannitsas replaced oils, filters and CV boots, and sorted out a faulty locking hub. With the maintenance completed, we fitted the Hilux with a fresh set of BFGoodrich All-Terrain tyres, which were nearly 40% cheaper than in South Africa. Our Deltec deep-cycle battery had given up too and needed to be replaced.

Santorini and Naxos

Choosing which island to visit in Greece isn’t easy. There are literally thousands (2 000 to 6 000, depending on what size rock you classify as an island) of which only 220 are inhabited.

We eventually settled on Santorini and Naxos – part of the Cyclades island group – which would afford us two different experiences: touristy Santorini and local fave Naxos.

With Kukuza safely on board the Blue Star ferry, we departed Athens from the Port of Piraeus and settled in for a comfortable eight-hour journey across the Aegean Sea to Santorini, near the south of the Cyclades.

Trendy Santorini has many gorgeous accommodation options where you can take selfies while sipping cocktails around infinity pools. But although Marie and I both love trendy properties, we have a bakkie with a rooftop tent and therefore the whole island was a potential overnight spot.

Santorini’s landscape is arid and rocky – it’s an ancient caldera with desolate-looking cliffs, black volcanic beaches and very little vegetation. Life in the small villages seems surprisingly rural and raw the minute you’re away from the sassy spots.

We spent our first night at what we call a “placeholder” – not a great spot but isolated and fine for our first night in a new place. The following day we hunted for a good wild camping spot and got lucky as we found a perfectly level area with amazing ocean views, out of the wind and private to boot. Here, far from the glitzy side of Santorini, we camped for a few nights, taking in the sapphire-blue water and sipping white wine from the famous Boutari Winery, while playing music on our JBL speaker and waving at the party yachts sailing by. We even had our very own staircase for beach access.

We visited cafés, restaurants and beach bars all around the island, lunching on lamb and quaffing local wine. Santorini has its own endemic vine species and what’s more surprising is how these vines survive and produce grapes. The island’s soil is porous and extremely poor in organic matter yet high in mineral content. Strong winds blow in all directions, rainfall is rare and peak summer temperatures are high enough to kill the weeds. Passing by vineyards, all you see are hundreds of little green “balls” in fields of sand. These “balls” are the result of a unique pruning practice called *kouloura*. The farmers purposefully train the vines on the ground, shaping each one in a spiral that forms a basket or ring on the ground, which looks like a ball when you see it from afar. The grapes then hang on the inside, protected from the elements by the trunk and leaves – brilliant!

Above: Patrick and Marie found this amazing (secret) wild-camp spot on Santorini island. Below: This farmer demonstrates the technique of *kouloura*: training vines into a basket shape. Bottom: Early evening in the village of Oia shows Santorini at its romantic best.





Clockwise from top left: Kitron liqueur is only made on the Island of Naxos. Beetle and bougainvillea in the tiny village of Chalkio, on Naxos island. This causeway links Monemvasia to the Peloponnese mainland. The small island consists only of the village Monemvasia and the ruins of a citadel on a hill, overlooking the village square (pictured).

Naxos is a two-and-a-half-hour ferry ride from Santorini. It's the biggest island (420 km²) in the Cyclades group with about 20 000 permanent residents and 20 villages spread across lush valleys, mountains and white beaches. Greek mythology claims that Zeus was born in Crete, but he grew up on Naxos, hence the highest peak is called Mount Zeus (1003 m).

We spent a week enjoying this amazing island with its homely feel. We circumvented Naxos by camping in various spots, two of which stood out: Itonas Bay and Alyko Beach.

Alyko is adjacent to a protected cedar forest (one of the largest in Greece) and at the beach there's an abandoned hotel building site from the 1970s – the ruin now sports some great graffiti. We set up camp for three nights, hidden between dunes and vegetation. Our only visitor was an old man who would pass by each day selling a handful of olives, fruit and fresh bread.

We used an app called Windy (popular with kitesurfers) to find some of our campsites. Wind is a key consideration when choosing an overnight spot. You're exposed to any wind in a rooftop tent, with nowhere to hide. At the coast, where wind is a given, it's better to find a sheltered spot than one with an epic view. We quickly learnt to sacrifice a view for a peaceful night's sleep!

Naxos stole our hearts. It has pretty towns with winding streets, and houses painted blue-and-white with classic Greek slate floors. At one fishing village we enjoyed excellent octopus salad, and in Halki we tasted their own unique liqueur called Kitron, a lemon-citrus spirit similar to limoncello (but stronger) and made from the fruit and leaves of the citron tree. The first distillery was established in 1896 in the village. We bought a few bottles to keep us warm in the coming winter months.

Olive country

Once back in Athens, we took a "sho't left" and drove 100 km towards Corinth. We snapped a few pics of the Corinth canal – a 6,4 km long shipping groove cut into the limestone by French and Greek engineers in the 1880s. This canal creates a convenient shortcut from the Aegean Sea to the Ionian Sea.

From Corinth, we set off to explore the wild and rugged Peloponnese peninsula, which is full of natural and historic treats.

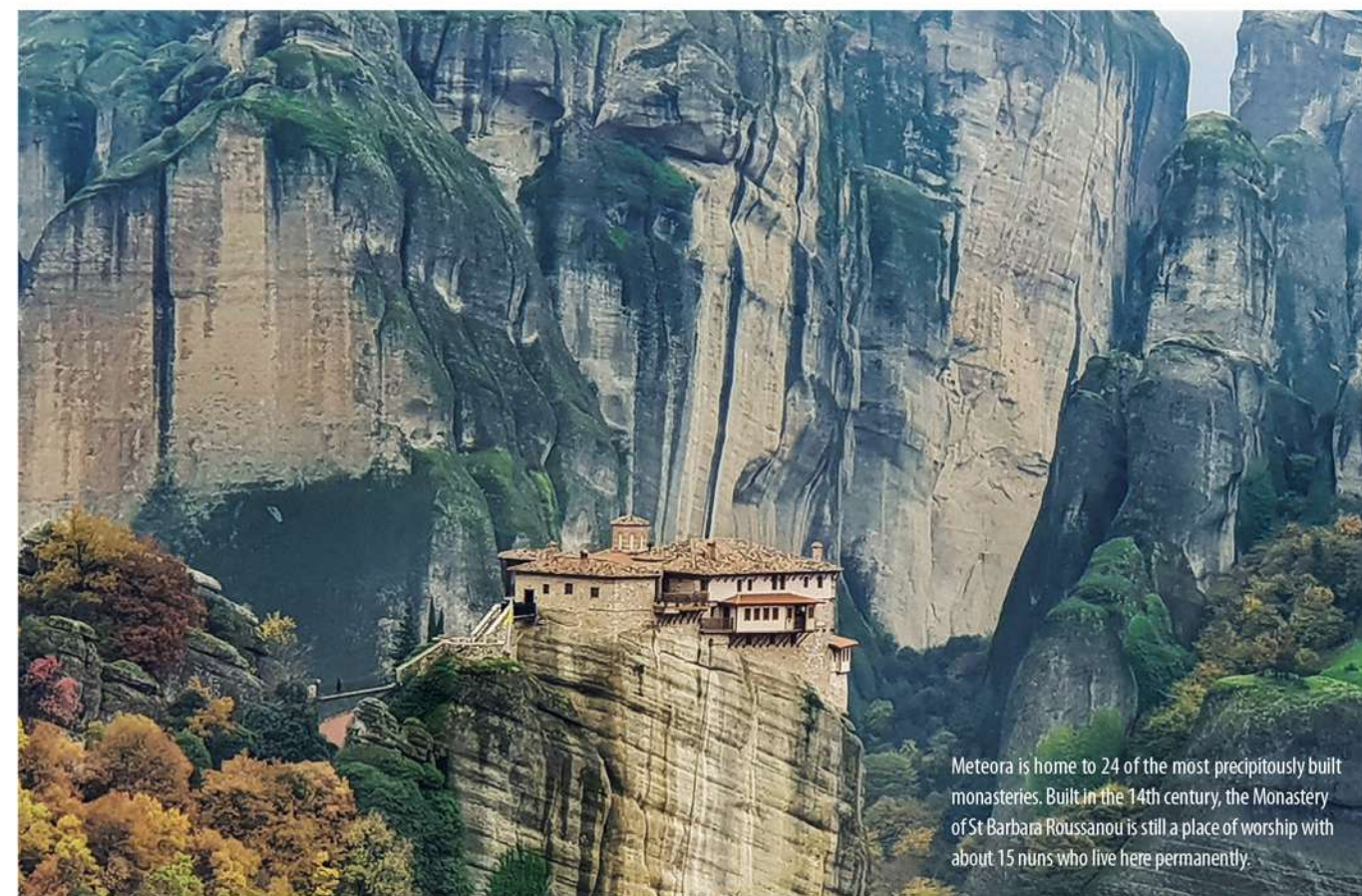
We drove to the fortress town of Monemvasia on the eastern side of the peninsula. Situated on a tiny island, it's linked to the mainland by a narrow, 200m-long causeway and surrounded by an impressive wall.

This very romantic town – once an important commercial centre of the Byzantine Empire – can only be accessed through one small entrance. Inside, we were transported into a labyrinth of narrow streets, quaint squares, ancient stone houses and a few swanky hotels and restaurants. We hiked the upper part of the town and explored the ruined citadel dating back to the 6th century AD.

The Peloponnese peninsula is olive country and we arrived slap-bang in the middle of harvest season. Every village was a hive of activity. Enormous nets lay under trees everywhere, awaiting the assault, while tractors hauled off big drums filled to the brim with olives.

We were keen to learn more and popped in at the Olive Museum in Sparta. First produced in the Middle East around 2 000 BC, olive oil was once three times more valuable than wine and mainly used for household lighting, soap manufacture and as a beauty product. Everywhere we travelled on the Peloponnese, we saw countless stone mills with piles of fruit waiting to be ground. The produce would mostly be consumed by local families or sold into the local markets.

Marie had some work to catch up on, so we booked a gorgeous (and fairly reasonable) Airbnb in Drosopigi. This tiny village only has 50 permanent inhabitants and is in a mountainous region down one of the "fingers" of the Peloponnese – points of land that jut into the ocean at its southern end. We spent most days taking early morning walks and having leisurely



Meteora is home to 24 of the most precipitously built monasteries. Built in the 14th century, the Monastery of St Barbara Roussanou is still a place of worship with about 15 nuns who live here permanently.

breakfasts (Greek yoghurt, nuts and honey) before settling down to work.

For me, that meant cleaning out the Hilux and doing research on our next destinations! We started referring to these mini breaks as "getting extracted" and they were important to keep us sane during our long months of overlanding. Taking a hot shower or casually rummaging through the contents of an upright fridge are as good as a week in Bali if you're used to roughing it. By this stage we had been on the road for seven months and we were starting to appreciate the challenges of being truly nomadic.

With Marie's work completed and both of us recharged, we set out to finish our Peloponnese circular route. We headed north, past the city of Kalamata (yup, where Kalamata olives originate from), to the Temple of Apollo Epicurius. The winding drive along tar and dirt roads through the Arcadia mountains took six hours (150 km) and cut across beautiful valleys.

The temple was built on the slopes of Mount Kotylion in the 5th century BC and is one of the best-preserved examples of classical Greek architecture. It was totally worth the long drive to see it.

Next up was Voidokilia Beach on the nearby Messinia coastline, which we had seen while scouring Google Earth. Seen from above, the beach perfectly resembles the Greek letter omega (Ω). The bay has crystal-clear water, a white beach and is shielded from the wind. We set up camp for a couple of days to take in the natural beauty and met some other van-life campers. Everyone enjoyed sharing stories from the road.

Our last stops on the Peloponnese peninsula included a visit to Olympia (site of the Olympic Games during Classical Antiquity from the 8th century BC to the 4th century AD), the ancient city of Messene, and the beautiful Foli forest, which is considered to be the oldest self-seeded European forest of beech and oak trees. Autumn was in full swing and the entire area was bathed in the enchanted golden yellow of falling leaves.

Delphi and the Monasteries of Meteora

We left the peninsula and returned to "mainland" Greece, aiming for Delphi. The ancient Greeks certainly chose stunning sites for their temples. Delphi sits on the steep slope of Mount Parnassus, with panoramic views of the valley below. I can see how its location would tantalise any pilgrim seeking wisdom from the famed Oracle of Delphi, but it beats me how they transported all the enormous chunks of rock up to the site!

Delphi peaked in influence between the 6th and 4th centuries BC and was considered the centre of the world to many. Our guide told us how important rulers all sought consultation with the High Priestess, or Oracle. In return for her prophecy, she would accept lavish gifts or money.

"And yes," he added dryly, "the larger the gift, the quicker you could jump the queue..."

We drove further north to the Monasteries of Meteora, a site of pure spiritual majesty. Two things make Meteora special. Firstly, you have these 300–500 m-high sandstone pinnacles that stand out from the landscape like candles on a cake. Secondly, each one is topped with a gorgeous stone monastery built hundreds of years ago. Of the 24 originally built, six are still active places of worship.

Visiting Meteora feels like taking a giant leap back in time. I could easily imagine monks being hauled up the sheer cliffs by rope and basket. Nowadays, access is by less scary stairways and bridges. The whole place is jaw-dropping – one of the world's grandest views, in my opinion.



Greece is a fantastic road-trip country. Its beaches offer some of the Mediterranean's best spots for swimming and it's a 4x4 enthusiast's dream as there are so many mountainous routes, especially in the north. Greek culture is welcoming and easy-going, and the street food options are great.

One of our best food encounters happened after we left Meteora and started heading north-east, towards Thessaloniki. I'm not even sure what the little mountain village was called, but when we reached it, we'd been driving for hours and we were hungry. Marie scoured Google for a place to eat. She found a place, but as we drove into the seemingly deserted village – there wasn't even a cat walking about – we had to stop and ask where it was.

Walking down an empty street, we looked left and there it was: full of people, or rather, full of men! We were told to sit on the street (like tourists) while they found a table. Five minutes later we were shown to a table inside. It was Saturday lunchtime and the place was full of farmers and louder than any restaurant I've ever visited. Everybody stared at us. It was definitely a locals-only joint.

We told the waiter we had €15 (R250) per person as budget and we wanted to taste as many dishes as possible. It would be the chef's choice as to what we got. What a result! We feasted on beef dolmades with a slightly sweet flavour, delicious courgette fritters, lamb moussaka, beef and tomato meatballs (keftedes), fried fish and plenty of grilled meats, olives, local dips (including fava, a yellow pea purée) and assorted bread.

Other diners insisted that we try other plates at their cost, so we also sampled *stifado* (beef stew), *kritharaki* (rice pasta with chicken) and *papoutsakia* (stuffed aubergine). The waiter was even scolded by the local patrons for giving us the cheap ouzo, so he quickly came running with complimentary retsina (a white wine infused with pine aroma). It all ended with me giving a speech to the patrons and staff, thanking them for their unbelievable hospitality. What an experience!

Christmas was a few weeks away and we had plans to meet our two sons in Cappadocia, Turkey. It was time to say goodbye to Europe – we were heading into the Middle East, and the relics of the Ottoman Empire were beckoning...



Clockwise from top left: Marie and Patrick in the village of Fira, Santorini. The Temple of Athena Pronaia, at Delphi. Patrick looks out over a deserted Alyko Beach. The Greek islands offer fantastic food and wine experiences, from fresh seafood and meat dishes to yoghurt desserts, and of course the traditional ouzo – an aniseed-flavoured spirit.

Above, right: Voidokilia Beach.

Fast facts



These prices are from 2018 and are meant to provide a rough idea of what the Gurneys spent on their trip. All prices would have gone up since then.

- ATHENS**
- Airbnb: R3 500 (five nights)
 - Acropolis entrance fee: R500 per person (included the museum and Agora)
 - Gyros: R35 each in Kolonaki
 - Yoghurt cup: R75 at the Fresco yoghurt bar at the Acropolis
 - Bakkie service and replacement of CV boots at Toyota: R7 200
 - BFGoodrich tyres (set of four): R6 800
 - Dual battery: R1 800

- DROSOPIGI**
- Airbnb: R2 700 (five nights)

- SANTORINI & NAXOS**
- Ferry from Athens to Santorini: R2 700 (two people, one-way, including bakkie)
 - Ferry from Santorini to Naxos: R1 550 (two people, one-way, including bakkie)
 - Ferry from Naxos to Athens: R2 700 (two people, one-way, including bakkie)

- DELPHI**
- Entrance fee: R160 per person

PREVIOUS GURNEY ADVENTURES

We have published the African leg of Patrick and Marie's journey – see issues #158 to #166 for their travels through Egypt, Sudan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Rwanda, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe.

This European part of the trip preceded the African leg. See issues #175 and #176 for their travels through France, Italy, Croatia, Hungary, Romania and Bulgaria.

In the end, they visited 23 countries and travelled 50 000 km before arriving back home in Johannesburg on 19 December 2019.

MORE INFO

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