

# A pilgrim's progress

After his punishing tour of Crete's White Mountains, Andreas Hofer soldiers on to meet the monks on Mount Athos – and attempts the peninsula's steep main peak



**T**he keel of the 'Little St. Anne' barge was furrowing with energetic speed through the Gulf of Agios Oros. My skis were safely tied to the railing, ski boots and luggage stowed in the back of the boat. Looking out of the porthole felt like saying farewell to paradise: the sight of undulating hills, densely overgrown with ancient forests; the intricate coast, lined with sandy beaches, steep cliffs and lonely harbours washed by the Mediterranean in all hues of blue - purple, cobalt, turquoise, aquamarine, petering out into long stretches of golden sand. We were speeding past monastery fortresses of grand design, complete with crenulated walls, belfries, balconies and galleries, looking like extended 19th century fantasy castles of Bavaria's mad king Ludwig - others resembling Lhasa's Potala Palace in Tibet.

A pair of dolphins escorted us for a while, showing off their glistening bodies in graceful, tireless jumps. I could still see the mules which had brought me and my luggage down to the jetty, turning around and climbing back more than a thousand cobbled steps to Nea Kiti,

the hermits' settlement, built like an eagle's nest on vertiginous crags. And I still recalled the kind eyes of Father Joseph, lifting his hand in a gesture which was part goodbye and part blessing, wishing me a safe journey back. Here, at the foot of Mount Athos, was my home. Or at least had been, for a few, very remarkable days.

My fellow passengers were less melancholy. They sounded like tourists, conversing in Russian, Serbo-Croat, English, German, Bulgarian, and Greek of course, yet they all looked alike. Caparisoned in black crepe, they were wearing medieval stovepipe hats, sprouting mattresses of beards, and golden chains hanging down to their portly waists, their long hair, like Sikhs, tied into a tight bun. They were resident monks and pilgrims from all over the Orthodox world, and for them, there was the certainty that they would always come back to their true home. But would I?

The 'diamontirion' entry visa issued by the Holy Executive Committee, folded in the pocket of my anorak, was invalid once

I had cleared customs. I have left a world which has been in existence since the early 10th century, with a constitution granted by Roman emperors, Ottoman sultans and even the European Union, with its own Byzantine calendar. Its own time even, counting twelve hours of the day from sunrise; laws which ban hunting, smoking (not very strictly executed, like everything Greek), shepherding, and forbidding all females to set foot on its territory.

"You have brought all the bad weather with you," Father Gabriel had smiled as he led me, on my arrival, along a steep, cobbled donkey path to the guest house of his 'kalivi', a family-sized monks' villa complete with church, orchards and kitchen garden.

It was snowing heavily, and the oranges, shocked by gusts of yet another winter, all came rolling down into the snow. The guest cell was so freezing that even snuggling up under six layers of blankets, I felt like a piece of luggage on a long-haul-flight. I slept for twelve hours, woken only once by a robin which tried to break through the glass window, and then ▶



another 20 hours! (As there was nothing else to do - no skiing, no eating - and the extreme cold was sapping so much of my energy, a long sleep was an easy option.) The next day, the snowfall had stopped. Alas, it didn't get any warmer. A fierce hurricane was ramping through paradise, turning the sea into a boiling cauldron, pulling the water surface high into the sky, white spray drifting along the coast at sonic speed. And then it stopped. A carillon of bells pealed, songbirds performed a woodwind sonata, and Turner painted dawn in his boldest colours. The *skete* (monastic village) with its countless cupolas, cast-iron gates, flagstone alleyways, olive groves, steps and garden walls, was covered in snow, which now started to melt from roof rails, awnings, and porches. The dome-sized cypress trees around my chapel shimmered in fresh green, the sea from Athos to Sithonia was a crinkling silver foil, and my mortally offended robin was cursing me.

The *skete* was the closest place I could be to the mountain. Although all the monasteries are utterly beautiful and romantic, hospitable and rich, any of them would have been hours away from Mount Athos, making an ascent without an overnight stay in a tent impossible.

But now it was time to go skiing. "You know what hubris is?" asked Nikola, the young rebel icon painter, leaning slightly backwards, his head disparagingly aslant, while he watched me getting my stuff ready. It took me a few seconds to realise what he meant. "Yes. Cockiness. Not a nice thing to say to someone who's just going into the mountains."

"I don't want to sound nice. You may think: Peak Athos is only 2,033 metres high, a cakewalk. But this sheer marble cliff rising out of the sea in one continuous gradient is a

challenge even in summer. If an avalanche goes off, there is no flat spot to stop you. That's the end of the line." I tried to think of something else while I was gluing the skins to my skis.

Theophanes, the Albanian muleteer, had arrived to put my skis and rucksack on one animal, and me on the other. The beasts looked absent-minded, and seemed thoroughly bored by the snow. To emphasise their disdain, they let a crown of droppings slip onto my door sill. "No," the muleteer corrected me, when he pulled the loaded and roped-up animals to the road, "you don't sit in the saddle like this. All legs on one side, with your back to the sea." "Do I have to?" I sulked.

"There was a lot of snowfall during the last two days, and the mules will have a hard time on the icy, narrow track" he said. "The road is really steep, you will see. This way, when the animals fall down the cliff, you will have a better chance of getting off in time." He said it matter-of-factly, as if to give well-intentioned advice. But I was sure that - instructed by Nikola - he just wanted to scare me off.

The ride from Nea Skiti to St. Anne and around the Cape of Pines to Kerasia, the starting point of my ascent, was terrifying. Terrifying and beautiful: we passed through dense cedar and oak forests, the snow sometimes so deep that we had to get off to help the mules plough through breast-deep drifts. Along the ridges, vistas opened to the sea a few hundred metres below, with a lone fishing boat the size of a matchbox ornamenting the gulf like a pin on sapphire velvet.

Broom, thorn oak, crocuses and hellebore were shedding their snowy burden in the morning sun; songbirds were whistling their best to make me feel better - to no avail.

Fingers clawed into the dangerously swaying wooden saddle, I hung on in mortal fear as the mules slithered across near-vertical torrent beds, sending cascades of shale falling half a mile to the sea. I had no idea how Theo could face this, cool as a Greek cucumber, with legs dangling nonchalantly. He casually whistled a short tune, unfolded the canvas bag roped to his saddle, and pulled out a chipped rifle in expectation of some holy grouse. Blessed Mary, don't let my mule balk...!

But then the mules went on strike anyway. The snow was so deep now that they just stood there, motionless. We unloaded, and I started my way through a densely forested valley, with the tracks of jackals and wild boar in the undergrowth. Theophanes said he'd wait for me in Kerasia.

At around 1,000 metres, I came out of the forest. For a while I was in bright sunshine, although the temperature must have been well below zero: the snow was crisp and powdery. Views opened up across the Aegean, to the ridges of Sithonia, the other 'finger' of the Khalkidhiki peninsula, and some large islands on the horizon - Limnos perhaps, or the Sporades. A solid cloud bank rose from the water now, blanketing the morning sun, and transforming the sea into a blinding, golden reflector. Traversing into another valley, I entered the forest again - chestnut trees, alders, holm oaks. I was alone. No footprints, no sign of life, were it not for the deep holes tunnelled into the snow - wild boars digging for acorn ice cream.

Reaching the church of Panagia, nesting on a promontory more than 1000 yards over the water, I saw the Holy Mountain for the first time: a solid piece of rugged marble jutting like





## Skiing Mount Athos



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a Neolithic blade into the sky - one moment obscured by wafting clouds, the next flooded in sunlit drama. It looked steep. Very steep.

Looking up the triangular snowfield to its apex, I tried to assess the possible dangers. Some single boulders, gnarled stone pines sprawling among them, must have come down a few million years ago. The slope, a single chute of debris disembodying into the waves a kilometre or so down the cliffs - staggeringly beautiful - seemed wind-freighted. Icy surfaces were showing in the depressions. I fixed *harscheisen* (ski crampons) to my skis, and decided to zigzag uphill, keeping to the ridges. After an hour of hard climbing, I reached the craggy edge at the top, a few metres to the south of the squat stone house which was the Church of the Transfiguration, the peak of Athos, at 2033 metres.

I left my skis in the snow to walk the remaining distance to the summit. I was tempted to ski down these almost 2000 vertical metres of soft, wind-carried powder in the middle of the chute that tumbled into the deep blue of the Aegean Sea. The slope was so steep that it felt as if the water were a single step away. The few bushes and gnarled trees which had not been swept into the abyss by previous avalanches were alluringly clad in glistening hoarfrost, and the contrast between the snowy landscape and the steel-blue sea was sharpened by the chill of afternoon. Reluctantly I succumbed to the sober rules of safety, and made my turns along the same ridge I had climbed up, enjoying the steeper slopes only once I had reached the



**Waiting for the ferry:**  
**Father Joseph, the soap maker, and a fellow monk on the jetty at Nea Skiti.**  
**Above: Theophanes arrives to put my skis on one mule – and me on another.**

forest again. This couloir will have to wait for spring to be skied safely.

Nikola, the icon painter, had introduced me to his fellow monks: to the fishermen, the olive farmers, the vintners, the belt makers; to Father Joseph, the soap maker. But Nikola had read some of my features on the internet, and didn't like them. "What you write is all about you. How can this be important? When you

will write about us, this sanctuary of tortured thinkers and saintly drop-outs, it should be like a letter to someone you love. Don't forget this." I will try my best, Nikola. They say that people who come as tourists to Mount Athos will leave as pilgrims. And, as I wish to add, those who come as skiers will have made their turns in paradise. 🇬🇷