Introduction

My first sight of Italy’s Cinque Terre National Park (p56) was through the train window as I headed south along the coast from Genoa. It was painfully brief. And the same could be said for my second… and third looks. Mere glimpses of the beautiful Ligurian coast, each a fleeting snapshot between the blinding darkness of lengthy rail tunnels.

My upset with the subterranean tracks didn’t last long, however, as I was soon gaping at the full coastal splendour of the Cinque Terre from the village of Vernazza’s splendid natural harbour. Cliffs plunged into the sea, forested hills marked the horizon and ancient drystone walls formed twisting terraces above town. And there was not an unsightly train track in view.

The stunning vistas only grew in magnitude over the coming days as I ran the steep and precipitous coastal trails linking the Cinque Terre’s five medieval villages. Mix in some lovely beaches, great Italian seafood and gelato, and the park was a truly rewarding experience.

This diversity is carried through to Europe’s national parks as a whole, and that is what makes them so special. They protect areas of coast, high-altitude peaks in the Pyrenees and Alps, and even parts of the frozen Arctic, with wildlife ranging from Carpathian squirrels and fin whales to peregrine falcons and polar bears.

Setting out to choose Europe’s top 60 national parks was no easy task, so we called on our expert writers and well-travelled Destination Editors. We asked them to tell us which parks provide the best experiences and why.

The final selections were those that offered something truly unique, often an enthralling mixture of stunning natural beauty, incredible wildlife, fulfilling activities, local culture and (occasionally) a compelling history too.

But this book is intended to be more than just a celebration of Europe’s top national parks – it’s also a practical introduction to each of them. We highlight the best activities and trails – in the case of Port-Cros (p226), one of the trails is actually below the Mediterranean’s surface! – explain how to get there and where to stay, show you the wildlife to watch out for, and even suggest itineraries.

We hope the following pages inspire you to explore more of Europe’s wild and wonderful spaces.

Matt Phillips
Explore a cluster of ancient Greek islands surrounded by aegean sea, home to the rare Mediterranean monk seal and vestiges of human habitation since the Stone Age.

National Park of Alonissos Northern Sporades

Getting there
Alonissos Marine Park encompasses a string of islands in the Sporades in the northeastern Aegean. The park is off the coast of the mainland Pelion Peninsula, with ports at Alonissos or further south at Agios Konstantinos. The nearest airport is on Skopelos island, from where boats serve the park’s main island of Alonissos.

Park in numbers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Park in numbers</th>
<th>226</th>
<th>Area covered (sq km)</th>
<th>80</th>
<th>Species of bird</th>
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<td>10,200 Years that human habitation began in the park area</td>
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Toolbox

When to go
April to October but dive freely into warm, open sea by visiting in June, September or October.

How to get there
By boat from Volos or further south on the coast of the mainland Aegean. The park lies off Skopelos island, with ports at Alonissos or further south at Agios Konstantinos.

Stay here

Undinia Hotel

Patitiri’s first hotel remains one of the best. This welcoming and impeccably maintained place overviews the harbour and has panoramic views. The practive owner, Maria, takes pride in making it all work: from hand-embroidered curtains to rich buffet breakfasts.

Paradise Hotel

This near-as-a-shellbox up to the name with its gorgeous setting above a private swarming cove. Rooms have rustic stone floors and balconies, but the real treat are the large pool areas with sweeping sunset views, and the pathway leading to the water’s edge.

What to spot

Alonissos has a mild Mediterranean climate. Maquis and pine and cedar forests dot the land. Rare species include Alonissos’s falcons, wild goats and Mediterranean monk seals.

MEDITERRANEAN MONK SEAL

These shy, endangered seals were depicted on ancient Greek coins and mentioned in Homer’s poems. Today, fewer than 600 remain in the world, and they hold in partially submerged caves to breed.

Stay here...

Krya Panagia Monastery

Stay near Krya Panagia island, then walk up to the ancient monastery on an east-facing cliff. From Ask-656 the island was a base of Dryos hermits, claves and wheat for the rest of the Monastery mountains.

Hike this...

Kyra Panagia Beach

Descend this 2.5km cobbled trail from Alonissos’ old capital to waterstroke Panagia. The fortifed houses were built to protect against pirates.

Paradise Mountain

Climb the eastern side of this mountain, dive with snow-glowing plates and fierce pomegranates and蔡leaves for the sunset views over its steep slopes.

Itinerary

Day 1

01 A day

Diving

With water plants by diving as well as skiing. The marine park offers the rare opportunity to play underwater between the islands. Deep, searching for over 300 species of fish as you follow submerged shipwrecks or jettisoned ancient amphorae.

Boating

Stay on board and cruise between the islands. A day trip will see you dive into the crystal water and search for Mediterranean monk seals. If you’re patient, you stand a great chance of seeing dolphin, even if the seals elude you. Or become a star for species like Audubon’s herons or tiny Snowy Egrets flying on high. When you approach Gialia island, try to spot the wild goats of the same name as they scramble up Cliff Caves. At Alonissos island, anchor in one of the sheltered bays and walk up the wind buffeted path to the ninth century monastery. End the day back in the harbour at Patitiri sipping ouzo and enjoying a rich buffet breakfast.

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