



Peloponnese

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Why Go?

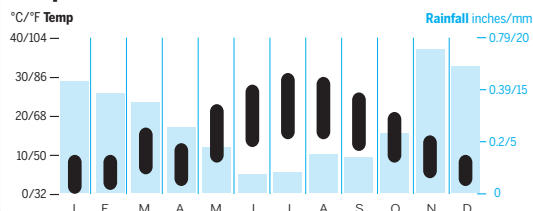
The Peloponnese (pel-o-pon-ih-sos; Πελοπόννησος) is the stuff that legends are made of. Numerous myths were born and borne out here – it is where many Greek gods or heroes strutted their stuff (and aired their buffed bodies). Today this region is far from a fable. It boasts historical sites, with classical temples, Mycenaean palaces, Byzantine cities, and Frankish and Venetian fortresses.

The region's natural playground truly mesmerises, with lofty, snowcapped mountains, lush gorges, valleys of citrus groves and vineyards, cypress trees and sun-speckled beaches. For centuries Greeks fought hard against invaders of their Peloponnese paradise, but today foreigners are far from repelled.

Filoxenia (hospitality) is as strong here as anywhere in the country and the cuisine is among Greece's best. The locals claim to have the best of everything to give. And that's no myth.

When to Go

Nafplio



Apr-Jun Wild-flower paradise; the perfect time for do-it-yourself explorations

Sep-Oct Enjoy the beaches and sun when the summer crowds have long gone

Easter Religious festivities and cuisine in Orthodox Easter week are unforgettable

History

Since ancient times the Peloponnese has played a major role in Greek history. When the Minoan civilisation declined after 1450 BC, the focus of power in the ancient Aegean world moved from Crete to the hill-fortress palaces of Mycenae and Tiryns in the Peloponnese. As elsewhere in Greece, the 400 years following the Dorian conquests in the 12th century BC are known as the Dark Ages. When the region emerged from darkness in the 7th century BC, Athens' arch rival, Sparta, had surpassed Mycenae as the most powerful city in the Peloponnese. The period of peace and prosperity under Roman rule (146 BC to around AD 250) was shattered by a series of invasions by Goths, Avars and Slavs.

The Byzantines were slow to make inroads into the Peloponnese, only becoming firmly established during the 9th century. In 1204, after the fall of Constantinople to the Crusaders, the Frankish Crusader chiefs William de Champlitte and Geoffrey de Villehardouin divided the region into 12 fiefs, which they parcelled out to various barons of France, Flanders and Burgundy. These fiefs were overseen by De Villehardouin, the self-appointed Prince of the 'Morea', as the region was called in medieval times, perhaps because mulberry trees grow so well in the area (*mouria* means mulberry tree).

The Byzantines gradually won back the Morea and, although the empire as a whole was now in terminal decline, a glorious renaissance took place in the area, centred on Mystras (see p165), which became the region's seat of government.

The Morea fell to the Turks in 1460 and hundreds of years of power struggles between the Turks and Venetians followed. The Venetians had long coveted the Morea and succeeded in establishing profitable trading ports at Methoni, Pylos, Koroni and Monemvasia.

The Greek War of Independence supposedly began in the Peloponnese, when Bishop Germanos of Patra raised the flag of revolt near Kalavryta on 25 March 1821. The Egyptian army, under the leadership of Ibrahim Pasha, brutally restored Turkish rule in 1825.

In 1827 the Triple Alliance of Great Britain, France and Russia, moved by Greek suffering and the activities of philhellenes (Byron's death in 1824 was particularly influential), came to the rescue of the Greeks by destroying the Turkish-Egyptian fleet at the Battle of Navarino, ending Turkish domination of the area.

The Peloponnese became part of the independent state of Greece, and Nafplio (in Argolis) became the first national capital. Ioannis Kapodistrias, Greece's first president, was assassinated on the steps of Nafplio's Church of St Spyridon in October 1831, and the new king, Otto, moved the capital to Athens in 1834.

Like the rest of Greece, the Peloponnese suffered badly during WWII; part of this history is vividly and tragically illustrated in the mountain town of Kalavryta, where nearly all males aged over 15 were massacred (see p198).

The civil war (1944–49) brought widespread destruction and, in the 1950s, many villagers migrated to Athens, Australia, Canada, South Africa and the USA.

CORINTHIA

Corinthia (Κορινθία) has disappointingly little to show for all its rich and tumultuous history (something it owes largely to its strategic position adjoining the Corinth Isthmus). Throughout time several empires have wrestled for dominance over the Peloponnese here; the Romans constructed a vast wall across the isthmus, many centuries later the Turks overran it and pretty much everyone else has attempted to carve a canal across it (the schedule slipped a little bit behind: about 2600 years, in fact).

The Corinthia region was once dominated by the mighty, ancient city of Corinth; this makes a fascinating visit. Several minor sites in the pretty hinterland west of Corinth are worth a detour if you have time and transport.

Corinth Κόρινθος

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Modern Corinth (κο-riin-thoss), located 6km west of the Corinth Canal, is the administrative capital of Corinthia prefecture. The town was built here after the old town was destroyed by an earthquake in 1858. The new town was wrecked by another, equally violent and damaging earthquake in 1928 and was badly damaged again in 1981.

The rather plain, modern town is dominated by cold concrete edifices, built to withstand future earthquakes. But it has a fairly pleasant harbour, a thriving cafe-lined beachfront and helpful, friendly locals.