

Central Greece

Κεντρική Ελλάδα



First-time visitors to Central Greece are often surprised by its rugged and diverse landscape, ranging from rocky sea cliffs and hidden bays to inland river valleys and olive groves, all punctuated with dramatic reminders of Greek history and mythology, oracles and muses, warriors and centaurs.

The ruins at Delphi, where Alexander the Great sought the advice of the famous oracle, remain one of Greece's most inspiring archaeological sites and are also the starting point for hikes that retrace ancient footpaths that overlook the Corinthian Gulf.

In the northern region of Thessaly, the surrounding flatlands and hills suddenly give way to breathtaking outcroppings of rocky towers, the sheer monastery-topped cliffs of Meteora. These spectacular columns of rock are not only a mecca for Greek Orthodox pilgrims, but also home to world-class rock climbing. Away to the west, river-rafting and hiking opportunities abound in the South Pindos mountain range, its high alpine meadows perfect for breezy summer hikes.

Facing the northern Aegean Sea lies the Pelion Peninsula, criss-crossed with historic cobblestone paths that link lush mountain hamlets with coves and beaches that rival the best islands, but without the crowds. According to Greek mythology, it was in nearby Volos that Jason and the Argonauts set sail in search of the Golden Fleece, in a boat made from timbers of the Pelion forests.

It is no coincidence that this dramatic landscape was the setting for heroic struggles among gods and mortals, or that a resilient and good-natured people endure and thrive here still.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Together at Last** Joining the evening crowd for outdoor summer cinema in Volos (p261)
- **Riverside Dining** Feasting on fresh trout from mountain streams near Karpenisi (p253)
- **Go with the Flow** White-water river rafting in the Tria Potamia area (p271)
- **Walk this Way** Following the cobblestone trails to the sea on the Pelion Peninsula (p262)
- **Don't Look Down** Climbing the monastery-topped rock pinnacles at Meteora (p275)
- **Historical Meditation** Catching the last light of day at the Sanctuary of Athena (p243), in Ancient Delphi
- **End of the Road** Spotting Dalmatian pelicans skimming over Klisova Lagoon (p250)



■ POPULATION: 1.9 MILLION

■ AREA: 37,042 SQ KM

STEREA ELLADA

ΣΤΕΡΕΑ ΕΛΛΑΔΑ

Greek mythology and history seem to mingle in the rugged and scenic landscape of Sterea Ellada. On the slopes of Mt Parnassos, overlooking the Gulf of Corinth, sits Delphi, regarded by the ancient Greeks as the centre of the world. Beyond Delphi, the lands stretch east to Attica, where legendary King Oedipus met his fate, and west to Messolongi, where British bard Lord Byron died of fever during the Greek War of Independence. In fact, the region acquired the name Sterea Ellada (Mainland Greece) in 1827, as part of the newly formed Greek state.

Sterea Ellada is bordered by the narrow gulfs of Corinth and Patra in the south, and Epiros to the north. Much of this mountainous region is known as the Agrafo or 'Unrecorded', so named during the *Tourkokratia* (Turkish occupation), when the hard-to-reach mountain villages were written off for tax purposes as uncollectable. Today, these same mountains are prized for their beauty, and explored by hikers and river rafters alike.

THIVA (THEBES) ΘΗΒΑ

pop 22,400

Thiva, the birthplace of Hercules and Dionysos, was a powerful city-state in 400 BC during Greece's golden age, occupying a strategic position between northern Greece and the Peloponnese. The tragic fate of its royal dynasty, centred on the myth of Oedipus, rivalled that of ancient Mycenae. Although present-day Thiva has few vestiges of its past glory, the tragic fate of its royal dynasty, centred on the myth of Oedipus, rivalled that of ancient Mycenae.

After the Trojan War in the 12th century BC, Thiva became the dominant city of the Boeotia region. In 371 BC the city was victorious in battle against once-invincible Sparta. Thiva's glorious run ended abruptly in 335 BC, when it was sacked by Alexander the Great for rebelling against Macedonian control and siding with Persia. Alexander spared the temples, but not 6000 Thebans who died in the bloody battle. Another 30,000 were taken prisoner.

In keeping with its history, Thiva has an impressive **Archaeological Museum** (☎ 22620 27913;

admission €2; ☎ 8am-2.30pm Tue-Sat) which includes jewellery found in the Mycenaean palaces, terracotta masks and decorated sarcophagi. However, the museum has been closed for renovations since 2007, and is not scheduled to reopen until 2011.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Niovi (☎ 22620 29888; www.hotelniovi.gr; Epaminonda 63; s/d incl breakfast €43/55; ☎ ☑ ☑) This welcoming lodging manages to be both homey and modern, with flower pots adorning the marble interior stairs, satellite TV and free wi-fi. The hotel is adjacent to the *plateia* (square) and DIA supermarket, and a 10-minute stroll from the archaeological museum.

Dionysos Restaurant (☎ 22620 24445; mains €4-7.50) Welcoming proprietor Kypriotakis boasts of his oven-ready dishes made 'in the old Greek way', such as lamb in lemon sauce, and *pastitsio* (buttery macaroni and lamb).

Ladhokola (☎ 22620 28400; mains €5-8.50) Just opposite, on the square, this snappy eatery serves tasty grilled shrimp, chops and souvlakia (cubes of meat on skewers).

Getting There & Away

Buses operate to Athens (€7.40, 1½ hours, hourly) from Thiva's central **bus station** (☎ 22620 27512), 500m south of Plateia Agios Kalotinis. The bus stop (no phone) for Livadia and Delphi (€4.80, 50 minutes, five daily) is near the Shell petrol station and train station.

Trains from **Thiva station** (☎ 22620 27531), 100m north of the museum, depart for Athens (normal/intercity [IC] express €3.50/9.20, 75/60 minutes, 13 daily), and Thessaloniki (normal/IC express €12.60/33, four/5½ hours, 10 daily).

AROUND THIVA

The well-preserved 4th-century **Fortress of Eleftherae**, guarding the Kaza Pass over Mt Kythairon, stands between Athens and Thiva. According to mythology, baby Oedipus was left to perish on this mountain bordering ancient Attica before being rescued by a shepherd. History buffs can also inspect the **ruins** near Erythres, where the Battle of Plataea (479 BC) took place, marking the end of the Persian Wars. A road branching off to Porto Germeno leads to 4th-century-BC **Aigosthena**, with the best-preserved fortress walls in all Greece.