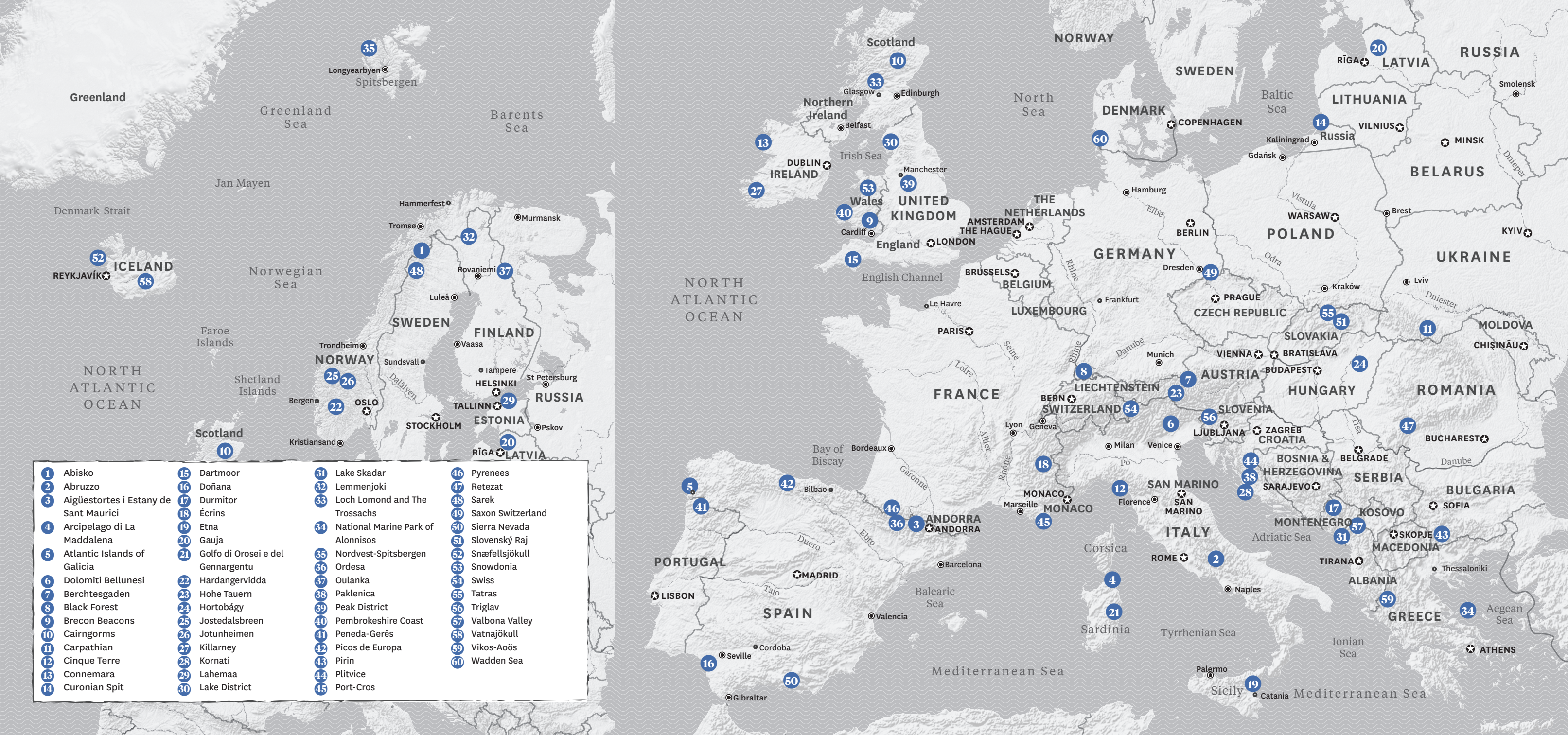


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Introduction

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

- 📍 The medieval fishing village of Manarola in the Cinque Terre.
- 📍 Dartmoor National Park.
- 📍 Plitvice National Park.
- 📍 Picos de Europa.

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GREECE

National Marine Park of Alonissos Northern Sporades

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



Boating away from Alonissos island into the heart of the marine park, you'll see dolphins leaping and spot dozens of bird species as you approach protected caves and islands. Fish will surround you as you snorkel the azure waters and, diving deeper below the surface, you'll discover ancient shipwrecks.

Greece's first marine park and Europe's largest marine protected area safeguards six islands and 22 uninhabited islets emanating from the one inhabited island of Alonissos. In Paleolithic times the islands were joined in a sheet of land with the other Sporades islands and mainland Thessaly. By the Middle Stone Age, humans had found a home at Kokkinokastro on Alonissos. The remains of a settlement here are perhaps the oldest in all of the Aegean. The story goes that the islands were later settled by the Minoans, who travelled from Crete in the 16th century BC, and it was they who introduced the vineyards and olive groves you still see today. Successive rulers

included Mycenaeans (Achilles' father is said to be buried here), Athenians, Romans, Venetians, Crusaders and Turks. Always a strategic spot along Mediterranean shipping routes, Alonissos weathered the many changes, and today you'll find a bustling harbour at Patitiri.

While humans were going through centuries of drama, the local sea life, birds and animals continued to thrive. The park was established to protect more than 300 species of fish and about 80 species of bird. *Gioura* (wild goats) are endemic to an island of the same name, and dolphins and whales cavort in these waters as well. But the reluctant star of the show is the terribly endangered Mediterranean monk seal (*Monachus monachus*). With only about 600 left worldwide, half of this rarest of seals are found in Greece, and the park's Piperi island is a main breeding ground.

■ The dreamy vista of Kyra Panagia beach on Karpathos.

Toolbox

When to go
Avoid crowds but dive freely into warm, aqua seas by visiting in June, September or October. July and August are packed with visitors.

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

Park in numbers

2260

Area covered (sq km)

80

Species of bird

10,200

Years that humans have been active in the park area

Hike this...



01 Palia (Old) Alonissos to Patitiri

Descend this 2.5km cobblestone trail from Alonissos' old capital to waterside Patitiri. The fortified houses were built to protect against pirates.

02 Kalovoulos Mountain

Climb the eastern side of this 325m mountain, dense with olive groves and pine forests, in time to arrive for sunset views over its steep western side.

03 Kyra Panagia Monastery

Boat to Kyra Panagia island, then walk up to this ancient monastery on an east-facing cliff. From AD 963 the island was a source of thyme honey, olives and wheat for the Mount Athos monasteries.

Stay here...

Liadromia Hotel
Patitiri's first hotel remains one of its finest. This welcoming and impeccably maintained place overlooks the harbour and has lashings of character. The gracious owner, Maria, takes pride in making it all work: from hand-embroidered curtains to rich buffet breakfasts.

Paradise Hotel
This neat-as-a-pin hotel lives up to its name with its gorgeous setting above a private swimming cove. Rooms have rustic stone floors and balconies, but the real standouts are the large pool area with sweeping sunset views, and the pathway leading to the water's edge.

Do this!

Boating
Zipping along the clear waters of the marine park is the highlight of any visit. Only authorised companies are allowed into the park's protected areas – head out with them to cruise azure coves, dive off the boat decks and picnic on white-sand beaches, or find ancient monasteries.

Diving
With waters plied by sailing ships since ancient times, the marine park offers the rare opportunity to play amateur underwater archaeologist. Dive deep, searching for over 300 species of fish as you seek Byzantine shipwrecks or jettisoned ancient amphorae.

What to spot...

Alonissos has a mild Mediterranean climate. Maquis and pine and cedar forests dot the land. Rare species include Eleonora'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 hide in partially submerged caves to breed.



Itinerary

Zip around azure seas in search of rare seals, falcons and wild goats. Dive in, too.

01 A day

Set out early by boat from Patitiri on Alonissos to take advantage of the cool morning temperatures and the best of the daylight hours. While the boat's captain will pick your route, a typical day would include cruising between the islands in the most protected areas of the park. You'll stop in azure bays to dive into the

crisp water and search for Mediterranean monk seals. If you're patient, you stand a great chance of seeing dolphins, even if the seals elude you. Or become a twitcher for the day: look for species like Audouin's gulls, shags and the mighty Eleonora's falcon, hunting on high. When you approach Gioura island, try to spot

the wild goats of the same name as they scramble up cliff faces. At Kyra Panagia island, anchor in one of the sheltered bays and walk up the wind-buffed eastern side to its 16th-century monastery. End the day back in the harbour at Patitiri sipping ouzo and snacking on *mezedhes* (small-appetiser plates).

