



21ST-CENTURY SPARTA

EXPLORE THE SLEEPY GREEK TOWN THAT MIGHTY
LEONIDAS ONCE CALLED HOME

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RIVING ALONG the main route into modern Sparta, with the grey mountains rising on one side and the fragrant olive groves on the other, you'd never know this nondescript Greek town was once the centre of a feared civilisation.

Just as warriors and diplomats did thousands of years before, you'll traverse a bridge across the Evrotas River, the lifeblood of the Peloponnese region. On its left bank sits the town of Sparta (or Sparti as it is known to the locals). Since the decline of Classical Greece, the town has lost much of its significance. In fact, it's even been invaded a number of times - by the Romans, the Ottomans and the Venetians. After Greece won its independence from the Ottoman Empire in 1830, the fledgling nation was looking to establish its identity, and for this it looked to the glory days of Classical Greece.

Sparta suddenly found itself at the centre of a grand government project. In 1834, King Otto declared that the small town bearing the name 'Sparta' was to become a city called 'Nea Sparti', designed to accommodate 100,000 inhabitants. A number of fine public buildings and private houses were built in the neoclassical style, blending Greece's ambitious vision for its future with its ancient past. If you take a stroll around Sparti's centre, you'll see many of these buildings still in use today, adorned by the blue and white stripes of the Greek flag.

Most of the hotels, shops, restaurants and tourist facilities in Sparta are to be found in the town centre, near the crossroads of Leoforos Likourgou and Konstantinos Palaiologou Street. If you arrive in the town by bus, the station is at one end of Likourgou. From here, you can catch coaches to Athens, Kalamata, Patras, Monemvasia and other fantastic destinations on the Greek mainland.

Like most Greek towns, Sparta is a little rough around the edges, but it has plenty of charm. Among the neoclassical public buildings and 20th-century apartment blocks, citrus trees spring up through the pavements. Don't be tempted to eat their produce, though - they're incredibly bitter, and the Greeks only use their peel to make curd after boiling them numerous times and adding heaps of sugar.

On a sunny day, the present-day citizens of Sparta will go about their working lives just like anywhere else in the world. Come lunchtime, don't be surprised if you see businessmen in suits drinking an iced coffee (frappe, as the locals call it) while sitting in a cafe making phonecalls. Meanwhile, the town squares - or plateia, since we're improving your Greek - are popular hangouts for teens and young people, especially in the early evenings. Be prepared to hear them chattering loudly, skateboarding or playing the latest pop hits on their phones.

The Taygetos Mountains loom above the modern-day city of Sparta



“ONCE YOU’VE EATEN YOUR WEIGHT IN HEARTY GREEK FOOD YOU’LL BE READY TO DO SOME EXPLORING”

If you're looking for a more traditional vibe, head to one of the town's tavernas, or more upscale 'estiatorios'. You'll be able to recognise them instantly, as the smell of thyme, olive oil and grilled meat will entice you in. Take a seat and enjoy the atmosphere, especially if there's a live laïkó music night going on. Be sure to order a side of Kalamata olives - they might be world famous, but here they're simply local produce.

Once you've eaten your weight in hearty Greek food and slept in a friendly B&B with the sound of cicadas serenading you to sleep, you'll be ready to do some exploring. If ancient Sparta is calling your name, the first place you'll want to visit are what remains of the formerly formidable city. The ruins are a bit scattered around town, but the main set of

relics lies on the hills just north of the centre.

They may not be as majestic as other archaeological sites in the region (such as Epidavros or Olympia), but nonetheless they are still very interesting. There's an ancient acropolis, including a temple and a well-preserved amphitheatre, lying among the olive trees. These ruins were first excavated in 1910 by the British School of Archaeology, but only partially - they weren't completely dug out until the 1990s. Walk up the dry, rocky path to explore what remains of the ancient city-state.

The oldest construction at the site is the Sanctuary of Athena Chalkioikos, which dates from the 6th century BCE. Unusually for the time, the interior of the temple was adorned with expensive copper sheets, which gave it its

name - 'Chalkioikos' is derived from the Greek word for copper. Inside the temple stood a magnificent statue of the goddess Athena, built by a Spartan craftsman. It bore the inscription 'Athena, Guardian of the City'. Some relics from the temple can be seen in the Archaeological Museum of Sparta, which isn't too far away.

The Sanctuary of Athena Chalkioikos features in a dramatic story told by Thucydides. King Pausanias, on the run from angry Spartans who accused him of conspiring with Persia, made a break for the sanctuary. He barricaded himself in, so the citizens decided to starve him out. When he was on the brink of death, they carried him outside the temple, where he died. After all, to have him die within the sanctuary would pollute its sacredness.

Just below the Sanctuary is the amphitheatre, which is a Roman construction. This was mostly used for public gatherings and celebrations and had a wooden stage on wheels. This is a bizarrely modern innovation for its time - a wheeled stage would take up less space and could possibly be used to adapt the area to suit the needs of different types of events put on there.





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The Evrotas River cuts a valley at the foot of Mount Taygetos and was once an artery for the ancient Spartans

Adjacent to the amphitheatre is the rubble of a few shops and stalls, which opportunist merchants used to sell their products to folks enjoying their time at the amphitheatre. Once again, these are Roman in origin and were made of bricks, mortar and plaster.

Just a few hundred metres away from the ancient Acropolis is the Sanctuary of Artemis Orthia, a ruin with a dark history. It was one of the most important religious sites in the entire region, originally home to a cult dedicated to worshipping Orthia, a pre-Olympian goddess. Depending on who you believe, it's said that young men were ritually whipped here, and their blood made a grisly offering to the insatiable goddess.

After you've seen what's left of these ancient constructions, you'll be itching to see what was inside them. That's where Sparta's Archaeological Museum comes in. Head back into town and buy your ticket for the bargain price of €2. There are seven halls inside this lovely neoclassical building. Each contains treasures from across the Laconia region, dating back from the Neolithic all the way up to the Roman periods. Some of the highlights include fragmented - but still grand - Roman mosaic floors once found in Spartan houses. There's also a 5th-century-BCE bust of a man purported to be King Leonidas, wearing a stunning - yet rather intimidating - helmet.

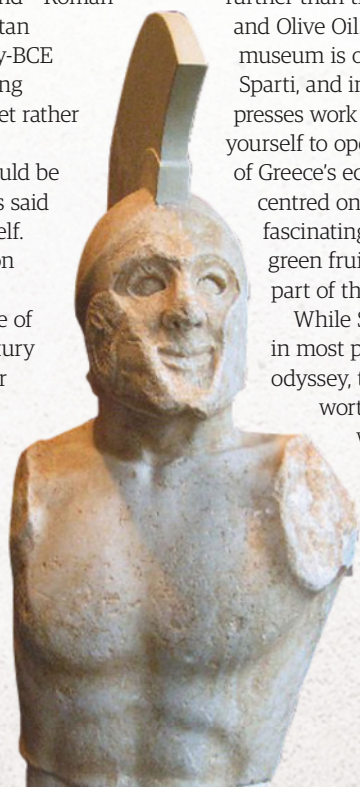
Naturally, no visit to Sparta would be complete without a visit to what's said to be the tomb of Leonidas himself. This mysterious, grey construction was unearthed in the late 19th century, but an inscription on one of the blocks dates it to the 5th century BCE. The 2nd-century geographer Pausanias writes that Leonidas was interred here after his death at the Battle of Thermopylae. While its two connected chambers would suggest that this construction was actually a thriving temple to Apollo, the locals insist that

the site is the final resting place of their proud warrior king. If you still require a Leonidas fix, you can also admire the impressive statue of him that stands tall and proud next to the ancient Acropolis.

Between the time of Leonidas and the present day, Sparta was largely abandoned. Instead, its Byzantine residents moved uphill to the settlement of Mystras, just a few kilometres away. Thanks to a flourishing economy and ideal climate, the town was hugely prosperous and became the headquarters for the province. Clinging to the edge of the hill, you can explore plenty of sun-baked churches, historic houses, ornate monasteries and even grand palaces showcasing the very finest of Byzantine architecture.

After getting your teeth into so much history, you might be hungry for something different. Luckily, you can enjoy another wonderful thing the Sparta region is famous for - olive oil. Greek olive oil is known worldwide for its verdant flavour, and the king of all Greek olives - the Kalamata variety - grows not too far from Sparta. So, if you'd like to learn more about the region's most sought-after product, look no further than the Museum of the Olive and Olive Oil. This beautifully laid-out museum is one of the top attractions in Sparta, and inside you can see how olive presses work - even by pushing a button yourself to operate one. With so much of Greece's economy (past and present) centred on olive oil production, it's fascinating to see how the humble green fruit has become such a key part of the country's identity.

While Sparta might not feature in most peoples' plans for a Greek odyssey, the place is still absolutely worth a visit. Whether you want to immerse yourself in its ancient culture or observe how its modern citizens live, there's a lot more to this typical Greek town than initially meets the eye.



HIKE UP MOUNT TAYGETOS

Standing at around 8,000 feet, Mount Taygetos is the tallest mountain in the Peloponnese peninsula. In the age of the Spartans, the foreboding mountain served as a natural defence against invaders, but it also served another, more gruesome, purpose. Criminals, the mentally ill, disabled children and others deemed 'unfit' to be a member of Spartan society were tossed into a deep chasm known as Kaiadas. Recent excavations from the University of Athens have confirmed findings of adult remains, but thus far, no unfortunate children have been found.

Today, Taygetos is a far cry from its ancient past, and the heavily wooded mountain is a popular hiking destination. Choose your route, starting from one of the villages around the base of the mountain, and hike its challenging paths. The east slope is where you'll find streams and forests, while the west slope is barren and features dramatic gullies. The best time to hike up the east slope is a day or so after it has rained - that way the intoxicating scent of the surrounding pine trees will be at its strongest.

For the adventurous, it's even possible to reach the summit, Profitis Ilias, where panoramic views of the gorgeous Peloponnese await you. Watching the Sun move across the sky from the top of this ancient peak is an experience that you will never forget.

