



AllWays Traveller

Monemvasia, Greece

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# So worth going those extra miles

The Greek municipality of Monemvasia sits at the south eastern tip of the country's Peloponnese region.

The Kastro (Castle Town) of Monemvasia, which is the 'must see' of the area, has been carved over the centuries from the cliff side of a rocky island located some 400 metres off shore.

This remarkable walled town is a maze of Byzantine, Ottoman, and Venetian houses dating back to the 13th century.

The ruins of the castle itself along with the original island settlement are perched atop the rock - one hundred metres above sea level.

Beyond the Kastro, visitors to this part of Greece will discover a more serene way of life with secluded beaches, small fishing ports and a genuinely warm welcome.

[www.monemvasia.gr/eng](http://www.monemvasia.gr/eng)

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## Aegean memories to cherish

By Ashley Gibbins

**The selling point for many a European short haul sunshine break is the convenience of the destination itself.**

An early morning flight will see one enjoying a late lunch on the beach or by the pool.

And within reason it can be any beach or any pool.

As long as there is sun, sea and the chance to sip something cool all is perfectly well.

The Greek Islands offer these tourist hot spots by the score - and there is nothing wrong with that.

So why choose to fly into Athens, pick up a car and drive four hours through to the southern most tip of the Peloponnese region?

Because that is what one has to do to get to Monemvasia.

That said, it is not an unattractive drive and there are small towns on route to stop for a coffee al fresco and a quick browse.

### **But is it worth it?**

If you are looking for a high-end break in a stunning part of Greece that is not yet on the main tourist trail - you bet it is!



### **Take a guided tour**



One of the best ways to appreciate the historical relevance of Monemvasia is to begin the visit with a guided tour.

Effie Anagnopoulou from the Greek Ministry of Culture, is one of a team excavating the ruins of the castle and the upper town.

But by pre-arrangement, via hotels in the area, she will provide a fascinating, highly insightful, English speaking tour.

In addition to the historic perspective, Effie points out the churches that scatter the old town (many built as a flagrant display of wealth by the Medieval merchants).

### **New Monemvasia**

Back across the causeway on the mainland is Gefyra (new Monemvasia), a pretty harbour village typical of those found around the Aegean and Mediterrean.

### **Neapoli**

Neapoli, the largest town in the area, is a traditional Greek seaside resort.

Built in 1837 on the site of the ancient town of Boeae, it has views of the islands of Elafonisos and Kythera and offers some of the best sunsets in the area.

The town has a Blue Flag beach and its waterfront promenade, with cafes, bars and restaurants is very popular.

The seafood restaurants offer fresh fish from the local fleet, one of the largest in Greece.

### **Geraki**

A Byzantine castle with views of the surrounding countryside is found a short hike from the traditional Greek village of Geraki.



## The Kinsterna Hotel

The Kinsterna is one of those places one wants to spend as much time in as possible - and to spend much time talking about when back home.

A 13th Century Byzantine-era mansion, the Kinsterna sits quietly yet majestically on a hillside overlooking the Aegean Sea and its own vineyard.

The property, which over the years was left to crumble, has been lavishly and lovingly restored by Antonis Sgardelis, a civil engineer by trade.

Antonis was encouraged to buy the land and derelict buildings by locals, who saw the olive trees as a reason for the investment.

But for Antonis, it was the house and its heritage that, he knew, needed to be celebrated.

What followed was a five-year project of meticulous renovation and careful enhancement.

No corners were cut or costs shaved because, from the outset.

(See A place to stay by Ann below)

Antonis realised that his work would secure the future of the mansion for many, many years to come.

Initially it was intended that this would be a family home but, gradually, it became clear to Antonis that his mansion deserved a life as a hotel.

As a result, discerning travellers can relax and make this mansion their home, albeit for a short while.

And so whether it be sat in the hotel courtyard gazing out to sea, or sitting by the pool gazing up at the mansion lit pale cream by the sun, one is sorely tempted to stay at the hotel and just sit and gaze.

## Monemvasia

The Kinsterna provides an excellent base from which to tour the Monemvasia area. And although a car is a necessity, everything that should be on the itinerary is within a relatively short drive.

### The Kasto

First on the list will be the Kasto, (castle town) of Monemvasia.

Built on a small rocky island this was, for centuries, one of the major sea trading Aegean ports.

The island itself was created by a major earthquake in 375 AD, and originally Monemvasia referred only to the fortress and castle town that was built on it.

In recent times it became the name for the south eastern part of Peloponnese.



[www.monemvasia.gr](http://www.monemvasia.gr)

### Gerakas

Gerakas is a traditional port village located in a fjord-like inlet with a range of fish 'tavernas' and cafes offering views of sea and mountain.

The fish taverns along the waterfront are owned by fishermen so the freshness of the menu is assured.

### The mountain villages of Zarakas

Located among the rugged slopes of Mt. Parnon, the mountain villages of Zarakas have retained their traditional architecture due to the difficulty of gaining access to the region until recent times.

Thousands of sheep and goats graze on the mountain slopes.

Riechia, the main village, has a folklore museum with exhibits from Zarakas' history.

The village is also the start of the Balogairi gorge, an attraction for hikers.

Harakas is a small settlement whose buildings are in the traditional architectural style.

On the road to Kyparissi is the Stavros gorge, with its views and hiking trail that ends at the isolated beach of Piliza.

At Lambokambos, the Doukas organic winery is open to visitors.

### Velanidia

Velanidia, one of the most attractive villages in the area, lies in the mountain range surrounding Neapoli.

Its white, traditional tiled-roof houses form an amphitheatre on the slopes of Mt. Krithina, with a view of the Myrtoon Sea.

A popular hiking path goes to the recently renovated Cape Maleas lighthouse, built in 1860.

There is also a pebble beach right next to the little port.

### The beaches



[www.monemvasia.gr](http://www.monemvasia.gr)

A string of fine secluded beaches are to be found along Monemvasia's Aegean and Mediterranean coastlines including :

### Ampelakia beach

The closest beach to the Kinsterna is a 20 minute walk down the valley from the hotel.



## All in a name

The name Monemvasia is derived from two Greek words, 'mone' and 'emvasia', meaning single entrance and refers to the narrow causeway, which remains the only way across from the mainland.

The ruins of the castle and parts of the original castle walls can be spotted high up on the cliff top.

Within these walls the first fortified settlement was built, followed by the lower part of the town, which was also walled.

This, with the causeway, gave Monemvasia a three pronged protection against attack - but also was its strategic weakness.

Being an island, and without running water, supplies to Monemvasia could be cut off were it held under siege (which is invariably what happened).

However the ability to stall inevitable defeat did give the Monemvasia merchants time to negotiate an orderly surrender.

### Continuing to prosper

So whoever ruled the rock, its merchant residents continued to prosper.

Monemvasia has been inhabited since the 6th Century, but it was during the later Byzantium and Turk Ottoman periods (12th to 18th Centuries), that the town enjoyed a prolonged heyday as a major commercial centre and trading port.

Some estimates have up to 40,000 living there during this period.

The area first became part of Greece following the Greek War of Independence in the early 19th century.

## Elafonissos



[www.elafonisostour.com](http://www.elafonisostour.com)

The island of Elafonissos is known to be one of the finest beach islands in Greece and the most popular in the area.

The white sands and transparent blue waters are among the best in the Mediterranean.

Elafonissos is reached via a short ferry ride from the mainland.

### Plitra beach

Plitra is a quiet fishing village and its blue flag beach is popular with families who enjoy its safe, shallow waters.

### Glyfada/Michada Beach

This secluded beach, which is a 45 minute drive from Monemvasia, offers white pebbles and blue-green waters.

### Kastania Cave

One of the most impressive caves in Greece can be found near the village of Kastania.

The route to the cave follows a winding mountain road leading through the forest-covered eastern slopes of Mt. Parnon.

The cave was formed from limestones during the Jurassic age and covers 1,500 square metres separated into two levels with visitors guided along a 500-meter route.

### The petrified forest



[www.elafonisostour.com](http://www.elafonisostour.com)

Just east of Neapoli lies an impressive petrified forest by the sea where one can see parts of palm trees that have turned to stone.

### Scuba diving the ancient city of Pavlopetri

For scuba divers, the remains of the lost Ancient city of Pavlopetri can be explored across from the island of Elafonissos.

It is believed that Pavlopetri was submerged around 1000 BC by the first of three major earthquakes in the area suffered.

Although eroded over the centuries, the town layout remains as it was.

### More information :

[www.monemvasia.gr/en](http://www.monemvasia.gr/en)

## Visiting Monemvasia today

Many of the properties that were once homes to rich merchants are now enjoying a renaissance as boutique hotels, small bars and restaurants.

Unfortunately the remains of the original castle and its upper town are being excavated by archaeologists from the Greek Culture Ministry and public access is currently denied.

What still remains 'open for business' is the lower town, which is a maze of narrow alleyways that wind through a veritable historic montage of architectural styles.

Even properties awaiting renovation offer the proverbial 'Kodak' moment with wild red poppies, sun flowers and geraniums adding colourful splashes to the sun scorched brickwork and faded doorways.



## The Kinsterna Hotel : [www.kinsternahotel.gr](http://www.kinsternahotel.gr)



By Ann Mealor

Set on 18 acres of hillside, the Kinsterna Hotel or 'mansion' as it is known, overlooks terraces of well kept and bushy olive trees, some of which are hundreds of years old and have been farmed over many generations.

From the mansion patios and courtyards one can admire the tall, willowy Cyprus and scented eucalyptus trees; the small gardens with brightly coloured flowers; neat vegetable patches and the hotel's vineyard; the rock of Monemvasia and, of course, the beautiful blue Aegean Sea.

The picturesque scenery, the gently trickling spring water and delicate scent of orange blossom add to the serenity and tranquillity of the place.

This is a wonderful Byzantine manor house with many original features.

### The Rooms

Our bedroom, a cosy suite of two rooms linked by a narrow, mirror corridor was full of interest and character.

An original stone fireplace was the main feature of the sitting room, which overlooked the gardens and courtyards.

The bedroom looked out onto a private courtyard terrace with views across the mansion, hillside and sea.

But then every room at the Kinsterna has a character and style of its own: some have original fireplaces from the Ottoman era; one features a typical Byzantium dome, another is thought to feature part of the old monastic kitchen.

The rooms in the newly built extension are more modern and larger, but are still furnished and designed in keeping with the mansion.

### Dining at is a pure pleasure

The estate produces its own olives, oranges, lemons, grapes, herbs and vegetables and the kitchen uses this fresh produce in its two restaurants.

The orange juice, lemonade and olive oil are superb and the Kinsterna's own red, white and rose wine is of a very high quality.

Breakfasts were particularly enjoyable as the food was freshly prepared, and there was a great selection of dishes to choose from.

It was glorious eating outside in the sun, looking out at the mansion or over the terraces, so we made each breakfast a long and leisurely one.

Fine dining outside in the evening was also a treat.

### The Spa

The Spa at Kinsterna is chic, modern and relaxing, with a cool, dark grey stone interior lit by a mix of stylish lamps and flickering candles.

I enjoyed the Golden Veil Lifting Facial, which claims to help reduce the depth of wrinkles and soften the skin using Fleur products from the French Phytomer range.

My skin looked wonderful afterwards and my wrinkles did appear softened. My skin certainly looked brighter and the tone more even.

The results of the facial lasted days and it was a thoroughly enjoyable experience

[www.kinsternahotel.gr](http://www.kinsternahotel.gr)

See also :

*AllWays traveller to the Kinsterna Hotel : \*\*\*\*\**



## A snapshot of Monemvasia



[www.monemvasia.gr](http://www.monemvasia.gr)

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