

LITTLE IS THE LIGHT

Nostalgic travels in the mini states of Europe

by Vitali Vitaliev

SAMPLE CHAPTER:

3. Mount Athos

The mountain path was steep and narrow. Strewn with rough, shapeless rocks and mule droppings, it wound mercilessly uphill along the edge of an abyss, and it seemed endless. Cicadas chirred deafeningly, as if they were laughing at us. The white-hot disc of the midday sun with several fluffy clouds around it – like a giant freshly cooked portion of bacon-and-eggs – glared at us from the blue sizzling frying pan of the Hellenic sky. Puffing like an early steam-engine, I trudged higher and higher up the track, scaring tiny agile lizards from under my trainers. My feet felt stiff and alien, as if I was walking on stilts, and streams of hot, salty sweat were pouring down my forehead.

At last, when I thought I wouldn't be able to take another step for a million pounds, I looked up and saw *him*. In his monastic *klobuk* hat he was standing on the path, blue robes and black beard flying in the breeze, and pointing at the square building of the nearby *skete*, resembling an obscure Cyrillic letter. In loose, worn sandals, he could have been mistaken for a mirage or an Old Testament apparition, were it not for the inscription on the fringe of the grey satin trousers showing from under his habit: 'Property of the Mount Sinai Military Hospital'.

It was Father Spiridon, the chief monk of St Anna *skete*, a small and secluded monastery. He came down to greet us, four London-based journalists turned hikers. He brought mules, one for each of us, and for the last several hundred metres to the *skete* we rode on their uncomplaining backs – a huge relief for us, if not for the mules . . .

This two-hour climb was by far the hardest moment of our three days at Mount Athos, the self-governing Orthodox monastic mini-state on the Halkidiki peninsula in Northern Greece.

The trip was organised by the Halkidiki Hotel Association in conjunction with a London public relations company. In journalistic jargon such trips are called 'freebies', since all the travel costs are carried by the sponsors.

The information booklet, sent to us in advance, promised long boat transfers, rides in trucks and on mules on very rough tracks, basic dormitory accommodation, frugal meals of bread, soup, olives, cucumber and fruit, and 'very early starts'. Among the useful items to be taken with us, the booklet listed insect repellent, torch, pocket knife and gifts for the monks such as 'a book, tea, coffee or a pen'.

As a heavy smoker, I was mostly put off by the smoking ban in the town of Karies, Mount Athos' capital, and in the monasteries. I even phoned the public relations company and said I was not going if not allowed to smoke. 'Don't worry,' was the reply. 'Most monks smoke.' 'And drink too?' I enquired sarcastically. 'Yes.' I thought it was a good joke.

It took us six weeks to get our *diamonitirions*, the official permits for visiting Mount Athos, from the Ministry for Northern Greece in Thessaloniki. The documents, signed by all five members of Mount Athos's ruling Holy Council, looked more like honorary diplomas or certificates of higher education than just visas. The Holy Mountain (another name for Mount Athos) is one of the world's most exclusive places, and the number of foreign visitors is limited to no more than ten a week.

'There are not going to be any ladies on this trip. I hope it won't lead to excessive drinking,' Doug Goodman, the PR company director and an inveterate traveller, who was to accompany us on the journey, told us at Heathrow. 'By the way, there has been a small last-minute change in our itinerary: we are not going to Mount Athos and shall just look at some nice hotels in Halkidiki,' he added with a wry smile.

'Oh, no!' we moaned in chorus: Mount Athos was the only reason we agreed to go on this trip, and Doug, who had taken hacks there before, was well aware of this. Luckily, it proved to be just another of his lovely jokes. He had a dry, if somewhat cruel, sense of humour.

Our Thessaloniki-bound aircraft finally took off after a long delay 'due to the problems in Yugoslavia,' as it was put by our Greek captain. 'But the weather is nice, and we are going to see lots of beautiful places,' he added apologetically.

The dark-eyed and sharp-nosed Greek hostesses were serving drinks, and a buxom Greek peasant woman next to me ordered a beer. I had three hours to think about the mysterious religious place I was going to, and about religion as such.

I have never been religious, despite the fact that I spent the first three years of my life in Zagorsk (now Sergiyev Possad), a town near Moscow which was the centre of the Russian Orthodox Church. My parents worked at a secret nuclear weapons factory located on premises of the old monastery, where crosses on the gates were simply replaced with red stars. My first childhood impressions were linked with the chiming of church bells, the black-robed priests and the time-worn icons displayed in the windows of log cabins next to portraits of Stalin.

My parents were at work all day and had to hire a childminder, an old religious woman, to look after me. Once, coming home from work, they saw her with me in a bundle in her arms standing near the church and asking for alms to feed 'the poor little orphan' (i.e. me).

My parents didn't perceive me as an orphan, and the begging childminder was sacked the following day. As she left, she boasted of having christened me secretly, though no one knew if she really meant it.

This must be the reason why, though not a believer in any gods, I am nevertheless terribly superstitious. I constantly keep my fingers crossed, even in my sleep or when writing. Every five minutes I spit thrice over my shoulder. I touch wood whenever I see it. I never shake hands over a threshold, and if a black cat or a woman with empty buckets crosses my way, I go back home. Does it help, you might ask? It sure does! I am a very lucky man in a way. Not that I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth, it was more like a fork, I guess, but at least my mouth wasn't empty . . .

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