

THE TIMES

The underrated corner of Greece that's lovely year-round

Pindus National Park is one of the least visited (and most spectacular) in Europe. Base yourself at this family-run spa hotel for hikes, truffle-hunting and more



The village of Metsovo in the region of Epirus

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When I told people I was heading to Greece in early October they all said the same thing: "Lucky you, one last shot of summer." They were picturing hidden coves and sun-drenched seaside villages and swimming in a sparkling sea.

They were wrong. I wasn't heading for the coast or the islands. Instead I was going to the foothills of the remote Pindus National Park in the northwest of the country, nearly three hours' drive inland from the port city of Thessaloniki. One of the least visited national parks in Europe, it's home to dense forests, magnificent rivers and the country's largest mountain range. I was hoping for uncrowded trails with grand panoramas, cosy evenings by the fire and mountains of cheese. Happily, I found all that and more at a perfect base camp.

The place to stay in these parts is the Grand Forest Metsovo, a family-run hotel opposite the traditional alpine village of Metsovo in the region of Epirus. With scattered buildings following the natural architecture of the private mountain on which it sits, the hotel has an outdoor infinity pool for summer months (June-August) and a spa, while inside you'll find locally made furniture, traditional woven textiles and far-reaching views.

It has been here for more than a decade and is run by the daughter of the original owner, who had his vision for the hotel long before the nearby motorway allowed easy access. Villagers used to laugh at his grand plans as he pointed out the spot on the mountain. It's unlikely they're laughing now.

What you need to know

- **Where is it?** In northwestern Greece, two and a half hours' drive inland from Thessaloniki.
- **Who will love it?** Outdoors enthusiasts and people who love to get off the beaten path.
- **Insider tip** You can reserve an hour of free private access to the spa's pool, hot tub, sauna and hammam between noon and 5.30pm.

The hotel is open year-round and there are perks whatever season you visit. There's cross-country skiing in winter (the country's oldest and newest resorts are nearby); stand-up paddleboarding on lakes and swimming in waterfalls in the summer; and hiking in spring and autumn as flowers bloom and leaves turn gloriously golden. No matter when you visit, a long weekend here is all about making the most of the great outdoors, which is right on your doorstep.



The Grand Forest Metsovo has spectacular views

CHRISTOS DRAZOS/LEADING HOTELS OF THE WORLD

Horseriding and hiking on the doorstep

From the front door you can step straight onto steep private trails that wind their way up into the forest of black pines that can grow up to 45m. Or you can join the Ursa Trail, a 25-mile hiking path that's used for an annual trail-running event. The name for the trail comes from the Eurasian brown bears that live here, though you're unlikely to spot one unless you're very lucky (or unlucky, depending on your perspective) — they tend to stay hidden in the remotest corners of the landscape.

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It's particularly fun to enjoy the views from the trails surrounding the hotel from the back of a friendly horse (three hours for two from £190, including a picnic; book at the hotel). I hadn't been riding since I was a kid, mainly because I remember being terrified. But I thought, when in Greece...

Dimitris Godevenos, in charge of the stables during our visit, took one look at me and offered Marco, a 27-year-old dark chocolate horse who likes a slow and steady pace, with plenty of stops for munching on the long grass and drinking from the spring. My friend Nick had the rather more rambunctious Billy. The horses were skilled on narrow paths that revealed new views at every turn.



The stables at the hotel

CHRISTOS DRAZOS

One of the best ways to see the Pindus National Park proper is to organise an off-road jeep tour with a local guide, setting off first thing in the morning (nine hours for four £470, including lunch; book at the hotel). The region is known for its cheese (don't miss the semi-hard, smoked metsovone), and on the half-hour drive through caramel-coloured farmland you'll spot herds of cows and flocks of sheep before heading into the park along a steep dirt track.

In addition to bears, this is an important habitat for wolves, wild boars and Balkan chamois, but you're more likely to spot birds of prey such as hawks, falcons and golden eagles, as well as trout and alpine newts. Nearly a third of the country's flora can be found here too — more than 1,800 species, including endemic varieties such as Pindos snowbells and netted irises.

Snow flurries and lunch by the lake

Our guide for the day in this protected forest, also known as the Valia Caldera, was charming Georgio Karagiannis of Epirus Adventures (epirusadventures.com). He peppered the day with facts, bending down to point out tiny, adorable frogs you'd otherwise miss in puddles and highlighting the trees at varying altitudes, from black pines and white pines to beeches.



Lizzie Frainier out hiking in the national park

On our visit even Karagiannis was gobsmacked by the views. A flurry of snow had arrived on the mountaintops the night before, meaning we had a rare chance to see the autumn colours glisten against a backdrop of powdery white snow. In Greece. In October. It was totally surreal. I delighted in the crunch of the snow under my boots, sprinting up the mountain in silly wonder. Like many good things it was fleeting — as we descended into the valley where it was a couple degrees warmer we could see it melting off the tree branches alongside the road until it was no more.

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We continued to explore, getting out of the car for hikes along impressive streams, waterfall sightings and snack stops courtesy of an overflowing picnic basket from the hotel. Spinach and feta pies are popular all over Greece, but in this region they are double the usual thickness and extra moreish. After several hours we'd seen only two other vehicles and a handful of motorbikes (although naturally in summer it's busier).

After leaving the park we finished the day with a late alfresco lunch overlooking the sprawling artificial Aaos Lake, 12 miles north of Metsovo at an altitude of 1,350m. The shoreline twists and turns in a delightfully curvaceous way, with many islets dotted around. Karagiannis had brought a camping stove to make *trahanas*, a comforting dish made with a traditional Greek dried pasta of fermented milk and wheat shaped like small pebbles. There are many different iterations; his version added plenty of feta cheese and paprika.



The modern fireplace in a cosy room at Grand Forest Metsovo

CHRISTOS DRAZOS PHOTOGRAPHY

On the hunt for truffles

Another must-do while you are here is the truffle-hunting experience, a 30-minute drive away in more mountainous forests (£310 for two, including dinner; book at hotel). The set-up feels wonderfully authentic given that it takes place at the home of the truffle expert Katerina Nola. Hunts are led by Nola or a member of her all-female team, heading off the property and into the woods.

You'll also be accompanied by one of the nine adorable lagotto romagnolo dogs, which can smell a truffle from 50m away. They are trained with milk infused with truffles as pups, and know three words (in Greek): come, go and search. Note that they love the taste, so you'll have to be quick once they start digging — otherwise you can kiss your truffle goodbye. I was smitten with Rocky, chasing after him as he followed his nose through woods dotted with pretty purple cyclamen.

You can hunt for truffles here year-round, with different varieties of black and white truffle available in different seasons. The latter is rarer and more expensive, and can go for £2,650 a kilo. Afterwards we arrived at a cute open-faced cabin in Nola's garden for a three-course feast with rustic bread and local wine. And yes, there are generous shavings of truffles in every course — even dessert. It's the kind of evening that feels a little bit magic.

Exploring the town of Metsovo

If you want a sprinkling of history and culture added into your long weekend, there are a few spots to keep you occupied on the cobblestone streets of hilly Metsovo. To understand this town, though, it helps to know a little about George Averoff, a Greek businessman and philanthropist from the 1800s whose influence seems to be everywhere.



The cobblestone streets of hilly Metsovo
GETTY IMAGES

First there's the Katogi Averoff winery, which does interesting tours and tastings; legend has it that Averoff smuggled cabernet sauvignon grapes back in his diplomatic suitcase from Châteaux Margaux in Bordeaux in the hope of creating a vineyard that could compete with those in France (from £17; katogjaveroff.gr). There's also the Averoff Gallery, which may be small but has many important Greek works from the 19th and 20th century (£4; averoffmuseum.gr). And there's the Metsovo Folk Art Museum, with traditional dresses, jewellery and more on display in the house where Averoff lived towards the end of his life (£2.50; metsovomuseum.gr).

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However you choose to spend your days, there are plenty of ways to recuperate at the hotel. Despite starting to look a little tired, the spa is a nice place to relax, with its indoor pool, another indoor heated pool with jets, a sauna, steam room and treatments (60-minute treatments from £66). There's also the seriously sexy bar, with timber roof beams and sofas for sinking into with a crackling fire in a modern fireplace, and the terraces of the cosy rooms (some with tubs) that look out over the mountain.

My favourite way to recover from a big hike though? Tucking into a feast — and it's easy to do that here. Breakfast is a huge buffet with local cheeses from small producers, strawberry tree honey, *bougatsa* (a semolina custard pastry), pancakes with feta, and of course, more local pies. You can also order a la carte: try the *strapatsada* eggs (scrambled with tomato and barrel feta cheese). There are casual meals at lunch in the restaurant and all-day in the bar upstairs, and a fine-dining menu in the evenings at the aforementioned restaurant, Metsovo 1350m, named for its elevation. The cooking here is elegant and delicious — think trout tartare and potato gnocchi with smoked eel and chanterelles — but it's the feta doughnuts at lunchtime that I cannot stop thinking about: crispy on the outside, cloud-like inside (mains from £21).

Trust me on this one. If you stop chasing the coastline and head into the mountains you'll find a secret worth sharing.

Lizzie Frainier was a guest of Grand Forest Metsovo ([grand-forest.gr](https://www.grand-forest.gr)) which has B&B doubles from £240. Fly to Thessaloniki

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