

# CRADLE OF ORTHODOX MONASTICISM:

## Mt. ATHOS - ΑΓΙΟΝ ΟΡΟΣ

Taiganides, Ελισσαίος Paul, [editor@greekethos.org](mailto:editor@greekethos.org)

One of the holiest, historical, and one of the most scenic tourist attractions of Greece, or maybe even of the world, it is *UN World Heritage Site*, is the **Mt. Athos** peninsula, the eastern-most of the 3 legs of Chalkidiki province [map], southeast of the city of Thessaloniki, capital of Macedonia. Millions of tourists flog into the



beautiful beaches of Chalkidiki every summer, but not to the third peninsula. Why? Because, **no female**, human or animal, is allowed on the “Mountain” by a decree of Byzantine Emperor Alexios Komnenos [not unlike Olympic Games where women not even mothers of athletes were allowed to watch the Games]. Yet, the peninsula is called *Inheritance and Garden of the Mother of God*. Legend has it that **Virgin Mary** rested on Athos when her ship to Cyprus was thrown off course by high winds.

Even males cannot visit without first getting not easy-to-get visa because Mt Athos is an **independent autonomous state** within the republic of Greece with its own constitution, a charter that was decreed by Emperor Tsimiskis in 972. Another major uniqueness of Mt Athos is that is officially recognized as the “**Holy Mountain**”, [**ΑΓΙΟΝ ΟΡΟΣ**], decreed so by Emperor Constantinos IX, in 1046.

Mt Athos is a welcoming haven of spiritual tranquility in a world that every day is getting more materialistic. It is worth noting that in these days when acquiring riches are the goals of most, there are indeed young men who forsake the comforts of that type of life, choose poverty, and devote themselves to a monastic life of daily prayer and isolation away from TV, radio, and scandalous ads.

The prevalent notion is that those who choose such life are weak who want to escape competition. Not so! I know of a financially well-endowed friend in Greece whose 2 sons and 3 daughters, all well educated and extremely talented, have chosen monasticism, but it was out of deep conviction that the life they chose is of higher calling, **servicing the glory of God**.

Monks attend ecclesiastical services in the middle of the night chanting those beautiful hymns that our Byzantine forefathers composed.

Visitors can sit alone by the terrace of their isolated cell gazing at the historical blue Aegean Sea contemplating without being bombarded with commercials and time commitments. One can invite one of the

monks to chat and explore the **Power of Faith**. Many of the monks have written scholarly books, are being invited as guest speakers in forums around the world. There are, of course, unique physical sights on the Mt. Athos peninsula whose forested summit rise to 6000 feet right off the sea. Some monasteries have spectacular architecture [*see fotos*], built off the rocky cliffs washed by the white froth of the ferocious waves of the Aegean Sea. They are indeed impressive sites. All the monasteries have precious libraries full of religious and secular books hand copied and hand painted by monks before the printing machines were invented, thus preserving our heritage, plus priceless icons painted by famous hagiographers like **Theophanes** of Crete, **Panselenos** of Macedonia, et al.

The number of visitors to Mt Athos is increasing exponentially. Every man, no female, must apply for a visa for a 4-day stay. **Prince Charles** of England is a regular visitor, but his is a pilgrimage. He comes with an entourage of officials, intellectuals, scholars who spend some of their time clearing walk paths that used to connect the monasteries. **President Putin** of Russia comes to Mt Athos, and so do other heads of State. There are Russian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Romanian, and Ukrainian among the 20 monasteries. One of the saddest days was in September 2004, when the helicopter carrying **Patriarch Petros of Alexandria** and of All Africa, a bright star of Orthodoxy, plus 9 others went down just before reaching Mt Athos killing everyone.

Young people take their backpacks and walk the mountain paths enjoying its unique flora, history, heritage of the spiritual power of the cradle of monasticism, bastion of Christian Orthodoxy, the holy place for the renewal of Christian values.

The aerial fotos below showing the magnificence of some of the more spectacular monasteries are taken from [www.ert.gr](http://www.ert.gr)!



They say once you visit Mt Athos that you will continue to return; spiritual yearning is inherent in our **Greek ethos**!