

# Central Greece

## Κεντρική Ελλάδα



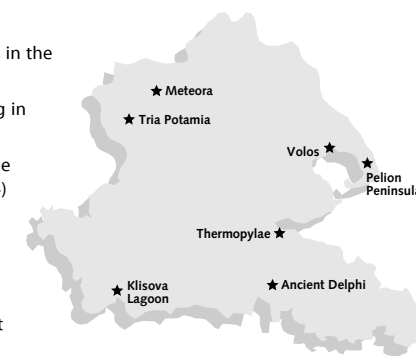
It's no coincidence that the rugged terrain of central Greece was the setting for heroic struggles among the gods and mortals. Journeys to this region provide glimpses of the essential character of the Greek people, along with plenty of outdoor adventures and unforgettable landscapes. The ruins at Delphi, where Alexander the Great sought the advice of the famous oracle of Delphi, remain one of Greece's most inspiring archaeological sites and are also the starting point for hikes that follow ancient footpaths. The northern region of Thessaly is home to the monastery-topped pinnacles of Meteora, with buildings dating from the 14th century. The spectacular columns of rock are not only a mecca for Greek Orthodox pilgrims, but also home to world-class rock climbing, with over 100 sandstone peaks and towers to choose from.

To the east lies the Pelion Peninsula, crisscrossed with old cobblestone donkey paths that link lush mountain hamlets with seaside coves and fishing villages. Sandy beaches rival the best of the Aegean islands, but without the crowds. According to Greek mythology, it was in nearby Volos that Jason and the Argonauts set sail in search of the Golden Fleece, in a boat made from timbers of the Pelion forests.

Overlooking the Gulf of Corinth, the steep slopes of Mt Parnassos invite modern-day hikers to retrace ancient walking trails. River-rafting opportunities abound in the South Pindos ranges, and the high alpine meadows are perfect for breezy summer hikes. To the south, nearer to Athens, are the Byzantine frescoes of Osios Loukas, the most famous in Greece. And to the southwest, natural wetlands and wildlife sanctuaries stretch from the Corinthian Gulf west to the Ionian Sea.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- **Live Music** Dancing in the bouzouki clubs in the old Palaia district of Volos (p253)
- **Go with the flow** White-water river rafting in the Tria Potamia (p264) region
- **Walking Haven** Following the cobblestone village trails of the Pelion Peninsula (p254)
- **Don't Look Down** Climbing the Tower of the Holy Ghost rock pinnacle at Meteora (p267)
- **Meditative Moment** Seeking a sunrise at the Sanctuary of Athena (p234) in Ancient Delphi
- **Photo Op** Spotting great cormorant and egret seabirds diving into Klisova Lagoon (p242)
- **Historical Experience** Standing where 300 Spartans bravely defended Thermopylae (p246)



■ POPULATION: 1.9 MILLION

■ AREA: 37,042 SQ KM

## STEREA ELLADA ΣΤΕΡΕΑ ΕΛΛΑΔΑ

Wherever you go in Sterea Ellada, the mythology and history of Greece seem to mingle in the rugged and scenic landscape. On the slopes of Mt Parnassos, overlooking the Gulf of Corinth, sits Delphi, regarded by the ancient Greeks as the centre of the world. Beyond Delphi, the lands stretch east to Attica, where legendary King Oedipus met his fate, and west to Messolongi, where British bard Lord Byron died of fever during the Greek War of Independence. In fact, the region acquired the name Sterea Ellada (Mainland Greece) in 1827, as part of the newly formed Greek state.

Sterea Ellada is bordered by the narrow gulfs of Corinth and Patra in the south, and Epiros to the north. This mountainous region is known as the 'Agrafa' or 'unrecorded', so named during the Turkish occupation, when the hard-to-reach mountain villages were written off for tax purposes as uncollectable. Today, these same mountains are prized for their beauty, and explored by hikers and river rafters alike.

### THIVA (THEBES) ΘΗΒΑ

pop 22,100

Thiva, the birthplace of Hercules and Dionysos, was a powerful city-state in 400 BC during Greece's golden age, occupying a strategic position between northern Greece and the Peloponnese. The tragic fate of its royal dynasty, centred on the myth of Oedipus, rivalled that of ancient Mycenae. Present-day Thiva has few vestiges of its past glory, except those that can be viewed within the Archaeological Museum (see right).

After the Trojan War in the 12th century BC, Thiva became the dominant city of the Boeotia region. In 371 BC the city was victorious in battle against once-invincible Sparta. Thiva's glorious run ended abruptly in 335 BC, when it was sacked by Alexander the Great for rebelling against Macedonian control and siding with Persia. Alexander spared the temples, but not 6000 Thebans who died in the bloody battle. Another 30,000 were taken prisoner.

### Archaeological Museum

In keeping with its history, Thiva has an impressive **Archaeological Museum** (☎ 22620 27913; admission €2; 🕒 8am-2.30pm Tue-Sat) documenting its place in Greek history and mythology. However, the museum is closed for renovations and not scheduled to reopen until 2009.

The collection includes tablets of Linear B script and jewellery found in the Mycenaean palaces, along with terracotta masks and decorated sarcophagi, unique to mainland Greece.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Hotel Niovi** (☎ 22620 29888; www.hotelniovi.gr; Epaminonda 63; s/d incl breakfast €38/43; 🏠 📺) Look for the red-and-black sign at the well-managed Niovi, adjacent to the *plateia* (square). Rates include buffet breakfast, free wi-fi and satellite TV.

**Dionysos Restaurant** (☎ 22620 24445; mains €4-7.50) Friendly owner and host Kyriotakis boasts of his oven-ready dishes such as lamb in lemon sauce, and *pastitsio* (layers of buttery macaroni and seasoned minced lamb) made 'in the old Greek way' at this welcoming eatery on the square.

### Getting There & Away

Bus routes operate to Athens (€7, 1½ hours, hourly) and Livadia (€3.90, 45 minutes, five daily) from Thiva's central **bus station** (☎ 22620 27512), 500m north of the central *plateia*.

Trains from **Thiva station** (☎ 22620 27531) depart for Athens (normal/express €3.50/9.20, 75/60 minutes, 10 daily), and Thessaloniki (normal/express €12.60/32.50, four/5½ hours, four daily).

### AROUND THIVA

The well-preserved 4th-century **Fortress of Elefthera**, guarding the Kaza Pass over Mt Kythairon, stands between Athens and Thiva. According to mythology, baby Oedipus was left to perish on this mountain bordering ancient Attica before being rescued by a shepherd. History buffs can also inspect the ruins near Erythres, where the **Battle of Plataea** (479 BC) took place, marking the end of the Persian Wars. A road branching off to Porto Germeno leads to 4th-century-BC **Aigosthena**, with the best-preserved fortress walls in all Greece.

If you want to travel here en route from Athens to Delphi, the best way is via the national highway, with a turn-off that takes

