



The rocks surrounding the Vikos gorge viewed from the monastery

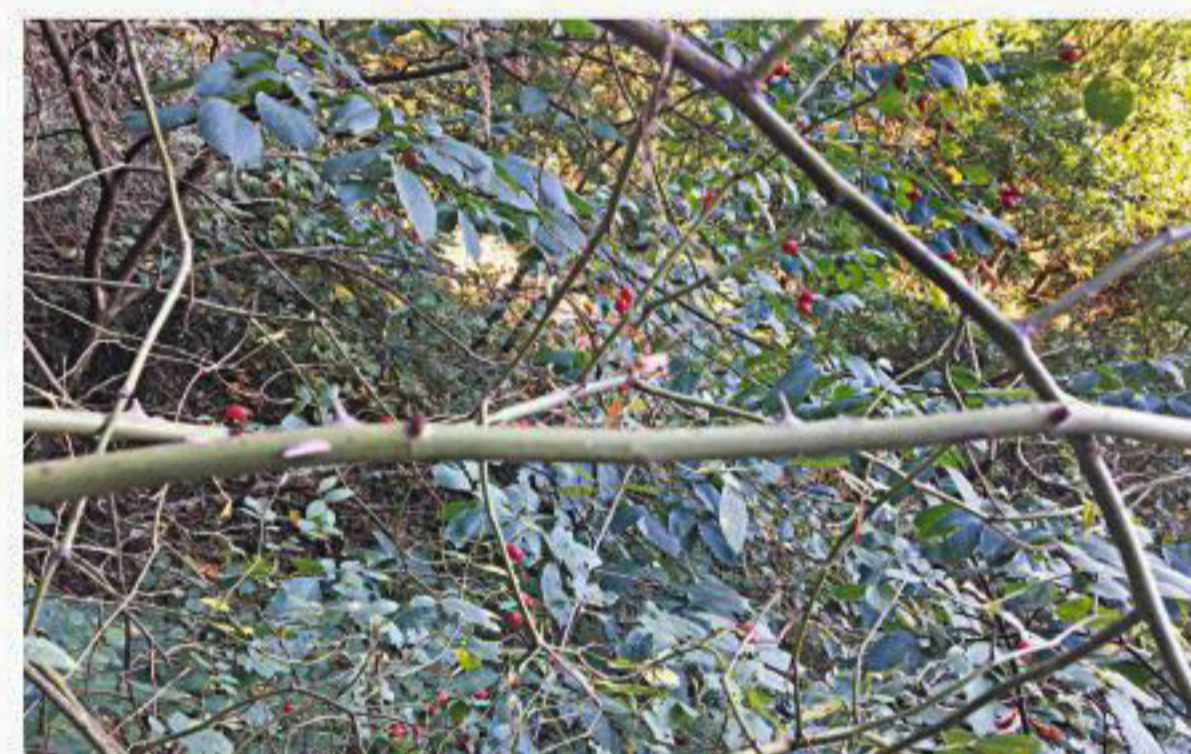
And then there are pathways, embedded into the natural stone, with mind-bending views of the Vikos gorge, the Vradeto stairs are a cobbled trail, that snake their way up from the village of Kapesovo. Until the new road was built in the 1970s, this arduous climb was the only way to Vradeto, which happens to be one of the highest of the Zagori villages. The stairs accommodate both humans and animals, and this area comes under Mt. Tymfi, which, along with its counterpart, Smolikas, houses the dragon lakes of Greece.

The Pindus mountain range is an extension of the Dinaric Alps, which enters through the Northern portion of Greece, and thus aptly known as the Spine of Greece. Its topmost peak and the second highest one in Greece is Smolikas (2,637m), home to one of Zagori's favourite myths. It is said that in ancient times, two dragons at Tymfi and Smolikas fought and threw stones at

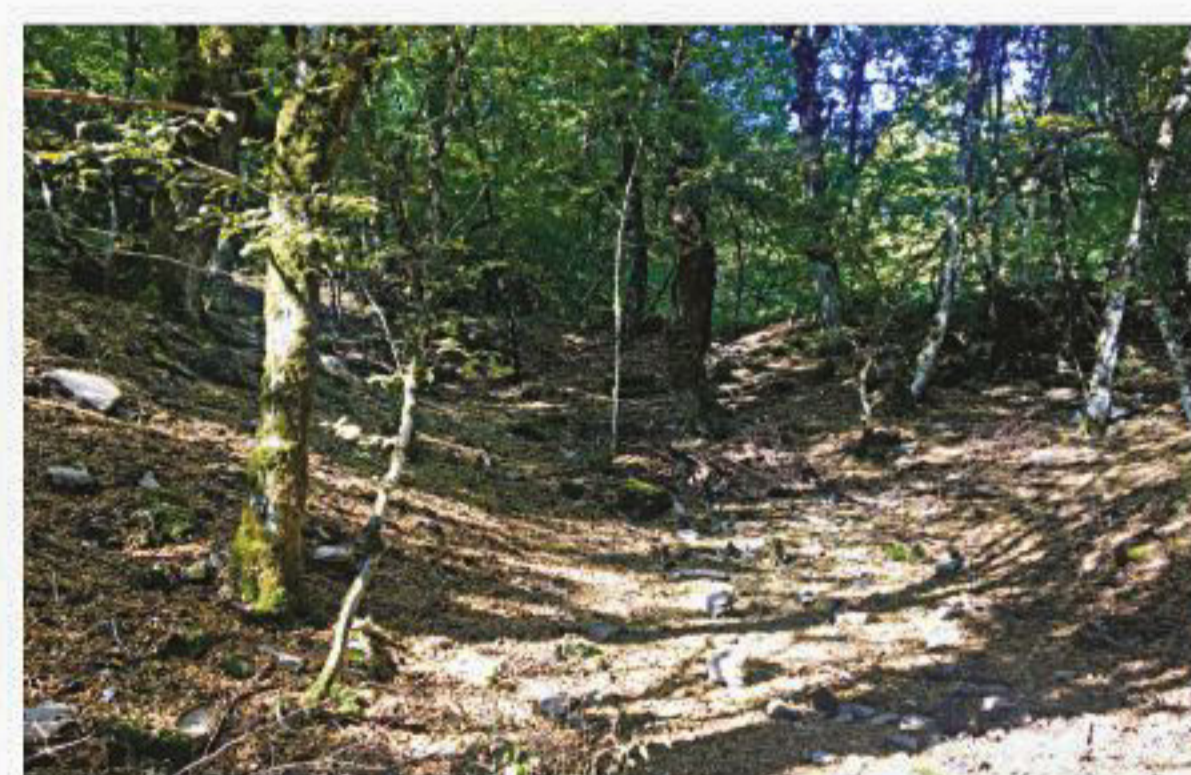


each other, forming a white and black lake. Surrounded by white fluffs of alpine snow and a climb that requires trekkers to stop by at the Astraka refuge, the dragons can still be found hiding under the lake waters. However, at 12cm long, the amphibian newts (*Ichthyosaura alpestris*) deftly swirling their tiny crocodile like tails through the waters have somewhat lost the fierceness of their imposing, mystical ancestors.

I visited Zagorochoria towards the dying days of summer, taking a bus from Athens, headed towards the capital of Epirus, Ioannina. The bus follows the Western route, crossing the Corinth canal and takes about



A bend on the cliff, close to the beehives



The woods near the monastery

five hours to reach. From Ioannina, I took a local bus, which started at the crack of dawn towards Monodendri, where a spectacular view of a world-famous Vikos gorge awaited me. A chilling mid-September wind hit me in the face, after the 1.5 hours long journey, as I rubbed my hands while looking for the route to the 15th century CE monastery of Aghia Paraskevi for a view of the gorge and the valleys below. Known as one of the deepest gorges in the world, reaching more than 1,000m in depth, the Vikos gorge is an aftereffect of the Voidomatis River's geological transitions. Towering

stone mountains that look like concentric layers of stone put together, forming the Oxia stone forest, and some of the most stunning views of an untouched territory, are your companions on this nearly seven-hour trek. The best times to undertake this soul-enriching journey are summers or early fall. This gorge is part of the Vikos-Aoos National Park, which houses a diverse range of flora and fauna, suited to a mountain and forest ecosystem. From the elusive and endangered brown bear, to amphibians, reptiles, and more than a 100 species of birds, the park also has options for rafting, canoe-kayaking and other adventure sports.

The trek leads towards Papingo, a village divided into Megalo (big) and Mikro (small) Papingo, a declared traditional village of Zagori. Its most known feature however, are the shallow pools of water, formed within hollows in the limestone rocks. The enticing turquoise waters pay homage to the incredibly striking geophysical makeup of the Zagori region and swimming in them is almost a ritual!

Zagori food, like its rustic environment, is simple and wholesome. The Epirus region is most famous for its pies, and Zymaropita with feta is almost like a pizza with a softer touch and that added zing, while Batsaria is a cornmeal based herby pie, more like an ode to wild greens.

Photo: Reema Islam

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<http://www.natgeotraveller.in/author/reema/>



More rooms visible in the monastery