Men Only.

Tim Salmon visits the monastic peninsula of Athos in northern Greece – *The Sunday Times*, 10 August 1998.

Of all the holy places of the t Orthodox churches, Mount Athos is the holiest. The Virgin Mary landed here and declared it to be her garden. No flock has grazed it since and no plough has turned its soil. Natural forest clothes its slopes. The sea washes its shores. In its gullies and coves, in the woods and on its heights, bloom in their season un-numbered hosts of wild flowers: orchids and fritillaries, lupins and anemones, crocuses, cistus, sea stock and tree heather.

Athos rises more than 6,500ft straight out of the sea, at the end of a long wooded promontory southeast of Thessaloniki in northern Greece. Attracted, no doubt, by its beauties and by the favour of the Virgin, hermits came, in the great age of Christian ascetjcism, to dwell in its caves and secret places. In the 9th century, Athanasios, the spiritual adviser to Nikephoros Phokas, emperor of Byzantium, organised them into monastic communities. Megisti Lavra, the oldest and greatest of the monasteries, was founded in AD963.

Today Mt Athos – or *Ayion Oros,* the Holy Mountain – is semi-autonomous, governed by monks under an administrator appointed by the Greek state. Of the 20 monasteries, most are Greek, but the Russian, Serbian, Bulgarian and
Romanian Orthodox also have one each. There are other nationalities, too, among the total population of about 2,000 monks.

It is not an easy place to visit. You have to be male and you need a permit, of which only 14 per day are issued to non-Greeks, and they can only be obtained on the spot in Athens or Thessaloniki. Getting them is largely a formality, although you must go in the spirit of a serious observer or pilgrim and not simply a tourist. And it is worth every bit of the trouble.

'The good thing takes time,' the Greeks say. *"To kalo prama aryee."* And Athos is a good, a unique, thing. You will know this for sure when you reach Stagira, the village where Aristotle was born. Below you is the long white stave of the beach at Ierissos, the yellow blaze of gorse creeping like fire up the shore hills and, in the blue beyond, the snow-veined pyramid of the Holy Mountain itself.

The road ends a little further on at Ouranopolis – Heaven's Gate, with a bit of poetic licence. It is 20 years since I was last here. Tourism has changed the place, as it has so much of Greece. The simple language of the fishermen's architecture has acquired some exotic additions, but the pretensions are homely and scarcely bothersome, and out of season it still feels like the last place on earth. "I left the world in 1927," a monk said to me, "and I have only been back once."

So it was with some surprise that I discovered, down at the jetty in the morning, that the little boat which used to take visitors to Dhafni, the official port of Athos, had become a car ferry, jammed with trucks, monastic four-wheel drives and a couple of hundred passengers armed with mobile phones and personal stereos.

It was a cold day, with a slatey swell running under the boat. Yet the soft green beauties of the shore glowed in the greyness. We stopped to discharge or take on packages, pilgrims and monks at the monasteries of Dhokiariou and Xenofondos, the former, particularly, the epitome of Athonite architecture, towered and a crenellated, with the living quarters suspended like bees' nests from the uppermost rim of the walls, the church close-guarded in their midst for security against raiders from the sea. We put in at Ayios Pandeleimonas, the Russian monastery, 20 years ago a forlorn barrack for a handful of geriatrics who had not received a recruit since the October Revolution, now proclaiming its resurrection with gleaming new paint on its domes and roofs.

When we arrived at Dhafni, there was most unseemly bedlam. Greek crowds are not seen at their best when there are boats and buses to catch and narrow passages to be negotiated. The trucks roared and belched, and the pilgrims jostled and shoved, deaf to the cries of the harbour police in their battle fatigues. Mobiles summoned up monastery guest-masters. Some monks seemed at home in this most worldly hubbub; others looked bemused.

I took one look and changed my plans. I went on down the coast to quieter places beyond the reach of the roads. The old St Anne took us. The sea was getting rough, making landing at the little jetties difficult. We passed the monastery of Simopetra, perched on a rock 1,000ft above the shore; Grigoriou, with its huge new

guesthouse; Dhionisiou, renovated and newly shipshape; austere and fortresslike St PauJ's, close to the snows on the north face of Athos; the monastic village of Ayia Anna, terraced high up the mountainside; the tiny settlement of Katounakia, crouched among the rocks; Karoulia, where the hermits live in the crannies of the cliffs, on prayer, wild herbs and sea air.

As we rounded the point that had wrecked Darius's invading Persian fleet in 490BC, our little boat began to buck and wallow. The rain came down. Mist hid everything above 500ft. How much further would the captain go?

At Kafsokalyvia we leapt ashore in the seconds between rolls, me and four boyhood friends from Thessaloniki, middle-aged now. Two black-clad monks waited with mules to take delivery of some crates of wine and other goods. *"Evloyeete,"* they said. "Bless you," in the standard greeting of Mt Athos.

Kafsokalyvia, right at the tip of the Holy Mountain, is another village of monastic communities, consisting of small brotherhoods of monks who have gathered round an elder or *dhikeos* and gone off to live a more ascetic existence away from the mother monastery. It was about half an hour above the shore, up a steep cobbled mule path beside a gully down which a white stream raged to the sea. There were perhaps a dozen houses scattered among the wet trees, each with a terraced garden, some with their own chapels, betrayed by a sort of organic swelling in the rough stone roof.

The guest quarters were beside the main church. The *arkhondaris* or guest-master – reputedly a former professor of philosophy – summoned us to eat almost at once. He seemed irritable, but it was late in Lent and the rigorous fasting and all-night prayer had begun to take their toll on everyone's strength. We ate in the kitchen: cold macaroni, a salad, a glass of wine. There was no ceremony. As soon as we had finished, two monks cleared our things and disappeared, saying we could attend the all-night vigil which would begin at 10pm.

We withdrew to our quarters, a bare downstairs room lit by an oil lamp. The rain fell unrelentingly and cloud had enclosed us. We lit the wood stove, and I climbed into my sleeping bag. The Salonicans chatted and tucked into the extra food they had brought. Night fell.

Some time after 10pm, I got up and went out into the streaming cloud-filled dark and into the church. It was pitch black. I groped my way across what seemed to be a log store, pushed open a door and entered the narthex. Guided by the sound of monkish chanting, I found my way into the body of the church. Here there were candles, their flames still and upright like bright blades in the
thick dark. Impenetrable shadow hid the domes above our heads and all the corners and recesses of the church. Robed and veiled in black, many of the monks were themselves scarcely visible, their presence revealed only by the pallor of a brow or the whiteness of a beard.

The cantors came and went some reedy and tuneless, some with fine singers' voices. I could not make sense of the geometry of movement and changing singers, and the punctuating passage of the censer, swinging at icons, swinging at monks, touring unseen in other parts of the church, swinging at us, the monk's hand dancing in swift and complicated patterns, the silver censer jingling like a festive bridle.

Our guest-master read a lesson with vigour and drama: the story of Christ's entry into Jerusalem, for it was the eve of Palm Sunday. The fire crackled in the wood stove. Century after century, aeon after aeon, these rites, words, movements have been repeated without interruption. Every day these private sounds rise into the ether. It is hard not to be moved, whatever your beliefs.

I went to bed about three in the morning, while the service still continued. Not long after daybreak I set off for the Great Lavra. It was still raining and mist clung to the mountainside. I could see little but the wet stones beneath my feet and the dripping broom and spurge that overhung them. Far below, out of sight, the sea
thumped and boomed.

From a distance, Lavra stands above its extensive kitchen gardens like a walled medieval town. But once inside the barbican and iron-clad gates, you enter an enclosure, part-paved, part-grassy, cluttered with buildings whose every asperity has been smoothed by the hand of time, where reigns an almost palpable air of domestic quietude. From the veranda of the guest quarters, where I was received with the customary shot of raki, glass of cold water and cube of Turkish delight, you look out over stone-tiled roofs, flecked and golden with lichen. Ancient trees rise above the library and red-washed church. I was not able, this time, to visit the library with its illuminated manuscripts, jewelled reliquaries and gospels, gifts of the emperors of

Byzantium. But I did dine in the refectory, whose walls are entirely covered with frescoes from the early 1500's.

We ate at the marble tables that Athanasios himself had brought from Constantinople. And while we ate, a black-veiled monk read aloud to us. We ate fast, for the moment the abbot gets to his feet, the meal comes to an abrupt end. And when it did, the 40-odd "civilians" – visitors and workmen – lined the aisle, bowing reverently as the monks filed past.

The workmen among us were employed in the extensive renovation work that has been going on for several years in all the monasteries. It highlights an uncomfortable dilemma: whether and how far to modernise. Roads, electricity, satellite phone links, computers... all these things have appeared on Mount Athos in the past 20 years, and not every monk approves.

A place with a road has a quite different feel from one that can only be reached on foot. Lavra has a road and, as has so often happened in the post-war modernisation of Greece, the road has destroyed the beautiful old mule path that
led through the woods and along the shore to the monasteries of the east coast.

So again I had to change my plans. I returned across the southern flanks of the mountain, but on a much higher path that climbs up through woods of oak, sweet chestnut and fir to the mountain hermitage of Kerasia, and then turned down to the shore past the lonely huts of the ascetics of Ayios Vasilios, where a pile of skulls beside the path reminds you of the transient nature of thingsmade flesh.

I spent the night at Ayia Anna and woke to what the Greeks call a sweet day – *mera glikia:* a soft, warm spring day, the hillsides heady with the perfume of gorse, the sky cerulean, the sea blue and dimpled, white lace wrapping the rocks in a perpetually renewed embrace, the tang of salt... I headed north up the coastal path to Grigoriou, where I fell in with my Salonican friends again.

How the Greeks love company: anybody to talk to is better than nobody... gabble, gabble as soon as they meet. That and eating. We got on the boat and ate the remains of the Salonicans' food. Athos fell away behind us. The mobile phones came out. "How is little Johnny? And Maroula? And Granny? ! We are on the boat..."