

In pursuit of lithium on the Holy Mountain

“Make sure you take a tonne of photos,” said Seb. “I’ve always wanted to go there,” he added.

We sat in Sebastien’s mum’s kitchen somewhere within the maze of nondescript apartment blocks that make up the 15th arrondissement. We had devoured an entire round of very smelly Munster cheese and finished half a bottle of Polish bison-grass vodka. I was laying out my plans for an upcoming trip to Athos, the easternmost finger of the Chalkidiki peninsula in northern Greece. My French mate, whose mum’s kitchen we were intruding upon, was at that time a student of archeology at the Sorbonne. Very much a history buff. It was a damp late winter evening in 2002, I was bumming around Paris for a few months. Europe was experiencing a moment of togetherness and it was a grand Bohemien moment. Life was indeed fine.

A week or so later I was seated on a ferry bearing fifty-odd pilgrims from Ouranoupoli to Dafni and the monasteries of the Athos Peninsula. The March sun shone brightly on the aquamarine waters of the Aegean. I made small talk with a troupe of young, heavily-bearded theology students from Thessaloniki. They told me of the father to son traditions they were fulfilling through making the pilgrimage. Very much right of passage stuff.

To gain entrance to Athos you must obtain a special entrance permit. This requires a declaration to the Orthodox Church authorities in Thessaloniki that you are journeying to Athos for the purposes of religious pilgrimage. In my most religious moments I describe myself as a pagan, so naturally I had lied to obtain my visa.

In a world unadorned with smartphones, I took out my camera to record the moment with my fellow pilgrims. The theology students were in frame, laughing in a moment of camaraderie and then it happened... the battery in the camera died. The camera itself was nothing special - just a simple handheld happy-snap model I’d brought along for the ride. But the camera battery was like nothing I’d ever seen before or since. These were the years camera manufacturers were pushing lithium batteries and they weren’t the type of thing you could find without a fight.

“Oh shit,” I thought. “What about the pictures for Seb?” In hindsight, my next actions in pursuit of a few unexceptional images were completely irrational.

The process of pilgrimage in Athos is quite formal. The idea is basically that male pilgrims (and only men need apply) pre-arrange their three-night stay on the peninsula through the Pilgrims’ Bureau in Thessaloniki. You are only permitted a longer stay than three nights if you happen to be an Orthodox monk. As a pilgrim, you must stay in a different monastery every night. So three nights, three monasteries, is essentially the deal.

My three nights in the monasteries were booked and the only way to get to them was the daily ferry that shuttles pilgrims along the coast of the peninsula. The only ‘shop’ to speak of, the students told me, was to be found in Athos’ largest settlement - the inland hamlet of Karyes (163 inhabitants). The only bus on the peninsula could get me to the shop - and a chance at a lithium camera battery - but I would have to leave the ferry and abandon my overnight accommodation at the Osiou Gregoriou monastery. In a fit of bluster, I disembarked the ferry at Dafni and caught the bus to Karyes.

The general store at Karyes was little more than a timber shack. There were large, aluminium milk cans awaiting collection at the door. Inside were shelves stocked with grains and soaps and candles and everything the monastic life demands (i.e. not very much). Speaking absolutely no Greek, I approached the counter gingerly and proceeded to withdraw the dead lithium battery from my jeans, “I know it’s a long shot,” I began. “You wouldn’t happen to have a battery like this?”

The dark-haired gent opposite me didn't miss a beat. "Is this the one you need?" he said, pulling a glistening, rarified packet from behind him. "Four euros."

So dumbfounded, map-less, bed-less, but armed with a functioning handheld camera, I set off along a mountain fire-trail hoping to find my way to a monastery before sundown. It was after eleven o'clock that night when I stumbled down a moon-lit goat track to the locked gates of Simonopetra monastery (where I had no reservation). Smitten by my first day on the holy peninsula, I rapped on the heavy gate.

A monk in jet-black Orthodox robes opened.

"You don't happen to speak English?" I asked.

"Come in, son," came a heavily accented reply. "I'm from Dublin. You look tired."