The central core of the Peloponnese is the luxuriantly spreading Mount Ménalo; but due south, in the Lakonian Evrótas valley, are Spárti and its Byzantine companion, Mystra, both overlooked and sheltered from the west by the massive and astonishing wall of the Taïyetos mountain ridge. Spárti had a big role in the development of ancient Greece, while Mystra, arrayed in splendour on its own hillside, is one of the country’s most compelling historical sites.

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**A Spartan upbringing**

As the blood-spattered 2007 film 300 would seem to confirm, the famously tough Spartans can still stir the imagination. In part this stems from their legendary upbringing. Under a system known as the agoge, Spartan boys were rigorously trained by the state to develop physical toughness, loyalty and cunning. Babies judged unlikely to make the grade were left exposed on the slopes of Mount Taïyetos. Other boys were taken from their families at the age of seven to live in barracks. They were habitually underfed, so that they would learn to live off the land. At the age of twelve, they were required to form a sexual bond with a young Spartan soldier, who would act as their mentor. At eighteen, they would become provisional members of the army until the age of thirty, when it would finally be decided if they were worthy of Spartan citizenship. At this point they were expected to marry and produce offspring. The system was much admired in the ancient world, and boys from other city-states were sometimes sent here for their education.

**Spárti**

Despite lying on the site of the ancient city-state of Sparta, modern SPÁRTI, capital of Lakónia, has few ancient ruins, and is today merely the organizational centre of a huge agricultural plain. Spárti’s limited appeal is its very ordinariness – its pedestrianized side streets, café-lined squares, orange trees and evening vólta. The reason for coming here is basically to see Mystra, the Byzantine town, 5km to the west, which once controlled great swaths of the medieval world.

**Brief history**

Commanding the Lakonian plain and fertile Evrótas valley from a series of low hills just west of the river, ancient Sparta was at the height of its power from the eighth to the fourth century BC, a period when its society was structured according to extremely harsh laws (see A Spartan upbringing). The ancient “capital” occupied more or less the site of today’s town, though it was in fact less a city than a grouping of villages. Lykurgos, architect of the warlike Spartan constitution and society, declared that “it is men not walls that make a city”.

The Spartans famously defeated Athens in the Peloponnesian War between 431 and 421 BC and later established colonies around the Greek world. They eventually lost hegemony through defeat to Thebes. A second period of prosperity came under the Romans – for whom this was an outpost in the south of Greece, with the Máni never properly subdued. However, from the third century AD, Sparta declined, as nearby Mystra became the focus of Byzantine interest.

The annual September Spartathlon, a 246km run from Athens to Spárti, commemorates the messenger Pheidippides who ran the same route in 490 BC: the current course record is 20 hours and 25 minutes.

**Ancient sites**

There are a few ruins to be seen to the north of the city. From the bold Statue of Leonidas, hero of Thermopylae, at the top of Paleológou, follow the track around and behind the modern stadium towards the old Acropolis, tallest of the Spartan hills. An immense theatre here, built into the side of the hill, can be quite clearly traced, even though today most of its masonry has gone – hurriedly adapted for fortification when the Spartans’ power declined and, later still, recycled for the building of Byzantine Mystra. Above the theatre a sign marks a fragment of the Temple of Athina Halkiakou, while at the top of the acropolis sit the knee-high ruins of the tenth-century Byzantine church and monastery of Ósios Níkon.

Out on the Trípoli road (Odhós-ton-118, just past the junction with Orthias Artémidhos), a track leads to the remains of the sanctuary of Artemis Orthia. This was where Spartan boys underwent gruelling tests by flogging. The Roman geographer and travel writer Pausanias records that young men often perished under the lash, adding that the altar had to be splashed with blood before the goddess was satisfied. Being addicts of morbid blood sports, the Romans revived the custom here – the main ruins are of the spectators’ grandstand they built.

**The archeological museum**

All moveable artefacts and mosaics have been transferred to the town’s small archeological museum on Áyios Níkonos. Among its more interesting exhibits are a number of votive offerings found on the sanctuary site – sickles set in stone that were presented as prizes to the Spartan youths and solemnly rededicated to the goddess – and a fifth-century BC marble bust of a running Spartan hoplite, found on the acropolis and said to be Leonidas. There is a dramatic late sixth-century BC stele, with relief carvings on both sides, possibly of Menelaos with Helen and Agamemnon with Klytemnestra; the ends have carved snakes. There are fragments of Hellenistic and Roman mosaics, and numerous small lead figurines, clay masks and bronze idols from the Artemis Orthia site.

**The Museum of the Olive**

At the southwest corner of town is the Museum of the Olive and Greek Olive Oil, at Óthonos & Amalías 129, worth a visit for its informative displays covering the primordial history, uses and production technology of the olive.

**Mystra**

MYSTRA is one of the most exciting and dramatic historic sites that the Peloponnese can offer – a glorious, airy place, hugging a very steep, 280m foothill of Taïyetos. Winding up the lushly vegetated hillside is a remarkably intact Byzantine town that once sheltered a population of some 20,000, and through which you can now wander. Winding alleys lead through monumental gates, past medieval houses and palaces and above all into the churches, several of which yield superb if faded frescoes. The overall effect is of straying into a massive unearthing of architecture, painting and sculpture – and into a different age with a dramatically different mentality.

**Brief history**

In 1249, Guillaume II de Villehardouin, fourth Frankish prince of the Moreas, built a castle here – one of a trio of fortresses (the others at Monemvasiá and the Máni) designed to garrison his domain. The Franks, however, were driven out of Mystra by the Byzantines in 1262, and by the mid-fourteenth century this isolated triangle of land in the southeastern Peloponnese, encompassing the old Spartan territories, became the Despotate of Mystra. This was the last province of the Greek Byzantine empire and, with Constantinople in terminal decay, its virtual capital.

During the next two centuries, Mystra was the focus of a defiant rebirth of Byzantine power before eventual subjugation by the Turks in 1460, seven years after the fall of Constantinople. Mystra remained in Turkish hands until 1687 when it was captured, briefly, by the Venetians. Decline set in with a second stage of Turkish control, from 1715 onwards, culminating in the destruction that accompanied the War of Independence, the site being evacuated after fires in 1770 and 1825. Restoration begun in the first decades of the twentieth century was interrupted by the civil war – during which it was, for a while, a battle site – and renewed in earnest in the 1950s when the last inhabitants were relocated.

**The Upper Town and Kástro**

The Kástro, reached by a path direct from the upper gate, maintains the Frankish design of its original thirteenth-century construction. There is a walkway around most of the keep, with views of an intricate panorama of the town below. The castle itself was the court of Guillaume II de Villehardouin but in later years was used primarily as a citadel.

**Ayía Sofía**

Following a course downhill from the Kástro, the first identifiable building you come to is the church of Ayía Sofía (1350). The chapel’s finest feature is its floor, made from polychrome marble. Its frescoes, notably a Pandokrátor (Christ in Majesty) and Nativity of the Virgin, have survived reasonably well, protected until recent years by coatings of whitewash applied by the Turks, who adapted the building as a mosque.

**Palatáki and the Despot’s Palace**

Heading down from Ayía Sofía, you have a choice of routes. The right fork winds past ruins of a Byzantine mansion, one of the oldest houses on the site, the Palatáki (“Small Palace”; 1250–1300), and Áyios Nikólaos, a large seventeenth-century building decorated with unsophisticated paintings. The left fork is more interesting, passing the fortified Náfplio Gate, which was the principal entrance to the upper town, and the vast, multistoreyed, Gothic-looking complex of the Despots’ Palace (1249–1400; closed at the time of writing, undergoing extensive rebuilding and restoration). Most prominent among its numerous rooms is a great vaulted audience hall, built at right angles to the line of the building; its ostentatious windows regally dominate the skyline, and it was once heated by eight great fireplaces. Flanking one side of a square, used by the Turks as a marketplace, are the remains of a mosque.

**The Lower Town**

At the Monemvasiá Gate, which links the upper and lower towns, there is a further choice of routes: right to the Pandánassa and Perivléptos monasteries or left to the Vrondohión monastery and cathedral, all very clearly signed. If time is running out, it is easier to head right first, then double back down to the Vrondohión.

**Pandánassa convent**

When excavations were resumed in 1952, the last thirty or so families who still lived in the lower town were moved out to Néos Mystrás. Only the nuns of the Pandánassa (“Queen of the World”) convent have remained; they have a reception room where they sell their own handicrafts and sometimes offer a cooling vyssinádha (cherryade) to visitors. The convent’s church, built in 1428, is perhaps the finest surviving in Mystra, perfectly proportioned in its blend of Byzantine and Gothic. The frescoes date from various centuries, with some superb fifteenth-century work, including one in the gallery that depicts scenes from the life of Christ. Other frescoes were painted between 1687 and 1715, when Mystra was held by the Venetians.

**Perivléptos monastery**

The diminutive Perivléptos monastery (1310), a single-domed church, partially carved out of the rock, contains Mystra’s most complete cycle of frescoes, almost all of which date from the fourteenth century. They are in some ways finer than those of the Pandánassa, blending an easy humanism with the spirituality of the Byzantine icon traditions. The position of each figure depended upon its sanctity, and so upon the dome the image of heaven is the Pandokrátor (the all-powerful Christ in glory after the Ascension); on the apse is the Virgin; and the higher expanses of wall portray scenes from the life of Christ. Prophets and saints could only appear on the lower walls, decreasing in importance according to their distance from the sanctuary.

**Laskaris House**

Along the path leading from Perivléptos to the lower gate are a couple of minor, much-restored churches, and, just above them, the Laskaris House, a mansion thought to have belonged to relatives of the emperors. Like the House of Frangopoulos, it is balconied; its ground floor probably served as stables. Close by, beside the path, is the old Marmara Turkish Fountain.

**Mitrópolis**

The Mitrópolis or cathedral, immediately beyond the gateway, is the oldest of Mystra’s churches, built between 1270 and 1292. A marble slab set in its floor is carved with the double-headed eagle of Byzantium, commemorating the 1448 coronation of Constantine XI Paleologos, the last Eastern emperor; he was soon to perish, with his empire, in the Turkish sacking of Constantinople in 1453. A stone with red stains is said to mark where Bishop Ananias Lambadheris was murdered in 1760. Of the church’s frescoes, the earliest, in the northeast aisle, depict the torture and burial of Áyios Dhimítrios, the saint to whom the church is dedicated. Opposite are frescoes illustrating the miracles of Christ and the life of the Virgin; more intimate and lighter of touch, they date from the last great years before Mystra’s fall. Adjacent to the cathedral, a small museum (included in main admission charge) contains various fragments of sculpture and pottery.

**Vrondohión monastery**

The Vrondohión monastery, a short way uphill, was the centre of cultural and intellectual life in the fifteenth-century town – the cells of the monastery can still be discerned – and was also the burial place of the despots. Of the two attached churches, the further one, Odhiyítria (Afendikó; 1310), has been beautifully restored, revealing startlingly bold, fourteenth-century frescoes similar to those of Perivléptos.

**Néos Mystrás**

This pleasant roadside community has a small square with several tavernas, crowded with tour buses by day but low-key at night, except at the end of August when the place buzzes with live music during the week-long annual paniyíri (fête).

**The Mystra renaissance**

Throughout the fourteenth century and the first decades of the fifteenth Mystra was the principal cultural and intellectual centre of the Byzantine world, attracting the finest Byzantine scholars and theologians and sponsoring a renaissance in the arts. Most notable of the court scholars was the humanist philosopher Gemisthus Plethon, who revived and reinterpreted Plato’s ideas, using them to support his own brand of revolutionary teachings, which included the assertions that land should be redistributed among labourers and that reason should be placed on a par with religion. Although his beliefs had limited impact in Mystra itself – whose monks excommunicated him – his followers, who taught in Italy after the fall of Mystra, exercised wide influence in Renaissance Florence and Rome.

More tangibly, Mystra also was home to the final flourish of Byzantine architecture, with the building of a magnificent palace for the despots and a perfect sequence of churches, multi-domed and brilliantly frescoed.