

# Halkidiki: A slice of heaven

## Northern Greek region delights with nature and food

By SUZANNE MORPHET

Special to Stars and Stripes

A black cloud moved across the sky, shifting shape and changing direction every few seconds.

"Common starlings," said my guide as we watched several hundred birds fly in tight formation over the shallow water of Lake Stavronikita in northern Greece. Suddenly their precise acrobatics were accompanied by a high-pitched trill.

"Look how agitated they've become," Chris Serafeimidis said, scanning the lake with binoculars until he found the reason. "A bird of prey." He pointed out a large brown hawk that's arrived on the scene. "He's definitely a marsh harrier."

Until then, I thought common starlings were simply that: common and uninteresting. But here in Halkidiki — a region on the northern mainland — I saw them with fresh eyes and discovered that birding combines nicely with my love of active, outdoor adventures.

At the Sani Resort, where I stayed, adventures like this are right on your doorstep. The resort sits on a curving expanse of sandy beach on

the west side of the Kassandra peninsula, one of Halkidiki's three finger-like peninsulas that jut into the Aegean Sea. Behind the resort is the 272-acre Sani Wetlands, which the owners work to protect through a partnership with a non-profit wildlife group. Guests can take guided birding tours like the one I went on.

"In the 1960s it was a huge swamp-land infected with malaria," Serafeimidis told me. "Now, 270 species [of birds] can be found here. We have some clients who come just to watch the birds in May and September."

It was mid-October when I visited, but it felt like summer. The next day's forecast called for temperatures in the mid-80s. I filled a couple of water bottles before setting out to hike the Koutsoupia-Siviri Trail, which meanders along the cliff tops between



Sani Resort and the nearby village of Siviri, a six-mile return trip.

The concierge at Sani Resort told me it's one of the most beautiful trails in all of Halkidiki. It climbs gently into a pristine pine

forest, hugging the cliff's edge most of the way. The turquoise Aegean spread out beside me while I stayed cool in the shade of Aleppo pine trees — the same kind that produce the resin used to flavor *retsina*, the popular Greek wine.

About halfway to Siviri, the trail descends to a beach. It was busy with vacationers at one end and nearly deserted at the other. Since I forgot to bring my bathing suit, I headed to a secluded spot on the quiet end for a refreshing dip.

Early the next morning I got into my rental car for the 2.5-hour drive to Mount Athos, Halkidiki's eastern-most peninsula. The bottom half is a self-governing community of 20 monasteries, home to 2,200 monks. A pilgrimage here has been described as a trip back in time, to the roots of Orthodox Christianity with its Byzantine architecture, rare icons, priceless art and precious manuscripts.



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Unfortunately, only men are allowed to step foot on what locals call the Holy Mountain; women have been banned since 1046. For me, a three-hour boat trip along one side of Mount Athos had to suffice. While the forested slopes and rugged shoreline are scenic, it was hard to appreciate architecture from a third of a mile away (the distance that boats carrying women must maintain). My disappointment, however, soon evaporated when a man started to play an organ and sing, bringing Greeks on board to their feet. It wasn't quite "My Big Fat Greek Wedding," but close.

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Above: A dish invented by chef Louloudia Alexiadis — octopus cooked with figs and honey, all local ingredients.

Below: Passengers on a boat tour along the shore of Mount Athos snap photos of one of the 20 monasteries on the peninsula.

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