

# **IMPRESSIONS OF ATHOS**

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# 1 The Miracle of Athos

Athos is a long peninsula in Greece, and difficult to reach. The path overland is blocked by a wall, access is possible by boat only. Only a few visitors a day are allowed to come to the Republic run by monks. Women are not allowed to enter. The peninsula is 45 kilometres long, and ends with the Ajon Oros, the Mount Athos, 2000 meters above sea level.

According to a myth, an icon of Mary from Istanbul was washed up onto the shores of Athos. The monks revere this icon as their patron saint and protectress.

For over a thousand years, hermits and monks have been living in one of the 20 monasteries. Smaller groups lived in "skites", farms which used to belong to the monasteries. The hermits lived alone in their huts or in caves higher up the boulder.

Not all visitors to Athos are religious. The nature here is still intact, it has not been destroyed by the monks. The monks only cultivate the amount of land necessary to live. In the monasteries' gardens, there are orange and lemon trees, and the monks grow tomatoes, salad and cabbage. Outside the garden walls, the monks gather herbs and mushrooms. The woods provide fruits, apples, nuts, olives, and berries. The monks live from these foods, they do not eat meat. Flowers decorate their world.

The wild animals are not hunted. There are jackals, wolves, boars, turtles, snakes, rabbits, different types of birds and fish. During the boat trip I was surprised by a curious dolphin jumping out of the clear waters.

Monks have built their houses surrounded by this beautiful nature,. The monasteries have balconies and bay windows which look like swallows' nests hanging from the wall, they make the grey facades colourful and cheery. The inhabitants love their bright colours. The white buildings have blue, red, orange and green windows and doors. New buildings are built, old buildings are left to fall into disrepair. In Athos you can see how life is transitory. Life comes and goes. 20 years ago, it was thought that the monastic tradition had come to an end – today there is a flourishing young generation of monks. Young monks from many countries have come to live their life here.

The church is the heart of every monastery. Golden icons and chandeliers, colourful frescoes, and more often than not, no electric light. Oil lamps and candles give off a warm light. The chanting monks diffuse an unbelievable atmosphere. The monks sing old chorals, unaccompanied by musical instruments, old melodies which have a mystical effect on us, they are open invitations to thinking and meditation.

This is not the first time in Athos. The first time was an in the 70s, and I was curious. The first time was strange and different. But I was impressed, that I came again and again.

Some people come here and start to believe in God. They start to think about life, beauty and the transition of life. The monks, their life, their diligence and their composure show how empty, stressful and hectic our lives are.

## 2 Father Vasili

During one of my stays, it was before the main tourist season, so there were only a few visitors, I met a couple from Vienna. The husband, a fire-fighter, had been coming regularly for the last 10 years.

The day before we went up, he accompanied us to visit his friend Father Vasili. He called out: "Father Vasili!", upon which appeared an old, haggard man with a beard and a hand crippled by the First World War. He let us in through a small iron door. His skite was a house with two floors, with a boat house. He showed us his rooms. An old wooden box contained all that was precious to him. We could see a picture of him as a Russian soldier from the First World War hanging over the bed. He had escaped from the army to Athos. Although his hand was crippled, he had learned to use it for different tasks. The boathouse had seen better days, but we could still walk onto the balcony and enjoy the beautiful view of the sea.

The boards of the balcony were rotten. The dog cleverly walked around them, but still had to be careful not to fall through a hole. Father Vasili only used the ground floor of the house. A round window and the door let some light into the kitchen. A strange-looking piece of furniture in the middle of the room turned out to be the stove: it had been built out of an old, rusty oil barrel. On the front of it, an oven door had been welded into the barrel. The kettle was balanced on the edge of the barrel. The stovepipe was a string of cans and hung to the ceiling with a wire. Father Vasili washed the dishes in another old oil barrel which had its place in front of the house. The amount of clean water in this barrel depended on the amount of rain. So, in summer, when there is less rain, the dishes are not washed as clean as they are in winter, when there is more rain. He offered us some wine in dirty glasses, and I did not really want to drink from them.

Towards the shore, he had a little garden. Here he planted and tended his vegetables, as, like all Athonites, he did not eat any meat. The Viennese man had brought him some packets of soup - Father Vasili checked these to make sure that they did not contain any meat.

Father Vasili only spoke Greek and Russian, and we didn't speak his languages, but we all knew what the other meant.

A policeman from Athos was residing with Father Vasili. Following the inspection of the border, the policeman was spending a couple of days with him. Unlike Father Vasili though, he could indulge in some worldly pleasures. He smoked a cigarette, something denied to the monk.

We took a photograph of Vasili standing in front of his house, the sea in the background. Not all monks in Athos let you to take their pictures. But Vasili was proud to be a model for us. The following year, I brought him a copy of the photograph I had taken. It showed Father Vasili wearing a heavy black coat, a black Russian fur cap on his head and a small cat on his arm. Instead of shoes, he was wearing brown slippers.

On the way back to the wall, he showed us his cistern. He collected rain water for dry spells.

Father Vasili used a tree which grew directly by the wall as a comfortable raised seat, it allowed him to see the arrival of the visitors from afar. Usually, when the visitors arrived, he disappeared. There is a story that some women, apparently nuns, had been swimming naked in a small bay. Vasili took a gun and chased them away with a round of shot.

## 3 Daily Procedures

The Byzantine day in Athos begins after evening prayer. It is not really possible to convert time in the same way as from Middle European to West European. It was as if each monastery followed a different clock. The day begins with sunset, so the day starts on the East coast first, then on the West coast.

The monks' daily procedure is not always easy for others to understand.

Evening prayer starts the day, and then, the monks go to their cells. Now is the time for prayer and sleep, although monks sleep very little during this time. According to one of the Fathers from Simonos Petras, some of the monks only sleep one or two hours. In some monasteries, the monks meet at midnight (Greek local time) to pray together. They return to their cells, and meet again at three or four o'clock in the morning for prayers, which, along with mass, lasts three to four hours. Again the monks retire, and attend their three main tasks: praying, reading and sleeping. At eleven o'clock a bell rings, calling the monks to midday prayers and their meal. It is their main meal, as monks eat twice a day, though in some monasteries, the monks only eat once a day. Prayers are held before and after the meal. After their meals, the monks start with the working part of the day – in winter four hours and in summer five hours of work. The abbot is responsible for the division of labour. At five o'clock a sound made by knocking on wood calls the monks to the vespers. These last between one and two hours. The day ends with an evening meal. Regarding food: Monday, Wednesdays and Fridays are days of fasting, which means that on these days the food contains no fat.

## 4 Father Mitrophan

We enquired about him in the village of Kariaes. But it was Sunday afternoon, and the Government buildings were closed – not a real surprise. The village was so quiet, it seemed abandoned. The streets were empty. Two young hikers slept on a wall. Interestingly, the small post office was open – something new in Athos. The post office was in an old house, and had a huge satellite dish on its roof. This aerial carries telephone conversations to the modern world. I had promised my wife I would call her, and, as I hadn't been able to in Ouranopolis, I tried here. I reached the office by climbing old, creaking stairs. The officer sat behind his counter. In the anteroom, a telephone. A monk in the post office was making a telephone call. He was shouting into the telephone, maybe he didn't have a connection. In his hand a piece of paper with some numbers jotted down. The free Sunday afternoon, used to contact the outside world. I was told to use the telephone in the anteroom. The whole thing was very primitive. There was no door. There was no privacy. No anonymity. Everybody in the room could listen. Two thin wires hung down from the wall and fed into the telephone.

The monk gave me the country code for Austria and I quickly contacted with Hannelore. It was amazing how quickly it went. The quality was not particularly good, there was a whooshing sound, as if the cables dipped directly into the sea. The call was extremely cheap. For a standard report, how I was doing, how the friends were, and that she should let Walter's wife know too, I paid 5 Austrian shillings. After I paid, I went to Mitrophan's. At first I was told to come back on Monday morning, when he would be in the office. Time has a different meaning here. Then they pointed up the mountain. I was told he lived up there. I saw a number of small houses scattered over the face of the mountain. I couldn't do much with the information I had been given, and I left the office. I was sure I would eventually meet someone who could give me more information.

The others were waiting, in front of the church, in the sun. The walk up from the sea had been more tiring than I had assumed. We sat on the small wall to rest. Then we went on a discovery tour. All the shops were shut. There were no busses. Today was Election Day in Greece. All civil employees had been called to vote. The village was silent. A monk came along, and started ringing the church bells. We asked him, and he described us the way. But it didn't help much. We were tired, and we didn't want to go a long way. Walter's map was detailed enough to show us how to get to the monasteries of Chilandariou, and we followed the route indicated on the map.

On the way there we met a monk hurrying into the village. We asked him too. He pointed into a direction, the opposite as indicated on the map. We decided to stick to our map – which turned out to be wrong, and we ended back onto the main road. Following this road, we reached Mitrophan's house. Wood was piled up in front of the house. The chestnut trees had produced many nuts, and not all could be gathered.

A rusty iron gate led into a garden. Two men sat under the shades, with a pretty view onto the village and the mountains in the background. We asked for Father Mitrophan. One of the men went to look for him and reappeared with Father Mitrophan. He seemed somewhat reserved, and said that he didn't have enough room for all of us. Only two of us could stay here, the other three would have to find a place in the monastery near the village. It was late in the afternoon, it was already time to leave. But Mitrophan was calm. A young boy made coffee. Water and liquor were served. Mitrophan sat down with us.

We sat on the shady terrace. It started to get dark, and Mitrophan brought a lamp. The village was dark, there were no lights. Only the stars shone brightly.

We were fascinated by Mitrophan. Even though we couldn't follow him all the time, every now and again something needed to be translated, it was an experience for all of us. This man exuded a sense of peace which was very pleasant.

It doesn't matter what career he would have chosen, he was destined to be special. We experienced him in the full. Wise, old, Father Mitrophan. This year, he was the chief of the mountain, he was the Protos. He had been elected by his fellow monks as the Leader. On the one side, an honour, on the other hand, a personal restriction. For a whole year, he was not to leave the mountain. He had to be available at all times for important political decisions. Certainly not easy for someone who was active and travelled so much.

In the evening, when he was talked, we sat around him like children. We were all adults, but in terms of spirit, we were young. He had a unique way of telling stories. Not like a priest. He wasn't lecturing. He was like any other citizen of this world. The manner was simple, yet it was like reading a book. When listened, his sentences were polished constructions. It was a pleasure to listen to him. He discussed a number of topics. Coming from his mouth, they seemed so easy and so logical.

## 5 Chilandariou

A thousand bees are swarming around the well. This made the water we wanted to drink is dangerous. The first well after a whole day's hike. Our bottles of water had been drunk empty long ago, we were happy to receive this gift of nature. Quickly, we took off our rucksacks. The pain caused by the straps started to ebb off.

A cross rises from the Holy Mountain like a crown . Everything reminds you of God. You must always be thankful. In a world smothered by presents, we no longer notice the wonders of the world. Here, everything has been reduced, so that the few things can be perceived better. After a day of hiking with no stops for refreshment, the well is an event in itself. In Manhattan, on Broadway, it wouldn't even be noticed. We quickly approach the water. The bees are a problem. The colourful bee-hives are set up behind the well, candles are made from the many bees' wax. These bees were just as thirsty as we are. It was dangerous to cross their flight paths to reach the water. There was also the danger of swallowing a bee whilst drinking the water. A bee-sting would be a big problem, given that we were one day's travel away from the next village. A bee-sting can be deadly. We didn't realise the danger at the time. We were thirsty, we saw the water – and we didn't think about anything else except our thirst.

The cool water was good. We poured some water over our heads –the heat dried our shirts quickly. Following a rest in the late afternoon sun, we walked towards the monastery Chilandariou. A road in the valley led from the sea to the monastery. The path was not steep, to the left and right high pine trees which were probably hundreds of years old. They elegantly framed the path. It was quiet, no human noises could be heard. No machines. Only nature: bees, birds and crickets.

Half an hour later we reached the gate. Behind it, the monastery which had been built into the valley. An hour ago we had been able to see its tower between the trees. Now we could see the whole building. It had not been placed majestically on the top of a mountain, and it had not been built on a plain. It had been hidden into the valley. You only see it shortly before you get there. Protection from enemies.

We see a graveyard and a chapel first. A cobblestone road. Manual work to work the sins away: unnecessary cobblestones. These cobblestones would actually impede cars, you have to slow down. They had set these stones into the surface of the road. Stone next to stone for half a kilometre. The visitor has to slow down, to avoid hurting the ankle. This means that one approaches the gate with great respect.

The monastery was empty. Nobody in front of the gate. Nobody in the courtyard. We sit down and take off our rucksacks. It was more beautiful than a film setting: a grassy courtyard, and in the middle, a church with a red domed roof. Two tall cypress trees looked like servers to the church. It looked like the architect had meant them to be there. They seemed to be guarding the holy building. The tree tops looked over the three floors of the monastery, towards the world. Apparently these were the oldest trees of the peninsula. The tree trunks were half a meter in

diameter. They must have seen so much, yet heard so little – the only thing to be heard here is the ringing of the bells.

Suddenly, we were discovered. A monk brought us to the visitors' wing. We were led up a wide, wooden staircase to the guest rooms on the third floor. The kitchen was on the second floor. We could smell the cooking. In the reception room, we wrote signed the visitors' book – Father Mitrophan had already given notice of our arrival.

The bells rang to call to evening prayer, which we were allowed to attend. There were only a few monks in the church. We stood at the back of the church, but were asked to come to the front. The prayers lasted about one and a half hours. We didn't understand a single word, but it uplifting and mystic. The monks' singing filled the rooms. The sun was setting, and yellow light shone through the windows.

Following mass, we stood around the church, chatting before going for the meal. Monks and visitors ate in separate rooms. But visitors were welcome, and Father Mitrophan took his meal with us.

Grace was said, and then came onions, milk soup, bread and cheese. We were not the only visitors, we were joined by two American guests and two Serbian historians who worked in the monasteries' archives. The cook himself carried out the meals to the visitors. Every now and again he would come to our table and encourage us to eat some more.

Mitrophan checked that we had had eaten enough before getting up. We walked back to the gate, to end the day. We could hear some quiet murmuring. There was no hectic. Calm. A couple of cats strayed about.

Then the bell rang night rest. The doorman shut the gate, the night was being shut out too. We went up to our rooms. There were no electric lights, only petroleum lamps and candles. A reason for going to sleep earlier. Only the washroom remained lit all night. A couple of wash basins, but no hot water. The wash room was open to one side, and there were no windows – not a problem in summer, certainly not very comfortable in winter. We were so tired, we fell asleep immediately.

## 6 Panteleimonos

The ringing bells woke me. My friends had also heard them ringing during the night. I had used ear plugs, so I hadn't heard them. We spent nearly 10 hours asleep, yet the bells ringing at five o'clock in the morning felt like the middle of the night. We were requested to join the "Liturgia", so we had to get up out of bed. Nobody was to stay behind. It was dark outside. In the background, a generator provided the energy for a couple of bulbs – one in the hallway, and one in the toilet.

We got up with difficulty, washed and got dressed. It was quite cool. In the dark, we looked for the path to the monastery. The gate was already open. A romantic light streamed out of the church windows. In the light of the oil lamps, a couple of monks were singing. We found our places at the back of the church. The seats by the walls were to be used for "standing / sitting" or "sitting / sitting". For the first function, the chair had a small board at the back and a seat to be lifted. The seat and the board could be pushed down, allowing two people to sit. High armrests provided support during "standing / sitting" and these could also be used as headrests when "sitting / sitting", it was easier to sleep then. An old monk indicated with a hiss when we were to stand up. We couldn't understand a word of the monks' songs or the recitals, but it was romantic. It was a beautiful setting for meditating. To think about oneself and about life.

Slowly light filled the room. At first it came in through the windows of the dome. It was grey in grey. Then it became possible to recognize the colours of the paintings. Gradually, the inner room lighted up and one could see the furnishings and the church goers. There was a constant coming and going. Monks were coming in, others leaving. They walked around in the church, kissing the icons. Each monk kissed a different icon. Did each monk have a favourite icon?

Two hours later, it was time to leave. The monks headed towards us, following the abbot to the refectory. The abbot was wearing a long purple gown. A small, young monk ran behind the abbot, carrying the veil. But it was not as festive as a bride on her wedding day. The abbot, in his sturdy shoes, took fast steps, and the young monk had to run to keep up and not rip the material.

Along with the monks came our Russian friend Jury. He had been with the monks in the main part of the church. The monk who had invited him yesterday led us to the refectory. Breakfast was abundant. It was Sunday, and the food was good. Fried fish, grapes, warm soup, potatoes, sheep's cheese and rice. And lovely red wine. One of the monks read from a book. Everybody enjoyed the meal. The cook leaned against a pillar and watched us eat. Somewhat shy, he brought each visitor a cooked egg. In the middle of the reading, the abbot rang and ended the meal. Everybody stood up, and the abbot, followed by the monk carrying his veil, quickly walked to the middle of the room, to hold a final prayer in front of the icon of Mary. Then he left, and ran back into the church.

We went with Jury's host to a building further up. On the last floor of this building there was a large church with many golden icons. The monks used this church every second week. One week below in the main church in the courtyard, one week up here in this church. All the icons were explained. Then we were led into another room, which contained a number of diverse relics. As we were not orthodox, we could not enter and had to wait by the door. The faithful entered. The monk put on his cassock, and opened some of the boxes. The visitors bowed, made the sign of the cross and kissed the conserved holy relics: heads in golden balls, hands in silver boxes, bone splinters in small caskets. Fancy goldsmith's work contained the relics. Later we were then allowed to enter too, one by one, but we were not to touch anything. We were to look only. It looked like a Baroque anatomy lecture theatre. But it had a deep religious meaning.

Following this tour, during which we also visited the church tower and the church bell, we were invited for coffee in the VIP rooms of the monastery. This is where Jury had slept. A special wing for special guests. We sat on the balcony and enjoyed the view of the sea. First he brought us a glass of vodka, then a second, for the "second foot", he claimed. Then he gave us coffee with lukumi and a glass of water.

Below us, the cook fed the cats with some bits and pieces from the kitchen. Wood was stored next to the kitchen. Cats jumped out from the pile of wood and started fighting over the scraps. Each cat wanted to have more than the others. Three Finnish pilgrims sat with us on the balcony. We took photos of each other. The atmosphere was light and pleasant, until it was time to say goodbye. Our host, the monk, cried as we left. He kissed each of us on the mouth, which surprised us all. He had really enjoyed our visit. He came from the city Perm in the Ural Mountains, where I had been only a month ago with Jury. Before coming here, he had worked 25 years in Russia. In the meantime he has adapted to the warm climate of Greece.

We picked up our rucksacks from the guest house, and left from the back.

## 7 The Miraculous Icon

The internationally acclaimed Russian cello player Rostropowitsch visited Athos, and Father Pater Mitrophan was to look after him.

Rostropowitsch held a concert in Athens which made him very popular in Greece. When he emigrated from Russia, he first stayed in Athens to get used to the Western world and then went to America. A year later he came back to Athens for a big concert. After this concert he visited Athos. He travelled as a modern pilgrim, by helicopter, but with no less respect.

In the church of Kariaes, he stood for a long time in front of an icon near the entrance. Mitrophan asked him why. He started to tell the story of a friend he had in America. This friend had been to Athos and visited the icon painter. Monks only paint to order. There are no ready made icons. The friend wanted a particular icon, but the monks did not want to sell it, as it was already being used. But the friend was so stubborn that they eventually gave him the icon as a present. Once he got home though, he realised it was a miraculous icon, it would cry. He took it to a Russian-Orthodox monastery near him. Rostropowitsch had already seen this icon once, and indeed it had started to cry. With some cotton wool, Rostropowitsch had dried away the tears. In Athos, Rostropowitsch showed Mitrophan the cotton wool, which had a wonderful smell. After all these years, the cotton wool still had this wonderful smell. Mitrophan smelled the cotton wool as it lay in his prayer book, and witnessed the miracle. The icon standing by the entrance is the original icon. What remains unnoticed by many visitors to Athos, was especially important for Rostropowitsch.

## 8 Simonos Petras

It was still hot, but we decided to go. The hike would take us to 400 meters altitude. A small cobble stone path zigzagged up the mountain. No pause to catch one's breath. The sun beat down. In summer it would probably be even harder.

Half way up, we could already see the monastery Gregoriou up ahead, there was a small chapel. It had a shadowy roof. We took a small break. The view was beautiful, the harbour seemed a long way down. Only donkeys could go up this path. The monastery was high up. Donkeys carried everything up from harbour.

Two pilgrims came down. Greeks, they carried rucksacks. They were sweating, and took off their shirts. Tanned men. They disregarded the rules of Athos and let the sun dry their sweat, then picked up their rucksacks again and continued on their journey.

Three years ago there was a big fire. It had created a moon-like scenery, there wasn't a single green leaf left. Everything had been burnt. Today, everything is green again. You could see the burnt tree only if you knew about the fire. All trees which didn't grow again were cut down and made to firewood. Nature looks after itself.

We heard the bells ring above us. The call to the vespers. After the vespers there is the evening meal, so we had to continue. I also remembered that the way to the refectory was through the church. Who wasn't in the church, didn't get a meal.

Again this heat. Behind us, a monk. It seemed to be the monk who worked in the house down by the harbour. He was not overweight, and had a light step. We waited for him, we wanted him to take picture of us in front of the monastery. Then he quickly continued his way up. Even our two sportsmen Arnoux and Gilbert could not keep up with him.

To the right of the building were the working quarters, and below, the steep vegetable gardens which could only be reached with ladders. We walked through one of the working quarters. A column in the middle supports the house. The cool shadows were tempting. The path serpented from the gate to the courtyard of the monastery situated at the top of the mountain. We could hear the sound of singing coming from the church. Vespers had already started. We looked for the visitors' wing. We reached a balcony, which we had seen as we walked towards the monastery. A ladder led us to the first floor, directly past the kitchen. We found the visitors' rooms. Relieved and happy to have arrived, we let our rucksacks fall to the ground.

## 9 The Summit

Putting impressions down on paper. This is me sitting in front of the chapel on the summit of Athos, at 2030 meters above sea-level. We started our hike yesterday at two o'clock in the afternoon. We paid a boats' man 1500 Drachmas to take us to the South end of the peninsula. We got out on the landing stage of the skite Karoulia, which lies between two boulders. Three monks got out with us. Two donkeys waited for the luggage: mineral water and two suitcases. In the suitcases, a monk's cassock and some newspapers.

On the map, the contours of the mountain are tightly drawn. The path is steep. Yet hermits still found some space to carve out their caves. Even though it was the end of October, the sun was beating down. Every now and again some clouds drifted by and gave some shade. It must be unbearable here in summer. After half an hour's hike we were invited into a skite for some coffee. A walled house with a chapel and a pretty garden. We sat under a vine arcade, drinking Ouzo, Greek coffee and water. Large ripe grapes hung above us. We needed the refreshment. The coffee had been the only warm thing we had taken today. Soon the donkeys arrived. The luggage was taken off. One of the monks must have been of a superior rank, the host bowed and kissed his hand.

We thanked the host for the hospitality and continued on our hike. After a few meters we came to a crossroads. One way led to the skite Katounika, 300 meters higher up, the other to a small settlement, Mikra Aghia Annis.

We walked over a steep and rocky ravine at 700 meters above sea-level until we crossed the path which circled the mountain. Along the path there were a few hermitages, some had caved in, but one must have been lived in until recently, the grave in front of it did not look very old. Its vegetable patch had run wild, but it was still recognisable. Other skites had fallen to ruin.

At five o'clock we finally reached the path. The question was whether to continue another 1500 meters to reach Pangaea, a walled chapel where we could spend the night or descend 200 meters to the skite Kerasis. It was the loss of 200 meters which made us decide to continue upwards. This left us with 3 hours. According to our calculations, we would reach the chapel by dusk.

The map indicated a source of water. We hadn't taken enough water with us. But the source had been cemented over. Pipes took the water to the hermitages below. No more cool water for the hikers. We were sweaty. Although we were tired and our shirts were unpleasantly wet, we speeded up so that we would not arrive in the dark. The shrubs became trees. Acorn woods and pine trees cooled us down. We continued, regardless of our sweaty shirts. We quickly walked another the 300 altitude meters.

I got depressed. Until now I had been at the head of the group, now I let Guenter lead, and I dragged myself along at the back of the group. I was afraid that we didn't have enough water. Guenter forced me to drink. A longer pause strengthened

us, but it wasn't enough. With great difficulty I somehow managed to keep on. Especially the last meters were arduous. One could see the chapel, yet it just never seemed to get any nearer.

In the chapel there were 3 wooden boards to sleep on. A cistern contained rainwater. It wasn't clean, there was a layer of dirt on it, but it was drinkable. We used a pot hung on a string to get to the water below. Before we drank the water we let the dirt settle to the bottom. Our bottles of water were empty, this dirty water was the only alternative.

I put on all that I had with me and got into my sleeping-bag. I still shivered. I was having a fit of shivers. With great effort I managed to eat a cheese sandwich. Again, Guenter forced me to drink. Although I had overexerted myself, I could not fall asleep. My friends seemed to have a bet about snoring. At first it was very melodic. Like a jazz band. Guenter held the rhythm, Walter was bass. I must have fallen asleep at some point, as next morning they told me that my snoring was unbearable. I probably fell asleep after having stuck in my ear plugs.

We got up at seven. It was cold. The sun started to rise. Slowly the sun came out. At first it was just red. The sky burned. Then the sun rose. A red ball of fire, increasingly shining more light and reflecting in the sea. We left all the unnecessary baggage behind, and continued our hike at eight. We paused twice, and reached the summit at half past nine. The iron cross at the summit is dated 1897. Below the boulder sporting the cross there is a small chapel. The chapel had everything which could be found in a church. There was a bench just outside of it, behind a wall and so protected from the wind. You could see the sea below, as well as the peninsula. Clouds drifted across the sky. This was Athos' summit.

The mists seemed to form an artificial horizon. The blue skyline looked arched. "The earth is round" came to my mind. Looking to the West, you could see Mount Olympus and to the North, the Bulgarian Balkan Mountains appear out of the mists. On the peninsula, one could see the monasteries Karakalou and Iviron. One could also see the amount of damage caused by the fire which had raged a couple of weeks ago: hectares of burned forests.

According to the lodge book, here a notebook, the last visitors were here three days ago.

The mists turned into clouds, and they approached the mountain. But during our descend they pulled back.

# 10 The Night of Easter

The sea was calm. Small waves splashed onto the wall which served as a jetty for boats. The peace of Easter could be felt everywhere. In the house of Chilandari's harbour, the monk slept. A small boat wobbled along the waves. Nature was late this year, but vegetables were already growing in the garden of the monk from the harbour. It had rained for weeks on end. But the monks took this to be a good sign. The last winters had only had little precipitation, so the level of water in the wells was low. Some of the monasteries didn't have any water left. The last winter replenished all sources of water for the next three years.

For those of us who come from the Northern regions of Europe, it already felt like summer. The sun warmed us. At home, nature is still brown, but here the fields are already green and the meadows are colourful. Bees buzz around the flowers. The water is clear, but still too cold to go in.

In the cemetery, we saw that a red Easter egg had been laid on each grave. There were red eggs in the wayside shrines and near the crosses.

Suddenly an eagle swept past us. It didn't fly away far. It perched on a tree. As we approached, it flew into the field and observed us. Walter solved the mystery. Next to the path, the eagle had killed a lynx. Where the animal had been killed, the earth was stained red. The eagle was eating its Easter meal near the tree. It carefully skinned off the fur, and ate the meat.

Following our hikes in the last days, this was our day of rest. We spent the night in the church. We stayed up all night, and from one until seven o'clock in the morning participated in the Mass of the Resurrection. We didn't understand it, but it was impressive. We meditated. Sometimes meditation turned into sleep. The church benches, with their low seats and their high backs, allowed one to lean one's head and doze for a while. Gilbert managed to let half an hour to go by in a second. When he looked at his watch, it was quarter past four.

At the beginning of mass, the monks gave all visitors a candle made of bees' wax, the bottom part wrapped in fresh meadow flowers. This candle was lit at the altar, so each visitor had their own Easter fire during the night. At the same time, this candle kept you awake. As soon as I dozed off, the candle would start to fall out of my hand and thus waken me.

Festive processions led out into the courtyard of the church. These were headed by lantern carriers and flag bearers. The monks carrying out the celebrations followed their brothers and the churchgoers. The first procession was headed by the youngest member of the public, a young Serbian boy, who carried the book of Gospels. The priest read from the book of Gospels. The silence of the night was only interrupted by the monks singing.

We walked back into the church and saw that the floor was laid out with laurel and all the candles had been lit. The chandeliers, even the big one in the middle, were swinging, creating ecstatic movements of light and shadows throughout the church. The laurel exuded a spicy smell.

The monks and the people took turns in singing. They had formed two groups in the lateral domes, to the left and right of the icons. The singing seemed never ending.

A stove had warmed the church up. As we walked out into courtyard for the second time, we felt the biting cold in our bones. The holy relics were carried out. Singing and praying, the people kissed the holy remains.

From one o'clock onwards we watched on from the vestibule of the church. Only at the end did we go to the front of the church. The warmth coming from the stove was pleasant, but made it more difficult to stay awake. The young boy who had led the procession a few hours ago was curled up asleep on a church bench.

The priest distributed the mass wine during communion. With a small golden spoon, the priest let a few drops fall into the everyone's mouth.

Then the candles were festively snuffed out. Some of the chandeliers were let down, and a monk put the candles out with a broad pair of tweezers. The candles higher up were reached with a long pole which had a pair of tweezers at the end and a special mechanism to work them.

After six hours of mass, a festive procession led to us the refectory. The tables had been set. Sweetcorn soup, cooked fish, strudel, white bread, red wine and painted red eggs. The monks had fasted for a long time to receive this meal. As usual, one of the monks read out aloud beforehand. But this time, the monks were cheerful. The Resurrection made them happy, and they pecked their eggs. Both the winners and the losers enjoyed the egg-pecking. The abbot allowed the meal to go on for a long time, then rang the bell to end it. The monks left.

In the courtyard, everybody hugged each other and wished a happy Easter.

This was the night of Easter in Chilandariou.

# 11 Goodbye

More people visit the monasteries on the West side. With this increasing number of visitors, one can see modern life creep in. There are cars on the short roads. Diesel machines to produce energy, telephones, fridges. As a visitor trying to leave the modern world behind, one is a bit disappointed to see the civilised world making its mark here.

But are we allowed to criticise?

Do we not visit Athos like a museum?

Like a zoo?

Does it bother us because the trip into our history is becoming shorter?

Each year, the monks' and our world come a little bit closer. Boats bring more and more worldly goods. Here a plastic bottle of mineral water for a hermit, there a new gas kitchen stove, a fridge and water pipes so that there is running water on the second floor too...every year there is something new. But this is positive too: there is new life on Athos. Young men bring new ideas, and there is renewal. For example, the monk Panteleimon and the skite Jovanitsa. He moved into this skite in spring, at that time a ruin. He spent the first nights sleeping outdoors. Then he started to renovate the first building. With his friends, more and more was done. Eighteen months later, Jovanitsa is a little treasure. The roofs have new tiles. The walls have been cleaned and painted. The garden wall has been straightened and repaired. The garden has been ploughed. The olive trees and the beehives have been tended to. It is a peaceful place now.

One and a half years ago ruins stood here. Technology made change possible. Cement machines and truckloads of building material were brought onto the island. The environment is being ignored though. I saw a monk clean the windows of his jeep with some newspaper, which he then threw to the ground. Cars break down and are left to rust in the woods. We found the battery of a car in a stream. The untreated sewage from a monastery near the sea runs directly into the harbour below it. Like the old earth closet, except the more in amount.

Yet it is still possible to find more seclusion and quiet here than anywhere else. Is this the most peaceful place in Europe? There is one boat a day, and it only comes when the weather is good enough. Our boat came at nine o'clock from Aghias Annis. A couple of hermits from the South side were on board. One was crocheting a rosary, the other was meditating. They are partially well-groomed as they visit the modern world, yet also so dirty, given their life alone in the huts. One monk is tanned and blond, but unkempt, his black habit bleached, he carries no luggage. A bent, old monk clamps his walking stick.

Athos is like a beautiful flower, one is granted the opportunity of a quick sniff. Visitors may stay for a maximum of four days. One day to get there, one day to leave – the trips are also an experience in themselves as they bring you to this other world – this leaves two whole days. As soon as one has arrived, it feels like one has to leave already. But it may be the brief time that makes the experience more intensive and memory sweeter.

# 12 The Holy Mountain and its Meaning for Europe

Father Mitrophan, Chilandariou Monastery

Of all the monk communities found in the history of the Eastern Church, only the Holy Mountain Athos has survived and fully maintained its monastic tradition.

## 12.1 Development

This monastic community has always been composed by a number of nationalities, and characterised by a spontaneous development. The Greek Anchorites were joined in 864 by the Bulgarians. As from 963, further nationalities built monasteries: the Georgians in the tenth century, the Russians in the eleventh century, the Serbians in the twelfth century, and the Romanians in the fourteenth century. The whole community had a pan orthodox character. The national representatives found a common element in Athos: the tradition of the Eastern Church, which itself stems from the old Christian tradition. At the same time, tradition also contained elements specific to their nation. All these nationalities, except for the Georgians, live together in their small monastic state, under the same conditions, and obeying the same rights and duties.

## 12.2 Secrets

Life on Athos itself is a secret, which is not easy to see or describe. To discover the secret, one has to go beyond the sensory. The secret is to be found there, where the human being reaches up and God reaches down to meet. It is this spiritual experience which makes the Mount Athos a Holy Mountain. Everything else, that is, the penitent life, the hospitality, the painting, the treasures, the architecture, the songs, the paths in the woods, the bells, the prayers and all else are a part of this secret, although they do not reveal the secret.

## 12.3 Future

My topic is the future of Athos as the future of Europe. It is a topic set in the present day and it is the main topic here. But the future is that category of time which is difficult for human beings to look into. In order for me to make my hypothesis about the future I believe I know the spirit of Europe to the same extent that I know the spirit of Athos. That is why I believe that the Athos' and Europe's future together rests on the answers given to the following two questions:

What can Athos offer the European Union for both their futures?  
What does the Holy Mountain expect from the European Community?

The structures of these communities are fundamentally different. The European Community focuses on a material economy, whilst the Athos community focuses on a spiritual economy. In other words, the European Union is development, whilst Mount Athos is preservation. The landing on the moon has shown that further development is senseless. The European lifestyle is physically and spiritually unsatisfactory. If the human being is not to perish, a return to Christian values must take place soon. It is not hard to look and find something one used to believe in. Europe used to be rich in spiritual and moral values. Historians often claim that it is the Christian monks which created Europe. The Gallic, the Celtic and the Anglo-Saxon monks preached the Gospel in the seventh and eighth century. These were followed by the Benedictine and the Cistercian monks, with their powerful influence deep into the Middle Ages.

The activities of these great spiritual carriers came from their intensive inner life, as Jesus said: "Look for the Kingdom of God first... everything else will be given to you". Europe was the centre of civilisation not through monks' translations, their buildings and schools, but through the monks' ascetic life which led them to find their inner soul and peace in their heart. A holy man from the East once said: "gain the soul of peace and you will save thousands of souls".

Today, when our Western brothers come to Athos they find the roots of their culture and their civilisation. They rediscover that our spiritual tradition is the one their fathers had and that Western monks taught prior to the Schism that split the spiritual unity of Europe. These are the values which will give Europe new creative vigour.

## **12.4 Youth**

The young Greek and West Europeans who decide to live in Athos are running away from the commercialisation of the spirit, from the erosion of morality and from a degenerate culture. They choose our communities, our strict, ascetic life. In this old form of life, which can fulfil and satisfy the spiritual life, young people find happiness and a reason for life. What is life on Athos like? The opposite of the social and political systems such as liberalism or totalitarianism which only pretend to show real life and actually only limit or destroy human beings' freedom. The Athos community shares a common way of life and a belief in the holy Trinity. God is the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, which are both the same thing yet also three distinct people.

This knowledge helps those in the community to belong, without having to fear that they will be lumped into the mass or sink into antisocial individualism.

## 12.5 The Individual

In the Athos community, the individual is not threatened by the community, as the key to life here is the Gospel and the Holy Scriptures. The individual learns that selfishness does not make one happy and is unsatisfactory. The human being has been created as an image of God, and can find happiness only in self-sacrifice, as this is the only way to be close to one's fellow human being. Only by rejecting personal interests can the person open up to the happiness found in the community. By accepting this lifestyle, it is not hard to develop and maintain a community which contains people with different characteristics, of different ages, from different cultures, origins and nationalities.

The community of Athos has existed for over a thousand years, which shows that crisis can lead to innovation and is the proof of its moral vitality. On Athos, there are monks from Greece, Russia, Bulgaria, Rumania, Serbia, European countries, North and South America, Asia and Australia. This is a wonderful combination of differences and unity. They are all united by their common belief which transcends national differences and oppositions, yet God's mercy allows for personal development and inner fulfillment.

The members of the community have a common belief, yet each member lives this belief their own way. This means that each individual contributes to the community as a whole. The Holy Mountain is also called the "Garden of the Mother of God – Pangaea", who is revered as the abbess of the Holy Mountain. Each plant is made alive by the mercy of God and the blessing of the abbess. Each plant is unique, but the garden is a whole, thus each plant makes the garden more diverse, more interesting and more beautiful. Difference and unity are the soul and life at the Holy Mountain.

Like all human beings, the members of the Athos community suffer from the weaknesses of human nature, the love of oneself. The main aim of each member of Athos is to transform this self-love into the love of God. Each human being is a copy of God and therefore deserves attention and love. Athos is physically isolated, but those who live belong here are part of an open community, they are open to each other, God and the world.

The centre and the basis for this unity is the belief in Christ. This explains why this unity stems from a human and not a divine source. The result shows human work and divine influence. Self-sacrifice to serve the unity is the starting point for all our members as well as for all true Christians. Christ is the best example. His crucifixion gave the world new life. The real Christian and the monk too, must die in order to live. To find society, the monk must leave society. He chooses "nothing" to find everything. Women are not allowed to Athos as the monks really love women. There are no women on Athos, yet they are here through the Maria, the Mother of God.

## **12.6 Myth**

How else can the mountain Athos contribute to the European Union?

Part of Athos is its myth, as we do not yet live in a world of wonders, shows and prophets. This world is true, real and everyday.

The historical truth is the kernel of the myth. But this kernel has been shrouded with concepts and symbols. This myth further extends the experience of God's energy. In Athos, the myth does not contradict reality, it is part of reality and truth. The myth also has a deep relationship to human phantasy and creativity, it makes human life beautiful and happier.

## **12.7 Silence**

A further element of the spirituality on Athos is the HESYCHIA – silence. Silence. This is eternal consideration of that aspect of the world which is not transitory. Silence can only be experienced when one is away from the world of noise. Silence and contemplation are compensation for a Christian, who, in his or her own way, renounces the world or the soul of our times. The Christian should live in this world, but not with the world. It is the way, not the place which determines Christian behaviour.

## **12.8 Economy**

In modern society, the experience of observation and rest with God as a principle of life has nearly, if not completely, disappeared. The "economic miracle" and consumerism have numbed society, and in its stupor, has not yet realised the high cost in terms of spiritual and ethical principles.

Athos too, has a number of economical issues which need to be resolved, given difficult technical conditions and other shortages. But issues concerning the spirit and the soul are more important. It is these aspects of our life, experienced through silence and observation, which show us the right way to solve all external and internal questions of life.

A further characteristic of life on Athos is diligence. But it is not to be compared to "fanaticism", a diseased expression of what one believes in. Rather, diligence is a conscious and dynamic perseverance in what one believes in. This belief is not forced, it is strengthened and confirmed through one's experiences. The experience which confirms increases this enthusiasm.

It is well-known with what enthusiasm belief and tradition are looked after. The support of tradition is the most fundamental characteristic of the Holy Mountain. This is rightly so, as tradition provides a deep source, which provides the members of Athos with those principles necessary to construct their inner life adequately.

All these comments represent the values of life on Athos, values which can be a common good for all, as these have been values held in the past. Monastic life need not be foreign to all other human beings. The Christian way of life is the same for all, as we all aim for the final goal in life, and the way to achieve this goal should be the same for all. Monastic life is a gift of God to humanity. It is here to maintain the real Christian personality of human beings. Christianity is not a religion, nor an ideology, it is a way of life for the human being, the image of God.

There is so much more that could be said about the rich spiritual life on the Holy Mountain, for example the confession of thoughts (according to Jacob's letter 5.16), night watch, fasting (rather than the West's dieting), the meaning of communion, the legends, the symbols, signals and other aids for the monastic path, which all help to keep life spiritually alive and fresh, maintain a love of life and increase the quiet happiness of daily life. These are aids which can help everybody.

## **12.9 Help**

I hope I have been able to show how Mount Athos can contribute to the European Union with social, moral and spiritual values. The question is what help the community of Athos expects from the European Union.

We are in the same situation as the monk on Athos who is asked by the Western brother what he should bring on his next visit. The monk is so "poor" that he doesn't know what he may need. We only expect one thing: to retain those legal possibilities, which already existed in Byzantine and Ottoman times, which allow us to live according to our monastic principles and which allow Athos to continue to be a place of encounter between the West and the East.

If the European Union sees our statement as insignificant and modest, or as reserved, then maybe we could add a further wish concerning our future: the community of Athos should never be viewed solely from a political perspective. A purely political view distorts what we really are. It is difficult for us to understand political language, in the same way that in politics, our language often seems to be incomprehensible.

We, members of Athos, are open to culture and science, and we know that the spiritual world is to be found in the European Union. I hope that they are able to understand us and are able to correctly judge us and represent our concerns.

And finally, I would kindly ask you the following: everything I have said about my home, the Holy Mountain, as well as my modest request to our new, extended home is to be seen as a message from one member of Athos, one who has spoken spontaneously.