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The duelling dragons of Zagori

In Epirus, the country's wild northwestern state, a snaking five-mile trail rises above the stone-built villages of Zagori to reach the fabled Drakolimni, twin alpine lakes dating to the last ice age. Words: Helen Iatrou

Departing in heavy mist, our hiking party zigzags its way up the mountain track from the still-sleeping village of Mikro Papigo, stopping to fill flasks at a spring-fed fountain half-concealed by the morning haze. Local lore claims our destination, the twin alpine pools of Drakolimni — 'Dragon Lake' in Greek — take their name from ancient duelling dragons once poised atop the opposing mountains of Tymfi and Smolikas. The boulders they cast at one another are said to stud the hillsides.

Deflating the tale with a smile, guide Achilles Papaefthymiou explains that the age-old moniker may instead originate from the newts inhabiting the lakes. "They probably reminded the local villagers of miniatures of the fire-breathing creatures," he says, with a note of apology.

This more mundane telling doesn't diminish the magic of Northern Pindos National Park. Resting at our first waypoint, the shuttered Astraka Mountain Hut, perched at 6,398ft, Achilles, founder of adventure tour company Alpine Zone, hands out homemade cake to nibble as we take in humbling views of the Towers of Astraka. One of Greece's great natural wonders, the undulating wall of this impregnable massif looks like the turret from a giant's castle, their buttresses and jagged crenelations carved by mighty hands.

With the hardest part of the ascent still to come, some members of our party decide to turn back. The 10-hour round trip isn't for amateurs, and we're hiking in winter — out of season. Between May and October, the peak months for walking in the Epirus region, this hut is open and acts as a refuge, hosting up to 51 hikers. Here, they can restore energy levels with the hearty cuisine of northwest Greece — lentil soup and *blatsaropita* (a pie thrown together with whatever's in the pantry), washed down with the local firewater *tsipouro* (produced with

the indigenous Debina grape) or mountain tea made with wild ironwort.

With no such facilities open at present, our weary companions are choosing to retreat to Megalo Papigo, among the most scenic of 46 traditional villages that make up the forested Zagori area. It's a setting plucked from a fairytale: fertile gorges and flowing rivers encircle stone-built, slate-roofed homes with heavy wooden doors and cobblestone pathways. It's the sort of place where dragons wouldn't be entirely amiss.

Our party lighter and our stomachs fuller, Achilles leads us onwards, fleshing out our understanding of the land. "In summer, we see wild horses and mules and the occasional brown bear," he tells us. This is one of Greece's most biodiverse areas, with more than 2,000 species of flora and fauna, home to wolves, chamois, roe deer, otters and such endangered birds as the Egyptian vulture.

The winter is quieter, both in terms of hikers and wildlife; its silence is palpable, even as we crunch through knee-deep snow in the dried-out lake of Xerolimni.

The forest has long given way to a naked, open landscape dotted with juniper shrubs. Climbing higher, the final ascent squeezes us into single file, following a slim path scooped from a scree slope that plunges away into nothingness on one side.

Five hours into the trek, we summit the plateau at the foot of Mount Tymfi and Drakolimni reveals itself: frozen solid and enveloped in a snowy embrace. Some of the group skate across the ice; I squint up at Mount Smolikas, trying to spot the second pool and — just maybe — a dragon.

HOW TO DO IT: Alpine Zone offers guided adventure trips in northern Greece. alpinezone.gr • Double rooms at Mikro Papigo 1700 Hotel and Spa start from €120 (£109), B&B. mikropapigo.gr • Wild Frontiers' Northern Greece: Along The Via Egnatia is available from £2,425 for nine days wildfrontierstravel.com

The conservationist



Wildlife biologist Alexandros Karamanlidis speaks about his work at environmental NGO Arcturos, whose bear and wolf sanctuary can be visited in Nymphaio, Western Macedonia

TELL US ABOUT GREEK FAUNA

Greece is home to about 500 brown bears, mostly split between the Pindos and Rodopi Mountains. Wolves number around 700 and are the key regulators of the food pyramid.

WHAT IS ARCTUROS?

It was created in 1992 to address the issue of dancing bears. Arcturos is focused on rescuing wild animals caught in traps or involved in accidents, and dealing with wild animals that get too close to human settlements.

WHEN CAN VISITORS COME TO THE SANCTUARY?

Bears and wolves reside in protected areas within their natural habitats. At the information centre, visitors can hear the stories behind each creature. The brown bear sanctuary is closed in January and February, whereas the wolf sanctuary is open year-round. arcturos.gr HI

LEFT: Hikers above the alpine lake of Drakolimni, near Mount Tymfi, Epirus
PREVIOUS PAGE: The view towards the Parthenon from Monastiraki Square, with Tzistarakis Mosque in the foreground, Athens