

GRAND TOUR  
Southern Greece

Duration  
35 DAYS

ROLLER TEAM  
Auto-Roller 746

Sapphire seas, welcoming campsites,  
fantastic food and an Olympic landmark

Total distance  
3782 miles

# A Grecian odyssey

GARY BLAKE and WENDY JOHNSON explore the millennia-long history of the Peloponnese on an epic, five-week tour



**GARY & WENDY** took up motorcaravanning after spending years sailing in cruising yachts. Today they enjoy touring across Europe, and further afield

**I**n total we passed through 29 tunnels – the Channel Tunnel was the longest, followed by Switzerland’s 16km Gotthard – on our journey; we also crossed bridges spanning breathtaking mountain valleys. We had travelled from our home in Reading, Berkshire, for 1000 miles, with a gradual downhill run over the final 300 to our first destination, Venice.

We had cruise-controlled it for most of the way, but finally engaged low gear as we climbed up onto the deck of Anek Lines’ *Forza* open-deck transporter, for our ‘Camping on Board’ passage to Greece. With our motorhome hooked up to the ship’s 220-volt electricity supply, and with our gas turned off, we were all set for the 36-hour crossing to Patras that would save us a long drive through Italy.

Our trip was partly inspired by the book *Blue Skies and Black Olives* written by John Humphrys (of BBC Radio 4’s *Today* programme fame). In it he describes building his holiday home in the Peloponnese, surrounded by the wild flowers of spring, in an unspoiled and tourist-free bliss. It sounded wonderful.

Although principally a transporter, we found *Forza* to be quite luxurious, with a piano-bar, casino, shops and a good self-service restaurant. Our accommodation came ‘free’, as we’d driven the ‘van aboard, with window views (ours) all for the price of passenger and vehicle tickets. We were also

The vertical rock that juts out of the sea at Monemvasia has earned the area the nickname ‘Gibraltar of the East’

PHOTOS: GARY BLAKE

allowed to use the showers – situated on the car deck and cleaned every two hours – as well as the Wi-Fi throughout the ship, and had access to all decks.

Our motorhome – a Roller Team Auto-Roller 746 (7.3m long, plus another metre to allow for our bikes on the rear rack) – had a reversing camera, accommodation for six, a spacious and comfortable Luton area and a spacious washroom. It also offered a good-sized garage that proved ideal for storing outdoor equipment, our barbecue, walking boots and more.

**WONDERFUL VENETIAN VIEWS**

Before catching the ferry we'd decided to spend a day exploring Venice, using Camping Village Jolly as our base for two nights. After taking the local bus into Venice – which was a 20-minute run – and employing our €20 (£17), 24-hour travelcard, we were able to visit the far island of Burano. You won't find any cars here – just speedboats.

With the hop-on, hop-off waterbuses as frequent as the buses that run along Oxford Street, we meandered through tiny streets and became wonderfully lost. In the afternoon light the view of the Grand Canal, with its gondolas and exquisite palaces, could almost have been a scene from a Canaletto painting.

High up on *Forza's* deck we viewed Venice once more, as we steamed through the Grand Canal at 2pm. We sailed past the Lido and into the Adriatic sea, in perfect picture-postcard weather.

**PREPARING FOR OUR TRIP**

We docked in Patras at midnight, which presented us with a dilemma about where to sleep. We'd read internet blogs about motorhomes being stolen while parked

*“ We were keen to smell the wild flowers, as well as sample the wine and olives, and dine in tavernas ”*

up, but fortunately this didn't materialise and we enjoyed a good night's sleep inside the yacht marina alongside the docks.

We had decided to circumnavigate the Peloponnese clockwise – Wendy has an aversion to steep drops, so that meant the inland mountain slopes would be on the driver's side as much as possible.

Despite having a new sat-nav including Eastern- and Western-European maps, we felt slight trepidation as to whether we would find our numerous forthcoming destinations. In his book, John Humphrys had written: “Villagers say the roads are unmarked on purpose, and [that] only the military know exactly where they are. Rumours of another Turkish rule led to this explanation of poor signage.”

So, with the purchase of a definitive road map from Orama Editions (*Peloponnese #056*), with both English and Greek spellings, we were ready to discover the area's history, from ancient times through to World War II. We were also keen to see and smell the wild flowers, including orchids, anemones, irises and campanulas, as well as sample local wine and olives and dine in tavernas. We would wild camp as the desire took us, and fish if time permitted, too.

**A PENINSULA INTRODUCTION**

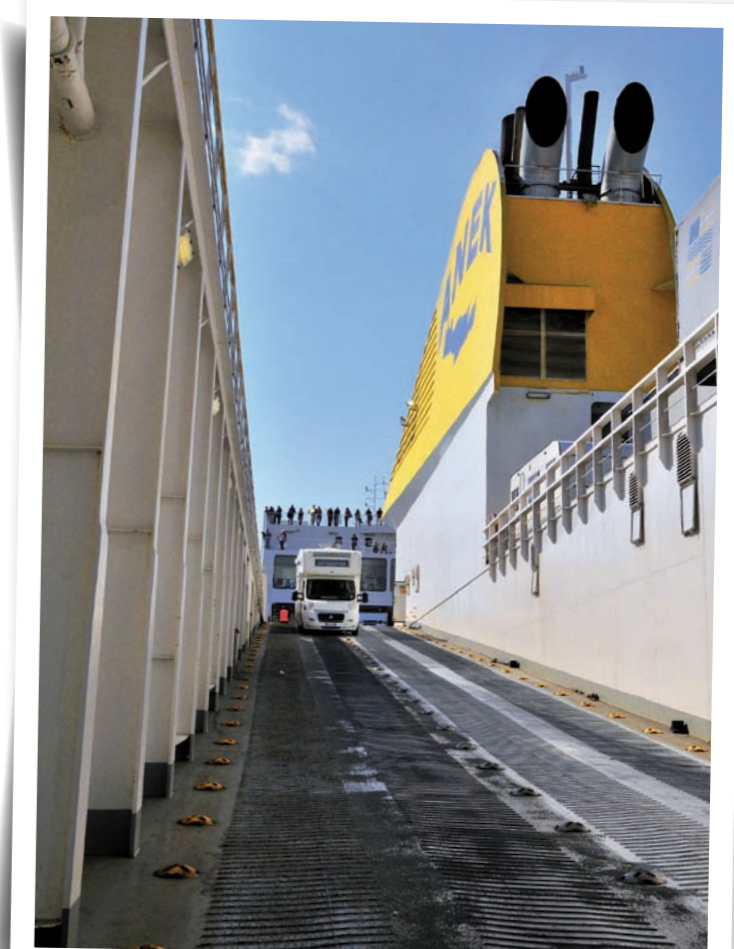
The Peloponnese – the southern-most region of mainland Greece – is made



Our booking on Anek Lines' *Forza* ferry, crossing from Venice to Patras, cost £377.61 for our motorhome and two occupants. It included 'camping on board', too. See [www.aneke.gr](http://www.aneke.gr) or call 0030 210 419 7400 for details



Clockwise from this photo Akrata Beach campsite; rolling off the Anek ferry; Venice made for a great stopover; Wendy admires the view at Kalavryta; the Auto-Roller 746 onsite; juicy local olives

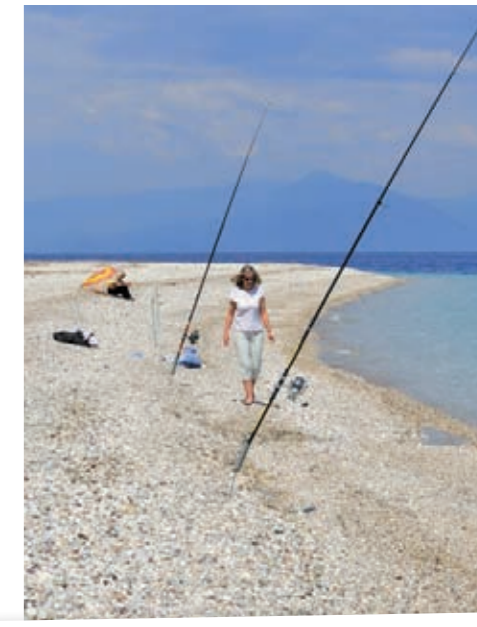




*Clockwise from this photo*  
The amphitheatre at Epidaurus can seat 15,000; the lovely Mauria restaurant; walking near Akrata Beach campsite; a wonderful pitch-side view at Bekas Camping Centre Tasty shrimps in Epidaurus



Navigating Greek roads can be confusing, so get hold of a good map. We took Orama Editions' Peloponnese road map, with both English and Greek spellings. For more information, visit [www.oramaeditions.gr](http://www.oramaeditions.gr)



up of four south-pointing peninsulas, a mountainous interior and ranges that divide the island into east and west; Mount Taygetus is its highest point, at 2407m (7897 feet). It gained island status when a ship passage – the Corinth Canal – was cut in 1893, and it now also has the Rio to Antirio bridge connecting it to the mainland. The Corinth offers a direct route from the Adriatic to Piraeus and on to Istanbul, the Black Sea and beyond.

**RIGHT ON TRACKS**

Our first stop was to be the cog railway at Diakofto. It is 30km east of Patras as the crow flies, but turned out to be at least 60km with our sat-nav – we were late for the first train's departure at 8.30am. Lesson one: enter co-ordinates into the sat-nav, rather than names!

We finally made it, and sat at the back of the train for the unforgettable journey through the incredibly beautiful scenery of the Vouraikos Gorge. The Diakofto–Kalavryta narrow-gauge, single-line railway, built by Italian engineers between 1885 and 1895, twists through tunnels and over rivers. We passed the old Mega Spileo monastery, which is built on the slopes of a steep canyon, and travelled up to Kalavryta: a village that's situated at 758m (2486 feet) above sea level.

*“If you get lost on your approach to the campsite – as we did – the owner will come out to find you ”*

We spent the day exploring the village, which reminded us of a previous tour through Switzerland, thanks to the early-spring wildflowers; there was even snow on the mountains.

Kalavryta is famous as being the birthplace of the Greek War of Independence, after an open revolt against the occupying Turks in March 1821. There was also an infamous Nazi massacre of local inhabitants that took place in December 1943, when the village was razed to the ground. You can walk up to the memorial and visit the museum to learn more about Kalavryta's history.

We'd planned to stop overnight at Akrata Beach Campsite, and we took the N8 coastal road rather than the motorway towards it. If you get lost (as we did) the owner, Emmanuel, will come out to find you and escort you in! Once we'd

arrived, we received a lovely welcome from Emmanuel and his Greek/Australian wife, and were straight away invited to join a family birthday party.

The facilities at the campsite are good, and include a taverna with home-cooked meals on offer both at lunchtime and during the evenings. We enjoyed a restful night, listening to the sound of the waves lapping on the beach.

**ONWARDS TO EPIDAVROS**

Next on our itinerary was a visit to the port of Epidavros, which could be reached by skirting around the top of the Peloponnese on the motorway and coast road, namely the E65/N8A and the N10. We would be passing the amazing Corinth Canal on this journey, but we had already seen its marvels from the road bridge above; we so decided against visiting

ancient Corinth on the way, and instead drive straight to Epidavros.

The wide asphalt road from Corinth eventually led us to another nice site, Bekas Camping in Gialasi, Ancient Epidavros. Confusingly, there is Old, New and Ancient Epidavros; this site was close to the port.

As it was early in the season – with few other campers at what must be a packed site in the summer – we chose to pitch up by the beachfront. We picked oranges from the trees that provide shade, and got on our bikes for a cycle into the port. The aroma of orange blossom was intoxicating as we meandered through the groves. We also enjoyed the soporific sound of waves lapping on the pebble beach, and saw a picture-perfect sunset over the Saronic Gulf islands of Agistri and Aegina, and the Peloponnese peninsula of

Methana, where John Humphrys had built his dream holiday house. At last we were in idyllic Greece.

The next day we enjoyed one of our finest-ever Greek lunches, on the terrace of the Gikes family's Mauria Restaurant, right on the water's edge. It was also alongside the open-air Little Epidaurus Theatre where actress Helen Mirren starred in Jean Racine's *Phèdre*.

We ate the sweetest shrimps, squid in spicy tomato sauce, cheese and spinach pie, vine leaves in lemon sauce and home-grown olives; it was a meal straight from the gods.

**SOME ANCIENT WONDERS**

Ancient Epidaurus, 8km away, has a spectacular amphitheatre in a beautiful and atmospheric setting. It's a staggering 118m (387 feet) in diameter, and is



A wild camper on Mani showed me the bike outrigger he built to cycle along a disused railway line. There are 200 miles of abandoned track in the Peloponnese. See [www.visitgreece.gr](http://www.visitgreece.gr) for more info on local activities

sunk into a hillside; it can seat 15,000 spectators and is still in use to this day. You can hear the stage way below no matter where you're sitting, as it has exceptional acoustics.

In ancient times Epidavros was known for its sanctuary, named after the god of medicine, Asklepios; it was the classical world's most celebrated healing centre.

Half an hour from the city is the Triton II campsite at Drepano Beach. It proved to be very efficiently run. We sat and chatted to the owner, and learned that her restaurant caters for 1000 people a day during the high season. With only a handful of motorhomes on site during our stay, we felt that spring was the better time to visit.

Nafplion – alternatively spelt Nauplion, Nauplia, Navplío, and Nafplio – was an

*“Traces of human occupation dating back to 2000BC have been discovered at the site of Mycenae”*

important town that was variously held by the Byzantine Greeks, Ottoman Turks and Venetians, as demonstrated by its diverse, elegant architecture. From 1829–1834 it was also the capital of Greece.

Nafplion is a pretty town, with free parking at the docks. Towering over everything is the 18th-century Palamidi Fortress. While I took the 857 steps to the top, you can cheat and get there by taxi. Wendy, meanwhile, walked along the promenade and around the headland of Acronauplia, the oldest part of the town.

#### AN OLIVE OIL EXPERIENCE

The following day we attempted to find Mycenae, an ancient site 30km north, off the A7. We were intrigued as to why a town would spring up in such a deserted place; it turns out that long ago it controlled an important traffic route connecting the Gulfs of Corinth and Argos.

Traces of human occupation dating to 2000BC have been discovered at the town's location. Large tombs began to be constructed from around 1700BC, which highlights the presence of rich and powerful aristocracy. This city increased its importance and dominated the Aegean, but was destroyed around 1200BC.

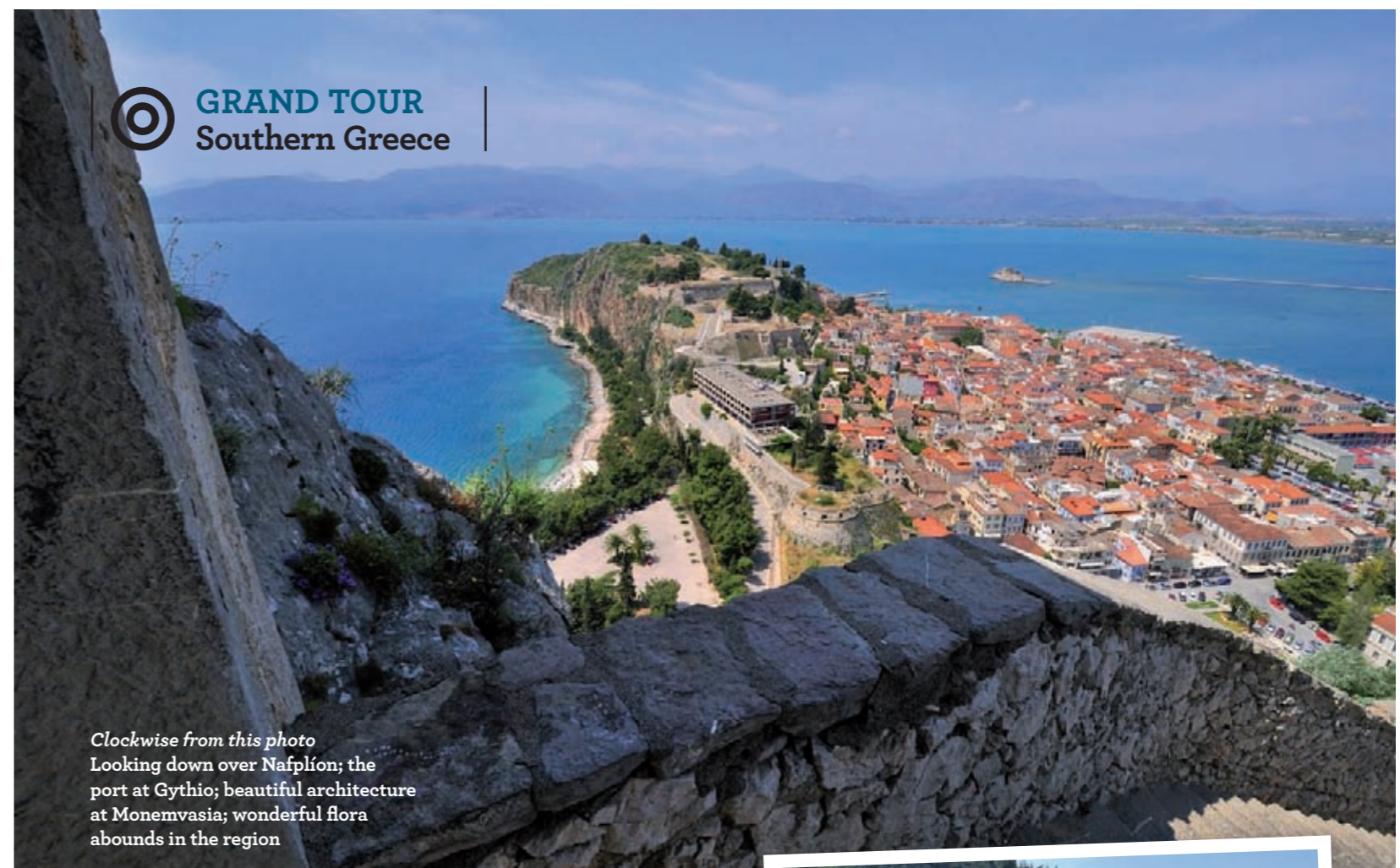
The superb A7 motorway took us to Tripoli, then we followed the A39 to Sparta for a visit to the Museum of the Olive and Greek Olive Oil. It's



*This photo* The path to the 18th-century fortress at Nafplion Below Nafplion was once the Greek capital



*This photo* Gary and Wendy picked oranges at Bekas Camping Left Onsite at Mystras



*Clockwise from this photo* Looking down over Nafplion; the port at Gythio; beautiful architecture at Monemvasia; wonderful flora abounds in the region



unique in Greece and is located in the heart of Laconia, one of the country's primary olive-producing areas.

We discovered a campsite behind a petrol station on our way to Mystras, which gave us somewhere handy to stop overnight. The owners weren't quite ready for the new season at that point, but we had all facilities that we needed on board our motorhome.

#### GIBRALTAR OF THE EAST

The following morning we visited Mystras itself. The picturesque Byzantine town was once a wonder of the ancient Peloponnese, and is now a UNESCO World Heritage site. It was abandoned in 1832, when the nearby town of Sparta was built; today, Mystras's breathtaking ruins stand in a beautiful landscape overlooking the Laconian plain.

Then it was time to move on to Gythio, one of the most picturesque towns in the Peloponnese. It's a port, and numerous fish restaurants line the waterfront; you can also see lovely neo-classical buildings from the past two centuries. Should you choose to, it's from here that you can take a seven-hour ferry to Kissamos, on the western side of Crete.

After a rest, we took the 75km drive to Monemvasia. Sometimes referred to as the 'Gibraltar of the East', the town

*“Monemvasia – or ‘Gibraltar of the East’ – is set amid a huge rock that rises vertically from the sea”*

is set amid a huge rock that rises almost vertically from the sea. I climbed up the steps to find the remains of a Byzantine town scattered across the top. The only standing structure is the church of Áyia Sofia, while a later, medieval town hangs on the steep, southern slope of the rock.

This lower town has been tastefully preserved, and you can wander the small streets and alleyways, browsing souvenir shops or stopping for a drink.

We weren't able to find a campsite here, but were told that in the off-season motorhomes are permitted to park on a hardstanding area at the port.

#### SUPERB LOCAL PRODUCE

We'd now reached our furthest point east, but we were advised not to return via the Sparta-Kalamata road: it is notoriously



“Wild camping on the beach at Kardhamili made up for our tiredness”

Clockwise from this photo The stunning harbour at Kardhamili; exploring historic Olympia; supplies for sale in Kardhamili; wild camping on the beach



high and dangerous. Instead, we took what we were told was the coastal road from Lemeni to Kalamata; our description would have to be ‘mountainous’ rather than ‘coastal’!

Until recently, many villages on the Mani peninsular could only be reached by sea. Today, a narrow and winding metalled road climbs up and down the coastline, via hilltop villages. Mani is known for its flora and fauna, as well as for producing the world’s best extra-virgin olive oil. It’s soft-pressed from partially ripened olives of the Koroneiki variety, which are organically grown on mountain terraces. The local honey is also of superior quality.

As time was short we had to miss the southern Mani finger, and pressed on to Kalamata along high mountain roads through pretty villages. We descended

back to sea level at Kardhamili, where we decided that we’d had as much driving as we could bear in a day. Wild camping on the beach and a spot of snorkelling made up for our tiredness, however.

#### AWESOME ANCIENT OLYMPIA

The next day – and fully refreshed – we got back on the road. A low-gear climb led us out to Kalamata and onto the E65/A7 motorway. After driving through fertile countryside featuring luscious olive and orange groves, we arrived at Camping Diana in Ancient Olympia – which would be the pièce de résistance of our trip.

The site is within walking distance of Olympia (uphill on the way back!), and we enjoyed the wonderment of ancient Greece the following morning, before all the cruise-ship passengers arrived. Renowned for hosting the Olympic

Games in ancient times – and where the flame is still lit for our modern Games – Olympia is a magical place set among the trees, with many remains still standing.

In Classical times the Games were held every four years, as they are now, but only for five days. Around 40,000 spectators came from other ancient civilisations, such as Egypt, and watched wrestling, gymnastics, horse racing and (of course) running. Only men and single women could watch; married women might be killed if they tried to sneak in.

Sadly, our Peloponnese tour was at an end. On the return to Patras we stopped off at Agios Andreas for a swim. As we sipped wine from the Mercouri Estate near Pyrgos, and ate black olives from Kalamata under blue skies, we reflected on what a wonderfully memorable trip we had experienced.

**1 Akrata Beach Camping**  
Porovitsa Beach,  
25006 Akrata, Achaia  
Tel +30 269 603 1988  
Web [www.akrata-beach-camping.gr](http://www.akrata-beach-camping.gr)

Akrata Beach Camping is located on a pebble beach, and offers good facilities; the site is run by extremely helpful and friendly staff. It’s a medium-sized park, with around 20-30 touring pitches, and is open all year.

You should aim to use the coast road if driving from the cog railway, rather than the motorway. If you get lost, telephone owner Emmanuel Tzavellas, who is always contactable on his mobile (0030 6974 761 681) – he speaks English.

**2 Bekas Camping**  
Gialasi, Ancient Epidavros,  
21059 Argolida  
Tel +30 275 309 9930  
Web [www.bekas.gr](http://www.bekas.gr)

There are 100 touring pitches at this attractive site, which is one kilometre from the small theatre of Epidavros. Bekas Camping is open from March to October.

This is a well organised, modern site that offers shade beneath fruit-bearing trees. It’s situated alongside the crystal-clear sea.

**3 Triton II Camping**  
21060 Plaka, Drepano  
Tel +30 275 209 2228  
Web [www.tritonii.gr](http://www.tritonii.gr)

Triton II Camping is large – it has around 200 touring pitches – and is owned by Christina Kremastiotis, who clearly knows how to run a site for the discerning motorcaravaner! It’s open all year; a month-long stay in the period from October to March will cost you just €300 (£258).

The site is located by the beach at Drepano, and has shaded pitches as well as very good amenities. It’s a great place to stay if you’re planning to visit Nafplion, which is just 12km away.

**4 Camping Paleologio Mystras**  
23100 Mystras, Laconia  
Tel +30 273 102 2724

Between Sparta and Mystras – and a couple of kilometres from the



Akrata Beach site is open all year



Stunning sea views are on offer at Bekas Camping (left) and Triton II

centre of the former – you’ll find Camping Paleologio Mystras, located behind a petrol station. The owner is a pleasant and helpful chap who speaks good English. The site is basic, with a limited number of hook-ups; there are approximately 30 pitches.

**5 Camping Meltemi**  
Mavrovouni, Gytheio,  
23200 Lakonias  
Tel +30 273 302 2833  
Web [www.campingmeltemi.gr](http://www.campingmeltemi.gr)

On the highway between Gythion and Areopoli is Camping Meltemi, set in a 25-acre olive grove and with plenty of shade from the sun. It’s open from April to October, and is located close to Mavrovouni beach, which extends for almost five kilometres.

The sea here is usually peaceful, and a refuge for the protected



loggerhead turtles that arrive from May to August to lay their eggs. The beach is also popular with surfers when the Meltemi wind blows, which brings good waves.

**6 Camping Diana**  
27065 Ancient Olympia  
Tel +30 262 402 2314  
Web [www.campingdiana.gr](http://www.campingdiana.gr)

Camping Diana is open all year, and it’s really well placed for exploring Olympia – it’s located just 200 metres from the main square, and 800 metres from the archaeological site. It’s well known to everyone in the area, too, so it’s worth asking for directions should you get lost.

The owner is Mr Thoukededes Kosmopoulos (90 years of age); he and his wife (80) have run the site for 32 years.

#### Find out more

- [www.mythicalpeloponnese.gr](http://www.mythicalpeloponnese.gr)
- [www.greececamping.gr](http://www.greececamping.gr)
- [www.oramaeditions.gr](http://www.oramaeditions.gr)

#### Food and drink

Food in most tavernas is locally sourced from known providers, and establishments set great store by using their own produce, especially olive oil, olives and honey. The bread varies enormously in each area of the Peloponnese.

The Mercouri Estate near Pyrgos is a good place to visit for a wine tasting; there is also a small agricultural museum attached to the winery. Telephone before visiting ([www.mercouri.gr](http://www.mercouri.gr); 0030 26210 41601).



#### Parking

Parking in the centre of towns proved difficult because of the length of our vehicle, but we found that most places had large car parks in which it was free to stay. We also found the roads of the Peloponnese to be uncrowded; although we were travelling away from the main holiday season.

#### The motorhome

Our Auto-Roller 746 was manufactured by Roller Team, part of the renowned Triganio Group. The brand is retailed in the UK by its Triganio stablemate Auto-Trail.

The 746 is a true family ‘van, with a spacious layout that features a double dinette up front, and a large, U-shaped lounge at the rear. The ‘van will sleep six in comfort, and has the same number of belted seats; alternatively, it makes a luxurious vehicle for two on a longer trip. We slept in the large overcab bed, which has two opening windows and a large rooflight.

The washroom is of a reasonable size, and there’s a separate shower cubicle. We found storage throughout the motorhome to be excellent, thanks in particular to the numerous lockers at roof level. There is also a good-sized wardrobe, as well as large exterior lockers.

#### Way to go

If you’re planning to travel south via Luxembourg, which offers cheaper fuel than France, make sure to find a petrol station off the motorway, where it’s 20 per cent cheaper still.

After the sensible driving of the French and Swiss, we crossed the Italian border and felt as though we were in the middle of a motor race. With heavy traffic on the motorways it needed a steady head to negotiate through the melee. A moment’s hesitation also brought a cacophony of beeps from the cars behind us!

In Greece we found that it’s normal to move over onto the hard shoulder to allow other vehicles to overtake you.

You should carry a warning triangle, fire extinguisher, beam converters and a first-aid kit with you in your motorhome; you’re also advised to take a reflective vest (compulsory in France) and a spare-bulb set.

#### The costs

Fuel .....	£882
Tolls .....	£152
Campsites .....	£469
Food and drink/attractions .....	£680
Ferries/Channel Tunnel .....	£553
<b>TOTAL .....</b>	<b>£2736</b>