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City Mouse, Country Mouse

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Zagori is not wilderness. Forty-six villages are tucked in the folds of the rugged terrain.

by Zora O'Neill

For two decades of my travelling life, I was a city mouse through and through. I lived in New York, and all my trips centred on other metropolises. Bangkok, Mexico City, Cairo – the bigger, the better. I enjoyed a good hike, like anyone, but I didn't consider nature its own reason to travel; cities were where the action was, where humans were at their best, ingenious and cohabiting.

Yet somehow, over just a few years, something changed. Tokyo struck me as faintly dull. At home, New York was irritatingly noisy. I craved wilderness and natural beauty in a way I never had before. Was it just my age, I wondered? Or a response to a stressful political era? Should I reject this change, or embrace it? I wasn't sure, but if I had to pinpoint the place where my attitude had first started to shift, it would be in the Zagori region of Greece.

Foreign visitors usually imagine Greece as a nation of islands, all rocky beaches and crystal-blue Mediterranean waters. Zagori is well off that map, mentally and physically: on the mainland, in the skyscraping mountains that mark the border with Albania. From the city of Ioannina, a narrow road ascends the steep, pine-black slope that sits behind the city like a theatrical screen. On the other side is Zagori; the name is from a Slavic root meaning "beyond the mountains."

As remote as that may sound, Zagori is not wilderness. Forty-six villages are tucked in the folds of the rugged terrain. The region's centrepiece is the Vikos Gorge, one of the deepest in the world yet easily accessible to hikers. The villages near the gorge thrive entirely on visitors – most from elsewhere in Europe, as well as a large contingent from Israel. I first visited in 2015, with my husband, Peter, for the typical daylong gorge hikes, exploring villages by car. Built traditionally of naturally flat slabs of local stone, right up to the chimney tops, the settlements fit seamlessly with the environment. This struck me as a kind of enchantment: whenever I turned to look back as we drove away, the village had already vanished into the hillside.

The sense of a magical spell reached its pitch in Kapesovo, where, in a tiny shop on the village square, a young woman with freckles and blue mascara plied us with wondrous treats: tiny

mushrooms preserved in sugar syrup and sausage made of grapes. She made us laugh with tin toys, and told us how her family wanted to teach their fellow Greeks, now years into a deep economic collapse, that they could be self-sufficient, that to live off the land was a joy. From there we walked up the cobbled street to the family's guesthouse, where the sister of the freckled fairy princess made us an impeccable lunch. The sun slanted through the windows and the lettuce in our salad became emeralds in a bowl. A year and a half later, the spell was still cast: in a January we would ordinarily have spent in some warm metropolis, Peter and I decided to return to Zagori.

It was deep winter, the snow up to our knees. We were the only guests, alongside seven year-round residents, including two relatively new transplants from Athens. Dogs outnumbered us, and a neighbour's cow roamed free. My days became simple. After breakfast, I could take a walk. Then I could return and read or write, slowly steaming dry by the dining-room fireplace. It jutted out from the wall at bench-seat height, as if part of the lunch conversation. Lettuce was not in season, but beets were. In the firelight, they glowed like rubies under a golden veil of olive oil.

It was a big event the day we walked across the village to the private home of Thoukididis, the patriarch who opened the guesthouse and whose daughters, Elli and Ioanna, had bewitched us on our first visit. A professor in Ioannina, he had written books about Zagori history and traditions – and lived them out every day. We toured his cellars and his still for transforming the scraps of pressed grapes into bracing, clear *tsipouro*, then sat for coffee in his snug kitchen.

Thoukididis struck me as a typical product of Zagori, and what makes the region different from other rural retreats: it is far more worldly than it looks. Today the drive from Kapesovo to Ioannina is only about 40 minutes, but Zagori residents have never been locked away behind the mountains. In the early Ottoman period, Zagori had an uncommonly good deal: autonomy and no taxes. This was in exchange for securing the roads, in cooperation with the neighbouring Vlachs, sheep herders who spoke a Latinate language from the centuries when they guarded the mountain passes on behalf of Roman rulers. The Ottomans eventually instituted taxes, however, and Zagori men of means chose to build wealth abroad. In Alexandria and Sofia, Paris and Bucharest, they established banks and bakeries, department stores and doctor's practices.

Sitting by the fire, I paged through a book of photos from the late 19th century, the period of peak emigration. In portraits from family sendoff celebrations, groups are gathered on the village threshing circles. In sharp contrast with the rocky hillsides, the men sport sharp city suits and liberal moustache wax; the women wear silk dresses and T-strap shoes. When the emigrants returned, they brought knowledge of strawberry cultivation, new apple varieties, and even a hair treatment: the permanent wave. They endowed schools (Zagori had full literacy by the second half of the 18th century)

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and funded a network of graceful stone bridges and paths that literally elevated the people of Zagori: their boots, it was said, were never muddy. A short walk from where I sat, an elegant stone staircase zigzagged up a canyon wall, the only way to reach the neighbouring village of Vradeto until a road was cut in 1973.

Eventually the wealth of other countries pulled more residents away, and there was less to hold people in Zagori. During World War II, the Germans bombed the eastern part of the region. Later, the Vlachs and the Sarakatsani – nomadic shepherds who brought their tens-of-thousands-strong flocks to Zagori's green meadows in the summer – bought some of the long-vacant stone houses. Later still, ecotourism developed as a source of local income, and near-ghost-town villages revived, at least in the months when the hiking trails were passable.

Peter and I returned to Zagori twice more, in hiking season. On the fourth trip, our Kapesovo guesthouse had a new employee, a young woman named Dimitra, and we settled around the fireplace to chat. "I used to be a city person," she said, as she poked at the logs. "But now this feels like the perfect place for me."

Inspired by Dimitra's certainty, I struck out on my own, to attend a *panegyri*, a festival in the village of Aristi. Zagori is known for a particularly heart-rending style of clarinet music; it has ancient roots but also perfectly captures the grief of families separated by emigration. Thoukididis had told us that in the old days, before the radio, the *panegyri* was the only time of year that music was traditionally played.

When I arrived in Aristi, 45 minutes by car from Kapesovo, I sauntered down to the square. Without my Greek-speaking husband, I had no easy way to break the ice with strangers – "Where's your family from?" is the eternal question in Greece – so I sat awkwardly alone at a café table. Two young Scandinavian women in hiking gear walked up and asked the waiter about the *panegyri*. There is music tonight? He shrugged and pursed his lips halfway to the Greek gesture

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for “no” then allowed: “Maybe.” What time? Again he shrugged. Where? He shrugged.

That evening I walked to the square again. I was expecting a rowdy crowd around the musicians, a group I could slip into or stand near. That was city thinking. Instead, a few people stood tending a lamb roasting on a spit. A murmur of conversation, followed by the faint sound of a clarinet, came from inside the restaurant where I’d sat earlier and watched the waiter evade the tourists.

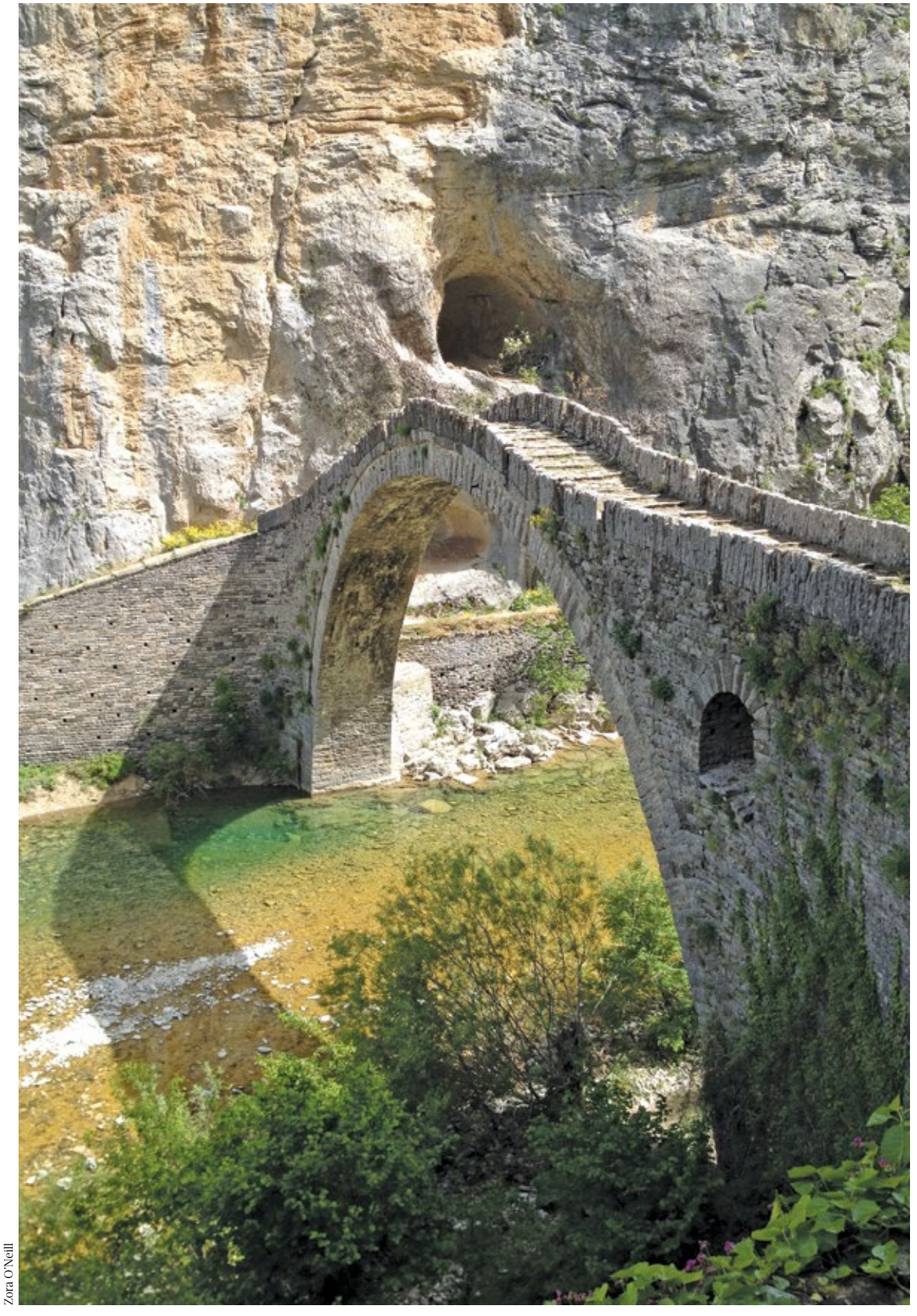
I stood in the dark street and imagined walking into a low-ceilinged, wood-panelled room packed with two dozen people who all knew one another, who had come together to dance and drink and celebrate and lament. Friendly people, I knew from many small encounters across Zagori; people who would go out of their way to welcome a guest, even before Peter trotted out his Greek. But was it my place to force them to, on this particular night? I turned around and walked back to my hotel.

The next day, wanting to salvage something of my country excursion, I forced myself to go into the village’s general store. I had read about its excellent *alevropita*, a Zagori speciality something like a thick baked pancake. When I pushed open the little door, it was briefly the awkward situation I’d feared the night before. Under a fluorescent ring light, four older men and a woman sat along the edges of the small room, around a wood stove. The store seemed an afterthought: two packages of Papadopoulos biscuits sat in a dusty case; a few bottles of clear *tsipouro* were evenly spaced on the sagging shelves. “Pita?” I croaked to the staring people, and eventually, with everyone’s help, the aged proprietress, introduced as Mama Aleka, understood and got up to work. It would take 45 minutes to bake, she communicated. Did I really want to stay?

Fortunately, in the process of ordering the *alevropita*, one of the men in the room had revealed himself as an English speaker. He eagerly patted the bench next to him.

While Mama Aleka, her bent back covered in a mauve cardigan, shuffled around assembling my pita, Andreas – “call me Andy” – told me about his 30 years in Boston, which accounted for his clean-shaven face and his baseball cap. His stories were the adventures of a country boy in the city: Pulled over his first morning in America for running a red light at an empty intersection. Following the smell of souvlaki down a New York City street to a Greek restaurant, only to find the owner was an old schoolmate. Andy missed America and work, but he was glad to be out of the city and away from crime – especially Athens, whose immigrants would take your wallet. I flinched.

When my *alevropita* was done, I offered it around, then ate a few pieces as everyone in the room sat watching. It was exceptionally good, chewy and crispy and a little funky from the butter of the sheep that clambered up and down these mountains every season. Mama Aleka had settled back in her spot by the wood stove, and all the conversation shifted back to Greek as I shut the door behind me.



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On my most recent Zagori excursion with my husband, we drove east, away from the Vikos Gorge. These villages, once bombed by the Germans, were quieter and shabbier, with shuttered windows and few hikers. A single-lane road dead-ended at Dipotamos, and we parked and walked in. The stones were soft with moss; the only sound was birdsong. In the churchyard, when we pushed open the gate, the creak was unnatural, intrusive. Looking down on the houses from under the shadow of the church, we finally saw one person: an old woman, head covered in a kerchief, shuffling slowly through her garden.

Walking back out, we noticed a second person: a young man in a bright blue T-shirt. Standing at the edge of the stone-paved street, he peered at his phone with precisely calibrated nonchalance. We stopped to talk to him, because that was what he so clearly wanted.

His name was Dritan, and he was from Albania. He had a thick shock of brown-blond hair and a sharp square chin. His English, though he apologised for it, was excellent and enthusiastic. When he learned we were visiting from New York, he didn't say, "That's far!" as almost everyone else in this area did. Instead he said, "Oh, I love New York! It's so beautiful!"

He had never been, but he dreamed of it. In the village, you do something, anything, he said, it's a big deal, not normal. But in a city like New York, you could do something weird, have your hair a crazy colour, and there it would be normal. "You could even be gay," he concluded, "and nobody cares."

My complaints about the noise seemed not worth mentioning. But Peter warned Dritan that New York was expensive, that he would wash dishes for $10 an hour, and share a room with three other immigrants. "But you would have freedom," Peter said.

That was why Dritan was planning to leave for London any week now. He would have to work without papers, but he had saved up money for the trip, and his brother was already there, and he could help him.

Before we left, we took a selfie of the three of us, our faces bright and our clothes vivid against the grey-green of the village. Peter tried to send the photo immediately to Dritan, but our phones had no reception. "Try the Wi-Fi," Dritan said. We gaped as he navigated to the village's free network – Zagori still far more connected to the world than it seemed – and he laughed. "What, you don't have Wi-Fi in New York?"

On our way to the car, I looked back, but Dritan had vanished – and then the village itself, like all the others, vanished into the hillside as we wound down the road away from it. I'm glad we have a photo of Dritan, or I wouldn't believe we met him: this young man who, just as I was dreaming of fleeing the city, reminded me of its merits. "The world is small," he'd said to us. "We're different, but we're really all the same, you know?"

Some of us are lucky enough to contemplate where our perfect place might be, to try on places and identities like new clothes. Others are naturally at ease, and make the most of the place we're raised. And still others charge out in search of some place, any place that has to be a better fit.

I hope Dritan has made it to London by now. May all of us find our perfect place in this world. –

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