



BILL WATT

Magical Meteora is a must

Incredible Greek monastery site should be on every traveller's list. By Marleena Forward

It's a common scenario. "Wow," friends say as they flick through my photo albums, "where's that?" "Meteora." "Mete-whata?"

I can only sigh. Once you've visited Meteora, it seems slightly ridiculous that the rest of world doesn't know about it, too.

A UNESCO World Heritage Site, Meteora is located in the Thessaly region of northern Greece. With its name meaning "suspended in air", the site is a collection of 24 monasteries perched high on top of towering pillars of rock.

The exact date of the founding of the monasteries of Meteora is unknown; however, hermit monks

are said to have been living in caves in the area as early as the 11th century. Hostilities between the Greeks and the Turkish occupying forces led the monks to establish monasteries on the inaccessible summits of the clifftops and, as a result, the monasteries became havens not only of Greek religious practices but also of Greek culture and artistic traditions.

Today, the monasteries are joined by roads and footpaths, but in ancient times they were accessible only via rope bags that were hoisted hundreds of metres from the ground to the buildings above. It is rumoured that on seeing this

method of transportation, a pilgrim nervously asked a monk whether they often replaced the rope, to which the monk replied, "Of course we do – when the rope breaks."

Six of the monasteries are still inhabited, and it is oddly thrilling to see the monks going about their daily business in such an extreme setting. (Indeed, the Agia Triada, or Holy Trinity, monastery was used as a setting for the 1981 James Bond film *For Your Eyes Only*.)

If there is one place that deserves international recognition as an earthly treasure, Meteora is it. Go there and you'll feel that you've had a life well lived.



Fast Fact: Greece

- Greece's national motto is "Freedom or death"
- About 75 per cent of Greece is mountainous
- Greece's highest mountain, Mount Olympus (2919m), was believed to be the home of the ancient Greek gods
- 98 per cent of Greeks belong to the Greek Orthodox Church