



A.C.T.

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EXPLORING THE PINDUS MOUNTAINS

Google images of "Greece". Go ahead. I guarantee your browser's page will be full of pictures of the white-washed buildings of Santorini and Mykonos, emerald-blue Aegean Sea beaches, the ancient Acropolis of Athens, and a few maps. What you won't find are images of dual-sport or adventure motorcycles carving through these landscapes since most of these areas are off limits to vehicles of any kind. If you want to enjoy the backcountry of Greece on your trusty two-wheeled friend, then your best bet is to point your handlebars into the northern regions where the Pindus Mountain Range rises over 2,600 meters (8,500 feet) above the Mediterranean Sea. Fortunately, this is exactly where the creators of the Adventure Country Track (ACT) Greece planned a marvelous 5-day motorcycle riding adventure.

BY TRAVIS GILL VIA JARMOTO.COM

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After riding the ACT Portugal through the length of this wonderful southwestern country (UPSHIFT Issue 80), we were looking forward to experiencing even more of the myriad of published routes that are offered through the ACT website at www.adventurecountrytracks.com. At the time of this article, there are published ACT routes for the United Kingdom, Portugal, the Pyrenees, Italy, Romania, and Greece.

The ACT Greece is a bit different than other ACT routes because it includes a portion that loops around and crosses back over itself. From the Charilaos Trikoupis Bridge in Rio, the route winds south into the mountains of the Peloponnese Peninsula. A 214 km (133 mile) figure-8 loop travels along mountain access roads that climb to a height above 1,900 meters (6,230 feet) and then drops back down into the lightly wooded town of Kalavryta before looping back again towards the start. After leaving the Peloponnese, the route then continues in similar fashion to other ACTs, as it winds north through the Pindus Mountain Range.

In total the route covers 920 km (570 miles) and is expected to take at least 5 days to traverse. The developers have designated the entire route as “medium/high” difficulty with 48 percent of it being offroad to include “rocks, more rocks, and gravel”. Due to the high mountain regions, the travel season for the ACT Greece is from May 15th to October 15th with seasonal snow and muddy terrain making it impossible to ride outside these months. The official language of Greece is, of course, Greek, but we found that most places would accommodate our English with the occasional help from Google Translate. The currency in Greece, like much of Europe, is the euro, and we found that nearly all restaurants, fuel stations, and grocery stores accept debit card transactions. However, it wouldn't be a bad idea to have about 100 euros of cash in your wallet – Just in case.



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COOLER TEMPERATURES AND NO CROWDS

With the latest update of the ACT Greece route and waypoints loaded into our Garmin GPS receivers, Chantil and I rode off the ferry ramp into sunny skies and the abnormally hot June afternoon of 32°C (90°F). We were eager to start riding some dirt and climb into the higher elevation of the mountains to cool off. Fortunately, within a short time, we were riding well-groomed gravel roads that snake around hearty bush-covered ridgelines and offer stunning views of the city of Patras and the Charilaos Trikoupi Bridge that connects the Peloponnese to the mainland. Each summit provided stupendous views that had me clamoring for my camera in order to capture the memory.

On one particular summit, we were clamoring for our cellphone instead! As we neared the top of the ridge, we could smell the undeniable scent of fire and could see wisps of gray smoke that lingered near a herd of congregating cows. It's not every day one comes across a fire in the wilderness, so we stopped to see if we could put it out. Unfortunately, it was just too big with the limited amount of water we carry on our BMW G650GS mules. We decided to call the regional emergency services by dialing 1-1-2 but weren't even sure the dispatcher would be able to understand us! Fortunately, most Europeans are bilingual, if not multilingual, and we were able to report the fire location using the latitude and longitude positions from our GPS. The dispatcher assured us she would relay the information and we continued on down the trail with hopes that we wouldn't be engulfed in a fire storm later that day. The entire experience was one of the weirdest things we have come across in the wilderness – a herd of smoking cows.

On another summit we noticed a small group of heavy dark-gray clouds that were forming between us and the valley below. We stopped to quietly marvel at the power of Zeus unleashing a tiny temper-tantrum and contemplated about how isolated we were in this small patch of backcountry. In 2022, more than 30-million tourists congregated to popular destinations like Athens and the Aegean islands of Santorini and Mykonos, yet here we were, just the two of us, enjoying the power of a small rainstorm in this relatively unvisited region of Greece.



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DEVIATION TO DELPHI

Although riding the entire ACT Greece from start to finish is an adventure in itself, it's worth deviating from the route in order to learn more about the history and culture of this region of Greece. Our first deviation, to the Archaeological Site of Delphi, was definitely worth the one-hour ride along the coast via the Greek National Road 48. Delphi was one of the most important centers of ancient Greece – even considered to be the center of the world. Greek mythology suggests that Zeus released two eagles from the east and west and they flew towards each other at the same speed. They crossed paths at Delphi thus becoming the Omphalos or “navel of the Earth.” An ancient marble monument, or stone, was placed in the Temple of Apollo to mark the center.

During the persecution of pagan beliefs of the late 4th century AD, most Greek religious sites were destroyed by the Roman Empire. What little remained was subsequently damaged by earthquakes, landslides, and buried underneath a small village named Kastri. It wasn't until centuries later, in the 1860s, that German and French archaeologists began researching and excavating ancient Delphi.





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Today one can walk among the ruins of marble foundations and columns, sandwiched between olive trees and the two towering rocks of Mount Parnassus, known as the Phaidriades, or Shining Rocks. The impressive, and recently remodeled, Delphi Archaeological Museum houses a vast collection of 8th and 7th centuries BC artifacts including bronze figures and armor, exquisitely crafted marble statues and reliefs, and the impressive Sphinx of Naxos which would have been a main centerpiece of the original Temple of Apollo.

As we returned to our parked mules, we contemplated what life would have been like for ancient visitors who would have traveled from all over Greece to reach this sacred site. We both agreed it would be quite impressive to witness. However, we were also grateful for our modern gasoline-powered motorcycles – Our personal horse-drawn chariots that are perfectly designed for discovering more of the backcountry of ACT Greece.





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WILD DOGS AND WILD CAMPING

One of the first things you notice about riding in Greece is the number of stray dogs that roam the cities, beaches, and countrysides. It's estimated that nearly 1-million stray dogs live freely in Greece and it's not uncommon to see them in small packs walking along the sides of the roads or lounging in the afternoon shade of a tree. Nearly all of them seemed to maintain a cautious distance from us and our motorcycles, at least until Chantil would break out her small bag of doggie treats.

During one evening of wild camping, we were visited by a lovely brown and black hound-dog. He approached us cautiously while sniffing as he courageously got closer, but it wasn't long before he warmed up to us and we could pet him. We ended up sharing a bit of our dinner, which he seemed to thoroughly enjoy – especially the meatballs we added to our spaghetti. That night we went to sleep and fully expected that he would be on his merry way – looking for the next doggie adventure over the horizon. When we woke up the next morning, we were surprised to see that he was happily curled up, on the grass, right next to the tent. It made us sad to have to say “vassas” (goodbye) to him the next day, but we hoped our kindness and short friendship made his day a bit better.





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THE MAGICAL MONASTERIES OF METEORA

Our second deviation from the ACT Greece was a visit to the spectacular Monasteries of Meteora. The word meteora means “lofty” or “elevated” and adequately describes the various monasteries precipitously balanced on mystical rock pillars that jet upwards from the rolling countryside. It is believed the area was settled by monks in the 11th century, who lived among the lower lying caves. During the oppression of the Ottoman occupation, the monks climbed higher and higher until they were living on the inaccessible peaks. By the 14th century, twenty-four monasteries were established – All built using ladders and baskets to bring the building materials to the summit. Until the 1920s, pilgrims and monks had to be hoisted 370 meters (1,200 feet) to the top using a system of ropes and pulleys. There’s even a story of a nervous pilgrim climbing into the basket and asking the monks if they regularly replace the ropes. “Of course we do – whenever they break!”

Today six monasteries remain and offer regular hours for visitors to walk among the well-manicured gardens and balconies that provide spectacular views of the surrounding countryside and the town of Kalabaka.



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CELEBRATING OUR COMPLETION WITH A LOUX

The last day of the ACT Greece was filled with excitement as we neared the final spectacular destination and views of the Vikos Gorge. This is the second deepest gorge in the world, superseded to the grandest of all canyons – The Grand Canyon of the United States. As we neared the end of the magenta track on our GPS receiver, we made sure to stop by a roadside kiosk and pick up our favorite Greek soft drink – a lemonade and orange Loux. It felt like a fitting non-alcoholic drink to commemorate the completion of riding the entire ACT without any breakdowns or injuries.

The final 200 meters (650 feet) of the ACT Greece has to be done on foot. We parked at the large lot, kicked down our side-stands, grabbed our Loux drinks, and hiked the final steps to the viewpoint. With a hearty high-five and a hug, we celebrated our journey through some of the most beautiful regions of Greece – all without the crowds and heat associated with the Greek islands in summer.

After our short celebration, we plotted a route from Vikos Gorge to the large city of Thessaloniki, where we had a new pair of Heidenau K60 Scout tires waiting for us. We wanted fresh treads for riding the ACT Romania, but first we had plans to spend some time in the next neighboring country of Bulgaria. More adventure awaits...





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