

Dalmatian Pelicans and Meteora Monasteries

Ancient Birds and Ancient Landscapes, Greece



Ancient Greece. These two words highlight the theme for our unusual winter wildlife and landscapes photo tour to northcentral Greece. Here, several intriguing photo opportunities are conveniently within a few hours driving distance. Lake Kerkini is one of the most important wintering sites for highly photogenic Dalmatian pelicans whose origins date back almost 30 million years. The spectacular stone monasteries of Meteora, built more than 700 years ago and perched precipitously on 60-million-year-old rock pinnacles, provide intriguing landscape images. And to complete our journey, we photograph the awe-inspiring Vikos Gorge, with glacial origins beginning some 30,000 years ago.

During winter, mainland Greece is reclaimed by the Greeks. The throngs of tourists that flood the country in the warmer months are gone, while impressive numbers of wintering birds



congregate on quiet lakes and coastal lagoons. Here, winter is an undiscovered season for great nature and landscape photography. Greece is roughly the size of Florida and, like Florida, the further south you travel, the warmer the weather. But, unlike Florida, temperatures in northcentral Greece can be cold, with the possibility of snowy mountain backgrounds in our images, or a fleeting snowfall on the Meteora monasteries.



Dalmatian pelicans—the world's largest, rarest and most spectacular—congregate annually on Lake Kerkini, not far from the northern border with Bulgaria. Though pelican numbers have declined dramatically during the 20th century, they thrive here, living peacefully with the local fishermen who now use their fishing boats (and fish) for winter pelican photography tourism. In January and February these amazing birds, weighing up to 15 kilograms (31.1 pounds) are in full breeding plumage with long comical and unkempt crown and nape feathers, massive red pouches and piercing white eyes. They can be photographed by boat as well as from the shore—in flight and on the water.

The Meteora monasteries are built atop dramatic sandstone pillars—some reaching heights of 550 meters (1,800 feet). Caves in this amazing landscape were inhabited thousands of years ago. As early as the eleventh century, monks occupied the caverns of Meteora. Then, construction of the famous monasteries commenced in the fourteenth century, when the monks sought refuge in the face of an increasing number of Turkish attacks on Greece. Nowadays, even without the monasteries, Meteora offers breathtaking panoramic views of its inspiring geological features and great imagery of the play of light and shadow on this stony landscape.



Another wonderful component of this trip is a shoot at the Vikos Gorge and the nearby traditional villages of Zagori. The gorge is deep and very photogenic. According to the Guinness Book of Records, Vikos is the world's deepest canyon relative to its width. The 46 sleepy Zagori villages are nestled beneath pine-clad towering peaks and are known for their characteristic stone architecture, cobbled streets and several picturesque arched bridges built “relatively recently” in the 18th and 19th centuries.

Tour Itinerary

Day 1

Depart from home.

Day 2 (Jan 18)

Arrive at Thessaloniki Airport, Greece. We will meet this evening and head to dinner at a local restaurant. (D)

Day 3

Following breakfast we drive with our vans to our hotel near Meteora and check in. We will be out for a sunset shoot of the Meteora rock monasteries. (BLD)



Day 4

We photograph Meteora, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Nothing can prepare photographers for the amazing scenes that await! Towering pinnacles of sandstone rise above the valley floor and are topped with spectacularly-perched red roof-tiled medieval Eastern Orthodox monasteries. Religious hermits took up residence here in the earliest days of Christianity. They were followed by monks who constructed monasteries on Meteora's inaccessible rock pillars as refuges from Turkish raiders as well as the temptations of secular life. A loop road provides us with excellent vantage points for photography. Often mist circles around these hills hiding the monasteries and, when they emerge, we are ready to capture scenes that words can scarcely describe. (BLD)



Day 5

Light and shadow play a crucial role in the success of our Meteora images, so we make one final sunrise foray to our favorite vantage points. Afterwards we pack up and drive about two hours to the Zagori villages. Along the way we photograph old stone bridges, bucolic landscapes and the small village of Ioannina where we photograph the town's mosque and castle along the shore of Ioannina Lake. (BLD)

Days 6

We shoot the traditional Zagori villages and graphic landscapes of Vikos Gorge. (BLD)

Day 7

Today is a travel day as we make our way north to Lake Kerkini. The drive takes about five hours and yields relatively few photo opportunities. We arrive at the lake in the late afternoon where we capture the last light of the day and have our first encounter with the spectacular Dalmatian pelicans.



Days 8–10

We start the day at first light. Over these three days we take three private boat trips on Lake Kerkini and attend three feeding sessions from the shore—ample time to capture amazing images of Dalmatian pelicans. Using small, low boats and enticing food, the pelicans follow us out onto the lake where we can easily maneuver our boats to compose images with the best backgrounds and light.

Shooting from the shore also has photographic advantages. Using a long lenses and tripods, we can isolate floating birds against “clean” backgrounds. Whether shooting from boats or the shore, the pelicans come extremely close—sometimes inches away—but, on shore, we’re able to take ultra-low-level images. Using wide-angle lenses, we can frame large groups of birds while accentuating dramatic skies and snowy mountain backgrounds.

Dalmatian pelicans are three times larger than the more familiar brown pelicans of North America. In fact, they rank among the world's heaviest flying birds—and what incredible flyers they are! With wingspans that rival the great albatrosses, these elegant soaring birds can be seen high in the sky, their flocks flying in graceful synchrony.

Our trip is timed to photograph the Dalmatian pelicans in their striking breeding plumage and curly silver-gray nape and crown feathers. Their amazing bill—the second longest of any living bird—with its brilliant red pouch, and their watchful white eyes surrounded by vibrant orange skin ranks them among the most graphically interesting large birds.



Dalmatian pelican numbers plunged precipitously during the 20th century due to wetland draining, poaching and disturbance to nest colonies. These days their numbers have stabilized with an estimated world breeding population of 3,000–5,000 pairs. (BLD)

Day 11

We have a morning photo session with the pelicans. Following lunch, we pack our vans and head to our hotel in Thessaloniki where we spend the night. (BLD)

Day 12 (Jan 28)

Transfer to the Thessaloniki Airport for flights home. (B)

Trip Details

Jan 17 - Jan 28, 2021

Fee: \$6,495 from Thessaloniki, Greece

Deposit: \$800

Limit: 8 participants

Activity Level: Easy

CONTACT US ABOUT THIS TRIP
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Tour Leaders



JAMES ROGERSON
And local guide



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