

Old School

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The Neo (new) Philosóphou monastery has stood for just over 300 years perched on a substantial ledge part way up the gorge that the Lousios river has carved through the Gortynian mountains in the central Peloponnese. When I stepped into the courtyard at midday, the cheerful caretaker monk passed me a welcome glass of cold water and a square of 'turkish' delight (though this wild area had been a nursery of the Greek revolt against Turkish occupation in the early 19th century). The stone-built monastery had redtiled roofs and was bright with flowers. The modest-sized church was richly decorated with frescos, ikons and polished brasswork gleaming in the dim light. Just beyond the church a low parapet allowed me to look down hundreds of feet to the whitened boulders of the river bed. The growl of the river could be clearly heard and an eagle circled beneath me.



The New Monastery

With numerous kilometres still to walk, I left the monastery by the lower gate, descending first down steps cut in the rock and then along a narrow, slithery path. I had presumed that I had somehow missed the site of the Old Philosóphou monastery when a faint trail forked right and up towards the sheer cliffs above. With some care I caught on to handfuls of shrub and worked my way up, emerging eventually alongside a stone wall with a single doorway and a few high, slit windows. This monastery clung to a narrow strip of ledge running along the cliff with occasional

larger areas opening under overhangs in the pinkish rock.

The structures of the roofs had mostly collapsed and I had to scramble over fallen masonry to access the tiny church, now occupied by a colony of bats. I avoided using any handholds on the outside wall, aware that on the other side there was now a sheer drop. It must certainly have been an ascetic experience living there, requiring both faith in God and in the builders. A thunderstorm was approaching from the north as I prepared to depart and the walls vibrated as the thunder bounced along the gorge. I was sure a fine white dust was trickling from between the stones and the cracked and worm-eaten lintels looked frail and brittle. Deciding that the monastery might not be the best place in which to weather the storm, I stepped out of the sole doorway on to a three foot wide patch of shiny rock - no barrier, and

beyond it a steep slope of scree with rock outcrops plunged down to a belt of trees and scrub where the main path resumed. Fortunately I reached the trees before the storm struck.

The notes to my walkers' map informed me that after the construction of the 'new' monastery in 1691, the old one continued in use as a school for another 70 years. Reflecting on this, I could only conclude that it must have produced students acutely aware of health and safety and of the effort required to gain an education. And I am sure that the pupils never rushed headlong out of school.