

MYSTRAS

Approaching Mystras, you feel making a pilgrimage to Byzantine Greece. Going up the hill, you enter through the castle gate which welcomes you to wander for a while delighted, through the narrow lanes of this once invincible fortress.

The castle was erected by the Franks (prince Guillaume de Villehardouin) in 1249, but after their defeat at Pelagonia was handed over to the Greeks. Bastions, houses, dungeons, storerooms, courtyards constituted the initial castle site. As the time went by, houses were built on the hillside under the castle and a town was born, whose fate was to become the centre of civilization and the cradle of the last dynasty of the Byzantine emperors.

The houses roundabout are of two or three storey's. With their imposing vaulted roofs and arcades, these mansions lead up to the Palace, an architectural creation of the Palaiologues. The throne room, the chapel with its vestiges of Byzantine frescoes, the rooms lighted by large windows with ogival arches, are some of the features of this building. During its two centuries of existence as the Byzantine capital of the Peloponnese, many churches and monasteries with domes and chapels were erected, representing all the painting trends of the capital.

The Cathedral of Agios Dimitrios where the last emperor of Byzantine Konstantinos Palaiologos was crowned -with the two-headed eagle symbol of his dynasty carved on the floor-, the full of movement and color frescoes inside the impressive churches that hold you spellbound; the narrow lanes, the castle's winding stair-ways, the arcades, the courtyards, the mansions and from the top of the castle, the endless valley stretching before you, everything takes you back centuries ago to the "protected by God" Mystras that was once transformed into a cradle of Renaissance. In our days, gentle nuns are the only living beings in Mystras, at the hospital convent of the Monastery of Pantanassa.

In 1989 the ruins, including the fortress, palace, churches, and monasteries, were named a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

