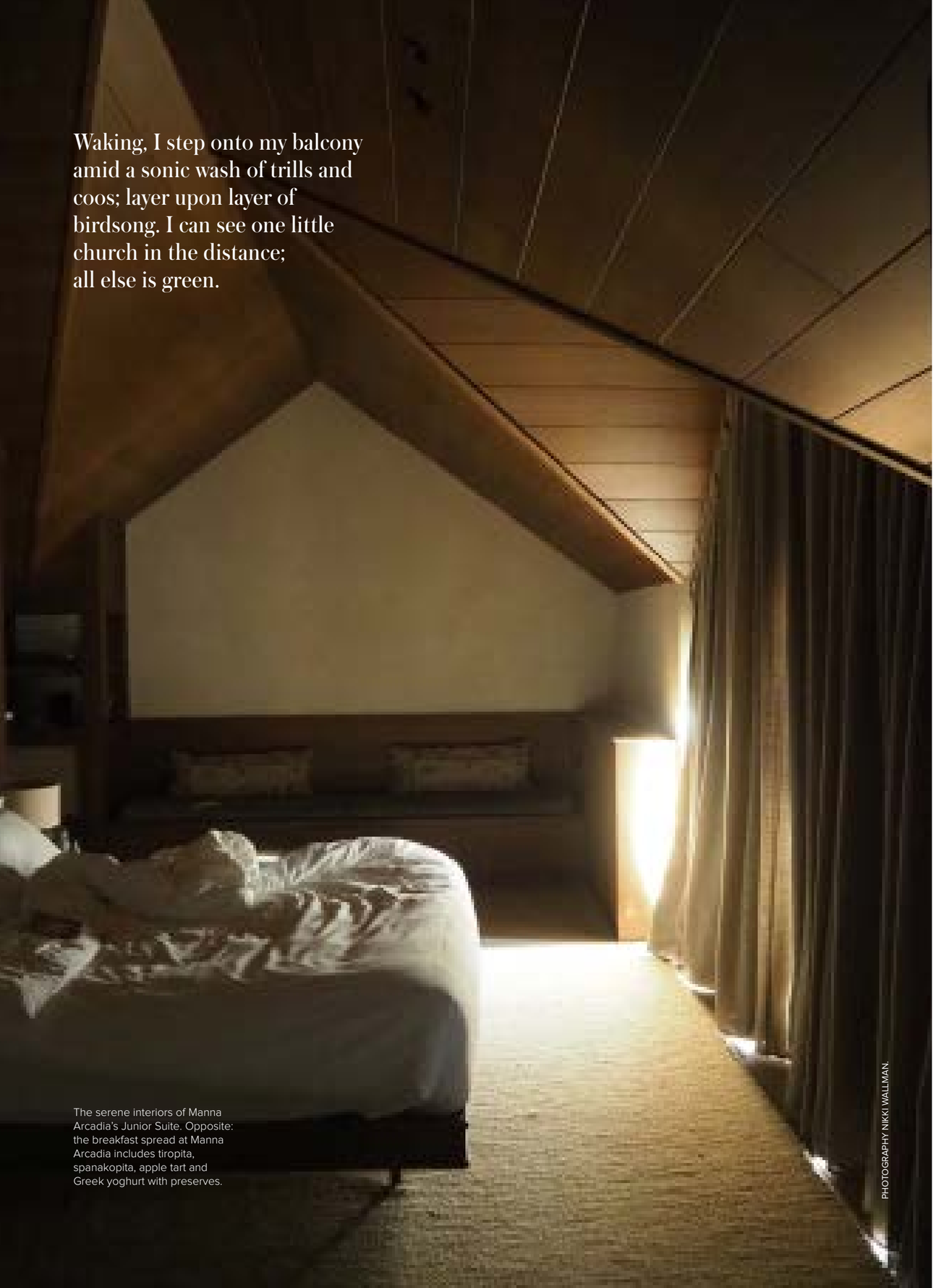


# The new sublime

In the heaven-sent heart of the Peloponnese lies mythical Arcadia – and a dreamlike hotel that reframes the idyll of ages past for modern travellers. **NIKKI WALLMAN** discovers a different kind of Greek escape.

PHOTOGRAPHY KOSTIS AGGELOPOULOS.

Prodromos Monastery. Opposite: mushrooms in the fir forests surrounding Manna Arcadia.




The serene interiors of Manna Arcadia's Junior Suite. Opposite: the breakfast spread at Manna Arcadia includes tiropita, spanakopita, apple tart and Greek yoghurt with preserves.

PHOTOGRAPHY NIKKI WALLMAN.



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ARCADIA! THE VERY NAME IS A SONG SUNG pure and green and promising, resonant through the ages. It's a song of human endeavour calibrated in harmony with nature; of Greek gods, and ascetic hermits seeking the divine in cliff-face caves; of goats' bells clanging across valleys; spirited rebellions against the occupying Ottomans, precipitously positioned monasteries-turned-clandestine schools, and villages where community still means something.

Thanks to Manna Arcadia, a soulful 32-key luxury hotel immersed fully in this extraordinary landscape, it's also a siren song for modern travellers seeking a different kind of Greek escape – away from the heat-scorched crush of coastal hotspots. I've reached far higher physical elevations, but here, 1200 metres above sea level, in the heart of the great outstretched palm of the Peloponnese peninsula, I've never felt so tantalisingly close to something suggesting the sublime.

If I hadn't seen it for myself, I might doubt the beauty of this place existed. But it is real; I reach it around 10pm, after around two hours' drive from Athens, passing signs pointing towards Olympia; driving through curve-streeted stone villages lined with tavernas, the temperature dropping steadily as we go. "It can be 20 degrees in Athens and snowing at Manna," says my driver John.

We approach a noble, grey limestone building encircled by thick, virgin fir forest, windows glowing in the dark. Minutes later I'm seated, bone-tired, in the fire-warmed flicker of Manna's dining room. The kind waiter guides my choices: cheese pie with local truffle, followed by a wild mushroom fricassée cloaked in avgolemono sauce, "like my grandma used to make," he says, touching his hand to his stomach.

The pie is a golden dome of impossibly light fillo pastry to be crushed down into the smoosh of fermented goat's cheese below, the scent of Menalon truffle filling the air. Ringed with golden-green olive oil and local honey, it is comforting beyond measure. I sip red wine made from local Agiorgitiko grapes as memories of stifling planes and too many people evaporate.

Upstairs, my Junior Suite is all elegant organic airiness and angular wooden roofing. My plush bed awaits, after thoughtful touches like an infusion of passionflower, licorice, valerian root, chamomile and lavender and a QR code revealing a guided meditation that knocks me out for eight hours solid. Waking, I step onto my balcony amid a sonic wash of trills and coos; layer upon layer of birdsong. I can see a little church in the distance; all else is green.

Fittingly, Manna Arcadia sprang from a dream. In 1929, Anna Mela-Papadopoulou, a philanthropic aristocrat who earned the honorary title, "Mother ("mana") of the Soldier" for her dedication to nursing wounded soldiers, commissioned a sanitorium for patients recuperating from tuberculosis before succumbing, tragically, to the disease herself. Closed in 1938 after the invention of penicillin, the building surrendered to ransacking and ruin. Decades later, 10-year-old Stratis Batagias stumbled across the site with his friends while camping in the forests cloaking



Mount Mainalo during summer holidays. Captivated by the "positive energy" of the place, Batagias decided that one day, he would be the one to revive it.

Incredibly, one day, he did: acquiring the derelict building in 2015, engaging K-Studio architects and interior designers and Monogon architects to pore through the protected property's archives before embarking on its restoration. Batagias swung open the doors in 2023. In the spirit of its original incarnation, Manna offers guests a restorative retreat soaked in the healing powers of nature: "Our philosophy is 'Inhale the forest. Exhale everything else,'" says Batagias.

The hotel is singularly calming, with a materiality that echoes its history and place – that preserved grey limestone, wood and original metal detailing. Newly sourced stone and terrazzo, chestnut panels and bespoke furnishings are lent warmth by open fireplaces with heft and real heat, alongside ambient, mood-inducing lighting (courtesy Eleftheria Deko, whose work is showcased at the Acropolis).

Chef Athinagoras Kostakos is charged with showcasing local produce – pork, lamb and wild boar; local cheeses, from Arcadian Gruyère to velvety manouri; truffles and forest mushrooms and fir honey and toothsome pastas – translated into generous, wholly of-this-place dining. A womb-like spa offers nurturing treatments, and an outdoor, glass-walled sauna encourages further relaxation. You come for the scenery, rather than a "scene", which feels like a luxury in itself.

Breakfast brings a long table laden, cornucopia-like, with a feast of humble grandeur: a glistening tower of sheep and goat's milk butter, studded with shards of honeycomb. Golden, salty spanakopita and little half-moon cheese pies, smashed cucumber and olives. Anthotyro tart, its creamy-ricotta-like filling strewn with sweet strawberries and zested with lime. Sheep's milk yoghurt, forest fruit jams, tahini paste for drizzling. Lalagia, deliciously crunchy squiggles of fried dough. Scrambled eggs folded through with tomato confit and feta. Coffee, black and strong.

Sated, it's time for a hike with my guide Nikolas Galanopoulos of X-Ormisis Outdoor Activities, one of Manna's many delve-deeper excursions – from truffle-hunting and horse-riding to river rafting, or hopping through villages that feel like time capsules, unsullied by hordes or hot lists. We embark on a six-kilometre stretch of the 75-kilometre Menalon Trail, which links nine such villages dotted around the region. Driving to our starting point, we pass walnut and chestnut trees, silvery olive groves and, befuddlingly, a rusty little truck driving backwards – the result, Galanopoulos jokes, of drinking a morning tsipouro, a local grappa-like spirit.

The village of Dimitsana produced "all the gunpowder for the revolution" that started in 1821 against the occupying Ottomans, explains Galanopoulos. I wander into Denada Palla's little workshop, where she's handmaking jewellery for an exhibition in Athens. Recent years have seen younger people returning from big cities,

Outdoor dining allows Manna Arcadia's guests to immerse themselves in the landscape. Opposite: the ancient fir forest of Mount Mainalo surrounds Manna Arcadia.

PHOTOGRAPHY MICHAIL ANDROULIDAKIS.



**BOOKING INFO**
Rates for a standard room at Manna Arcadia start at $512 per night including breakfast. *mannaarcadia.gr*

Above: the restored heritage stone façade of Manna Arcadia which was originally built as a sanitorium in the 1920s.

starting businesses and families, says Galanopoulos; searching for balance, a slower pace.

We start our hike at the New Monastery of Philosophos, built in 1691 as a more accessible alternative to the nearby Old Monastery, which was founded in the 10th century and became a renowned centre of learning; even operating as a secret school for a time, hidden from the occupying Turks. The New Monastery is now home to a solitary monk, who interrupts his plant watering to offer us sweets. Inside the diminutive katholicon, centuries-old paintings of holy men had their eyes gouged out; a symbol of the animosities that raged here.

We set off downward into the gorge, the Lousios River rushing through sylvan scenery befitting the mythical local gods. According to legend, Zeus was first bathed as a baby in these pure waters by the nymphs Theisoa, Neda and Agnus. Then there was Pan, of course – "half goat, half man," says Galanopoulos. "He liked women very much, so he was chasing women… he had an instrument, a flute." Quite the picture, I reply. "I can say that he is the picture of a local guy here," laughs Galanopoulos. "Flute, no worries, only wine, chasing women!"

Approaching the Prodromos Monastery, a resident mule stares insolently at us. I stare, awestruck, up at the monastery. Believed to have originated in the 12th century, it appears as precarious as an old man's teeth jutting out of the tremendous shear of cliff-face; tiny box-like living quarters for the monks supported by toothpick beams, their laundry flapping soundlessly above the abyss.

The monastery, which also served as a refuge and medical station during the Greek Revolution, is spiritually hushed and cool inside, with an internal, tiny, frescoed church partially carved into the rock face. In a small room where Greek coffee and biscuits await, a monk appears, long-bearded and solemn but with a warmth in his eyes. Which part of Australia was I from? He has friends in Melbourne. At 1pm the heavy, battered door clangs shut, abruptly delineating the divide between mere mortals and men of God.

Passing rampant wild sage and daisies, and waving grasses at hip height, we end our hike at the ruins of Ancient Gortys, the site of a temple dedicated to the Greek god of medicine, Asclepius. So hallowed was this complex of healing, thermal baths, today sunken into the overgrown embrace of its surrounds, it's said Alexander the Great visited to dedicate his breastplate and spear in tribute.

Galanopoulos leads me over an arched stone bridge, pointing to the great Lousios river below: "I'll give you some privacy." Alone, I wade into the rushing waters, an impossible turquoise turned clear as a diamond in the shallows. The cold shocks me into laughter. I drop under the surface and emerge understanding a little more about just how alive it's possible to feel; and deeply thankful for the dreamers, like Batagias, who make good on their dreams. •

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