

Heart of stone

MICHAEL de LARRABEITI does battle with the unforgiving terrain of Greece's Mani region and achieves a childhood desire to find Cape Matapan

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Epaminondas was proud of his name. "It was the name of a famous Theban general," he told me. "There's a life of him, by Plutarch."

I was overnighting in Stoupa, a tiny seaside resort on the west coast of the middle peninsular of the Peloponnese - The Mani. It was early in the year and there were only two or three families on the beach, and two Greek dowagers who had walked straight into the water, up to their necks, huge straw hats jammed on their heads, talking loudly. Epaminondas, Nondas for short, was my waiter.

Young, dark-haired and dark-eyed, he sat with me at my table and watched me eat my salad.

"You ought to go up into the Taygetos mountains," he went on. "Up to my village, it's so peaceful, there's a Byzantine chapel. Come tomorrow, I'll be there."

I parked the car at the entrance to the village. There wasn't much to see: a bus stop, a broken-down lorry and an abandoned building with an old man sitting on some steps. I took out the piece of paper that Nondas had given me with his name and address on it. "Prepitsa," I said. The man nodded, and jerked a thumb over his shoulder at the street of stone that rose, like a ladder, behind him.

I began to climb, stone walls head high on either side, with scarred wooden doors here and there leading to secret gardens. From time to time I passed a house, sometimes inhabited, sometimes ruined, the stones slipping. Olive trees grew like weeds, the trunks and branches black, centuries old. Vines gave shade and bougainvillea gave colour, and the silence was exquisite, something to be touched. Once I heard a cough from an open window; somewhere a donkey brayed; that was all.

The village dwindled. In an open space between two houses I found a goatherd, a woman in black. "Prepitsa," I said again and she pointed to the ground meaning that I had got there. "Nondas Nikolis?" I continued, but she shook her head, and then called out in a voice that was harsh and loud enough to scare the goats three valleys away. Another woman appeared, then another; soon there were five of them looking after me.

Suddenly one of them disappeared and returned a second later with an old man in pyjamas. He was tall and gaunt and 84 years old, with a face that did not

look its age. His week-old stubble glittered silver, but he was effervescent with energy and eager to talk.

"I am Nondas Petruleas," he said in an accent that had been perfected by half a lifetime spent in Chicago. "We'll have breakfast."

In the tiny courtyard of Nondas's house the tea was already made and the bread cut. The walls were painted in grey and covered with writing in black and red.

"I write poetry," he said, "and these are the names of the men from this village who were killed in the war and the civil war."

As we ate young Nondas arrived - the word had flown around the village - and old Nondas beamed, hardly taking breath to interrupt the flow of his words, so pleased was he to have company.

"This is the greatest place on earth to live," he said. "The air is so pure, first it comes across the Sahara, then across the sea...it's clean, scrubbed and washed, and the olive oil from these trees is the best in the world."

He grabbed me by the hand and pulled me through his house, up narrow stairs and through simple rooms. "Any time you wanna come back, you come back...we'll sit here and talk for ever."

We parted company in his courtyard and I asked him to translate one of his poems for me and he read it off the wall: "I am alone in bent old age, worn thin by loneliness. Now it is time to go, so I wish you good health, and be fair and just in all you do."

The next day I journeyed on, heading for the end of the peninsular, the southernmost part of mainland Greece: Akri Tenaro, a place my old school atlas had insisted on calling Cape Matapan, and that's how I still thought of it - Matapan. As a schoolboy of 15 the name had fascinated me, such a ring there was to it - a faraway location that I had to visit, just so that I might stand at the end of Europe and stare out across the sea towards Africa.

"According to legend the entrance to Hades is down there," old Nondas had told me, "and the ancient Greeks always said that those who set sail to round the cape should say a last farewell to their wives and children. So be careful. Them old gods and goddesses are still on the prowl, up to no good, stirring up mischief."

The Mani is perhaps the strangest part of the

Peloponnese, the coast ragged and rough with the land lying along by the sea like great slabs of muscle. "A wild and sparsely populated country, threatened by bleak grey mountains," my guidebook said, "and inhabited by warlike men, harder than the stones around them..."

In time these warlike men formed themselves into clans and tribes and fought each other for a barren land that was too poor to support them all. They fortified their houses, too, making towers of them, 50 to 80ft high and, from these strongholds, they carried on their vendettas until they or their rivals were vanquished. Now these crumbling towers can be seen on almost every hilltop, sometimes solitary, sometimes gathered into tiny villages, half-abandoned, dark and forbidding.

Yet I found Areopolis, the local capital, a cheerful town when I got there. In the old quarter the church bell was ringing and I found a room in one of the converted towers. In the garden two old ladies moved their chairs to follow the shade; talking slowly because they had all the time in the world, but never stopping in case they hadn't.

Music drifted into the house from behind the church, where 20 or 30 children were playing their bazookis under the direction of a music master. On the square, where I ate later, a dozen men were watching a televised football match, the set and the chairs spread across the street, forcing passing cars to weave gently among the spectators. A man bursting with bonhomie brought my dinner, his enormous smile half-hidden behind a Cretan moustache.

"I am the Maradonna of the souvlaki," he announced and banged down a bottle of wine by way of emphasis, the noise in no way troubling the pack of scrawny cats who prowled beneath my table, hungry enough to gnaw the shoes off my feet. I threw some meat to them, by way of propitiation, and poured a glass of wine. For a town that is named after Ares, a god of war, Areopolis was decidedly welcoming: the Maniots have mellowed.

So I drove on southwards, over the empty hillsides where the endless stone walls made aimless snail trails up to the horizon; a stone crop in a stony land. At Harouda I turned towards the sea, into a road that became a track and led me to a small Byzantine chapel, one of the many.

I pushed at an iron gate and let myself into a small graveyard where the sun burnt fiercely off the white marble crosses. I passed by the side of the church and came into a walled courtyard where six tall pine trees gave a generous shade and a stone coping made chair and table for my picnic: bread, cheese, tomatoes, melon, and a red wine grown hot in the car; not so much

chambre as mulled.

The 11th-century building was made of stone, pink and grey, with bands of red brick for decoration. There were arches of a similar brick over the windows, held in place by skinny columns, and the roof was of Roman tiles. Crowning the chapel and set in the middle of it was a hexagonal tower.

I could have sat there for ever. Once again I was lost in that Peloponnesian silence; not a bee buzzing. The shade crept across me; two hours went by, three. A breeze idled in from the sea and a company of lizards stared at me from the rocks.

Then two women came, the keepers of the key. They swung open the door and lit the lamps and sat in the cool interior. I followed, footsteps echoing, to stare at the frescoes that flowered up the walls and window arches until they covered the ceiling. They were squared off into painted frames, smudged by time but full of life and colour - steel blue, bright yellow and crimson; arcaded towns, towers and gateways, angels and knights in armour and kings in crowns; serene saints wearing haloes, great dishes of gold, and a remarkable figure wearing both halo and crown, with a thin straight nose, triangular shadows under his eyes and a full sensuous mouth above a pointed chin. And high up, in one of the window embrasures, a small bird fluttered itself to death against the glass; too high to reach, too frightened to save.

I dawdled my time away and progressed at a genteel rate towards Cape Matapan; the 15-year-old me ardent with expectation. The landscape became wilder. I visited the tower houses at Nomia and Kitta, and though they looked abandoned there were some signs of life: a dog, a man reading a newspaper, a shirt waving at me from a clothesline. I spent a night at Gerolimenas, in the Hotel Akroyiali on the edge of the sea, and then on again to Marmari, the very end, so I thought, of the Mani.

At Marmari the road died and became a track that became a path. Where the path began I found a man making cement.

"Akri Tenaro, Matapan," I said, pointing at a huge swelling hill in front of me, and mimed walking with my fingers. "Yes," he said. "Yes."

The thought of my destination spurred me on, and my enthusiasm convinced me that there would be a well-worn path to Matapan. I set off in shorts, too eager and too pig-headed to return to the car for protective gear. It was a mistake. Before long I was lost in high gorse, deadly thistle and murderous briar, and there were hidden stones underfoot - all I needed was a twisted ankle and I would have been out till nightfall.

Getting lost in the maquis is not only frightening, it

is very painful. Soon my legs were torn and bleeding, sore and stinging. Was this adder country, I wondered. I was into a maze of broken stone terracing, the undergrowth getting denser all the time. No matter which way I turned I was faced by a barrier of thorn. I began to curse the day I'd ever heard of Matapan, and I could have wrung the neck of the 15-year-old who had brought me here.

I kept climbing, hoping that I would stumble across a hunter's path or a goatherd's trail, but this wilderness was too strong a meat for either. At long last, as I neared the top of the hill, the brush became sparser and I sped towards the last rise, hoping that the pain I'd suffered would turn out to be worthwhile, and that I would, in a moment, look down on the cape that marked the end of Greece. What I saw, of course, was another great rolling hill, all rough and yellow, silent and supercilious.

After another hour of cuts and scratches I got back to the car and it was then that I should have given up - returned to the hotel and soaked my wounds in a bath. Consequently I spent some time informing the 15-year-old that we'd both be better off sitting by the sea tucking into a jug of retsina - ice-cold in Gerolimenas. It didn't work out that way.

On the road out of Marmari I noticed a dirt track leading east and turned the car into it: a cloud of mythology rose behind me and the hired car surged forward, taking on a patina of intrepid dirt. Five or six kilometres later I came over a rise and saw the sea, this time on my left. There was a bay far below me; it might have been Porto Kagio or Paliros - my map wasn't good enough to know. The sea was a blue to hurt the eyes, and there were two or three toy yachts on it. The track turned south. I was succeeding, I thought, and my mood improved, but I was wrong. Once again the road faltered to an end, this time in the middle of a ruined village of those tall houses, haggard and blind. I climbed to the nearest peak, hoping to see Matapan, but what I saw was another rolling hill, and nothing else near me but the wind from Hades, howling through the ragged towers.

Halfway back to Marmari I saw a notice board saying "Taverna" and pointing down yet another track. I had previously ignored the sign, believing that it was just a ruse, an enticement to lure the unwary traveller into danger, but the car stopped of its own accord and my alter ego slipped behind the wheel. "This is it," he said.

The track sank down into a valley and there were more towers to my right and left. Then it rose and led me across a kind of plateau; the dust became dustier and the wind windier. At last the land fell away before

me and there was the sea again; a bay, an inlet with four caiques at anchor, a couple of houses and a headland to the right. I smirked. This had to be Cape Matapan - the world's end.

I parked by the taverna, a small house with a tiny terrace. I sat in a chair and gazed, my face, I imagine, seraphic. A corpulent adolescent emerged from the kitchen and I ordered a beer. The adolescent had flat brown hair, chubby thighs that rubbed together and a low, dog-like brow hiding dark eyes that were full of suspicion: Cerberus or Pluto himself, or Charon the fatal boatman.

From inside the house his mother screamed and then came out to look at me. She was short and round with little fingers of black hair reaching down to cover her face. Her smile gave me no reassurance - Circe perhaps.

Slowly I drank the beer and Charon scowled at me. "Cape Matapan," I said, taking great pleasure in the words. "Tenaro. Here!" A nasty grin spread over Charon's face and he shook his head. He pointed to the west. "You take a boat," he said, "round the headland. Four thousand drachma."

I knew about Charon. Once in his boat it was the underworld and no coming back unless you were Orpheus, Hercules or maybe Dante - and I was none of those. I looked across at the headland and saw the trace of a path climbing over it. My watch said 6.30 and even though the air had lost its warmth and the sun had dropped below the hill, there were probably two hours of daylight left to me. I put on trousers, took a chunk of bread from the remains of my picnic and shoved a torch into my jacket pocket.

Before I left I ordered dinner: pork chop, potatoes, Greek salad and a jug of wine. No, they didn't do rooms, but I was happy with that. This would be the night I had promised myself - out on a hillside, waiting for the gods to come by.

It was an easy walk this time. A real path, its stones trodden down into a red earth and well-worn marks across the boulders. The sea was down to my left, darkening. I followed the shore for a while, then the path climbed over the hill, westwards, following a lazy contour, then over the brow of the next hill until, at last, I saw the weather vane of the lighthouse rising up with every step I took. We'd done it, me and the boy.

The cape itself was bleak, dark in its own shadow, its sides dropping precipitously into the waves. By contrast the lighthouse was gleaming white and bright, caught in the last rays of the sun. It stood elegant and serene at the very end of the promontory, a square terrace around it with a low coping just made for sitting on - good for drinking and good for pouring libations,

flattering the divine.

So I sat there, staring out to sea, and again the silence filled the space between the sea and the sky; not a bird, not a wave, not a plane, not a fly; just the wind making noiseless patterns on the water and the sweet air shifting in from the Sahara.

That night, after my meal at Charon's taverna, I walked down past the car and rolled my mat and sleeping bag out on the dusty ground behind a wall. It was a soft dark night; the wind had dropped now, the sea was still and the lights in the house were soon extinguished. And then the stars came down, nearer and nearer, and then even nearer, until in the end they were so close to the ground that the 15-year-old boy who always travelled with me could reach up and touch them.