

ADVENTURE & TRAVEL

By TONY PERROTTET

IN 1985, a local sponge fisherman and his teenage son discovered the Peristera, an enormous vessel that sank around 425 B.C. off the east coast of Alonissos. Dubbed the Parthenon of shipwrecks, the Peristera was one of the largest classical ships ever found. With no written records, archaeologists have had to deduce the story of the wreck, which was probably a two-sailed merchant ship plying between Athens and the Black Sea. The ship's cargo, nearly 4,000 wine amphorae, handcrafted from clay, had survived in a submarine mass. It took more than three decades, but amateur divers were finally welcome to visit the shipwreck in 2020 as a kind of underwater museum. Late last summer, I had made the pilgrimage to Alonissos to be part of the first wave, only to learn that I lacked a key requirement to visit the site: specialized training.

Just after I arrived in the port of Patitiri—after flying from New York to Athens and then by car and ferry to Alonissos—I learned that

The wooden hull of the ship had dissolved many centuries ago, but its shape was clear. We gently kicked from prow to stern, admiring the doomed vessel.

in addition to being certified in PADI open water dives, which I was, I'd need an Advanced Certification to go below 60 feet. The wreck lies between 70 and 90 feet, and the archaeology authorities monitor visits to the site obsessively, with reams of paperwork for all divers and five underwater cameras. Fortunately, the required certificate simply meant that I'd need to spend a little more time bobbing around the Mediterranean.

At the port, I noticed a hole-in-the-wall dive shop, the Seacolours Dive Center. I asked the owner, Panos Anagnostou, who had a tattoo of a scorpion on his back, how long it would take to get an Advanced Certification. He shrugged: Five dives in three days. "It's not so hard." Could I do the course, then dive the wreck on the morning before my ferry left? "Why not?" he said. "If the weather is good." Suddenly, the wreck was within my grasp again.

On the first morning of my diving course, I woke up in my small room in Casa Nina, which had a balcony high above the cliff-fringed port. I descended the worn stone steps to a waterfront cafe where fishermen gathered for span-

DIVING AMBITION

Exploring the Peristera, which sank around 425 B.C., off the Greek island of Alonissos.



The mountaintop village of Chora on Alonissos island.

sun. Large fish—goldblotch, dogtooth and dusky groupers—swam past. Moray eels emerged from crevices, baring their fangs; a small squid shot past with a burst of black ink.

The relaxed dive schedule left me plenty of time to explore Alonissos above the waves. The hilly island, shaped like a cigar stub, is only about 3 miles wide and 12 long, but thanks to the narrow, winding roads, it feels considerably larger. One spectacular route leads up to the mountaintop "old village," also called Chora, where a maze of cobbled lanes lead to boutiques, cafes and Byzantine chapels.

On the morning of the Peristera dive, I clambered into a small boat with Panos and Kostantin, another amateur diver, and chugged across glassy waters to a buoy in the channel, 100 yards off the uninhabited Peristera islet. Bobbing in the "wine dark ocean" of Homeric lore, it was easy to picture Odysseus weighing anchor or a giant one-eyed Cyclops emerging from the forests. We slid into the water, as placid as a swimming pool, and made our way along the ocean floor. Slowly, the shapes emerged like abstract sculptures. There were amphorae piled on amphorae as far as the eye could see, their smooth clay forms coated with a film of algae. The wooden hull of the ship had dissolved many centuries ago, but its shape, about 75 feet long by 27 wide, was clear. We gently kicked from prow to stern, admiring the doomed vessel and its tangle of cargo.

As we sped back to port so I could catch the ferry back to the Greek mainland, I thought of a piece of ancient graffiti I once came across in my own historical research. It was scrawled in the 2nd century by an exhilarated Roman sightseer in Egypt's Valley of the Kings: "Those who have not seen this...have seen nothing," crowed the pioneer tourist. "Happy are those who have!"

An Underwater Odyssey

A long-awaited trip to visit Greece's 'Parthenon of shipwrecks'

akopita (spinach pie) fresh from the oven and thick coffee. At Panos's dive store, we piled scuba gear into the back of a beaten-up red truck and drove to an empty bay, Roussoum Gialos. After two shallow dives—learning how to use a compass in vodka-clear waters—I repaired to the lone taverna for lunch. The

owner used hand signals to indicate the freshest fish, which I savored with Mythos beer.

Day two was even more idyllic. We dove around a twisted finger of volcanic rock in the roughly 850-square-mile Marine Park, exploring an underwater shelf covered with leaves of soft coral that glittered like gold coins in the

TIMO DRESCH (COVER); ALAMY STOCK PHOTO (CHORA)

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