

Hunters of the last Ice Age in the Voidomatis valley

During the peak of the last global glacial extent (c. 22,000 – 18,000 years ago), ice-sheets capped the W. Pindos high altitude (> 2500m) summits and karst plateaus enhancing erosion of the limestone and flysch bedrock and discharging massive water volumes into the Vikos – Voidomatis – Aoos river system. Natural resources were then scarce as was human activity.

It is only when the climate took an upturn trend (17,500 years ago), triggering the melting of ice and the expansion of pioneer woodland and of wild animal mountain species, that palaeolithic bowmen chose to explore systematically the newly available habitat. For the next 7 millennia, families and/or hunting task-groups, every spring/summer, used as temporary abodes fault-controlled rock overhangs (e.g. Klithi, Boila, Megalakkos) at the sidewalls of the gorge. There they lit fires for warmth, cooking, company and protection against carnivores (bears, wolves, foxes and lynx).

They scheduled expeditions on the steep slopes to capture agile wild caprids, ibex and chamois, the latter especially valued for its soft hide, fished in the river and trapped beavers, hares etc. Equipped with sophisticated technologies, they collected flint (chert) pebbles from the riverbanks or used animal bones to manufacture tools and weapons (e.g. arrowheads, knives, scrapers, borers, needles).

With beads made of fresh water shells and herbivore teeth, and natural red ochre they decorated clothes and marked their bodies.

As the forest grew thicker, reaching even the highlands by c. 9.000 years ago, the gorge environment became less rewarding

and transit hunters provisioned venison, fat, marrow, antlers and hides from migrating deer herds fording the river in the nearby Konitsa plain and traversed ravines for adventures beyond the mountain chain.

Visitors can follow a designated itinerary along the Voidomatis river (from the Aristi / Papigo bridge to the Klithonia bridge and vice versa) with information on the palaeolithic cultures and the pleistocene ecology.



The mysterious rocks in Papigo

The rocks forming the geological structure in Epirus are sedimentary and mainly belong to the geotectonic unit of the Ionian zone, while to the north and east occur sediments of the Pindos zone and magmatic rocks.

The geological history of the broader region of Pindos begins 200 million years ago about the beginning of the Jurassic era with the formation of rocks of biochemical, organogenic origin.

During that era, 35 million years ago, from the Lower Jurassic

to Upper Eocene, dolomites and limestones were formed with variations in the sedimentary environment (depth, chemical processes, tectonics).

At the end of the Eocene, the sedimentary conditions changed abruptly and began a new, different cycle of sediments. It is the period of the flysch formation from alternations of clays, siltstones, sandstones and conglomerates.

Moreover, 20 million years ago, strong geodynamic processes took place causing deformation of rocks. From the continuous convergence of the lithospheric plates, specifically of the African plate under the Eurasian, sediments and magmatic rocks, termed ophiolites, are compressed and pushed towards the surface to create in turn the mountain series. Following the formation of the terrestrial and the mountainous region, new rocks are formed by erosional and weathering processes.

During the Pleistocene, alternations of glacial and inter glacial periods took place. The area of Tymfi was covered by glaciers during intervals. The rapid upward movements combined with the strong vertical erosion have created two of the most beautiful and deepest canyons worldwide that are crossed by the homonymous rivers Voidomatis (or Vikos) and Aoos.

Following the geological thematic route starting from the village Megalo Papigo, heading to the north and ending at the top of Koula (1560m), the visitor will have the opportunity to learn many of the secrets that hide inside the rocks and the wider area of the geological bedrock.



The “miraculous” flora of the Vikos Gorge

Mt Tymfi is among the most interesting floristic regions of Greece with about 1.700 species of plants. In the Vikos gorge, one of the core areas of the Northern Pindos National Park, one can find many of the rare plants of the area. On the steep slopes of the gorge, horse chestnut (*Aesculus hippocastanum*) grow, a tree native to the countries of the Balkan peninsula that is included in the global list of species in need of protection of the U.N. In spring, color is added to the stone by snowdrops (*Galanthus reginae* – *olgae* subsp. *Vernalis*), Centauries (*Centaurea pawlowskii*) and Madonna Lilies (*Lilium candidum*), all limitedly spread in Greece and protected by legislation such as the Berne Convention, the CITES Treaty and the Presidential Decree 67/1981 of the Greek state. Among the rarest plants in the gorge, Serbian phoenix (*Ramonda serbica*), remnant of an earlier geological period when the climate was tropical in Europe, holds a particular place.

The great floristic value of the area is enhanced by the existence of many medicinal plants, herbs, which are used by the residents of Zagori for therapeutic purposes. In fact, the

area was the birthplace of the famous Vikogiatroi (“Doctors” from Vikos), practical healers who cured using various herbs sourced from the large natural pharmacy of the Vikos gorge, like European centaury (*Centaureum erythraea*), Felty germander (*Teucrium polium*), Common sage (*Salvia officinalis*), Mountain tea (*Sideritis raeseri*), Hellebore (*Helleborus cyclophyllus* subsp. *odorus*), St. John’s Wort (*Hypericum perforatum*), etc.

As part of this place, both the old paved steps of Vradeto that climbs the Mezaria gorge (an offshoot of the Vikos gorge) connecting the villages Kapesovo and Vradeto, and the old path that leads from Vradeto to the view point of Beloi (the balcony of Vikos gorge) are very rich in floristic elements. Across a path of just 5 km, 350 plant species and subspecies are recorded, while one out of three plants, that one encounters hiking there, is characterized as plant of particular interest, as it is either native to Greece or the Balkans, or rare and protected by the law, or, finally, is used as pharmaceutical.



The hidden thesaurus:

Architecture in Konitsa

The art of building in the town of Konitsa of the 18th century as well as in its surrounding area, after having completed a long evolutionary period, becomes a precursor and, simultaneously, one of the most important components of modern Greek technical science. In this era, the so-called art of the empirical craftsmen fits into the broader geographical context of the meridian Mediterranean and has strong local characteristics which distinguish it from neighboring areas.

In the post 1821 period, the villages around Konitsa, called Mastorochochia, perform, worthily, a great part of engineering works, not only in their wider region and the Ottoman Empire, but also in the Asian, African and transatlantic space. Thus, in the late 19th century a geographical expansion of the building craftsmen business activity is recorded, among others, along with that of other Konitsa's artisans. The above mentioned geographical expansion of the Konitsa's craftsmen business activity contributes to the process of influence and assimilation, and to the further development of technical and above all else, aesthetic expression of the technical work. So, in the town of Konitsa, the construction, interrupted often by historical events, is changing, slowly but steadily, from a countryside art to urban art. The aforementioned change appears initially with the new building materials, such as cement mortars, blanks, etc., and then with interior and exterior elements of decoration coatings, which mimic the Greek antiquity.

The social, economic, political and cultural transformations of the 20th century are determinant to the art of building and its aesthetic expression. The new building materials such as tiles, bricks, cement and aluminate, sheets of corrugated metal sheet, metal frames and reinforced concrete, displacing stone and slate, shape, mostly in the town of Konitsa, a construction which has all the features of the contemporary

Greek urban space. Nevertheless, in the rising of the 21st century, Epano Konitsa (Upper Konitsa) maintains a large number of local architecture features of the 19th-20th century, combining thus, elements of pre-industrial and modern times. In short, places, districts and buildings project various and numerous landscapes, the image of which form those who lived and those living in Konitsa.

