

# Expériences

TRAVEL + LEISURE

**TRAVELERS' TALES, FROM NEAR AND FAR**

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY MARCO ARGUELLO



A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a black top and denim shorts, is sitting on a stone terrace with a striped cushion, reading a book. The terrace is built into a rocky hillside. In the background, there are tall cypress trees, a small white house on a hill, and mountains under a clear sky. The scene is bathed in warm, golden light, suggesting late afternoon or early morning.

## PARADISE AND PROSE

At a literary couple's former home in the bucolic Mani Peninsula of Greece, **ELENI N. GAGE** finds herself transported—and inspired.

ONE REASON I travel is to envision lives other than my own, or to picture my own life in new, irresistible settings. Rarely has that thrill of trying out someone else's existence felt as intense as it did during my stay at the **Patrick & Joan Leigh Fermor House** ([ariahotels.gr](http://ariahotels.gr); villas from \$600, three-night minimum). This sun-kissed stone refuge sits above a turquoise cove near the Greek village of Kardamyli. It's located in the Mani: one of the three "fingers" of the Peloponnese, the hand-shaped peninsula that hangs off the mainland.

*Just the spot for a good book: the terrace of the Patrick & Joan Leigh Fermor House, a hotel and education center in southern Greece.*



▼  
The secluded cove below the house, perfect for a midday dip.

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A sitting room is filled with the Leigh Fermors' collection of scholarly books.



For decades, this idyllic place was the home of Patrick Leigh Fermor, one of Britain's best-known travel writers, and his dynamic wife, Joan. "Paddy," as the late author was called, is perhaps best remembered for *A Time of Gifts*, an account of his youthful trek across Europe in the 1930s. After becoming a World War II hero (he orchestrated the kidnapping of a Nazi general on Crete), Leigh Fermor spent the postwar years walking, sailing, and hitchhiking around Greece, journeys that would become the basis of his later books *Mani* and *Roumeli*. Joan often accompanied him; a former debutante, she was happy to trade her British high-society life for this sunlit coast.

Paddy had long dreamed of a Greek retreat where he could read, write, and host visiting friends like British poet laureate John Betjeman







ILLUSTRATION BY MAY PARSEY

Fresh fruit is served on the terrace.



and modernist painter Nikos Ghika. Joan's only requirement was that she be able to watch the sunset. Hiking the Taygetos mountains in 1962, they spied Kardamyli, and decided to build a house—which Joan funded by selling jewelry she'd inherited from her aristocratic parents—just outside the village. Later, in a Greek television interview, Paddy recalled “all these wild mountains, and the olives and the water and the islands; here would be an ideal place to live.”

Since I also dream of making Greece my permanent home, my husband and I were inspired to visit the house on a recent road trip through the Peloponnese. I quickly realized that if I had Joan-worthy jewels, I'd trade them all for this, too. The place is a writer's dream: the dining room is lined with bookcases, so Paddy could jump up to answer questions that arose during dinner. On the long staircase down to the sea, benches were carved out of the stone for Paddy to stop and write. Sitting under Joan's sunset-watching pergola, I noticed a paw-print mosaic underfoot—a nod to her love of cats.

In 1996, the Leigh Fermors made arrangements to bequeath the house to the Benaki Museum, in Athens—stipulating that it be used as a retreat for writers and artists nine months of the year, and run as a hotel from June to August to pay for its upkeep. Joan died in 2003, and after Paddy followed her in 2011, the Benaki approached Aria Hotels—a Greek company known for its atmospheric, historic properties—to take on hosting duties.

The house reopened last year as a combination artists' colony, boutique inn, and museum. Both the Benaki and Aria have worked to ensure that it reflects the region's beauty and culture. “About the swallow's nest,” Kyriaki

Roumpi, our concierge, said when we arrived, pointing to a mud basket on the arched ceiling. “We've decided not to remove it.” A wise choice: swallows are symbols of good luck in Greece.

Even without its literary connection, this would be an idyllic spot to vacation. In Old Kardamyli, we wandered through a collection of 18th-century stone towers where local rulers holed up during the Maniot vendettas—episodes of interclan warfare that raged for centuries—and later plotted the Greek Revolution. In the charming newer village along the seafront, we ducked children running around the church square, and I popped into a jewelry store to stock up on evil eye bracelets, remembering Paddy's description, in *Mani*, of the “amused tolerance coupled with veneration” locals felt toward the amulet. “Because, true or not, these beliefs are old and they are heirlooms.”

The couple are still remembered here as Kyrios Michalis (“Mr. Michael,” Paddy's code name when he was embedded in Crete) and Kyria Ioanna (“Mrs. Joan”). Locals seem to have considered them family. At dinner under the olive trees at **Elies** ([elieshotel.gr](http://elieshotel.gr); entrées \$9–\$18), a hotel opposite a lovely beach outside town, I discovered that Stavros Giannakeas, the owner, was raised in the housekeeper's cottage at the Leigh Fermor house; his mother, Lela, was Paddy and Joan's personal cook before she opened her popular Kardamyli taverna, **Lela's** ([lelastaverna.com](http://lelastaverna.com); entrées \$11–\$14).

The couple's last housekeeper, Elpida Belogianni, now cooks for visiting guests. One day, she mentioned that Paddy swam daily to the islet across the bay until he was 94—inspiring me to make the half-hour swim, stopping in caves that seemed lonely for sea nymphs. Initially, I felt jealous that someone got to do this every day: wake up, work a little, swim, eat Elpida's otherworldly cooking—chickpeas bright with citrus, cold almond soup studded with green grapes—then nap, read, work, and talk until sunset. “If I lived here,” I told my husband, peevishly, “I bet I could hunt Nazis, or walk across Europe, or write prize-winning books, too.”

But after a few days of sea foam and sunlight, my envy mellowed into awe. The Leigh Fermors fulfilled a near-universal fantasy: finding a place that speaks to your soul and creating a life there. They not only built their heaven on earth but also devised a way for others to appreciate it. In *Mani*, Paddy asks, “What wondrous life is this I lead?” Having tasted life in the place he loved the most, I share his wonder. 🐼