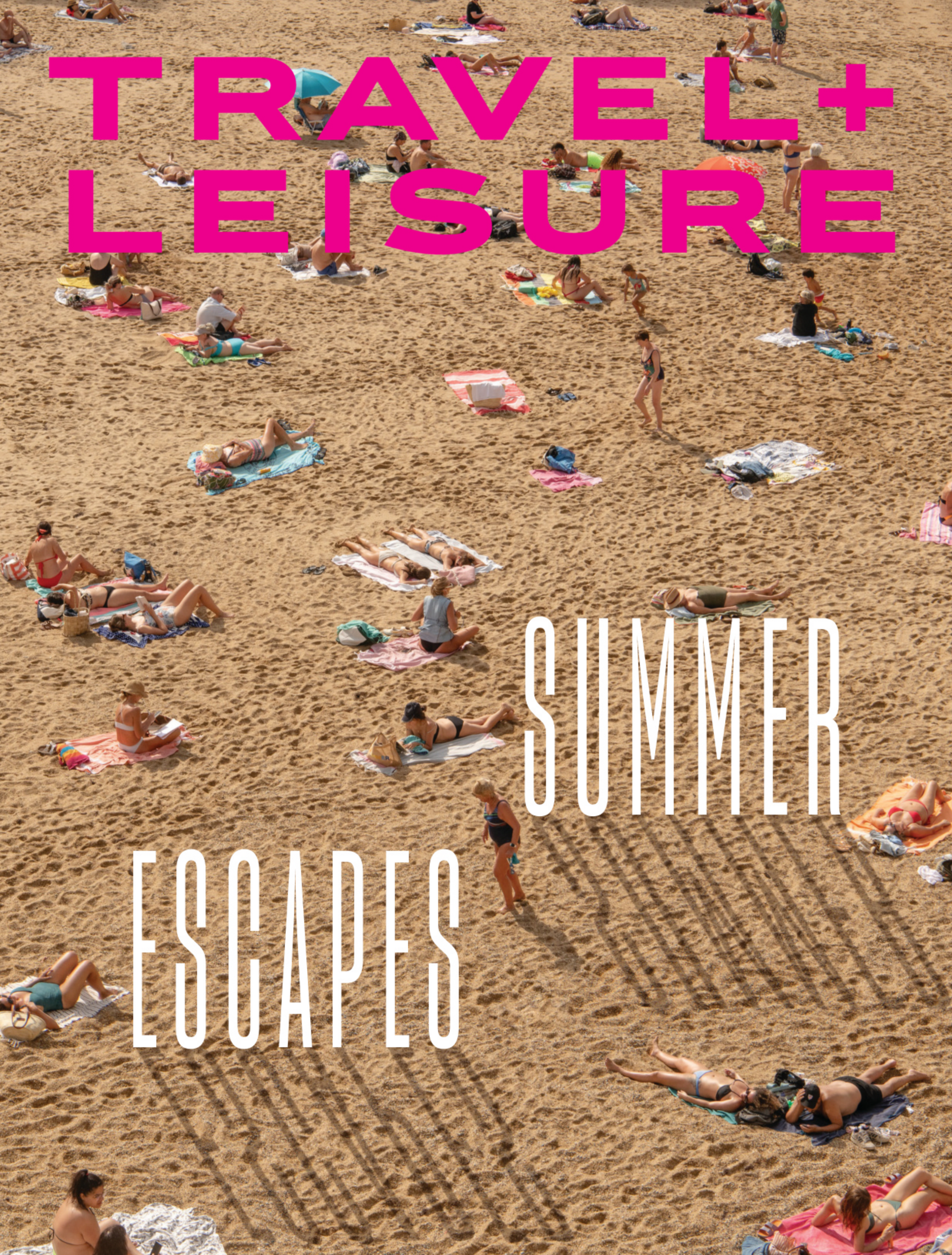




TRAVEL +
LEISURE

SUMMER

ESCAPES

TRAVELERS' TALES,
FROM NEAR + FAR

EDITED BY
DENNY LEE



EXPERIENCES



► *Sunset in Papingo, one of the 46 villages in northern Greece that make up the Zagorohoria.*





It Takes a Village

In the canyons of northern Greece, the people of the Zagorohoria are cementing their home as a playground for outdoor enthusiasts.

Eleni N. Gage shares their story.

“YOU’RE CANYONING!” my husband, Emilio, yelled down from the monolith above me. I hadn’t realized there was a verb for what I was doing—half hiking, half sliding down to a ravine filled with frigid water on a hot summer afternoon. This was our third day in the Zagorohoria, a group of 46 villages that cling to the edge of the Vikos Gorge, in the Epirus region of northern Greece. And we had already used up most of the sporty verbs I knew, as we rock-climbed, hiked, and rafted our way through half a dozen different fairy-tale settings.

The canyon we were exploring has a series of rock pools, or swimming holes, carved out of the limestone by mountain springs. It wasn’t the only spot where we took a dip. The previous morning, in the village of Iliochóri, we hiked 3,000 feet down—yes, down—to waterfalls that ended in three levels of strikingly green natural pools. This hidden paradise was well worth what *we* considered a strenuous trek. But as we spotted an older woman descending a wooden ladder to the swimming area in pumps and palazzo pants, leather purse in hand, we realized “strenuous” might not be a sentiment shared by everyone.

On another excursion, Emilio and I rented an inflatable raft and glided down the Voidomatis, said to be one of the cleanest rivers in Europe. The water was so clear we could have counted every pebble at the bottom if we had the time—which, in these timeless surroundings, almost seemed like a possibility.

The region's pine-covered mountains, sparkling rivers, stone cottages, and curved bridges—called *xerolithia*, or “dry stones,” because they’re made without any cement—bear little resemblance to the blue seas and whitewashed houses of most Greek postcards. But the landscape is every bit as stunning. Isolated by the mountains, native flora and fauna have flourished over the centuries, with more than 2,000 indigenous plant species present today. (Some villagers even continue the tradition of using them to make botanical medicines.) The wildlife still includes brown bears, the goat-like chamois, golden eagles, and Macedonian newts—amphibians that resemble tiny dragons and live in the Drakolimni (“dragon lake”) at the top of Mount Tymfi.

Over the course of the 20th century, many residents of the Zagorohoria moved away from the villages to larger cities or other countries to make a living. Now the spectacular environment is drawing people back, as well as enticing new visitors to explore the region. Vasileios Remos, our rafting



FROM TOP
A group preparing to raft the Voidomatis river; a vendor's stall in Papingo; the lounge area of Kipi Suites, a hotel in central Zagori.

guide and the owner of **Zagori Outdoor Activities**, is one of those returning locals. After leaving to pursue an economics degree at the University of Ioannina, about 40 miles away, he began going back in 2007 to work as a rafting guide on weekends. At the time, resident old-timers thought he was nuts. “It was difficult to persuade people here about the ways of the outdoors,” he recalled, noting that in the beginning demand was limited, and there were only so many days a year he could get work as a guide.

Around 2010, things changed. Formerly separated into three different municipalities, the Zagorohoria became a single big one. And 2011 brought the first-ever Zagori Mountain Running races: six events, from a kids’ race to a 37-mile run, held over the last weekend of July. That year, just 300 athletes participated; last summer, there were more than 2,500 runners from 35 countries, and more than 10,000 visitors filled the villages—where the number of full-time residents hovers around 4,000.

As runners, hikers, and rafters returned home with tales of jogging over arched bridges, rafting crystal rivers, and lingering at tavernas under ancient plane trees, tourism began to grow. It was enough to support a handful of B&Bs, as well as larger properties like **Aristi Mountain Resort & Villas** (doubles from \$184), where we stayed in the western Zagori. The hotel has indoor and outdoor pools, a restaurant, and a spa, all just up a cobblestoned path from the village square. Today, Remos guides groups on hiking, rafting, canoeing, kayaking, and



FROM TOP
A waterfall
near the village
of Iliochóri;
the terrace at
Kipi Suites.



mountain-biking expeditions close to 200 days a year, and has even led rafting trips past snowcapped mountains on Christmas. Unlike other regions of Greece, the Zagorohoria now attracts visitors year-round.

As appreciation for the Zagorohoria's natural environment grew, so did the infrastructure needed to protect it. The area was named a UNESCO Global Geopark in 2015.

In 2023, it was added to the World Heritage list. And in 2021, it became part of the Epirus Trail: a 230-mile-long, well-marked footpath, with shelter available roughly every 12 miles. "The goal is to build structural support, but leave the natural environment untouched," says Epirus's governor, Alexandros Kachrimanis. With paved, albeit winding roads, and an airport just 45 minutes away, the villages are now well connected to the rest of Greece. As Kachrimanis points out, "When you can drive a half-hour from Ioannina to the seashore to swim or to mountains to hike, you realize that this area offers unusual benefits."

Unusual they undoubtedly are. At every corner, we found a heart-stopping view, a just-scary-enough adventure, or a distinctive meal. At **Sta Riza** (*entrées* \$9–\$15), in Vitsa, Emilio loved the grilled chicken and green beans so much that he began plotting how he could relocate us and eat there every day. Also in Vitsa, we shared grilled mushrooms at **Kanela & Garyfallo** (*entrées* \$33–\$38), where the owner not only grows his own shiitakes but also employs a team of foragers to scour the gorge for wild varieties (more than 2,500 grow in Greece). In a single four-hour hike from **Kipi Suites** (*doubles from* \$121), the charming collection of restored stone homes where we stayed in the central Zagori, we traveled over, under, and around five sturdy and picturesque *xerolithia*.

That night, we had dinner at **Vikogiatros Café** (*entrées* \$16–\$18), a local hangout in the village of Koukouli. The taverna's name means Vikos Doctor, and in the glow of lightbulbs strung between tree branches, its owner, Nikos Kontodimos, explained that he carries on the traditions of the herbologists of yore, making liqueurs from 118 different native herbs. When I asked to see a list, he tapped his temple and said, "It's all in my brain. But the crowning jewel is pine, which is energizing."

At the sound of it, I opted for wild rose. But Kontodimos brought me a shot of pine anyway. Almost minty, it was instantly invigorating—something I need in my everyday life. I asked him if he bottled his liqueurs to sell. He shook his head.





“Only if I have a large supply. I have to keep enough to serve my customers or I won’t have pine again until next summer.”

While mildly disappointing, the answer was not entirely surprising. Like many residents of the Zagorohoria, Kontodimos realizes that what he has here is precious. Luckily for me, he is both smart enough to safeguard it and kind enough to share it. 🌍

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT Local products at Sta Riza, in Vitsa; a mushroom plate at Kanela & Garyfallo; Nikos Kontodimos of Vikogiatros Café; the Kakkori stone bridge, near the town of Kipi.

