

# Greek Epic

The island of Evia in Greece offers everything that Mallorca does – winding roads, incredible views, glorious sunshine – but without the crowds

Words **PETER STUART** Photography **DAVID WREN**



**L**egend has it that the Greek god Poseidon called the island of Evia home. In *The Iliad*, Homer describes the sea god striding across the land in four giant steps, crushing the landscape beneath him.

Looking at the island's jagged landscape, I can easily imagine it being carved by titans trampling stone and rock beneath their gigantic sandalled feet. We have an epic day of riding ahead of us, with 4,100m of ascent over 173km. That includes four peaks nearing 1,000m, with the day beginning at sea-level. Not quite the roll alongside white sand beaches I might have expected from a ride in Greece.

As it happens, though, the island of Evia (also called Euboea) is a bit of an undiscovered gem for cyclists. The second-largest island in Greece, just an hour or so north



of Athens, it boasts almost the exact same surface area as Mallorca but with a smaller population, slightly warmer temperature and higher mountain peaks. That makes it a cycling playground hidden in plain sight, and when the team at Greek Cycle Holidays suggested the island to us, we couldn't work out how we'd never noticed it before.

Now we're here, the sun is just breaching the horizon and it's time to begin our odyssey to the mountain of Dirfys and the island's eastern coast.

### Riding to an empty amphitheatre

Our ride begins in Eretria on the western shores. Just beside our villa sits the ancient theatre of Eretria, which was built around 300BC and was once no doubt a venue for orchestras and public spectacles. There's no crowd to cheer us on today, though, as we roll towards the sea in the amber dawn light.

Next to the theatre sits the house of mosaics, which from the outside looks like an innocuous white building but which is home to a mosaic floor constructed in 370BC. We're literally stumbling over ruins here. By 'we' I mean myself and Andreas and Nico, a pair of local riders from the NPO Chalkidas Cycling Club. They've been invited to join me on the ride by Steven, our host from Greek Cycle Holidays, who is supporting us in a van. Steven set up his cycling business in Eretria a few years ago after a career as a professional chef in London, and now knows these mountain roads uniquely well.

Andreas and Nico have been frank about today's ride, describing it as *téras* – a monster. For many locals this route is a big target for their summer, because an audax follows a very similar course to today's ride. While audaxes in the UK conjure up thoughts of panniers and sleeping in town halls, here in Greece they're a little more like a self-supported sportive. ▶



Left: The first coffee stop of the day in Triada showcases Evia's picturesque mountain towns

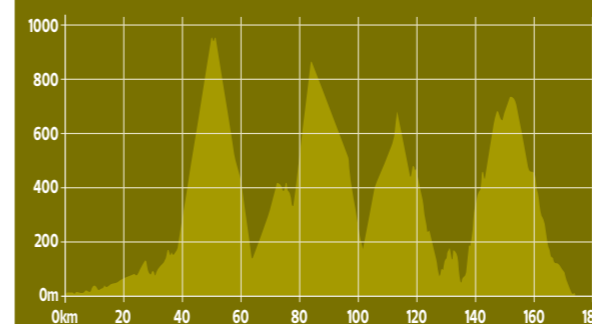
Previous pages: A hairpin at 500m of elevation overlooks Chiliadou Beach on the east coast, around 100km into the ride

## Andreas charitably teaches me my most valuable Greek word of the day: *argós*. It means 'slow'

### Ride of the gods

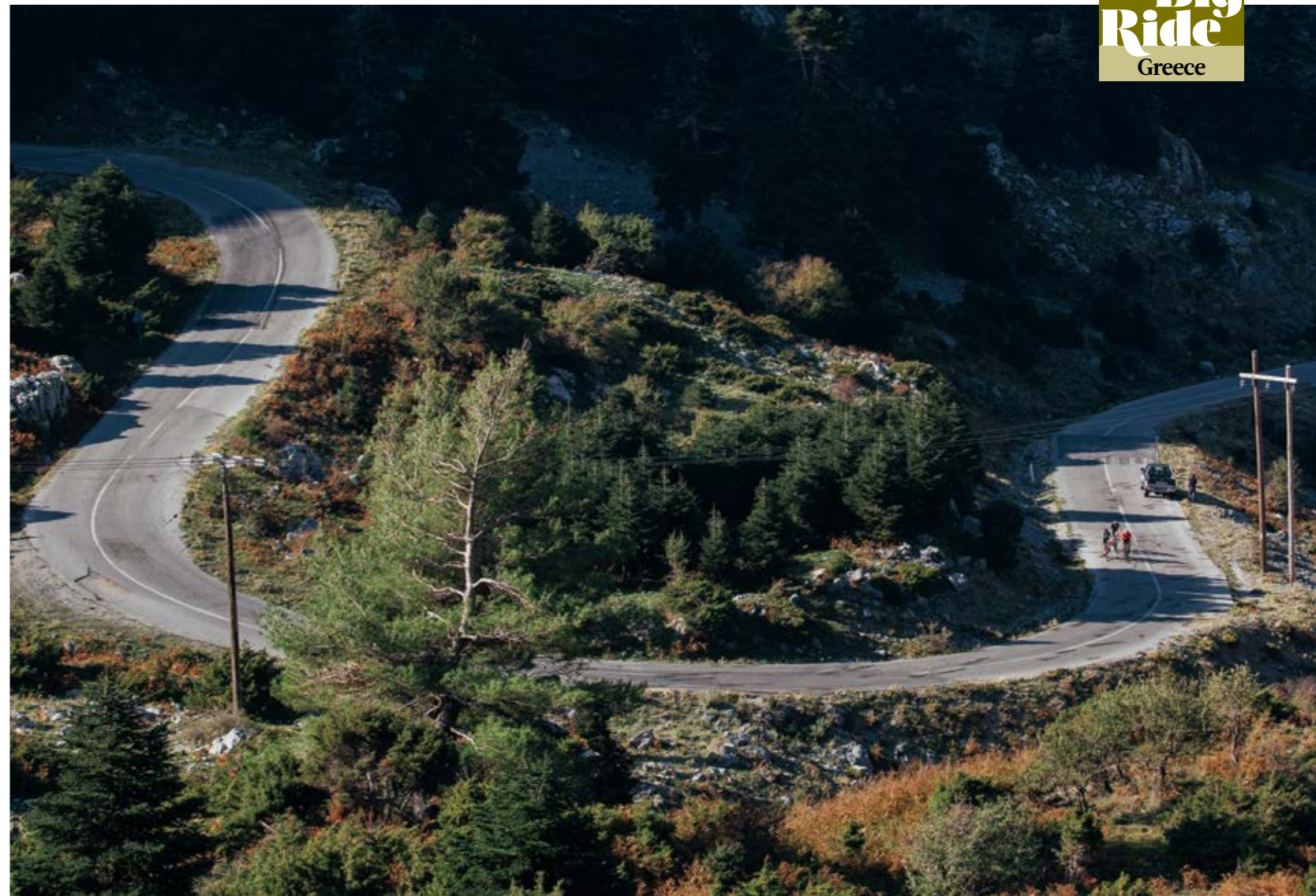
Follow *Cyclist's* odyssey around the island of Evia

To download this route, visit [cyclist.co.uk/99greece](http://cyclist.co.uk/99greece). Beginning in Eretria, a town 97km north of Athens, ride along the coast to the town of Vasiliko before heading inland towards the town of Makrykapa. Soon after that you begin the climb to Dirfys, which is followed by a descent to the coast. Next take the road around to Stropones, then climb southwards out of town until turning back inland through Metochi. Follow this road back to the coast before turning your back on the sea and following the road south through Manikia and Seta. From here it's downhill back to Eretria.





**The Dirfys mountain looms large ahead of us, casting a sinister shadow over the plains beneath it**



◀ The early start seems to be paying off because we're treated to a perfect warm-up along the shores of the Aegean Sea. The roads are wide and quiet as we pick our way through a series of small seaside towns. Despite it being 7am the cafes are filled with locals, and we're tempted to stop for a pick-me-up coffee. Andreas insists that we ride a little further, though, as the first 35km of the ride are more or less flat, and the town of Triada will be the perfect spot for a caffeine boost before the first big climb.

From the coast we work our way along winding country roads into a wide plain of grasslands, forest and orange groves. Tracking us to our right is the river of Lilas Potamos, although at this point in the autumn it's little more than a dribble. The rainy season is still a few weeks away.

Through the early-morning haze a ridge of mountains rises up on the horizon, beaming at us like the peaks of an African savanna. The Dirfys mountain looms large ahead of us, casting a sinister shadow over the plains beneath it, and I'm somewhat relieved when Nico and Andreas point us away from them towards the town of Triada instead.

We set ourselves down in a cobbled square in the shadow of a rather grand Orthodox church named the Church of St Spyridon. If this were Mallorca or the Alps I'd expect the town to be filled with cyclists enjoying a similar morning coffee stop like ourselves. As it is, we're in quite splendid isolation.

At the risk of letting our warmed-up legs chill, we down our espressos and set off for the 815m climb to the top of Dirfys.

#### Playground of the gods

Dirfys dominates the centre of Evia. The mountain is affectionately called 'little Fuji' on account of its sharp trapezoid form. The summit is named Delfi, not to be confused with the more famous Delphi beside Mount Parnassus. Both, however, literally translate as 'navel', the centre of the island.

As we approach the climb we stop only to refill our bottles at a gushing water fountain. The heart of the ascent is an 8.5km section with a gradient of 9%, and once we're out of the forest we're treated to a succession of hairpins with expansive views over the west of Evia.

At each corner the panorama improves, although for much of the time I'm staring only at the calves of Andreas and Nico as I try to keep up with them. To compensate, Andreas charitably teaches me my most valuable Greek word of the day: *argós*. It means 'slow'.

After 50 minutes we reach the summit, from which we can see the opposite coast. It's shrouded in mist, which is baffling given the perfect sunshine around us. We take a moment to cruise over to the mountain refuge just off the route to take in one of the best views on the island. ▶

Above: The upper hairpins of Dirfys, the first climb of the day, offer a steep but manageable gradient that warms up the legs perfectly

Top left: A local man we met just off the route entertains us with his stunning beach house, grape crushing and dubious moonshine

It would be the perfect setting for a cafe, but being such a secluded spot the refuge is little more than a set of wooden beams and a roof. Steven whips out a thermos and some Greek spinach pies, which I quickly become convinced could be the rear-pocket food of the future.

The mountain peak here was the birthplace of the goddess Hera, so the legends say. In ancient times the mountainside was the site of a sanctuary dedicated to the queen of the gods, where she tied the knot with Zeus.

It strikes me that we're only 50km in, and with so much climbing ahead of us we can't spare the time to hunt down some corroborating archaeological relics, much as I'd like to. We head down the descent, which begins with a stretch through bare, rocky terrain that reminds me of the Stelvio Pass. It means we can sweep across the full width of the road and hit the apex of each corner, nudging speeds of 80kmh along the way.

By the time we return to sea level my heart is racing but we're all beaming as we begin the next section, which snakes along an undulating road beside the sea cliffs.

#### Lost in translation

As we roll along, Andreas and Nico teach me a few more useful cycling terms in Greek. *Gigora* means fast, although

Below and far right: The mist only adds to the feeling that *Cyclist* is slightly lost in the Dasos Stenis Park, the forested terrain that sits below Dirfys



I'm not sure I'll need that one today. *Parakalo* is please, which could be put to good use accompanying *argós*. And the most important word, they assure me, is *malakas*, which is to be shouted at car drivers passing too close. Its meaning? Well, you can probably guess.

Language is actually something of a special attraction on the island of Evia. The tiny village of Antia at the most southern point of the island is famous for its unique whistling language, *sfyria*. The bird-like vocalisation has been used in these parts for 2,000 years, and can articulate complex conversations over long distances around the



We sweep across the full width of the road, nudging speeds of 80kmh along the way





## This is the most famous beach in Evia, upon which a giant boulder separates a clothed segment from a nudist one

◀ village. Today the village has only 37 residents, making it one of the most endangered languages in the world.

In the interest of pursuing some local colour, we head down to the coast to a small cove by the beach. In amongst the rocks, below a canopy of shrubbery, we see a small beach house and outside a shirtless man is crushing grapes. Andreas and Nico greet him merrily and in moments they're laughing away like old friends. I half expect him to turn out to be the mayor of Evia, or some other municipal authority figure. That is until he starts handing us moonshine.

It's a clear, thick liquid that's so strong even the smell turns me dizzy. I take a feeble sip, purely for show. We don't stop for too long because our shirtless friend's tranquility is interrupted by what seems to be a rather vocal phone call. He quickly finishes his drink, which makes me almost

nauseous to consider, before rushing off to his car while shouting down his phone. I exchange looks with Andreas and Nico over whether this man should be driving, but before we can intervene he has sped off in a plume of black exhaust smoke.

We return to the road along the beachfront as the sun teases through the clouds. Quickly we find ourselves on another ascent, and once more I'm sheepishly suggesting 'argós?' as Nico and Andreas chat away happily in front of me, seemingly untroubled by the gradient.

### Natural beauty

Lunch is in a small town set discreetly among the mountain peaks. On the other side of the mountain ridge to the south is Steni Dirfis, one of the most stunning sets of switchbacks in Greece. While we could sample it today, doing so would ▶

Above: The heart of the Dirfys ascent is an 8.5km section with a gradient of 9%

Left: The water fountain just outside the Makrykapa is perfectly situated ahead of the first major climb of the day



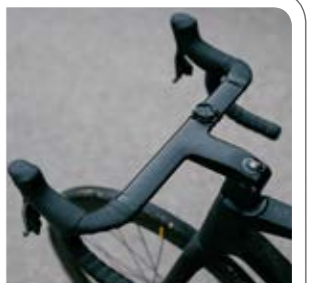
## The rider's ride

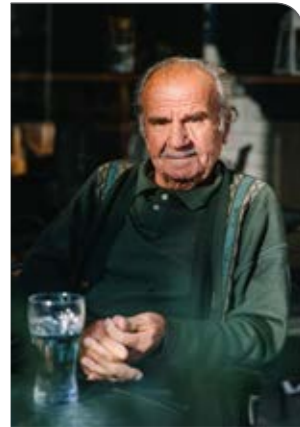
Ribble Endurance SLR Disc, £6,519, [ribblecycles.co.uk](http://ribblecycles.co.uk)

The Endurance SLR Disc was uniquely well suited to the savagely long climbs of Evia. At 7.6kg it's agreeably light for a disc brake build with deep-section wheels. That weight, coupled with a rigid rear end, meant that every vertical metre of ascent was made with as little wasted energy as possible.

When it came to the descents, the integrated cabling and aerodynamic one-piece bar/stem played two roles. They improved the aerodynamics of the front end, thus increasing speed, but also offered a nice balance of rigidity and comfort so the bike handled immaculately but was still smooth over the rougher surfaces.

As for the Sram Red AXS groupset, wireless shifting is a dream when it comes to travelling and packing a bike bag. Once you've had the joy of removing a rear mech and securing it in bubble wrap hassle-free, it's hard to imagine going back to cables.





## By the numbers

It's all Greek to us

172

Length of the ride in kilometres

4,105

Elevation gain for the day in metres

952

Highest peak in metres

1

World-famous nudist beaches on the route

20

The price in euros for lunch for five

300

The date of construction (BC) of the amphitheatre beside our villa



Left: The final climb to the village of Manikia is tough, but from here it's downhill all the way back to Eretria

Below: A mountain refuge atop Dirfys is a wasted opportunity for a cafe in our book, but its rusticity does add to the peak's secluded charm

mean either extending an already lengthy ride by 50km or cutting it short by 50km. The latter would be criminal given the scenery waiting on the coast; even the thought of the former makes my quads and lungs sting in protest.

At the Kivotos cafe in Stropones we tuck into a delicious pasta lunch with a selection of meats and olives, all of which comes to less than the price of a sandwich in a London cafe, before hitting the road once more. We ride directly onto a punishingly steep 10% ramp that takes us upwards for around 500m before the road swings round and we find ourselves descending towards the coast through a thick forest.

With a long string of tight corners to negotiate I'm nervous about careless drivers heading in the opposite direction, and I get ready to curse them as *malakas*, but in truth we barely see a car on the whole of the 15km descent.

We bottom out in the town of Koutourla before climbing up a shard of coastal mountain that overlooks Chiliadou Beach. It's the most famous beach in Evia, upon which a giant boulder separates a clothed segment from a nudist one. Apparently this is one of the most popular nudist beaches in all of Greece, and I'm quite relieved that we're high enough up that I don't have to be confronted with unwanted views of intimate body parts.

### Myth and reality

There are a few roads in Europe that go beyond impressive road design and become an almost artistic flourish. The mountain road that overlooks Chiliadou is one of them, and certainly a piece of architecture worthy of comparison with Sa Calobra in Mallorca or Norway's Atlantic Road.

## The road folds back on itself in a hairpin that acts almost like some gigantic viewing platform for the coast below



We follow the road along a ridge of limestone cliff before it folds back on itself in a hairpin curve that acts almost like some gigantic viewing platform for the coast below. The tarmac itself offers the sort of incline and camber that has us up out of the saddle and in the big ring, trying to eke speed out of the corner.

We can't help but pull up at the armco for a few minutes and snap some pictures. The mist is beginning to clear and the sun is hitting the low cloud in a way that turns the sky a fiery orange. This is a Greece I never expected to see – moody, challenging and dramatic.

We climb out of the hairpin and continue to the high point of the climb at 612m. The peak has handsome views of its own overlooking the coastal mountains, but after a day of sensory overload we barely make time for a single phone snap. The evening is chasing us too, so we make haste back inland.

After a rapid descent we approach the sting in the tail of our ride, a climb to the town of Manikia. It's a 6km slog with a few 10% ramps that are torture to my legs this late in the day, but it does have its rewards. On one perfect hairpin between sheer limestone cliffs I'm reminded of some of the most scenic spots in the Alps and I wonder once again how this spot has never been leapt upon by Strava hunters and club training camps.

Beyond Manikia the climb continues for another 4km and 200m of elevation. One section of 15% has me twisting my frame from side to side, unable to even wheeze my plea of *argós* to Nico and Andreas. They're struggling





too, and when we get to the top there's little in the way of celebration because we know we still have another 2km climb to come shortly after this one.

The mountains around us begin to glow magenta in the late afternoon light, and as we tackle the final climb the mist gathers in the valley below. Eventually the moment comes when we know that the day's hard work

## This is a world away from the beaches of Mykonos and the tourist hotspots

**Previous pages:** The climb to Derfys is the longest of the day, rising to an altitude of 952m

**Left:** Once you get inland, Evia's roads are varied and full of local character

is finished. From here it's downhill all the way back to Eretria – and not a moment too soon.

If we had more light, and if I had more energy, I'd savour the descent. The fast sections are almost perfectly complemented by technical and tight corners, but I'm happy to take it easy and by the time we make it back into town we're welcomed by an empty amphitheatre and the very last dregs of daylight.

We roll down to the same coast that the Argo sailed beside on its mythical homecoming, although in our case in search of a beer rather than a Golden Fleece.

This wasn't the Greece I expected, and it's a world away from the beaches of Mykonos and the tourist hotspots. Instead we've seen wild landscapes, savage inclines and stunning descents. Greece may have a long history behind it, but for cyclists much of it has yet to be discovered. 🌸

Digital editor Peter Stuart is a legend in the Cyclist office

## How we did it

### TRAVEL

Cyclist flew to Athens International, which is serviced by a wide selection of low cost airlines such as RyanAir and Easyjet. Greek Cycle Holidays ([greekcycleholidays.com](http://greekcycleholidays.com)) arranged a transfer for us to Eretria, which takes about 80 minutes using the ferry from Oropos and is included in the package price. Public transport options to Eretria are scarce, so renting a car is the best option if you're not using a transfer.

### ACCOMMODATION

We stayed at Greek Cycle Holidays' villa in Eretria. The villa comprises four twin rooms that can sleep eight people in total, and boasts an outdoor jacuzzi for some fine *apres velo*. Steven, a professional

chef in the off-season, cooks all meals on site. There's also a free bar with a trusting self-serve policy at the villa. Packages start from £550 per person for a week, with guided tours and all food and drink included. Visit [greekcycleholidays.com](http://greekcycleholidays.com) for more details.

### THANKS

Many thanks to Steven and Peter Frost for organising our accommodation and support, and to Steven for accompanying us on the ride. Thanks also to Andreas and Nikos, who took the time to ride with us, and to local cyclist Myrto Teskos for making us a fantastic post-ride seafood meal at her restaurant Teskos in Nea Artaki.

