

WALKING AND TREKKING IN ZAGORI

photo: Thomas Chatzigeorgiou



About the Author

Aris Leontaritis is a PhD candidate in the glacial geomorphology of the mountains of Greece. He was born in Athens, where he studied and worked as a mechanical engineer for a few years before his love for the mountains and their nature inspired him to change direction. Already connected with the region of Epirus as a visitor, he moved to Metsovo to participate in a postgraduate programme on the development prospects of mountainous regions, with respect to the preservation of local identity, culture and environment.

WALKING AND TREKKING IN ZAGORI

**WALKING ROUTES IN GREECE'S WILD AND
BEAUTIFUL NORTHERN PINDOS MOUNTAINS**

by Aris Leontaritis

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The route maps in this guide are derived from publicly available data, databases and crowd-sourced data. As such they have not been through the detailed checking procedures that would generally be applied to a published map from an official mapping agency, although naturally we have reviewed them closely in the light of local knowledge as part of the preparation of this guide.

We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal, LA9 7RL.

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Front cover: The breathtaking view of the Vikos Gorge from the famous Beloi viewpoint (Walk 5)

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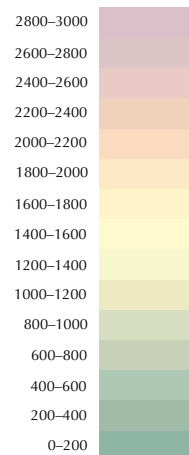
Finally, many thanks to Elena Dalamara for her inspiration, support and help throughout this beautiful project.



The peak of Avgo as seen from Mt Mavrovouni on the southern side of Valia Calda (Walk 27 extension)

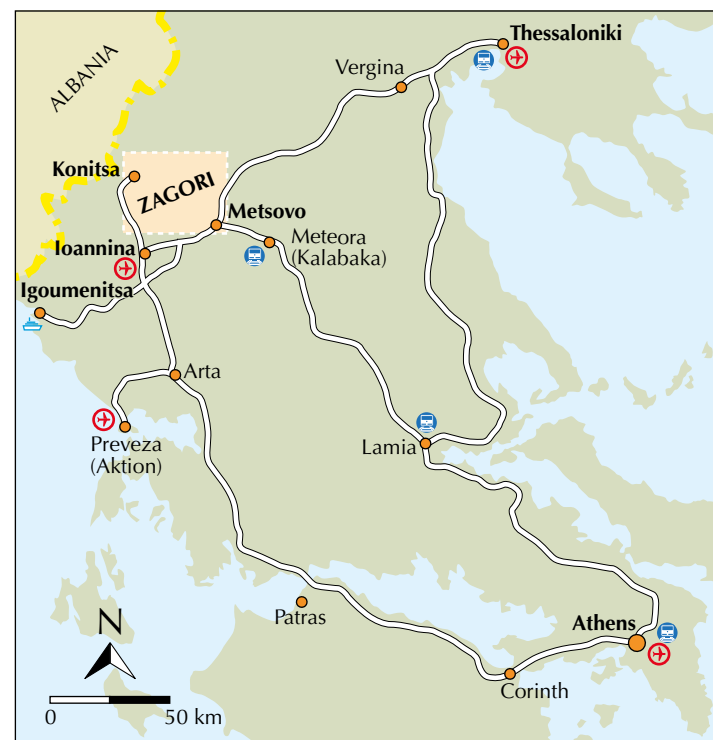
Symbols used on route maps

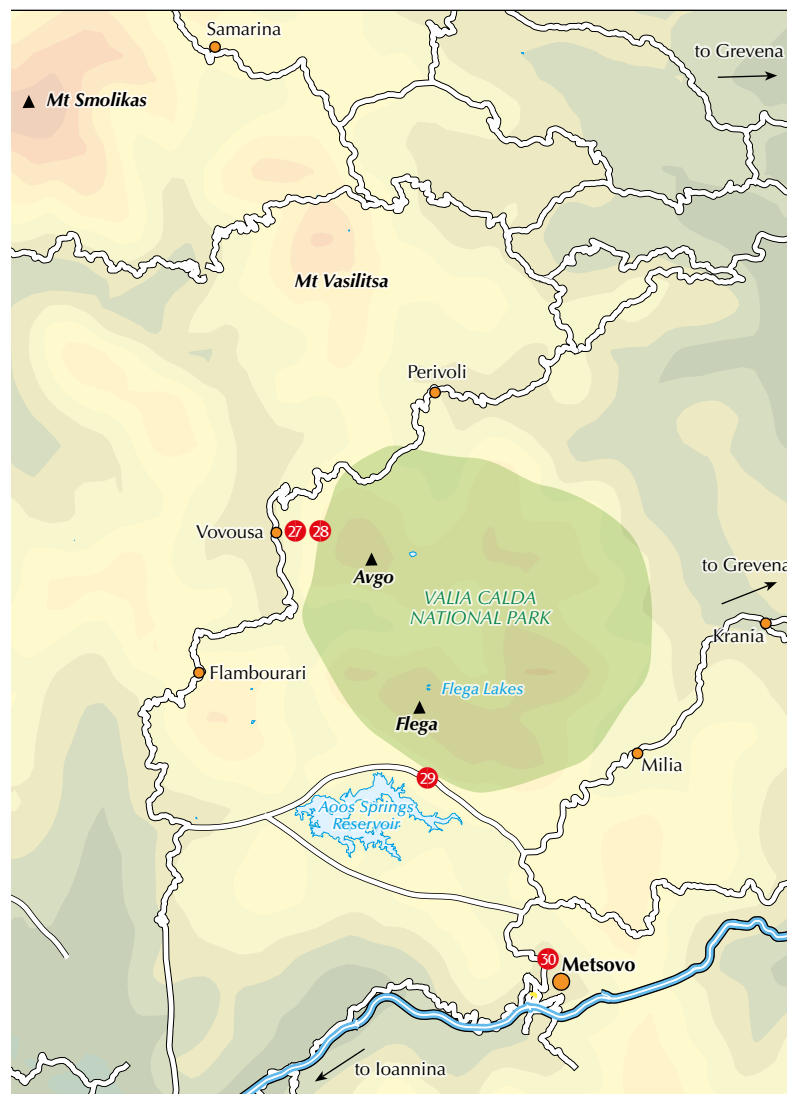
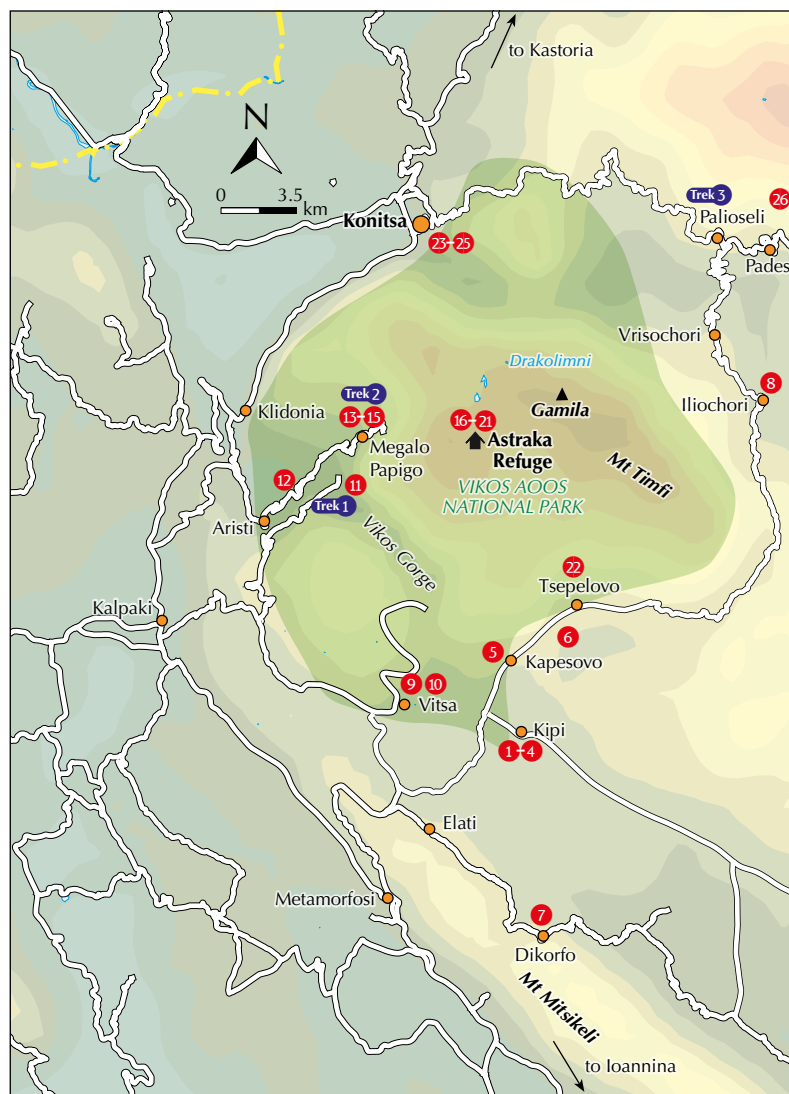
-  route
-  alternative route
-  start point
-  finish point
-  start/finish point
-  asphalt road
-  dirt road
-  woodland
-  urban areas
-  regional border
-  international border
-  station/railway
-  peak
-  town/village
-  refuge
-  campsite
-  building
-  church or chapel/monastery/shrine
-  pass/bridge
-  water feature/waterfall
-  other feature
-  viewpoint

Relief
in metres

GPX files

GPX files for all routes can be downloaded for free at www.cicerone.co.uk/941/GPX







The view of the Aoos Gorge from the natural balcony at the Stomiu Monastery (Walks 24 and 25)

INTRODUCTION

A first visit to Greece's Zagori region will linger long in memory. Setting off from the basin of Ioannina, you climb over Mt Mitsikeli to enter this fantastic world. Thick forests and stunning mountain scenery welcome you, with rocky canyons and impassable ravines gracefully bridged by the ubiquitous stone arch bridges. How many locals, travellers and merchants must have crossed these bridges over the years, carrying wealth, fresh ideas, good or unexpected news, hopes and fears?

Today, walking over these same bridges and along the well-preserved network of paths, it is possible to reach most of the villages of the region on foot. You can admire their stupendous

architecture and rich history, the cobble alleys and beautiful stone mansions, then enjoy the atmosphere in a traditional local café, usually located in the village square under the shade of a vast plane tree.

A first view of the dramatic Vikos Gorge or daunting northern crags of Mt Timfi; an encounter with a brown bear in the mystical forests of Valia Calda; rewarding hikes to the alpine tarns of Drakolimni (Dragonlakes) and the barren peaks of Mt Timfi and Mt Smolikas with their endless views – these are just some of the magical experiences awaiting you in Zagori. Such indescribable beauty cannot fail to generate awe and wonder and is bound to leave a lasting impression.



Impressive views of the saw-toothed northern crest of Mt Timfi pop out briefly through gaps in the trees on Walk 20

WALK 1

The round of the stone bridges

Start/finish	Kipi
Distance	9km
Total ascent/descent	380m
Grade	Grade 2
Walking time	3hr 15min
Waymarks	Frequent signs and paint markers
Water	Springs in Kipi and Koukouli

This is a gentle and very beautiful circular hike around the famous stone bridges of central Zagori. Most of them were built more than two centuries ago by the unrivalled stone masons of those times and still arch gracefully over the streams and rivers of the area. Perfectly blending in with their natural surroundings, they are a very good example of how the Zagorian landscape has been influenced by the relationship between man's needs and his physical space.

Overall, this route is short but taking time to admire the bridges and their setting as well as having a picnic or lunch at some point could make for a wonderful full-day hiking excursion. Lunch could be enjoyed either at Kipi or Koukouli, both of which are worth exploring for their typical Zagorian architecture. In May and early June you can bathe in some natural pools in the river before it runs dry for the rest of the summer.

Follow the main asphalt road east out of **Kipi** (750m) towards Negades/Fragades for a few hundred metres and turn right on to a dirt road signed '**Mylos bridge, Watermill**'. Cross the bridge to the restored traditional watermill and take the well-trodden path to the right along the valley (red/cream paint markers). When you come to a small stream, go left along the streambed and turn immediately right again. From this point, there are lovely views of Kipi above, while in summer wild orchids



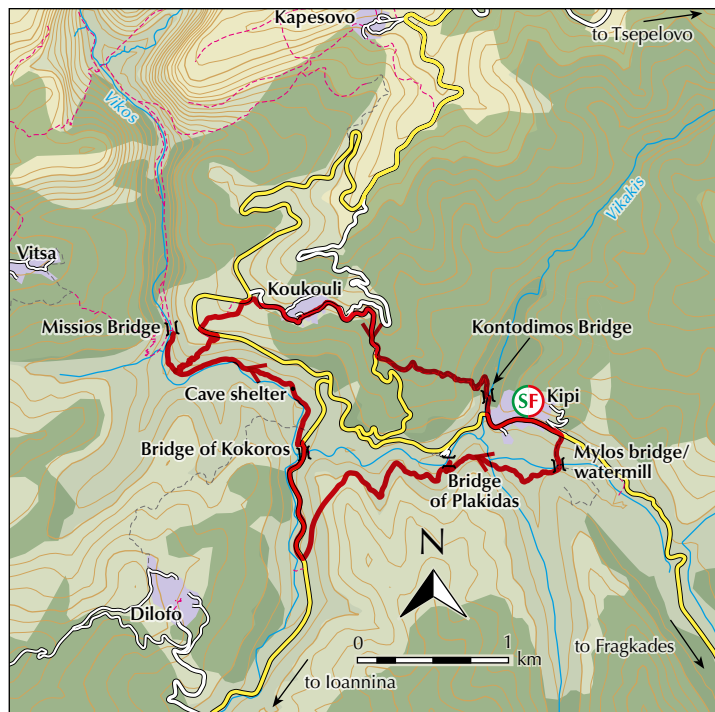
bloom all around. Soon you will reach a fork. The small path to the right will quickly bring you down to the monumental triple-arched **Bridge of Plakidas** (30min).

Retrace your steps to the main path and continue on among hornbeams and oaks to reach another fork some 20 minutes later. Take the left branch that descends to an asphalt road. Opposite, there is the small stone bridge of Kapetan Arkoudas (1806). Turn right on to the asphalt road and walk along its side with care to reach the **Bridge of Kokoros** (1hr 15min); its single arch has spectacularly bridged the vertical walls of this magnificent small gorge since 1750 and until 1940 it was the only passage to and from many villages of central Zagori.

Cross to the other side and make for a yellow sign ('Misius Bridge, Vitsa, Vikos Gorge') where a steep and not very clear path descends left to the riverbank. Once there, turn right and follow the well-trodden path along the bank. ► Soon you will climb over some wide limestone slabs. In May and early June there is usually a pool here, ideal for a refreshing bathe.

The Bridge of Plakidas

The distinct limestone formations of perfectly stacked slabs on the cliffs around the river are known as Theoktista (built by God).



THE MYTHICAL SIDE OF THE STONE BRIDGES

Many legends and superstitions are connected to the stone bridges in Zagori. If a woman had an abortion she would have to throw one of the *arkades* – decorative stones vertically placed at the edge of the bridges – so as to prevent it from happening again. This way she would punish the river, the old god of fertility, as in popular lore a bridge is a construction that humiliates the untameable river. The result of this superstition can still be seen today, as many stone bridges in the area are missing some of their arkades.

According to another legend, when someone was accused of theft, he was brought to the old Bridge of Kokoros, which flooded when the water level rose. He had to cross the bridge with a goat on his back. If he managed to cross, he was innocent. If he drowned, he was guilty; and his punishment was death.



Continue on along the gentle path and pass by a natural **cave shelter**. ▶ This pleasant stretch of path under the shade of tall oaks and through flower-filled fields will bring you to another fork signed 'Koukouli Steps'. This is the way to Koukouli over the perfectly preserved cobbles path known as Skala Koukouliou (Koukouli Steps). Continue on along a paved path to reach the startling **Missios Bridge** right at the mouth of the Vikos Gorge (1hr 45min, 720m). It is worth taking some time to admire the impressive rocky walls and caves around this fantastic stone bridge far away from the noisy asphalt road. Retrace your steps to the fork mentioned above and turn uphill left towards Koukouli.

Around 15 minutes later, you will emerge onto a dirt road where you should turn left, cross the main asphalt road and continue straight uphill following the red/cream paint markers. When you reach a pasture, bear diagonally left and move along the left side of a rusty fence to climb to a wooden kiosk on a secondary asphalt road. Go right and at the car park continue straight along the cobbled lane to reach the scenic square of **Koukouli** with the remarkable old school built over the arches of a walled spring (2hr 30min, 900m). On the way you will pass the Lazaridis botanic collection dedicated to the

In June the beautiful white lilies, *Lilium Candidum* (also known as Madonna lilies), bloom around the path.

herbs of Vikos and the local empiric doctors. This is also an opportunity to see the hidden interior of a genuine traditional Zagorian mansion.

THE VIKOYIATRI (EMPIRIC DOCTORS OF VIKOS)

In the 18th and 19th centuries, empirics possessed many secret remedies for any kind of health problem based on the herbs, roots and flowers growing in the Vikos Gorge. They were a closed guild (being originally from Zagori was a strict prerequisite) who travelled on horseback offering their services. Apparently, they were not all quacks and at some point they had become popular even among the nobles and the lords. Nowadays, the Vikos Gorge is being meticulously studied by botanists for its remarkable variety of plants and their potentially healing properties.

Take the cobbled lane below the square going uphill eastwards and continue straight/right along the asphalt road. Soon after that you will come to another wooden kiosk. Take the waymarked path turning off to the left (red/cream paint markers, red on white triangles). A gentle and mostly shady descent with some great views of Kipi, the Vikaki Gorge (Walk 6) and the rocky peaks of Mt Timfi in the background will bring you down to the riverbed. Go right and cross the beautiful **Kontodimos Bridge** (also known as Lazaridis Bridge – 3hr) to emerge onto the main asphalt road. Turn left and you will soon arrive at the starting point in the centre of **Kipi**.

WALK 2

Kipi to Dilofo and Vitsa

Start/finish	Plakidas Bridge near Kipi
Distance	11.5km
Total ascent/descent	500m
Grade	Grade 2
Walking time	4hr 30min
Access	From Kipi, take the main road west for about 500m to reach a wooden sign above the bridge
Waymarks	Frequent signs and paint markers
Water	None between the villages

This is another excellent hike around the scenic villages and the amazing stone bridges of central Zagori. It is suitable for all kind of hikers and even though it is not very long in terms of walking time, you can easily spend a whole day wandering in the inner part of the villages, taking wonderful photos and admiring the bridges and their setting. During the summer season, food and accommodation is on offer in all villages.

It is sheer delight to explore this region on foot. Starting at the famous Bridge of Plakidas near Kipi, this walk first passes through Dilofo – arguably one of the most beautiful villages in the region. You will then climb through a landscape typical of the area to Vitsa, another fabulous village, and descend the old cobbled path to Missios Bridge right at the southern mouth of the impressive Vikos Gorge. From there, a gentle shady path along the river will bring you to the picturesque Bridge of Kokoros, which arches over a startling little gorge. In May and early June you can bathe in the natural pools in the river before it runs dry for the rest of the summer and autumn. Later on in the year, you can finish this walk by going along the dry riverbed through a dramatic little gorge.

Set off from the wooden sign on the main road above the monumental triple-arched **Bridge of Plakidas** (750m), then take the whitish cobbled lane down to the riverbank. Cross the bridge and walk uphill along a clear little path.



The name of the **Bridge of Plakidas** or Kaloyeriko reveals its history in a very simple way. The bridge was initially wooden (mid 18th century) and was rebuilt with stone in 1814, thanks to a donation by the abbot of a nearby monastery (*kaloyeros* means monk in Greek). A watermill belonging to the monastery was also in operation back then. It was given its final shape during restoration in 1865, sponsored by the Plakidas brothers from Koukouli.

When you come up to a well-trodden path way-marked with red/cream paint markers, go right. Continue on among hornbeams and oaks to reach another fork some 20 minutes later. Take the left branch that descends to an asphalt road. Cross it and go over the small stone **Bridge of Kapetan Arkoudas** built in 1806 (40min, 750m). The paint markers and red/white signs guide you uphill over a steep flysch slope among oaks and black pines. The path gradually eases off and will soon bring you to the first ruined houses of Dilofo. When you reach the graveyard with its enormous fir tree, go briefly left on the dirt road and turn immediately right. Pass by a walled spring, the water of which is undrinkable, and take the steep cobblestone right past the first houses, and then go



A typical cobblestone lane among beautiful stone-built houses in Dilofo

The beautiful stone building opposite was once the school for boys. It was built in 1855 as a donation from two brothers from Dilofo, who made their fortune in Romania.

It is worth visiting the upper part of the village with its beautiful mansions. Go right on the main asphalt road and right again at the two beautiful churches.

left to reach the beautiful square of **Dilofo** in the shade of a large plane tree (1hr 10min, 880m). ◀

Take the cobbled lane to the far right side of the square next to a well. Ascend among some exceptional stone houses and turn left, with the bell tower of the church at your back. When you reach a stone gate on your right, pass through it and go left on the dirt road among the grassy outskirts of the village. Continue along the concrete road and turn immediately right to reach an *aloni* (circular paved floor where pack animals were used for threshing wheat and barley). From there, you have some wonderful views of Vitsa, perched above the mouth of the Vikos Gorge.

Take the descending dirt road signed 'Vitsa' and go left at the next fork. Keep descending and take the signed path that turns off right. At the next fork bear right again, cross a small stream (780m) and soon you will emerge on to a dirt road, where you should go right (1hr 45min). Continue on under some big oaks and the road soon turns into a path. Ignore a faint path to the right signed 'Vikos Gorge', cross another dirt road ('Vitsa, Dilofo') and continue on uphill to reach a **crossroads** with two wooden signs. Take the ascending dirt road on the left, go past a quaint chapel to your left and at the next fork take the left branch. A cobbled lane winds among the colourful gates of the first houses to reach the main square of lower **Vitsa** under the shade of a vast plane tree (2hr 30min, 960m). ◀

Retrace your steps to the **crossroads** and take the descending cobbled path straight between the two wooden signs ('Vitsas Steps'). When you reach another yellow sign ('Koukouli, Vitsa') there is a minor cobbled path left that leads to the **Ayios Nikolaos chapel** – a good provisional shelter in the event of rain. Behind the chapel a small path descends to a rocky outcrop with some brilliant views to the Vikos Gorge and the Missios Bridge below.

Continuing on the main route from the sign, the masterfully built cobblestone path will bring you down to **Missios Bridge** in a very beautiful gorge setting



The view from the outcrop below the Ayios Nikolaos chapel

(3hr 10min, 720m). Cross it, ignore a path forking left ('Koukouli Steps') and continue along the riverbank at times under the shade of tall oaks or through flower-filled fields. After a pleasant 20-minute walk you will pass by a **cave shelter** then climb over some wide limestone slabs above a pool that is usually formed in June and May; a perfect spot for a refreshing bathe. Continue along the left bank in the same fashion and when you reach a sharp left turn of the river climb the steep slope left to emerge on to the asphalt road next to the famous **Bridge of Kokoros** (3hr 40min).

From there you have two choices. The easiest one is to cross the bridge and take a path ascending steeply to the left (red/cream paint markers). It will bring you to the fork above the Bridge of Kapetan Arkoudas in about 15min, where you should go left to return to the starting point (4hr 30min). Sometimes the first steps above the road are in a bad state, so if you find it difficult to climb them you will have to follow the asphalt road for about 10 minutes to reach the Bridge of Kapetan Arkoudas and retrace your steps back to the starting point.