

ONE TOWN, TWO EMPIRES

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Kubbe or tower of
Panagia Koumbelidiki,
Image M. Eckenwiler



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Far from the famous island beaches of Greece, lies a hidden gem, waiting to be explored by the intrepid visitor.

Nestled in a narrow curve of land between two very steep mountains, Kastoria lies on a peninsula that juts out into Lake Orestiade within the northern prefecture of Macedonia, Greece. While native Greeks consider Kastoria to be their prettiest town, visitors might find it the most dramatic.

As you enter Kastoria, roads narrow to their medieval width and plunge steeply downhill towards the lake. This very dramatic setting, combined with a history extending from the

Byzantine to the Ottoman Empire, makes Kastoria well worth a visit.

For hundreds of years, Kastoria has been famed for its fur trade: the name of the town itself derives from the Greek word for beaver. Although beaver were hunted to extinction in the vicinity by the 19th century, furriers continue to ply their trade with imported fur.

Proximity to the Via Egnatia ensured that Kastoria was visited both by Eastern and Western traders throughout its history. The wealth derived from the fur and fish trades allowed the Kastoriototes to build extensively: the town holds more than fifty Byzantine era churches and dozens of Ottoman style mansions.

Byzantine Churches and Museum

A fundamentally medieval town, Kastoria's labyrinthine streets can be confusing to navigate. Fortunately, almost everywhere you go, there is a Byzantine church or chapel to visit. Luckier still, the municipality has posted large brown signs identifying each church in both English and Greek.

The oldest churches in Kastoria date from the 10th century and are completely Byzantine in style. The finest of these, the Church of the Panagia Koumbelidiki, is recognizable by its high dome. In a testament to the many different cultures which passed through Kastoria, this early church

derives its name from the Ottoman Turkish word Kubbe, meaning dome, and the Greek word, Panagia, an epithet of the Virgin Mary. The church itself is surprisingly small which only makes the tower style dome seem larger.

Within Panagia Koumbelidiki layers of frescoes cover the walls. The frescoes served as icons and are most worn in those spots where the faithful would have kissed them, usually the face and hands. The oldest preserved icons are thought to date from the late 13th century. The outside wall of the exonarthex (the outer entry) contains frescoes which have been dated to 1496 based on their inscription.

A few blocks away, Agios Nikolaos sits on Omonia Square. This is the perfect church to visit just around lunchtime, as the square boasts several restaurants with excellent food and outdoor tables.

Once you have eaten, wander over to the 12th century church of St Nicholas. Above the lintel over the main doorway, there is a portrait of Nicholas who serves as the patron saint of this church. Just to the side of the saint you will see two small portraits. They are the church's founder, Nicephoros Kasnitzis and his wife, Anna. Nicephoros holds up a model of the church for the saint's approval.

Many of the icons and other relics belonging to these churches are now housed in the Museum of Archaeology, also known as the Byzantine Museum

located on Plateia Dexamenis. The small exhibit at this museum can help you visualize the churches as they would have been. Unfortunately, the labels are only in Greek but the artifacts speak for themselves.

Arhondika under the Ottoman Empire

Arhondika are the mansions or houses of the arhons – the wealthy governing class. Kastoria boasts arhondika that date back to the 16th century as well as arhondika built at the end of the Ottoman period, the late 19th century. A quick walk through the Doltso quarter will acquaint you with this traditional architecture.

The first floors are built of stone: this kept them cool so they could be used for storage and for fur manufacturing. The upper stories are timbered plaster painted white with the occasional outer fresco. The second and third stories usually extend far out over their stone foundations casting the cobbled streets below into shadow.

Most of the arhondika are still privately owned and occupied: they may be viewed only from the outside. One exception is the Aivazis mansion at 12 Kapetan Lazou St. in the Doltso quarter. One of the oldest arhondika in the city, it was built by the Aivazis family in the 16th century and occupied continuously by Aivazis descendants for four hundred years. In 1975, the municipality bought the arhondiko from the family. It is now home to the Folk Museum of Kastoria.



Fishing Boats in the Harbor, Kastoria

Image, M. Eckenwiler

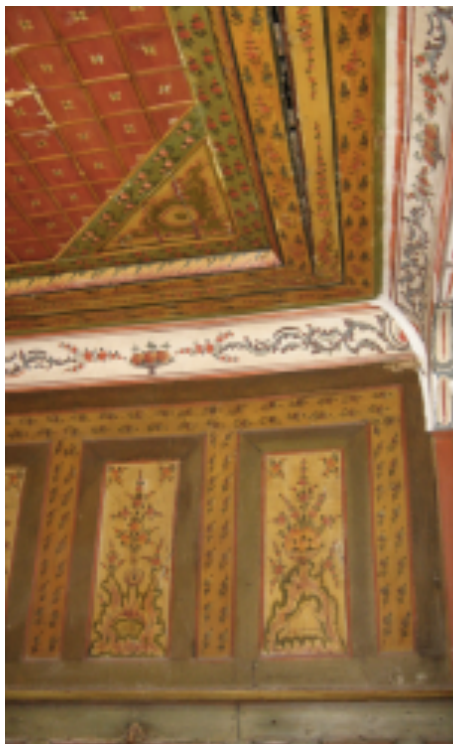
The rooms have been preserved down to the smallest detail. Be sure to visit the *onda* where the guide will point to a small rectangular grill high up in the wall.

The grill served an important purpose in the days of arranged marriages. When a prospective bridegroom visited the family, the young woman climbed a narrow stair between the walls and pecked down at him through the grill. If she liked his looks, she sent sweet coffee in to him; if she didn't want him, she sent in bitter coffee as a warning not to return.

The other highlight of this house is the formal salon. The Aivazis chose to show off their enormous wealth by installing a formal reception room with three walls of windows at a time when glass was very expensive. Amazingly, the stained glass windows have all survived through many wars. The elaborate woodwork and wall paintings that decorate the room are typical of *arhondika*.

Around the Peninsula

If you have time, drive or bike the road that skirts the lake and encircles the eastern end of the peninsula. The route provides beautiful views of the water, the mountains beyond, and the small monastery of the Virgin Mavrotissa. Greek historians believe that the monastery is built on the spot where the Byzantine army landed in 1083 to retake Kastoria from the Norman Kingdom of Sicily. Constructed over the course of centuries, this is still a working monastery. The monks ask that women expecting to visit the interior of the



Arhondiko interior

Image, M. Eckenwiler

buildings wear modest skirts or dresses.

The town boasts many excellent restaurants: several are located alongside the lake that supplies them with delicious fresh fish. Be sure to try the local specialties: perch and lake trout cooked with peppers, as well as *sarmades*, stuffed cabbage leaves bathed in a delicate lemon sauce. Wild boar, caught in the surrounding Pindos Mountains, is often available at Restaurant *Doltso*. *Doltso*, on a small quiet square, is housed in a fully restored *arhondiko* that dates from 1860. Finish off your meal with a shot of *tsipouro*, the Macedonian variant of ouzo and then stroll along the lakefront as the sun sets.

You can reach Kastoria easily by bus or car from Thessaloniki, Greece's second largest city. The drive (approximately 200km or 125 miles) along the *Via Egnatia* provides many other sites of interest to the tourist including the

ancient city of Pella, the home of Alexander the Great, and the picturesque village of Siatista.

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