

A writer's retreat in the beautiful Peloponnese

Amanda Dardanis finds the Greek home of her literary hero transformed into a luxury hotel

Every day, while well into his nineties, Patrick Leigh Fermor would swim about half a mile from the private beach below his rambling Mani retreat to a ruined fortress on the nearest islet of Meropi. Emboldened by wine and the company of friends, he was known to leap from a boulder he dubbed "Geronimo" on the cliff face at the bottom of his garden. I've been standing on Geronimo for ten minutes, trying to summon the nerve to follow his example. On this steamy day in Kardamili, in the central southern Peloponnese, a lusty breeze whips up the sea. It's only the ego blow of being bested by a nonagenarian that eventually propels me into the swell.

I am the first journalist to stay in the writer's pad that, this year, is having its first season as a luxury hotel managed by Aria Hotels. It was a condition of the author's bequest of his estate to the Benaki Museum, in Athens, that his home could be rented in summer. It has taken some time, but this is, finally, the chance for literary sorts to immerse themselves in the charmed Mani lifestyle of the Leigh Fermors.

"Paddy" Leigh Fermor — romanticised chronicler and war hero — rarely did things by halves. Aged 69, he swam across the Turkish Hellespont strait in Lord Byron's wake. As a young man, he walked from the Netherlands to Istanbul, notebook in hand — a journey that resulted in *A Time of Gifts*, one of the most famous travel memoirs. Greeks still recount the time when he posed as a Cretan shepherd named Michalis and abducted a German

general during the Second World War, a feat for which they adore him.

When he died in 2011, aged 96, Greece had been his home for almost 45 years. On a Grecian tour in the mid-1960s, he chanced across "a gently sloping world of the utmost magical beauty... thick with magnificent olive trees" and "crescent-shaped beaches" (as he would write to his future wife, the photographer Joan Rayner). Kardamili was splendidly detached from the rest of Greece by the towering Taygetos range. It was also immortalised in his beloved Homer in *Iliad*. For an erudite wanderer in search of his own Elysian fields, it was the perfect place to settle and write. He completed *A Time of Gifts* and its second instalment, *Between the Woods and the Water*, here.

Initially the couple camped in a tent on their rugged nine-acre plot in Kalamitsi Bay, south of Kardamili village, while Paddy pored over Palladio and paced out imaginary rooms. His vision was of a "loose-limbed monastery cum farmhouse with massive walls and cool rooms" where they might entertain friends on Greek soil (writes the biographer Artemis Cooper in *Patrick Leigh Fermor: An Adventure*). The house slowly emerged from foraged marble offcuts and peach limestone given by locals who called him Kyrie (Mr) Michalis. Leigh Fermor toiled beside his stonemason and tipped village children to scout pebbles on the beach. He would insert these into mosaics designed by his close friend, the great Greek artist Nikos Ghika. Once the house was complete, the couple spent summer evenings on their broad terrace by the sea; they were often joined by the artistic elite, including Bruce Chatwin, John Craxton and Nancy Mitford, who came for the company as much as the location.

As a fan of Leigh Fermor and the gilded Greece of his heyday, I'm giddy to have been handed the keys to the freshly renovated estate for the weekend. After a twisty 45-minute drive from Kalamata, I am greeted at the weighty Ottoman-style gates, a discreet distance down a steep dirt road, by Elpidia Beloyannis, Paddy's former housekeeper and Kardamili local. Elpidia's father was a close friend to Leigh Fermor

and she remains at the property, giving guests tours and cooking Paddy's favourite dishes — almond soup with green grapes and slow-cooked octopus among them. Arabic lanterns light the length of a whitewashed colonnade. Stone arches frame a Mediterranean landscape that's fragrant with lavender, oregano and pine. Vivid glimpses of teal water peep through olive groves and emerald thickets of cypress spears. Everything is bathed in soft Peloponnesian light. The serenity is broken only by birdsong, drumming cicadas and the sound of the sea.

The estate consists of three separate dwellings. There's the main residence — an L-shaped, two-storey building with drawing room, kitchen and dining area that sleeps up to six (two upper-floor doubles and a garden suite with private courtyard); a 52 sq m traditional stone cottage (once Paddy's "powerhouse of prose"); and a smaller guesthouse with a private entrance. Each accommodation has its own writing space, while certain areas — including the garden and vast drawing room, described by the poet John Betjeman as "one of the rooms of the world" — remain communal to encourage salon-style exchanges between guests.

The arched colonnade of the main house salutes the Greek monasteries of



One of the estate's writing spaces

Mount Athos; the stern turret detail is an architectural signature of the fierce Maniots, the peninsula's first inhabitants, said to be descended from the Spartans.

"This room was modelled after his favourite in the castle of a former lover, the Romanian princess Balasha Cantacuzene," Elpidia tells me as we enter the light-flooded drawing room, with its coffered ceilings and Turkish-style funnelled fireplace. "He used to take his afternoon naps over there by the window."

I'm staying in Joan's old suite, which looks out to the sea and has an airy, restful sitting room, with an internal arch, two comfy plaid armchairs, her old writing desk and windows opening to brilliant blue on three sides. You're surrounded by books on the estate, and Joan's quarters are no exception, with everything from a well-thumbed Nabokov to Nijinsky. Sadly, they're all off-limits to guests, preserved behind wire.

To enter into the spirit I shadow Paddy's footsteps. After my strenuous morning swim, Elpidia brings me tea, eggs and toast in the main courtyard ("Paddy usually had three rounds: one with Marmite, one with Gentleman's Relish and one with bitter marmalade"). I write at his desk until lunch, then snooze away the scorch of the afternoon, waking to roam the

Need to know

Amanda Dardanis was a guest at the Patrick and Joan Leigh Fermor House, which is available for three-night minimum stays between June and late September from £322 a night, to £3,221 a night for exclusive use of the estate (ariahotels.gr). Fly to Kalamata with British Airways

Mediterranean gardens where he once "strode around putting sentences together and pulling them apart again", to quote Cooper again.

I pad about barefoot, savouring the cool flagstones of Joan's bedroom and Ghika's serpentine mosaics. There are shady nooks with stone benches everywhere — perfect for evading the heat and dipping into favourite passages from my battered copy of *Mani: Travels in the Southern Peloponnese*. At sunset I sit with a glass of wine on the dramatic exedra that Paddy fashioned in the spirit of ancient Greece. It was the site of most Leigh Fermor soirees.

"Patrick and Joan used to prepare discussion topics in advance to avoid awkward silences," Elpidia recounts, "but Joan always left the showing off to Paddy. He had the enthusiasm of a child."

Prepping a museum for the wear and tear of paying guests was a delicate endeavour (and guests face a £450 bond against any damages). Under the watchful eye of the Benaki, interior walls were replastered to retain the same rough texture. New roof tiles lie beneath weathered originals, preserving the distinctive ochre, red and yellow tint. Electricity and plumbing were replaced; central heating and air conditioning installed.

Old photos were used as guides to re-

store the couple's furniture — wooden chairs, lamps, desks — and return pieces to their original positions. Valuable paintings by friends including Ghika and John Craxton have been replaced with replicas. Craxton's *Tall Goat* and *Reclining Cat* are both in the sitting room, and there's a Robin Ironside in one of the bedrooms.

Aria's serene interior scheme of snowy white and soft greys does not detract from the property's charms. The slender pool, where I cool off surrounded by olive trees, is a new addition, and perhaps the only thing at which Leigh Fermor may have bridled. "He didn't like pools," Elpidia says. "He always preferred the sea."

If you tire of tranquillity you can walk 15 minutes to Kardamili, a Cotswolds-like village of upmarket wine bars, arty boutiques and traditional tavernas that ignites each May when the International Jazz Festival comes to town. In summer you'll do well to snare a table at the popular Lela's, a taverna under the plane trees in a charming stone house by the sea. Set up by Paddy's late former cook, it's still family-run, and offers lodgings upstairs.

With Lela's closed at present, I go a little further down the main street, past the yellow village church, and take a left to Ritsa Beach, a long pebble-and-sand stretch with sunbeds and other tavernas.



A terrace at the house, on Greece's Mani peninsula



The coast at Kardamili

3 more authors' homes to stay in

Rudyard Kipling's Naulakha, Vermont

Naulakha means "precious Indian jewel", and Kipling's former residence in rural Vermont is just that. Built in 1892 for him and his bride, Caroline Balestier, the four-bedroom, three-storey home has rolling views over the Connecticut River valley and New Hampshire peaks, and is part-Indian bungalow, part-Mississippi riverboat. Rented for stays by the Landmark Trust USA, guests can perch at the desk where he wrote *The Jungle Book*, play tennis on his clay court, explore the gardens (with hiking and cross-country ski trails) or browse the collection of artefacts.

Details Naulakha, which sleeps eight, is from £410 a night; minimum three-night stay (landmarktrustusa.org)

The White House in Corfu



Lawrence Durrell's White House, Corfu

Durrell's White House, where he lived with his wife, Nancy, is a breezy four-bedroom villa "set like a dice on a rock", in his words, on Kalam Bay. He captured its charm in *Prospero's Cell*, which he wrote here. French windows open onto the sea, and there's a pier for dips and dives. Inside is bright, with whitewashed walls, whimsical decor and memorabilia. Linger over lunch at his repurposed desk, or dine on your private patio. Everything's a lot more spruced up these days — including the old fisherman's hut that's now a chic restaurant — but Kalam's emerald and blue setting remains a bestseller.

Details The White House, which sleeps eight, is from £485 a night (thewhitehouse.gr)

Agatha Christie's Greenway Apartment, Devon

To Christie, her stately holiday home by the River Dart was "the loveliest place in the world", but it was also a murder scene, in *Dead Man's Folly* and *Ordeal by Innocence*. Greenway House is managed by the National Trust and dates from the 1490s. You can hole up in her quarters on the first and second floors, amid curios including her typewriter. Explore the public areas free of charge and, after hours, have the run of the gardens (the bathroom is also immortalised in *Dead Man's Folly*).

Details Greenway Apartment, which sleeps eight, is from £430 a night; minimum three-night stay (nationaltrust.org.uk)

Elies is recommended by locals who rate its idyllic setting and oven-baked dishes. Here I sit in an olive grove by the sea, surrounded by bright flowers, and enjoy a superb slow-cooked lamb with lemony potatoes, the Taygetus mountains rearing up behind me.

Mostly, though, I stay in, because there is so much to look at: Ghika's leonine sculpture embedded in the entrance; Joan's evocative snaps of 1960s Greece. In Paddy's bedroom, overlooking the garden, a large metal trunk sits dented and dormant. Stamped "PL Fermor. Traveller's Club. Pall Mall London", it's a poignant marker of journey's end. "You're staying in a museum, and there's a responsibility in that," Kyriaki Roumpi, Aria's on-site manager, says. "Most guests understand. The first sentence nearly everyone says [on arrival] is: 'All my life I've known the work of Patrick Leigh Fermor.'"

As for Elpidia, who cared for Paddy between Joan's death in 2003 and his own 11 years later, she says that in that time she never once saw him angry. Won't she find it unsettling, I ask, seeing the house filled with strangers? Staying in his room, touching his things? "Paddy was like a second father to me," she says, smiling softly. "But it will be nice to see the place full again. A house like this should be alive."