

Climbing the peak

Climbing the peak of Mount Athos can be a physically exhilarating and spiritually uplifting experience but it is not a walk in the park, so it is worth making careful preparations. The mountain is a holy mountain and deserves our respect. It is not advisable to attempt the ascent alone.

Climate

Athos is 2,033 metres (6,670 feet) high, so whatever the temperature at sea level, it will be degrees colder at the summit. Winter snow lasts from November into May, wind and rain can be a hazard at any season, and there is often low cloud on the upper slopes.

What to take

A waterproof jacket, a hat, and stout walking boots are essential; hiking poles provide welcome support, especially on the descent. You should take your own supplies of food and plenty of drinking water as there is not likely to be anything available.

Route

The easiest starting point is St Anne's skete where the usual pilgrim facilities are available (tel. 023320). It is advisable to make an early start, before sunrise if possible. From St Anne's you take the path for Great Lavra which rises steeply from the skete and takes you mostly through dense forest with occasional views down to the sea. After a couple of hours the path levels out and soon after that you reach the crossroads known as Stavros where there is a spring. From here paths take off in several directions (Lavra, Kerasia, Karoulia, Katounakia, Panagia). You take the last-named which is the only path to the summit.

The path is easy to follow and climbs steadily through woods with occasional views of the sea and the mountains of Thessaly. Soon after you emerge from the trees, the Panagia refuge comes into view at approximately 1,500 metres. It is possible to reach the summit and go down again in one day, but it may be more comfortable to break the journey at this point.

The Panagia is a mountaineer's refuge containing very basic facilities: a dormitory with a number of elderly bunk beds with mattresses, (some) sleeping bags and blankets, a saloon where a fire may be lit, a kitchen (but no running water or cooking facilities), and a chapel. The water in the well is not fit to drink.

You can leave non-valuable possessions at the refuge while you make the final ascent (roughly 500 metres, steep) to the summit. At the summit another refuge (under construction) may now be open. There is a chapel dedicated to the Transfiguration where a liturgy is served on 6 August (OS). On a clear day the views in every direction are stupendous, including famously at dawn the shadow of Athos.