

An Olympic Odyssey: Where the Games Began

A road trip in Greece back in time nearly 3,000 years to the precursors of the modern Olympic Games. Plato sweated here.

By BILL HAYES JULY 22, 2016



The Temple of Zeus at Nemea, one of the four sites of the ancient Greek games. Credit Susan Wright for The New York Times

Some dream of going to the Olympics. I'd long dreamed of going to [Olympia](#). I wanted to take a solo road trip like no other, searching for the four sites of the ancient Greek athletic games — Isthmia, Nemea, Delphi and Olympia — precursors to the Olympics spectacle opening in Rio on Aug. 5.

Collectively known as the Panhellenic Games, they were open to athletes across the Greek empire, but Olympia's festival was always the most prestigious. The first to be established (in 776 B.C.) and the last to go (abolished in A.D. 393 by the Roman Emperor Theodosius I, a Christian who deemed them pagan rituals), the games at Olympia took place every four years — this was one way the Greeks measured time — with the other three held in the interval.

I could picture herculean athletes hurling the discus, boxing, wrestling or chariot-racing to take home the top prize, a simple crown — olive branches at Olympia, laurel at Delphi, wild celery at Nemea and pine at Isthmia. Such figures are depicted on ancient vases and vessels, in statuary and, nowadays, in recreated scenes on History Channel specials.

But what do the sites for these games look like now, what condition are they in, and how would I get to them? As a lifelong exercise fanatic, this would be my personal pilgrimage to the birthplace of athletic competition.

I sketched out my route in Rome over a beer in a bar on the Gianicolo, the hill next to the Vatican with a sweeping view of the city across the Tiber River. As a visiting scholar at the American Academy in Rome, I'd met a young archaeologist for drinks. Leigh told me how to get where I wanted to go, which was, in a sense, back in time nearly 3,000 years.



The circular tholos at the Sanctuary of Athena Pronaia at Delphi, on Mount Parnassus. Credit Susan Wright for The New York Times

I went on to Athens in mid-June and spent two days seeing the sights before hitting the road. I got a great deal at Hertz on a “supermini” Ibiza with one major drawback — a stick shift. I hadn’t driven a stick in 40 years, but no cars with automatic transmissions were available. My rental also didn’t come with GPS, but I convinced myself that everything would be fine. I’d go old school, relying on maps, my inner compass and, if needed, locals for directions. At least the air-conditioning worked. It was a blazing 90-plus degrees.

Practicing with the stick shift in the Hertz lot wasn’t pretty, but once I had the basics down, the car was soon flying west on the broad national highway. Within an hour I began spotting signs for Isthmia — so named for being on the Isthmus of Corinth, which connects [Greece](#)’s mainland with Peloponnese, the peninsula to the south.

I’d chosen to visit Isthmia first for one reason: It was closest to Athens. (After this, I planned to travel in a loop over the next five days, ending up back in Athens.) Yet, finding no signs for the ruins, I stopped at a roadside

gas station. The clerk, an older woman in a bib apron, spoke little English, so I showed her the spot on a map. Pointing out the window, she exclaimed, “Street? Yes!” Pause. “Bridge? Yes!” We then locked eyes and she made the sound “Poof,” like a magician pulling a rabbit from a hat: “Now, Isthmia!”

It was essentially just down the block, and I found it in minutes. What I didn’t find were crowds, lines, vendors — the trappings of tourism. There was no one else there except a ticket clerk and two burly security guards inside the site’s small, informative historical museum. I bought a ticket and stepped outside to survey the grounds.

While historians cannot say with certainty how large the site of the Isthmian Games had been at its height, when it featured an imposing shrine to the god Poseidon (plundered and destroyed by the fifth century A.D.), it would have extended far beyond the few hundred meters first cleared there by archaeologists in the 1950s.



The town of Galaxidi in the Gulf of Corinth near Delphi. Credit Susan Wright for The New York Times

As I wandered along dirt paths, peeking into a partly uncovered running track (a remnant of the stadium) and the tiled floor for a bathing complex added in the early Roman Empire, the first word that came to my mind was “forlorn.” The site was mainly a dry, rocky field, only a fraction of which had been excavated. But “forlorn” would be unfair, for this field was rich with history. I knew that a young Plato had competed as a wrestler at the [Isthmian Games](#) in the early fifth century B.C. Think about that, I told myself: Plato’s sweat had mixed with this dirt, here on these very grounds. I took a handful and sprinkled it through my fingers.

I stayed in Isthmia for a good hour, then got back on the road. I had to get to Nemea by 1 p.m. I had made an appointment with the distinguished archaeologist responsible for the Nemean excavations for more than 35 years, Stephen G. Miller, now a retired professor of classical archaeology at the University of California, Berkeley. He had one hour to spare.

The trip from Isthmia to Nemea went smoothly, if you don’t count a missed exit and some frantic backtracking. After about 45 minutes on the highway, I followed rural roads curving through vineyards redolent of sweet wine. I made it in time, barely, and found Dr. Miller waiting at the entrance to one of the two digs. As at Isthmia, I was the only visitor. Dr. Miller, a bearded, sturdily built fellow in his early 70s, shook my

hand, then briskly strode ahead while beginning a history of the excavations. Stopping suddenly, he announced, “We are now in the locker room.”

I looked about: Nine sand-colored Doric columns in varying heights stood majestically on ground that was as even and as smooth as a gym floor (originally, it had a roof as well). “Then this is the most beautiful locker room I’ve ever seen,” I whispered, for I felt as if I were in a truly sacred place. And, in fact, sites like these were far more than athletic fields — they held deep religious significance for the Greeks, who dedicated the games and individual victories to their deities.

Here in the locker room (apodyterion from the ancient Greek), athletes stripped and rubbed their bodies with olive oil and dust, which functioned as both a natural sunscreen and, not incidentally, an enhancer of muscular male beauty. As at all the athletic festivals, they’d compete in the buff. (This was also true at public gymnasiums throughout the empire, where men assembled in the nude to exercise; the word gymnasium comes from the Greek word for naked.)



After competing, athletes returned to the locker room to scrape the oil and sweat from their bodies with an instrument made for this purpose, a strigil. This funky goop, called gloios and thought to contain the essence of arete — valor, excellence — was often funneled into small vials and sold at gyms for medicinal purposes.

Dr. Miller led me farther back to a “secret entrance” from the locker room to the stadium — a tunnel over 100 feet long with a remarkable vaulted ceiling. Naked men huddled here waiting for their names to be called, and evidence remained that the games were not the only thing on their minds in this steamy atmosphere. Dr. Miller pointed to surviving ancient graffiti with a name carved into the wall: “Akrotatos is beautiful,” he translated from the Greek.

“So, this is one young man complimenting another — a guy named Akrotatos?,” I asked.

“Of course. Women were barred from competing or even watching the games.” As I reminded myself, too, sexual relations between men in ancient Greece were not the taboo they would become with the rise of Christianity.

Exiting the dim tunnel into the bright open-air stadium, I thought how thrilling this must have been for the athletes filing out. I could almost hear the fanfare played and the echo of cheering crowds from two millennia ago. The stadium, twice as long as a football field, had been excavated to nearly pristine condition by Dr. Miller and his teams of colleagues and students, Greek and American.

The running track’s original granite starting blocks remained firmly planted; holes drilled into them once held poles threaded with cord across the whole track to prevent false starts; a dozen runners at a time shot off from here. Shallow ditches running alongside the track provided water from an aqueduct to wet the track down between events — foot races and field events like the javelin — as well as drinking water for the athletes.



Vineyards on the road from Isthmia to Nemea. Credit Susan Wright for The New York Times

Wrestling, boxing and the bloody ancient equivalent to [mixed martial arts](#), pankration, were also held there. Spectators (dressed in variations on a toga and sandals) sat on the gently sloping hillsides — several thousand men could be accommodated. And at the end of the track, evidence remained of a platform for a panel of 10 judges, who, in the event of what we would now call a photo-finish, arbitrated who would go home the winner. Unlike today’s Olympics, with its bronze and silver medals, second and third places were not recognized in the games of antiquity.

From here, Dr. Miller suggested we go to the second Nemean site, a quarter-mile down the road, so we each hopped into our cars. Suddenly, I heard a loud bang, then had a feeling of being shoved hard. I saw in the

rearview mirror that the back window was shattered, as if shot out. But no, in my haste I'd shifted into reverse, not first gear, crashing straight into an olive tree.

Dr. Miller pulled up beside me. "I've done that twice over the years," he called out. "That damn tree — welcome to the club!" He chuckled and peeled off. The hatchback was banged in but the car worked, so I drove down the hill, shaken yet determined not to miss anything.

Dr. Miller gave me a tour of the reconstructed Temple of Zeus — a fourth-century B.C. shrine where religious rites were performed, animals sacrificed — then he had to depart. And there I was, basically on my own in the middle of nowhere.

One of my sisters, a travel agent, had urged me to buy all possible car and travel insurance beforehand. After I placed a call to Hertz, they offered to have a replacement waiting in Nafplio, a seaside town where I had arranged to spend the night (I'd have to pay only a \$100 deductible). There was no need for air-conditioning on the hourlong drive to Nafplio since the entire back window was open to the cloudless skies.

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As promised, a new car awaited at my charming, family-run hotel, the Victoria. The next morning, the desk clerk drew me a map of the route from Nafplio to Olympia, the third site on my journey. I would essentially traverse mountainous central Peloponnese, east to west. He said the drive would take maybe two hours. He also said he'd never done it before.

Eight hours later, I pulled into Olympia. I'd made one detour on purpose (to see the remains of the ancient civilization at Mycenae, dating back nearly 4,000 years) and several more that would more accurately be called mistakes. (Road signs in Greek didn't help.) But I didn't care; I had no cares. The drive through the Mainalo Mountains in the heart of Arcadia was magnificent, albeit unnerving.

I sweated through my T-shirt as the narrow road wound around blind curves for miles and tunneled through a tree-covered mountainside. Stopping for lunch at Platanos Cafe in the tiny village of Langadia, nestled high up on a cliff, was a highlight of the day.

When I finally reached Olympia, I found the main street blocked, with traffic at a standstill. Had there been an accident? I parked on a side street and walked toward the small town center, which had the feel of a pleasant but generic outdoor shopping mall. A crowd had converged around a jewelry store with broken windows, shattered glass on the sidewalk, police everywhere. A man told me that "bandits" had robbed it at gunpoint, grabbing jewelry from the storefront windows, just 15 minutes earlier. "People will do anything for money now in this country," he scoffed.

How sad to be thrust back into the 21st century. I left the scene and found my way to the Olympia site. By now, it was 6 p.m. The site would remain open another two hours. This was a perfect time to go. The tour buses had left, and I found it empty except for 15 or 20 people. It was magically beautiful at dusk, the light of the low sun like liquid gold beaming through the cypress trees.



The Rio-Antirrio Bridge connecting the northern Peloponnese and the mainland. Credit Susan Wright for The New York Times

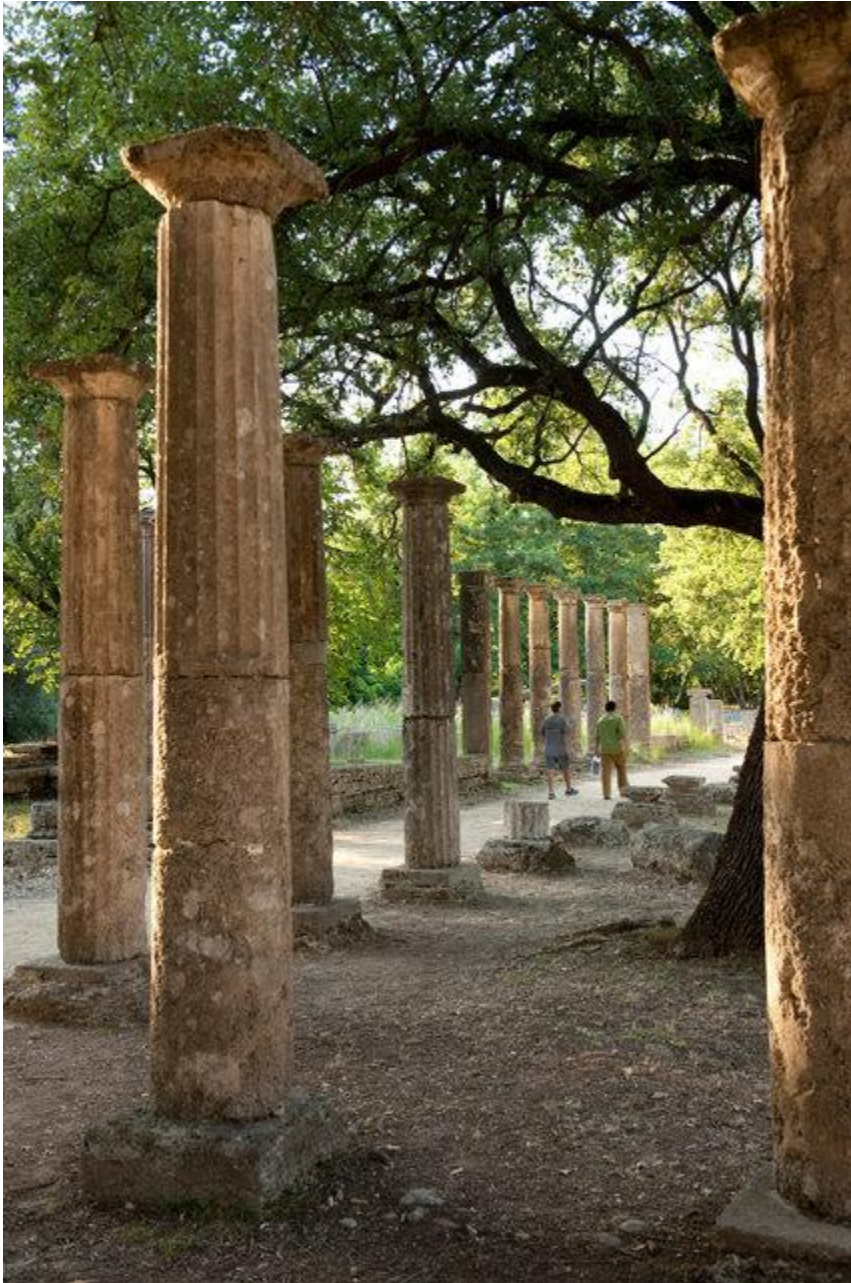
I visited the remains of the gymnasium; the stadium (similar to Nemea's but larger, accommodating 45,000 spectators); and the palestra (a wrestling arena) — all constructed from native stone. Remarkably, large chunks of the foundations and many lichen-encrusted columns still stand. Though the events held at all four sites were generally the same, one crucial factor made the Olympic Games at this site the ultimate Tough Mudder: These athletes were required to train together for 30 days immediately before the contests' start and, furthermore, had to pledge that they'd trained for a minimum of 10 months every year (financial support from their hometowns made this feasible).

The pregame training was considered harder than the games, in part because athletes were not divided into weight categories — a welterweight might find himself on the other side of a heavyweight's fist, for instance; similarly with wrestlers. The net effect was to weed out less accomplished athletes, leaving the best of the best for Olympia, as well as the toughest coaches. In at least one recorded instance, a coach was so relentless he trained an athlete to his death.

Leaving Olympia the next day for Delphi, I had a sense of freedom that I think of now as “being in fifth gear,” the feeling, both literal and figurative, one has while cruising at top speed on a stretch of empty road. I stopped once to cool off by skinny dipping at a deserted beach, inspired, I suppose, by all those naked ancient athletes I'd been contemplating (swimming, incidentally, was never a competitive event in the games of antiquity); and stopped another time to get fuel and directions just before crossing the stunning new Rio-Antirrio Bridge, with its distinctive white, fan-shaped cable supports. The bridge connects northern Peloponnese back to the mainland. I commented to the gas station attendant on how impressive it looked from there.

The young man shook his head in disgust. “Yes, but — we are hungry here. That bridge, it's ... false.” By this, I gathered he meant it's a sham that this financially troubled country could ill afford — a big spectacle, not unlike the exorbitant, overdesigned arenas and “villages” built for the modern Olympic Games.

My itinerary had been dictated by geography — the fastest way to drive from one site to another — but it turned out there was an accidental logic to it. The sites had gotten more and more spectacular with each stop. Pulling into Delphi, where I would stay two nights, I realized that I'd saved the best for last.



Colonnade in the palestrae, where wrestling was practiced, surrounding the wrestling arena at Olympia. Credit Susan Wright for The New York Times

Tucked into the southwestern spur of Mount Parnassus, Delphi overlooks the Gulf of Corinth and a velvety-looking valley blanketed with olive orchards. It was too late in the day to visit the site, but I caught a peek — breathtaking, as it had been carved out of the looming mountainside.

According to myth, the god Apollo started these games at Delphi after killing Python, the dragon living there; hence, they were named the Pythian Games in recognition of this act. During the Pythian Games, a competition in music and dance was held at the same time as the athletic contests, an ancient equivalent to “American Idol” cum “Dancing With the Stars.” For this, a 5,000-seat amphitheater had been constructed.

I dined that night in the pretty nearby seaport of Galaxidi, and arrived back at the site first thing the next morning. I slathered on sunblock before heading in — which is to say, up, for seeing the Pythian ruins would involve a fairly steep hike up the mountainside. Even at this early hour, the place was crowded with hundreds more tourists than the others I'd visited.

I took my time walking toward the first major monument, the Temple of Apollo, as scores of visitors scurried past. The temple was so large it made the locker room at Nemea seem like a delicate miniature. I found it hard to conceive how this had been built some 2,500 years ago. Slave labor is the short answer, but something more, something mysterious in its decayed beauty, was also at play. Here at this temple was where the Oracle of Delphi resided — this was not myth. She — and it was always a she, a priestess — would inhale fumes rising from a crack in the earth (likely, ethylene emitting from faults in the ground below), which reputedly put her into a trance, in which she would prophesy events of the future.

Even an oracle could never predict how amazing a life can be, it struck me — all the unlikely places that travels can take one. I felt fortunate to have made it to all four sites, as I'd hoped. As I began my ascent to the open-air theater and, farther up, the stadium, I recalled my favorite lines by Pindar, the fifth-century B.C. poet whose odes celebrated the heroic athletes who competed at Isthmia, Nemea, Delphi and Olympia:

He who has achieved a new success

basks in the light,

soaring from hope to hope.

His deeds of prowess

let him pace the air,

while he conceives

plans sweeter to him than wealth.

IF YOU GO

What to See

Rent a car to travel directly to all four sites of the ancient games. International Driving Permit recommended (via AAA). Plan on spending at least three to four days on the road — more, if you have time to explore other ancient sites (e.g., Mycenae, Epidaurus, Sparta) and towns along the way (Nafplio, Galaxidi). While Olympia and Delphi — Unesco World Heritage sites — are well-appointed tourist stops, Isthmia and Nemea are more off the beaten track. Check opening and closing times; they change depending on time of year.

Isthmia: isthmia.osu.edu

Nemea: nemeacenter.berkeley.edu

Olympia: whc.unesco.org

Delphi: whc.unesco.org

Where to Stay

Hotel Victoria (3, Spiliadou, Nafplio; 30-2752-027420; hotelvictoria.gr). From Nemea, it's about an hour's drive to Nafplio, a romantic seaport town with an extraordinary 17th-century castle atop the hill. The Victoria is a small, moderately priced hotel a few blocks from the boardwalk.

Hotel Europa (1, Drouva, Ancient Olympia; 30-26240-22650; hoteleuropa.gr). Just up the hill from the ancient Olympia site, this Best Western hotel has spacious rooms, a big swimming pool and excellent outdoor dining.

Amalia Hotel (1 Apollonos Street, Delphi; 30-2265-082101; amaliahotels.com). Large hotel with spacious rooms, a short walk from the center of town. Be sure to make the quick, 30-minute drive to Galaxidi, an enchanting, cobblestoned seaport with a mile-long walking path, spots for swimming and some of the best dining in Peloponnese.

Where to Eat and Drink

O Bebelis Taverna, also known as O Mpempelis (N. Mama 20-22, Galaxidi; 30-2265-041677; “O Bebelis” on [Facebook](#)). About 20 miles from Delphi, in the seaside town of Galaxidi, this small family restaurant serves outstanding, fresh Greek classics — highly recommended.

Platanos Cafe, also known as Cafe Aroma (Langadia 220 03, Arcadia; 30-2795-043671; agnantiostudios.gr). About 90 minutes by car from Olympia, this bar and cafe in a tiny village built into a sheer mountainside — with breathtaking views — is worth the journey.

[Bill Hayes](#) is the author of four books, including “Insomniac City,” a memoir to be published in February 2017, and he is at work on a history of exercise, “Sweat.”