



## Visiting Greece's Meteora Monasteries

### Description

***“Humble men lived suspended for centuries between the heavens and earth, perched on the edge of sharp cliffs, glorifying God for He made the earth and heavens by His power. They achieved the impossible of building Meteora monasteries.”***

*From “Visit Meteora” website*

## Meteora, The Monasteries in The Clouds

The breathtaking images of the Meteora monasteries in Greece captivated us and inspired our visit. Having seen numerous photos of these stunning structures over the years, we initially wondered if they had been heavily edited or strategically photographed to appear more impressive than they really were. However, during our visit, we were taken aback by the sheer magnificence of the monasteries. One of our photos from the trip received a comment implying that it was fake, but we can assure you that the beauty of Meteora is anything but fake. In fact, the photos we took hardly capture the true grandeur of the place.



## Fairytale Come True

The search for a good fairytale is always an exciting and enjoyable pursuit. In the heart of mainland Greece lies the enchanting and mystical place called Meteora. It truly feels like stepping into a fairytale as you marvel at the monasteries perched atop seemingly otherworldly rock formations, high up in the sky, almost as if they are floating among the clouds.

Perched high above the picturesque towns of Kastraki Trikala and Kalabaka are the awe-inspiring monasteries, seemingly defying gravity as they rest upon unexplained rock formations. These architectural marvels, constructed over 700 years ago without the aid of modern technology, stand as a

testament to human determination and faith. The origins of these monasteries date back to a time when persecuted monks sought refuge in the natural caves within the towering pillars. Supported by the villagers below, these monks found solace and safety in this unique setting, believing it to be a divine sanctuary. Driven by a deep spiritual connection, the monks envisioned and built these sacred places of worship, seeking protection and closer communion with God amidst the towering stone pillars.

## **It is not just about religion**



As you ascend the steep steps towards these magnificent and intricate structures and wander through the sacred grounds, you can't help but sense a powerful energy, even if you're not particularly religious. Gazing out at the breathtaking rock formations from hundreds of feet above, with the town sprawled below, you're transported to a realm that defies description and can only be truly appreciated in person. It's almost unfathomable to comprehend the depth of unwavering faith, profound commitment, and selfless sacrifice that these structures and grounds embody, especially in today's world.

The tale is truly captivating and serves as a powerful example of human creativity and resilience. When we unite with determination, we have the ability to accomplish extraordinary feats that defy all limitations. Simply visiting the majestic Meteora is enough to rekindle our belief in the boundless potential within each of us when we transcend our individual concerns. Join us as we embark on a journey to another era, another realm, and a lifestyle unlike any other as we explore the enchanting Meteora, the Monasteries in the Clouds.

## **First Look as We Approached**

First impressions of this wondrous place start miles away as you get your first glimpses of that unique rocky skyline. The site only continues to amaze you with every mile closer you get. The anticipation will

be greater than you have prepared yourself for, as it was for us. Excitement grows until you finally arrive in the town below these magnificent rock formations, and the true magic starts to reveal itself. The light shining on the rocky structures with a slight haze in the air gives them a painted canvas backdrop appearance.



As you walk through the streets of the towns below, it never truly looks real. It feels alien and magical, with every angle more photogenic than the next. The scale and beauty are only matched by the sheer awe and wonder it creates. That is when you realize that there are many steep hills to drive and trails to climb if you are up to the challenge.

Get to your hotel and settle in a bit because you will have a long day ahead if you want to see every monastery in a day. Do not worry; this is a place you will want to spend at least two full days in, so don't rush. The sunrise and sunset are more than worth it. If you arrive after they close for the day, take a drive up and survey the location of each monastery or just take in the sunset.

## **The History of the Meteora Monasteries**



The history of Meteora goes much farther back than these man-made structures. Caves near Meteora reveal they were inhabited continuously between 50,000 and 5,000 years ago. The first and oldest known structure is a stone wall that blocked two-thirds of the entrance to the Theopetra cave. This construction dates back 23,000 years, yet Meteora has never been mentioned in Ancient Greek myths or literature.

After the Neolithic Era, an ascetic group of hermit monks was the first documented occupants of this area. They moved up to these ancient rock peaks in the ninth century AD, living in hollows and fissures, some reaching as high as 1800 ft. above the plains below. They reached their caves with rope ladders. As a result, the hermits led a life of solitude and isolation, meeting only on Sundays and special days. In those early days, they would come down and gather in a chapel built at the foot of a rock known as Dhoupiani for worship.

## **But threats require a change**

This all started around the eleventh century; however, the building of the Meteora monasteries did not commence until the fourteenth century. This was due to the increasing number of Turkish attacks on Greece. As a result, the monks began to seek places to hide from the Turkish forces. At that time, access to the top of the Monasteries was only through removable ladders, ropes, and hand wenches.



Today, getting up those rock faces is still challenging but doable, thanks to the addition of beautiful stone steps carved into the rock during the 1920s. That is what makes them even more mind-boggling. They built these magnificent architectural sites and lived in them for 600 years before the steps were built. We climbed some of those steps; it was exhausting and challenging. It makes their achievement genuinely monumental in scope.

At Meteora's peak in the sixteenth century, there were as many as 40 monasteries. Unfortunately, only six of these grand structures remain fully functioning. Four of them are occupied by monks and two by nuns, with each housing usually no more than ten individuals. Remains of many of the other long ruined Monasteries are visible on the surrounding rock pillars if you look for them. This helps give you a small glimpse of how much more glorious the sight of this area would have been centuries ago, with all those beautiful buildings covering almost every peak.

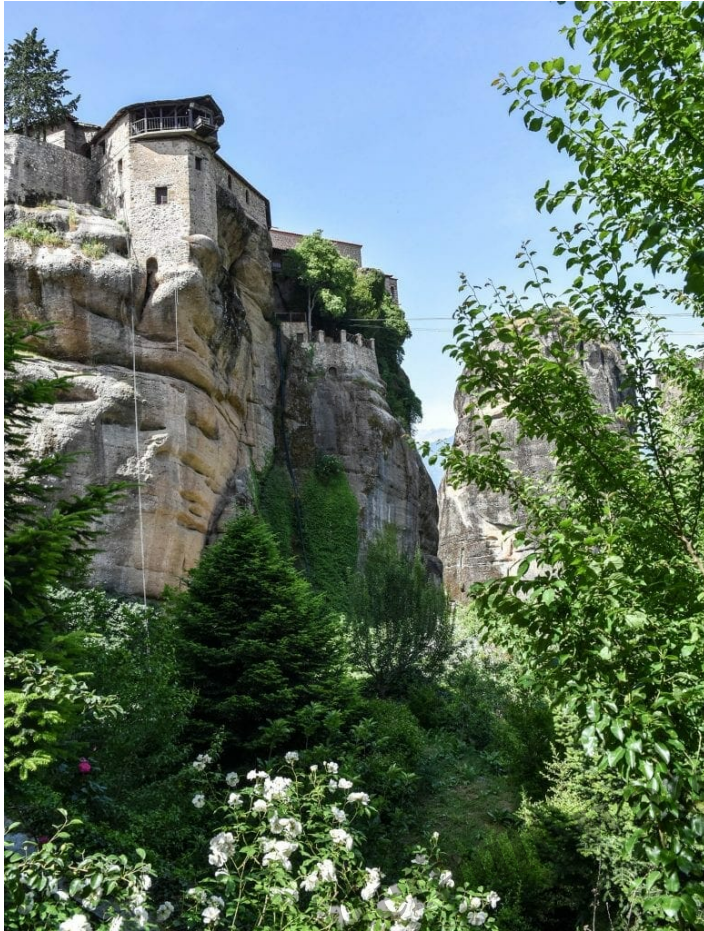
## **The Building of the Monasteries**



Unfortunately, no one knows the exact date of the establishment of the monasteries. Still, we know the creation of these holy structures was to serve monks and nuns following the teachings of the Eastern Orthodox Church. As a result, the rudimentary monastic state formed around the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries called the Skete of Stagoi; further, this state was centered around the church of Theotokos (Mother of God), which is still standing today. An ascetic community had started to flock to Meteora by the end of the twelfth century, and the area began to grow.

In 1344, Athanasios Koinovitis from Mount Athos came to Meteora and brought a group of followers with him. Between 1356 and 1372, he founded the Great Meteoron monastery on Broad Rock. The monks stayed safe from political upheaval and controlled the entry to the monastery. But at the end of the fourteenth century, the threat from Turkish raiders over the Byzantine Empire's reign of northern Greece grew. They wanted control over the fertile plain of Thessaly, which threatened the hermit monks seeking a retreat from the Turkish occupation. The monks found the rough, inaccessible rock pillars ideal for refuge.

## **Two centuries later**



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Theophanes then built the monastery of Varlaam in 1517. This monastery was reputed to house the finger of St. John and the shoulder blade of St. Andrew. Access to the monasteries was deliberately complicated, requiring long ladders latched together or large nets to haul goods and people. They say the ropes were replaced only “when the Lord let them break.”

Until the seventeenth century, the primary means of conveying goods and people were baskets and ropes. In the 1920s, the arrangements improved. Steps were cut into the rock, making the complex accessible via a bridge from the nearby plateau.

Tragically, Meteora and the monasteries were bombed during World War II, and many of the site’s art treasures were stolen.

*Considering visiting Greece? Check out our [Greece Travel Guide](#)*

## The Monasteries

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## The Great Holy Meteoron Monastery

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## The Great Holy Meteoron Monastery

The Holy Monastery of Great Meteoron is the oldest and largest of all the monasteries. Within its name, Meteoro stands for “suspended in the air” due to the cliff formation of a massive pillar of rock it was built on. The Great Meteoron Monastery was founded in the 14th Century by Saint Athanasios, the Meteorite. He was also attributed with forming structured monasticism for the whole region, thus making this monastery the foundation of organized monasticism in Meteora.

The monks who built this monastery did so at great sacrifice and suffering. The first monks took 25-30 years of hard labor to assemble the materials needed on the top of the massive stone pillar. Building and completing the structure we see today took another 20-25 years. These monks were isolated during this whole time. Most who constructed this magnificent structure, especially the 14 monks who followed Athanasios, never lived to see it completed. Their faith was so strong that they persevered to complete this herculean effort, though they never could see it themselves.

The main church of the Holy Monastery of Great Meteoron was built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. It is decorated with spectacular frescos from the same century. These are some of the best examples of post-Byzantine Greek art.

There is a wonderful museum to visit with highly regarded religious icons. The view alone makes this monastery a must-do.

### Entry and difficulty

As in all cases, you must wear appropriate clothing because this is a holy place. [See below for specifics.](#) The cost for entry is 3 euros.

This is the most difficult of the monasteries to reach. There are over 300 steps to climb to get to the entry. Pack water and some snacks, especially in the warmer months. There is most often a roadside canteen for before and after your climb of the 300 steps.

### Notes

Sadly, we could not visit this monastery as it was not open the day we were there (a good reason to plan at least two full days in the area). However, we spent much time photographing it and visiting the various terraces near it. It was indeed spectacular.

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## The Holy Monastery of Varlaam



The Holy Monastery of Varlaam

The Monastery of Varlaam is the second-biggest monastery in Meteora and is near the Great Meteoron. It was founded and built in the mid-14th century by a monk named Varlaam. When Varlaam died decades later, the remaining monks abandoned the monastery, and in subsequent years, the structure almost turned into ruins.

In the early 16th century, two brothers, who were both monks, brought Meteora's abandoned monastery back to life. They spent many years building a beautiful new chapel dedicated to "All Saints." The beautiful frescos in the monastery's chapel of All Saints belong to the famous 16th-century hagiographer Franco Catalano.

During your visit, you will see a sizeable 16th-century oak barrel used for water storage over the previous centuries. The monastery also preserved the tower with the old pully system where you can see the net, which the first monks used to bring up people and provisions. The day we were there, they were using a similar system to bring up supplies.

There is a museum with many lovely religious icons and paintings, most from the Renaissance.

### **Entry and difficulty**

As in all cases, you must wear appropriate clothing because this is a holy place. See below for specifics. The cost for entry is 3 euros.

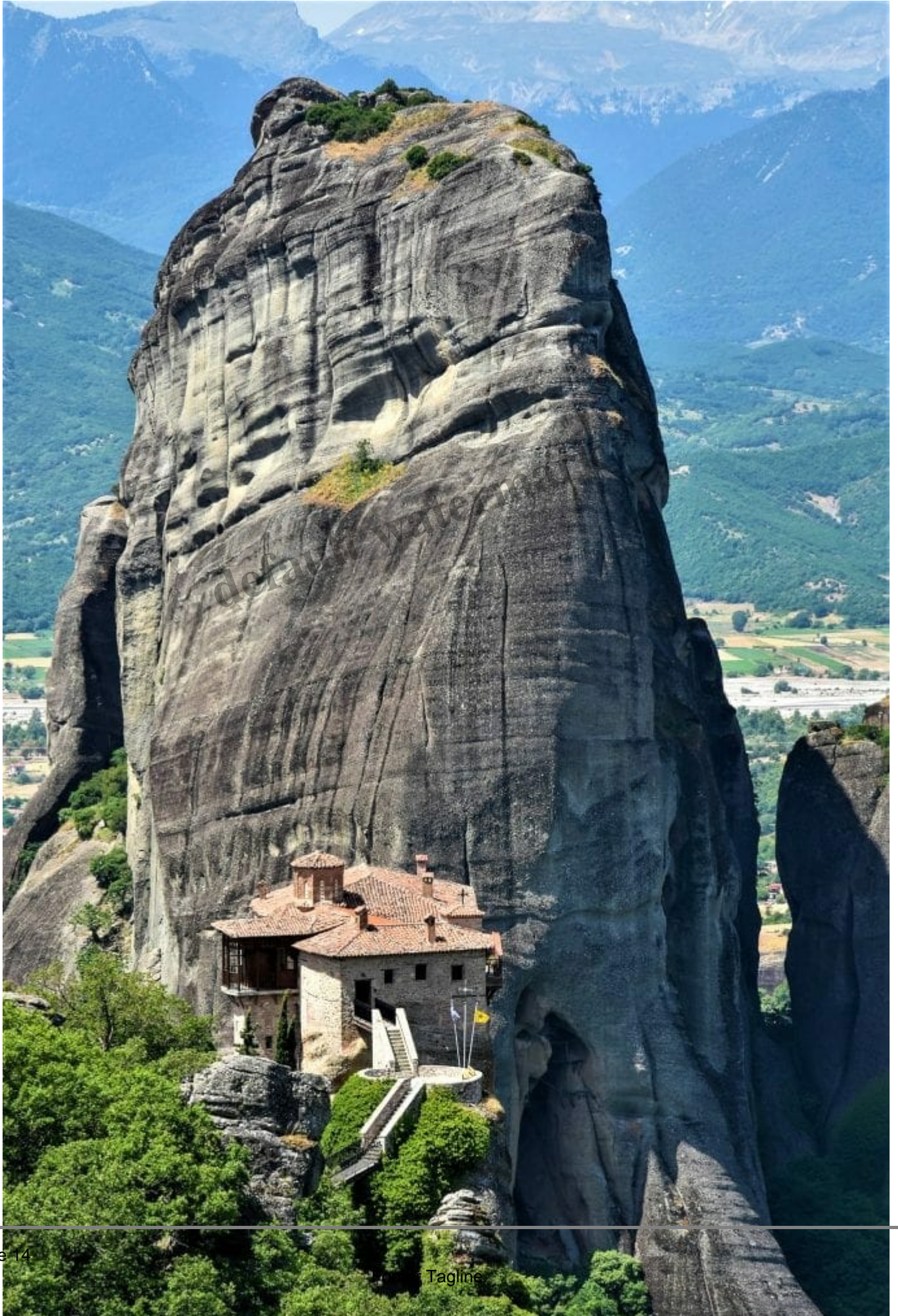
There are over 140 steps to reach the entry. It required work but was not as steep of a climb as some others. Pack water and some snacks, especially in the warmer months.

### **Notes**

It was the third monastery on our schedule and by far the most beautiful. The setting and design are almost perfect. The massive outdoor patio with a tiled gazebo had stunning views to write home about. The inside is mostly modern and elegant. The artwork throughout was amazing. The monks living here obviously have a place that must give them such peace and solace in even the darkest days.

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## **Monastery of Roussanou or St. Barbara**



## Monastery of Roussanou

The Holy Monastery of Roussanou was first established in the 14th century and is likely named for the first hermit-monk who settled there. The main cathedral was built in the 16th century and subsequently was decorated thirty years later by a monk who lived at the monastery.

This monastery is lower in elevation and thus smaller than most others. It suffered severe damage during the World War II bombings. Though built by monks, it became a convent in 1988 and now has about a dozen sister nuns living in the monastery.

The beautiful wall paintings of the Catholicon were from the 15<sup>th</sup> century when the priest-monk Arsenios was the Abbot of the monastery. The hagiographer is unknown but clearly was a talented artist.

What makes Roussanou unique is an incredible view of the surrounding cliffs and the nearby Meteora Monasteries. There are two ways to enter, and if you enter from the upper main road, the reward will be a stunning panoramic view! Therefore, this is the perfect spot for pictures and to watch the sunset.

### Entry and difficulty

As in all cases, you must wear appropriate clothing because this is a holy place. [See below for specifics](#). The cost for entry is 3 euros.

The entry has over 140 steps, but it is not as difficult as some of the others. The stairs and foliage along the path are beautiful. Pack water and some snacks, especially in the warmer months.

### Notes

The monastery is smaller and quick to get through. The nuns are the current keepers, and you will often find them in prayer. It is a beautiful vantage point from which to photograph the area.

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## The Monastery of Agios Stefanos



Monastic life on the rock of Agios Stephanos dates to early in the 12th century. St. Stephen's Monastery includes two cathedrals: the old 16th-century chapel, which sustained severe damage during WWII, and the 18th-century main cathedral, which contains the holy relics of Saint Charalambos.

This monastery is now a convent. It offers spectacular views of the vast valley of Thessaly, the river Pinios, and the Pindos Mountain range across the plains.

### **Entry and difficulty**



As in all cases, you must wear appropriate clothing because this is a holy place. [See below for specifics.](#) The cost for entry is 3 euros.

The monastery of Agios Stefanos is the most easily accessible, with an entrance that can be reached by crossing a small bridge. Therefore, it is best for visitors with mobility issues who cannot use the steps yet wish to experience a Meteora monastery.

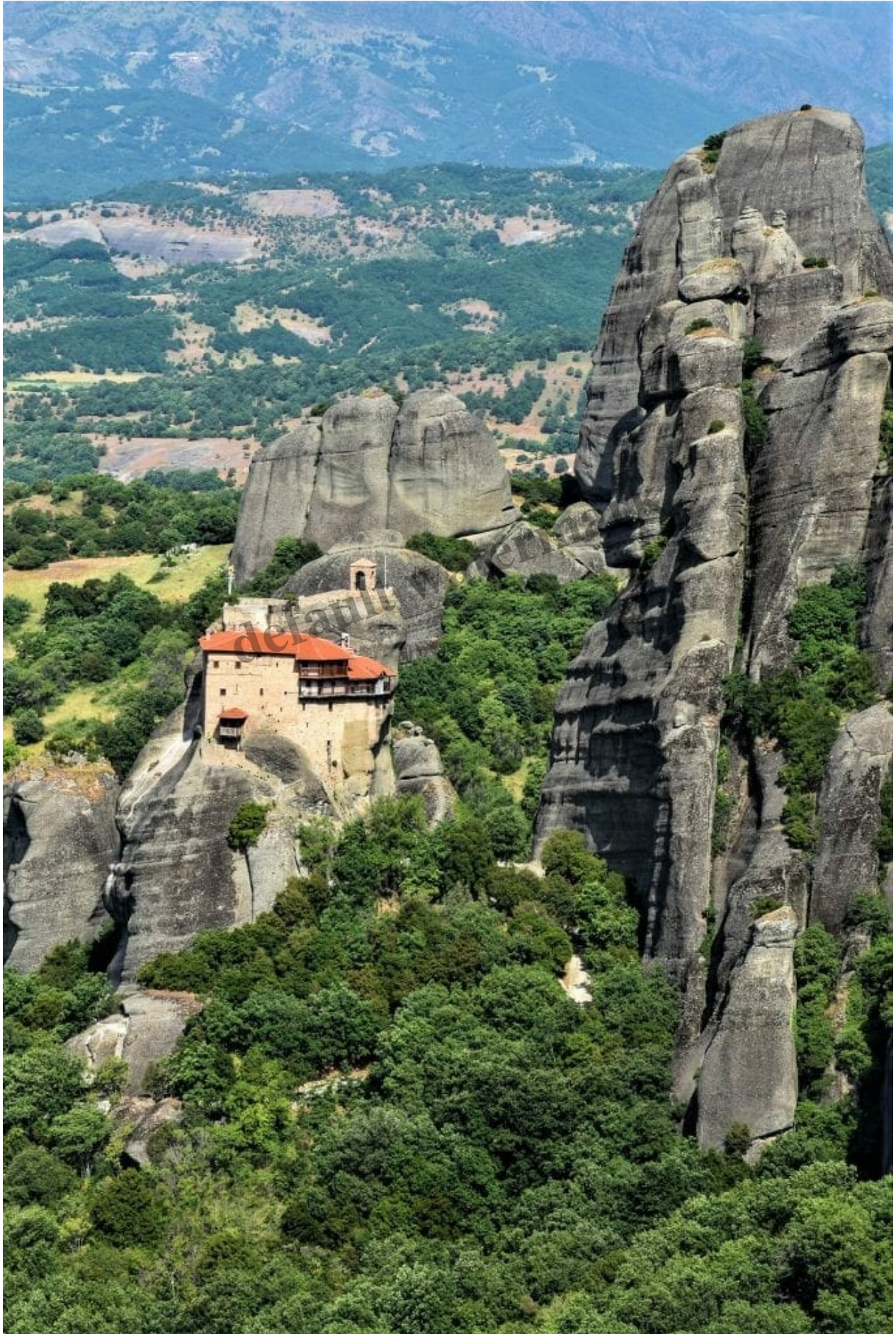
### Notes

We came upon nuns praying in the chapel, but they are pretty hidden and can scare you as you study the artwork. There was a lovely gift shop with many items the nuns produced.

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## The Monastery of Agios St Nikolaos Anapafsas

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## Monastery of Agios St Nikolaos

The Holy Monastery of Saint Nicholas of Anapafsas or Agios Nikolaos. Founded at the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century. It is the closest one to town; therefore, it is the first active Monastery you will encounter on your way up to the monasteries.

Anapafsis, translated in Greek, means resting. Historians believe this name may have had to do with the monastery's position being the first on the path and probably served to the pilgrims as a resting place before traveling farther.

The surface of the rock pillar is much smaller than that of the other monasteries. This forced the builders of the monastery to build it vertically on floors, one level on top of the other. On the walls, paintings from the 14th century are visible.

The Catholicon, honoring St. Nicholas, is on the second floor. The Holy Table rests on the third floor, decorated with murals. Space is restricted, and there is no courtyard like the other monasteries; the monks could only gather in the narthex. There is beautiful artwork throughout. You will see the monks who reside here often. With smaller quarters here, a monk was ironing clothes in one room we visited.

### Entry and difficulty

As in all cases, you must wear appropriate clothing because this is a holy place. [See below for specifics](#). The cost for entry is 3 euros.

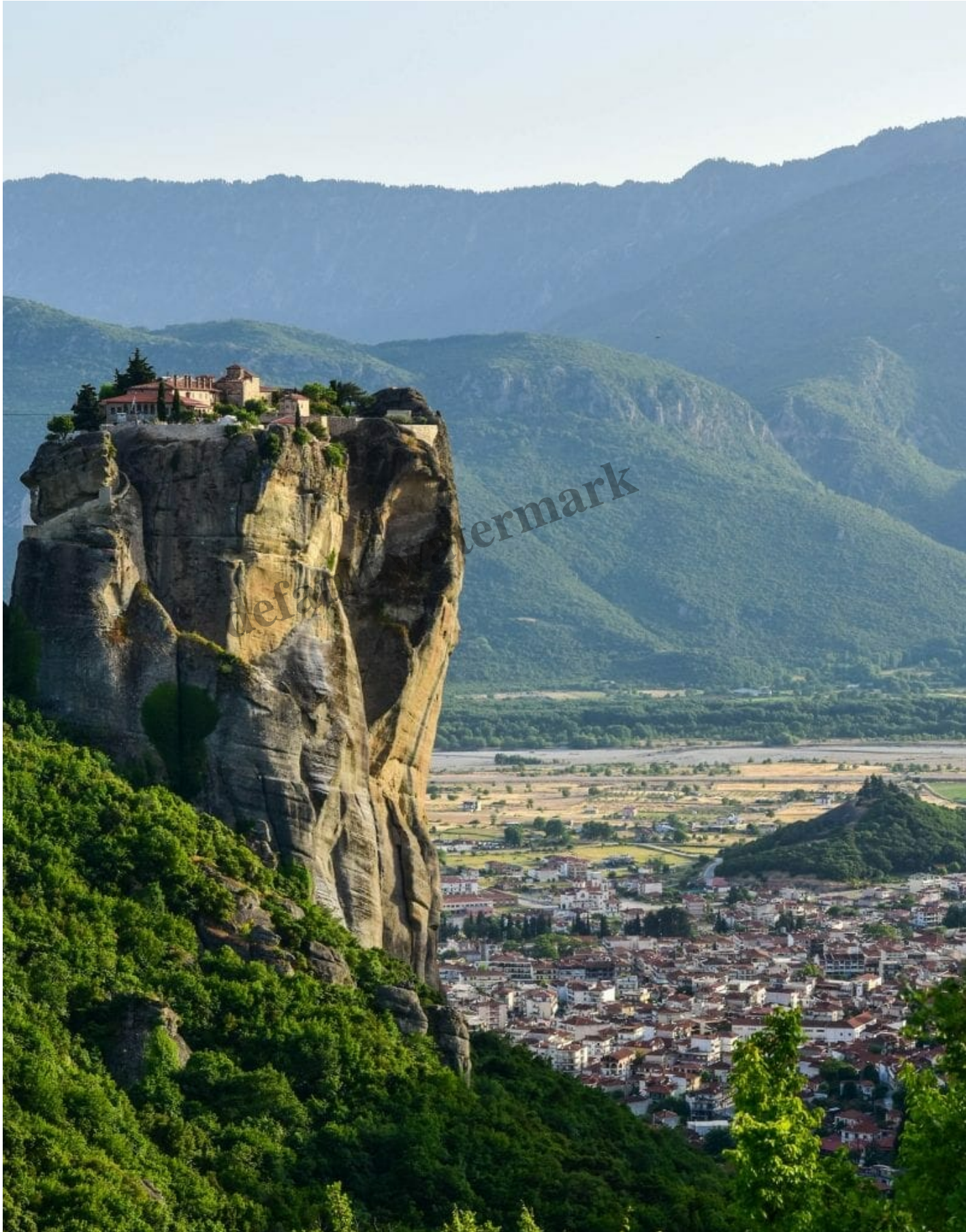
This route had around 140 steep steps and seemed the most fatiguing. It is absolutely worth every effort. Pack water and some snacks, especially in the warmer months.

### Notes

This was a lovely, smaller monastery that was much more intimate and humble than other grander ones. With the monks very present, it truly captured their life here. There are lovely views of the valley and vineyards.

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## The Monastery of Holy Trinity



## The Monastery of Holy Trinity

The Holy Trinity Monastery (Agia Triada) at Meteora is one of the most photographed monuments. It was founded in the 14th century and is perched on what appears to be a leaning rock pillar. It is also the most difficult to reach.

The monastery's main cathedral was built in the 15th century, and the frescoes were painted by hagiographers Antonios, the priest, and his brother Nicolaos. The chapel of Timios Prodromos (St John the Forerunner), a small circular church with a cupola, has lovely wall paintings that are very impressive. The architecture seemed unique to the other monasteries.

The Monastery was in the setting for the final scenes of the James Bond film For Your Eyes Only.

### Entry and difficulty

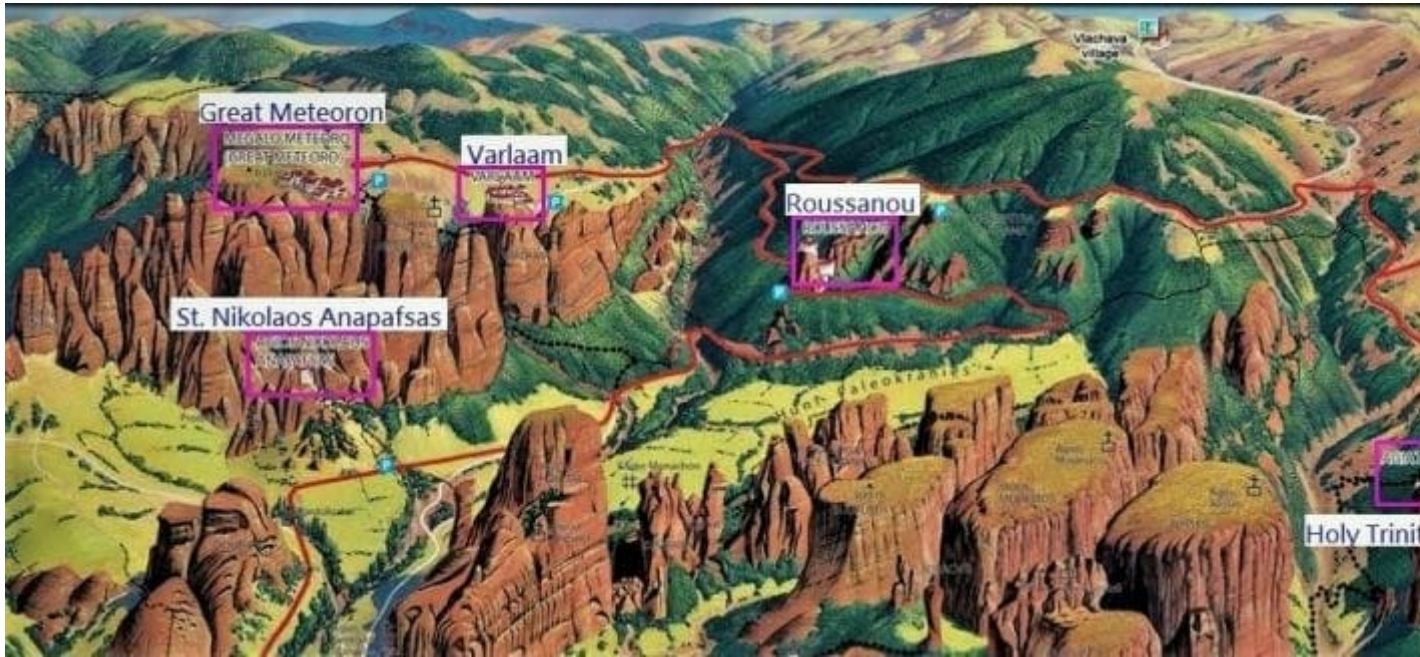
As in all cases, you must wear appropriate clothing because this is a holy place. [See below for specifics](#). The cost for entry is 3 euros.

This is the most difficult monastery to reach. There are over 140 steep steps to the entry, but that is after a hike to the base of the rock pillar. Pack water and some snacks, especially in the warmer months.

### Notes

This monastery was under construction (May 2021); therefore, it was shut down with no reopening date noted. It was apparent work was actively going on from our vantage point. The ascent looked pretty rough and likely for the more adventurous souls. Those attempting to reach it will have the pleasure of the panoramic view of the surroundings, which is simply captivating!

## Map of the Monasteries



## What you must know before visiting the Meteora Monasteries

These are all Holy Sites. All Monasteries have a dress code in force.



Meteora is a UNESCO World Heritage site and an archaeological site. Greece officially recognizes Meteora as a Holy Place. These monasteries are religious sites of great importance, so show the appropriate respect during your visit.

To enter all monasteries of Meteora, **men must wear long pants and sleeved T-shirts. Sleeveless shirts are strictly forbidden. Ladies must wear long skirts; no pants, shorts, or capris. Shoulders must always be covered.**

All Meteora monasteries at the entrances provide skirts and scarves for ladies to cover themselves. They do not offer any clothing for men, and they will deny you entry. We saw one man in shorts covered by a skirt, but it was an incredibly quiet day with few visitors. It might be best to carry a pair of long pants in your pack on a hot day. Children under 12 years old do not have to follow the dress code.

### Be mindful



Flying drones without written permission from the authorities are strictly forbidden by law anywhere on the site. Subsequently, being archeological, the Meteora site of Greece has a flight restriction zone of up to 4.000 ft.!

Please do not take pictures or videos of the monks or nuns unless permitted. You may offend them if you attempt this because you make them feel like a tourist attraction.

**Be very respectful of their way of life and the fact that they allow you to enter their home!**

## Getting Around Meteora Monasteries

### Traveling to Meteora

*Meteora is an area of few square miles and is best described as a rock forest with over 100 massive rock pillars of various sizes and shapes, some 1200 feet above the ground. The monasteries are built on top of those pillars like a natural extension. Though the area is not exceptionally large we strongly recommend giving Meteora a two-night stay at least. If we would do it again, we would give it three days. Especially since some of the monasteries are open on different days.*

*When we visited it was just after Greece reopened after the pandemic. We had many of these places to ourselves. We were able to get four in one day and parking was a breeze. That will not be the case in peak season. The monasteries as a whole are not that large and don't require long visits but if you have a large group of people visiting it will be slower to get around.*

*Our trip there came after a few days stay in Athens. We rented a car in Athens and headed north with a stop along the way in Delphi, which was fantastic. The drive nonstop from Athens to Meteora would be about 4.5 hours. The roads were good and easy to navigate. There are some cute towns along the way and some castles to stop at. We did the drive in just over 8 hours that included four stops.*

This could vary based on the time of year you are there. If it is during the off-season, a car would be ideal. On that note, through peak season, parking can be horrendous. There are only a handful of parking spots at each location.

A public bus can take you several times a day to the Great Meteoron Monastery but cannot move you between the monasteries, which are a significant distance apart. Hiking or walking is an option, and we saw many people doing it.

We saw bicycles, some electric, though the road in spots lacks a good shoulder and has sharp turns. Many tours are available to take you up to each monastery.

### The Local Area

Now, after a long day of walking up hills, steps, and maybe even a trail or two, you can wind down your day by exploring a little of the nearby towns. Kastraki Trikala is the smaller northernmost village, a perfect place to find small hotels, local places to eat, and fun tavernas. Start your drive around the monasteries.

On the other hand, Kalabaka is much bigger and has more of a city feel. You will enjoy a wide array of great places to dine, stores, and souvenir shops here. There are some lovely churches to visit and an



old town area. We enjoyed both.

## Where to stay

The Meteora area offers many options. We stayed at the Tsikeli Hotel Meteora in Kastraki Tirkala. It is right next to the road that takes you to the Monasteries. The village is quaint and quiet, with many restaurants and tavernas.



Our hotel was charming, with breakfast served in front of the hotel on the lawn, looking out toward Meteora's rock forest.

The rooms can be simple or fancy. We reserved the two-bedroom, which was a bit basic but still clean and comfortable. The breakfast was fantastic and plentiful. They have electric bikes available for rental at the hotel. The staff was kind and engaging and lived up to the reviews.

There are many places to stay in the area of the Meteora Monasteries; look closely at the reviews and ensure they are recent.

It is important to price out accommodations on various sites. [Expedia](#) is a US-based company, whereas [Booking.com](#) is Europe-based. Not all properties appear on both, so it is ideal to check both out. Our personal first choice is [Booking.com](#). If the establishment has a website, check the price there as well. Click the link below to check out hotels and vacation homes in the area. It may be just the motivation you need to start planning that next grand adventure.

[BOOK NOW](#)

## Where to eat

In our short time there, we only ate at one restaurant worth writing about, but what a fantastic one! [The Meteoron Panorama](#) in Kalabaka is at the base of the Meteora pillars on a hill. At night, the rock pillars are beautifully lit, which gives them a mystical feel. If that wasn't enough, you are above the town and valley; therefore, the views are spectacular on all sides. The restaurant is lovely, with extensive patios where you can enjoy your meal.

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The staff was friendly, knowledgeable, and attentive. The menu features delicacies of the region. This region of Greece is known for its beef, and there are some exceptional choices on the menu. The wine list was quite extensive. It was the ideal setting for our first evening in Meteora.

## Other activities available in Meteora

If you are lucky enough to stay a few days in the area of the Meteora Monasteries, there is much more to do than visit the Monasteries. Popular activities include:

- Scramble hiking tour of Great Saint: While tethered, hike narrow ledges of cliffs, not for the faint of heart.
- Biking: There is a lot of biking in the area. Many places rent pedal bikes and e-bikes. Guided mountain bike tours are available, and sunset bike tours are popular.
- Rock climbing: That should be no surprise for those who are so brave.
- Hiking: Lots of open lands near the rock forest to explore. We found an abandoned Monastery built into a rock wall on our hiking trip. (see pic below)
- Hermit cave hiking: Visit the caves where the monks lived in isolation for centuries.
- River rafting: Rafting day trips are available.
- Truffle hunting: Tours have private truffle hunting with lunch included.
- Taverna hopping: There are many charming and fun Tavernas in the area where you can have some local brews and meet fellow travelers.

*Check out this link for more info on local area activities: [Click here](#)*

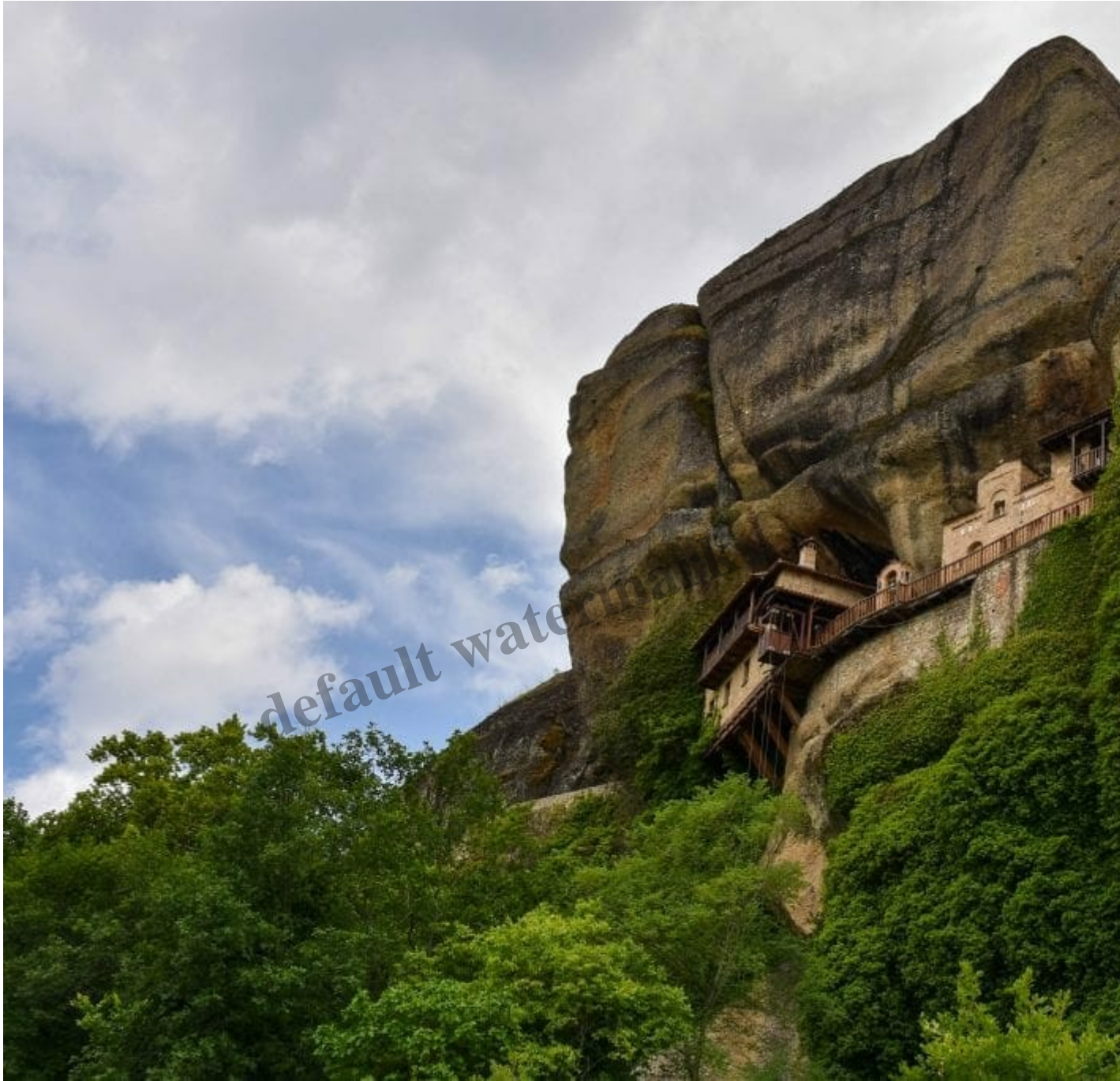
## Final Thoughts

Discover the Meteora Monasteries, a place that transcends being just a destination. It's a mesmerizing journey filled with unique natural wonders and a humble way of life. The deep faith and awe-inspiring beauty of the landscape will leave a lasting impression, allowing you to gain a fresh perspective on nature, architecture, faith, and life itself.

As you ascend each step, you'll be filled with increasing excitement, greeted by breathtaking vistas, and immersed in the true beauty of your surroundings. When you reach the summit and stand on a rocky ledge, you'll be treated to some of the most mesmerizing sunsets imaginable. As the sun dips toward the horizon, casting a golden glow on the monasteries, you'll be struck by the surrealness of the moment, wishing it could last forever. This journey is truly invaluable and will leave an indelible mark on your soul.



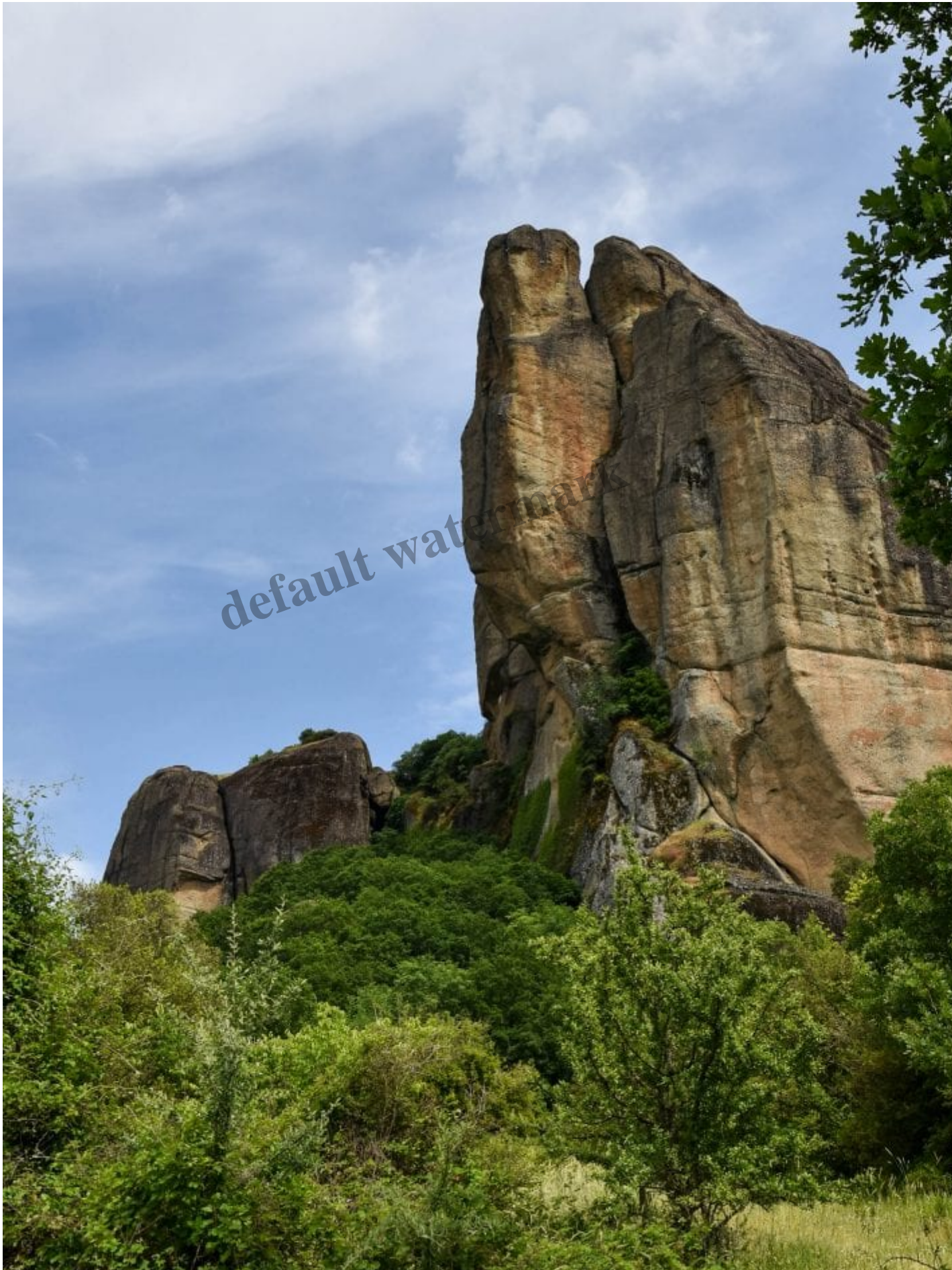
## Meteora Photo Gallery





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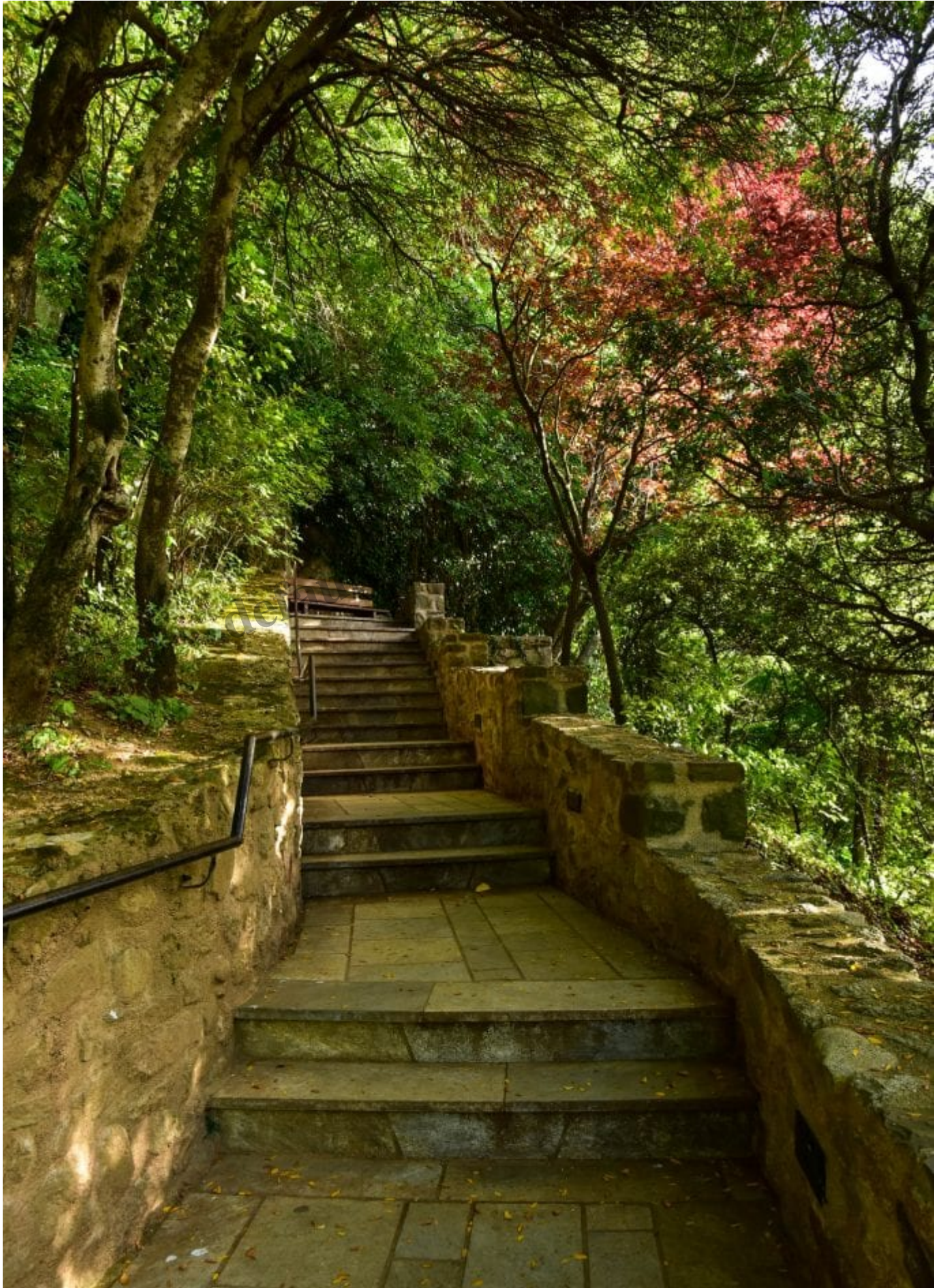


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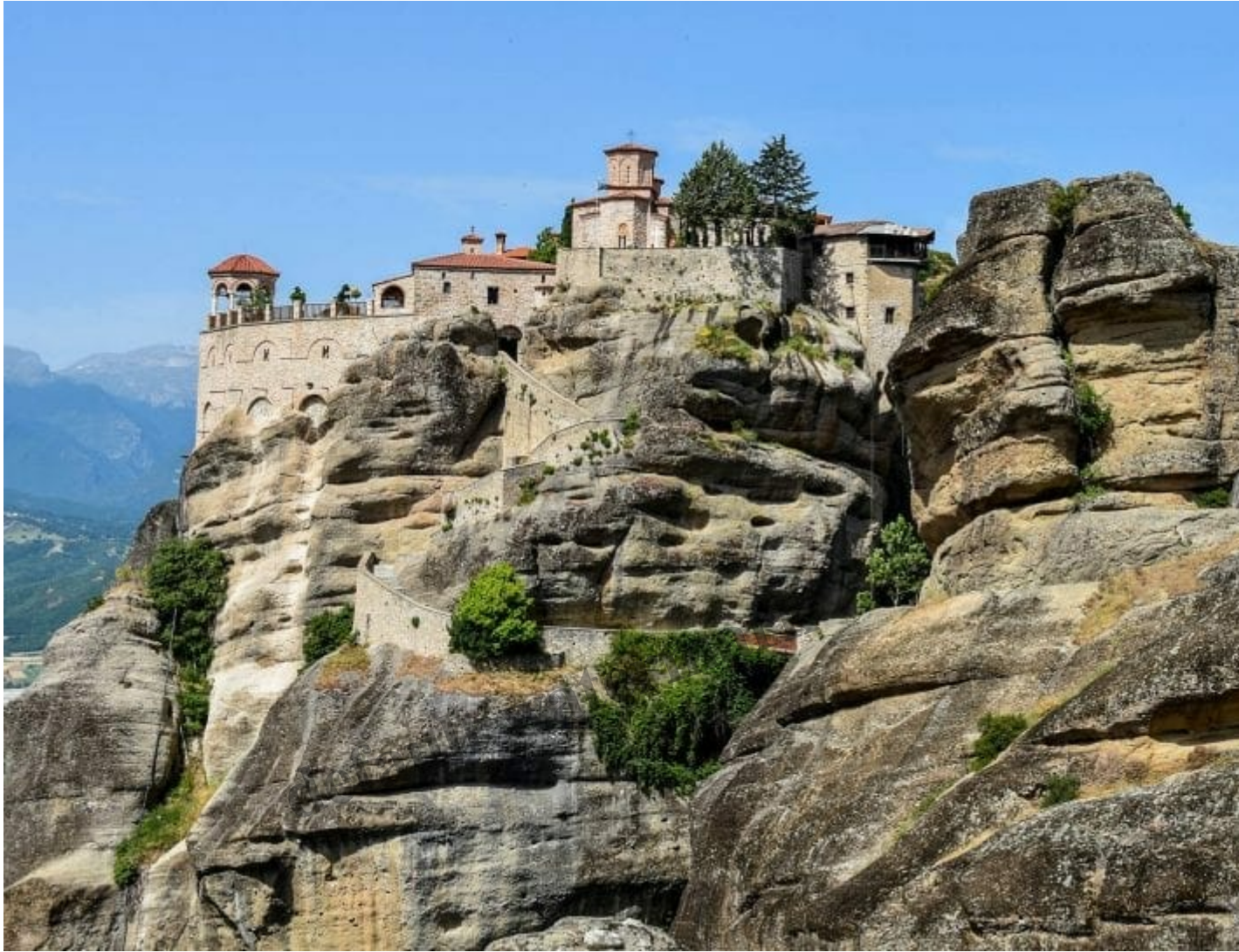




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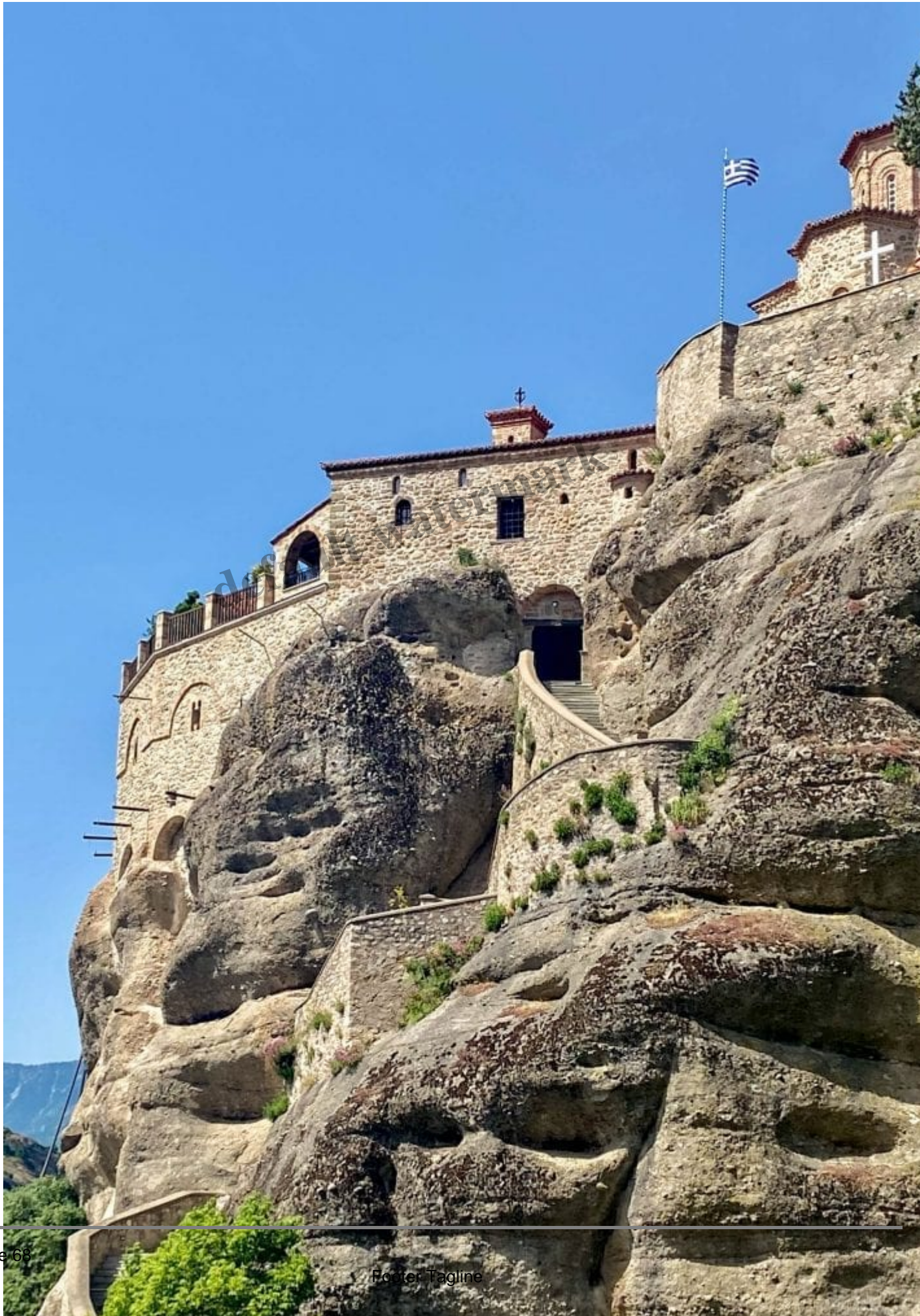




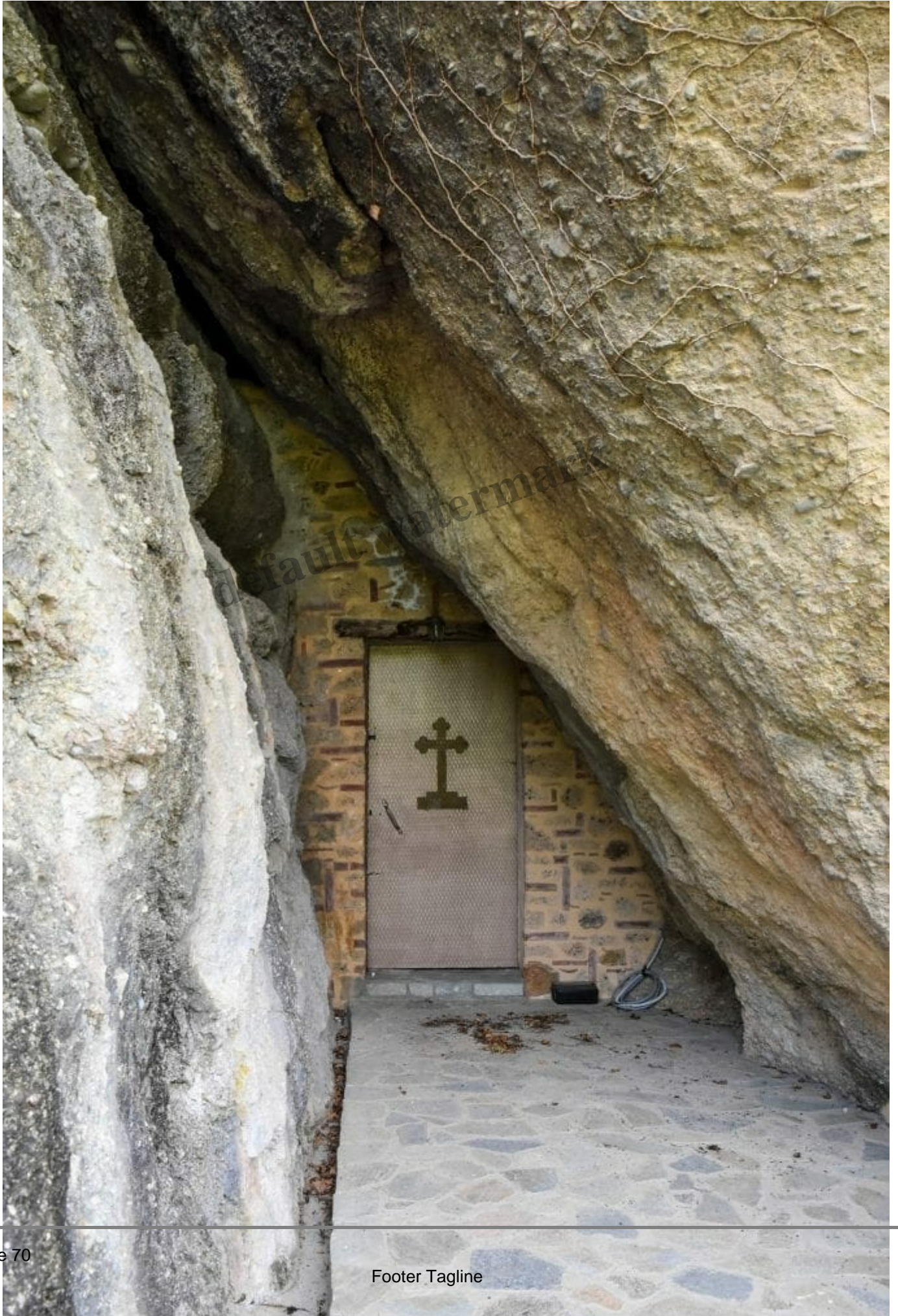
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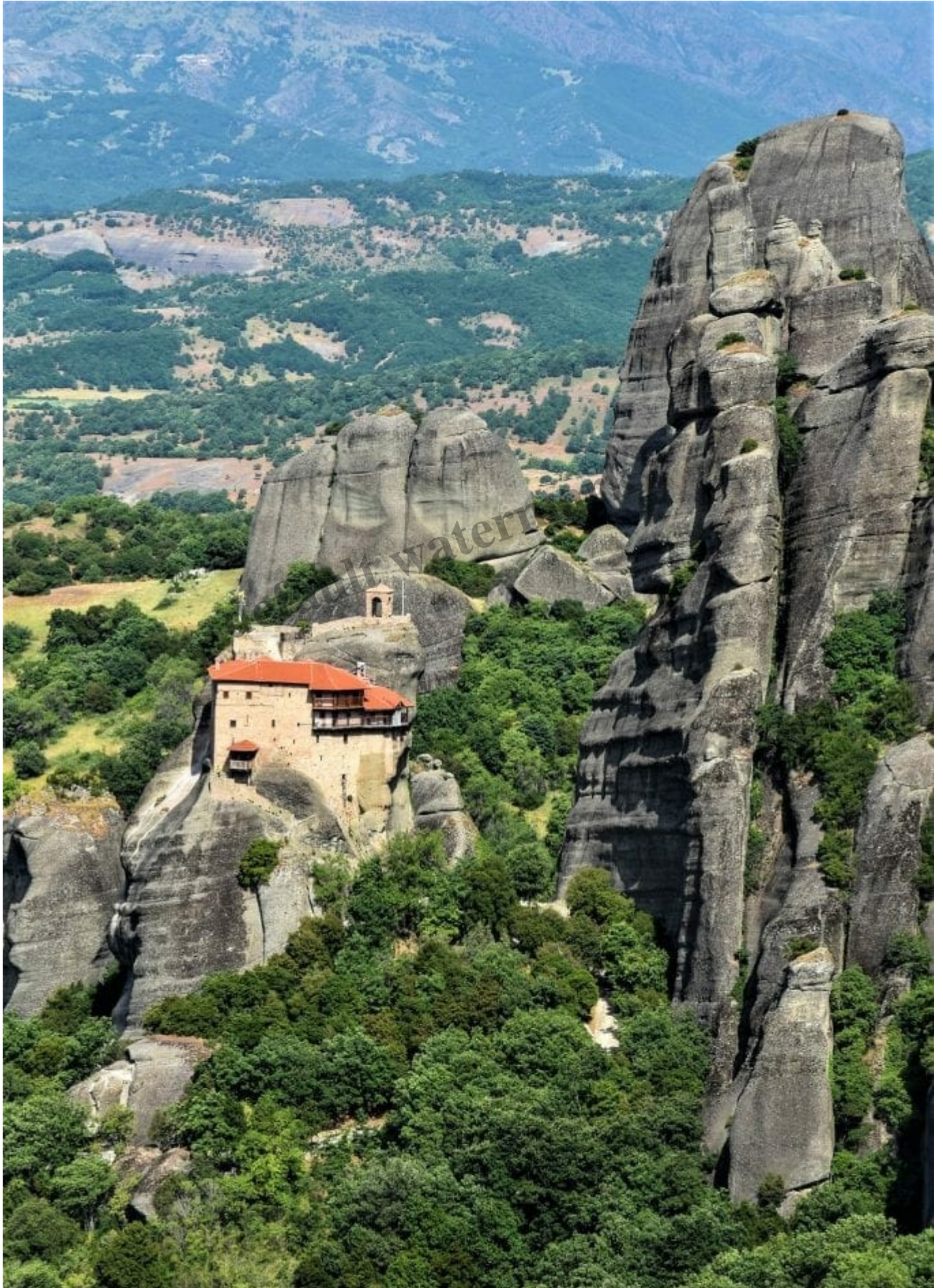




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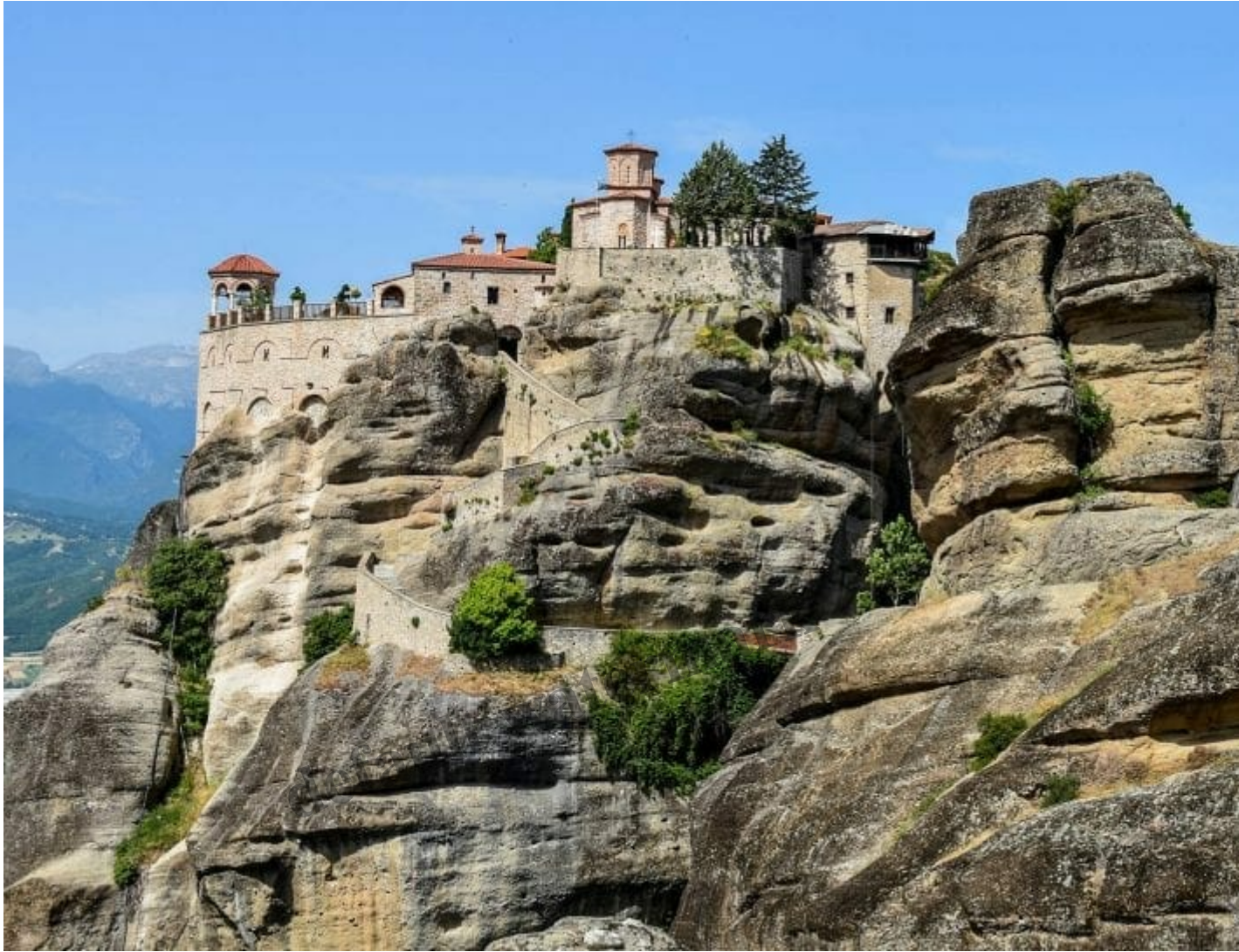


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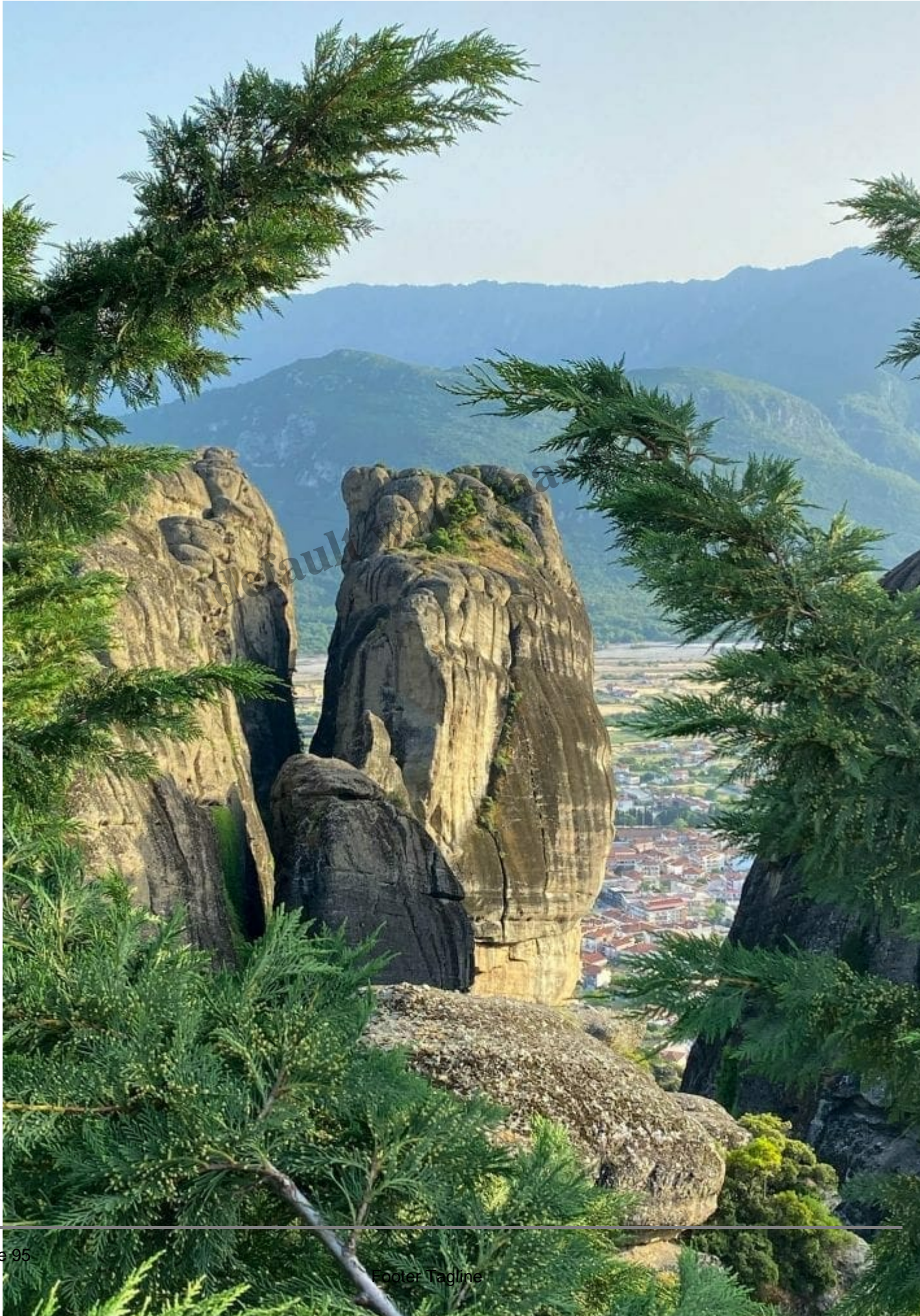
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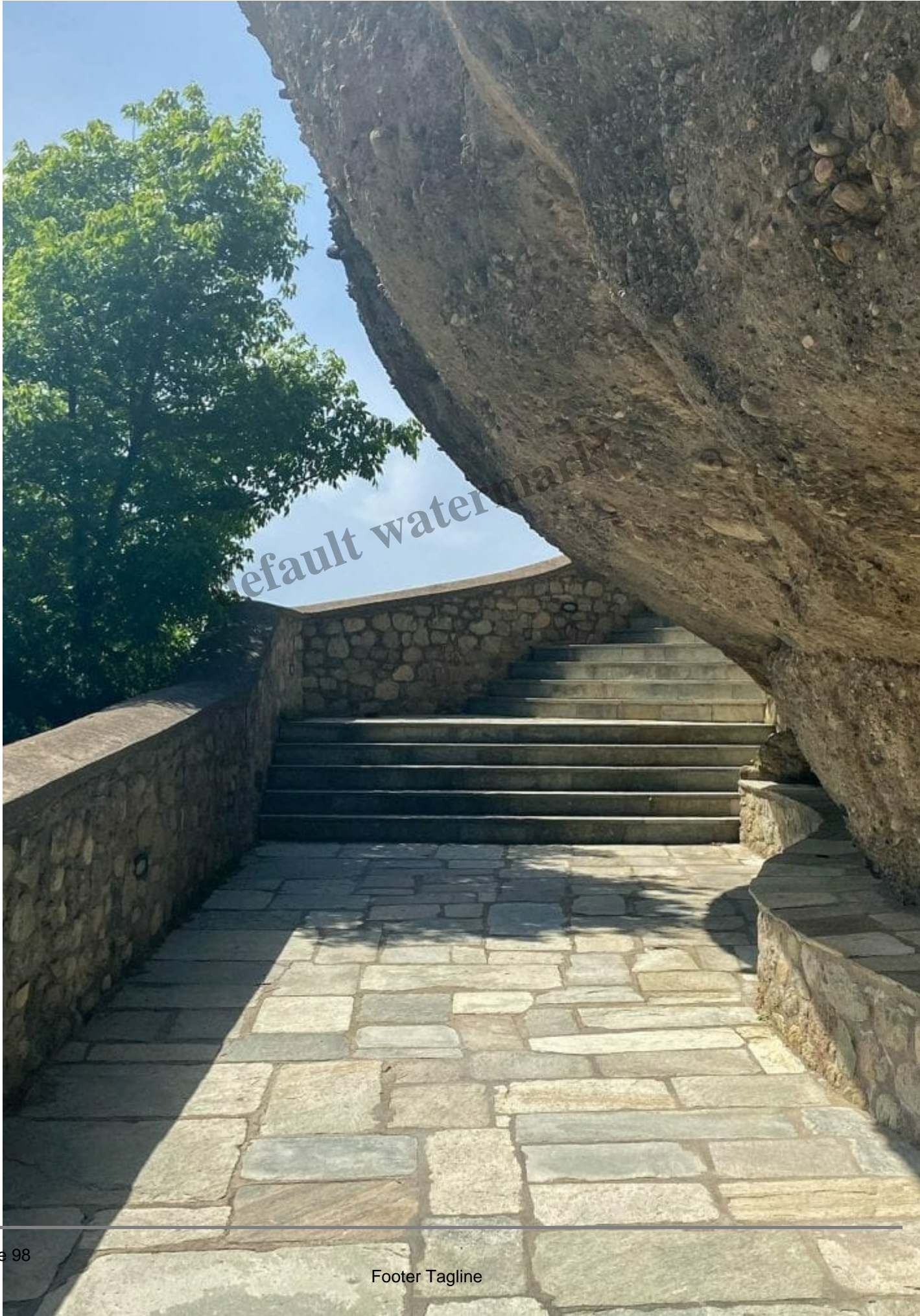
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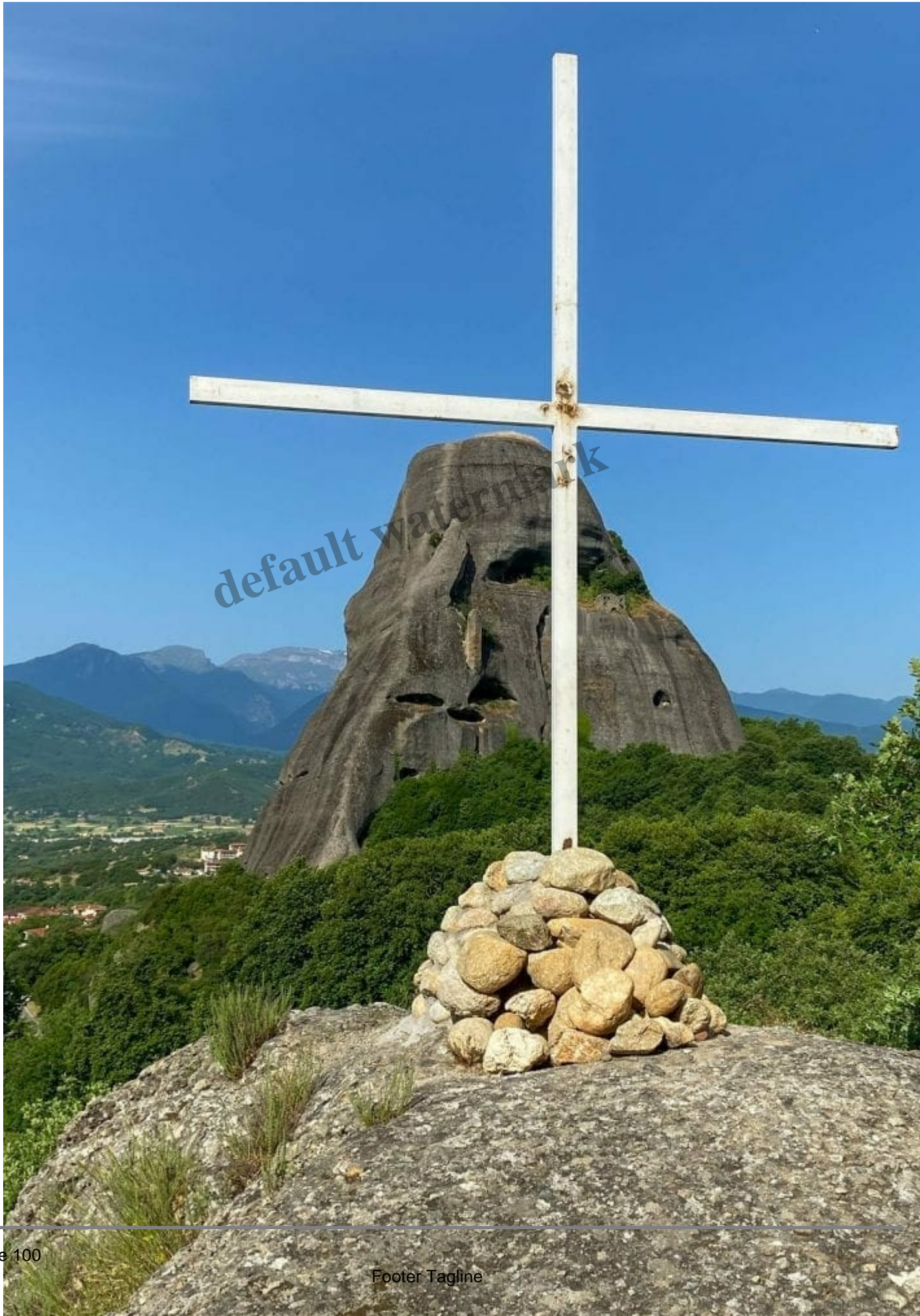




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## [Iceland's Surprising Natural Wonders: Beyond the Famous Tourist Attractions](#)

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