

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS<sup>i</sup>

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## Where is the prefecture of Grevena geographically?

The prefecture of Grevena occupies the southwestern part of Western Macedonia. It borders northeast with the prefecture of Kozani, east with the prefectures of Kozani and Larisa, south with the prefecture of Trikala, southwest and west with the prefecture of Ioannina, and northwest with the prefecture of Kastoria.



Its area is 2,291 km<sup>2</sup>. The terrain of the county as a whole is mountainous and semi mountainous (85% approximately).

The topography is shaped by many peaks of Vourinos, Kamvounia, Hasia and the Northern Pindos, which are the highest peaks of the county.

The mountain range extends into the western part of the county and constitutes an impenetrable wall, which makes it difficult to communicate with the region of Epirus.

The water of the county drains into the Aliakmonas river and its tributaries.

The most important of these are the Greveniotikos or Grevenitis or river of Grevena that crosses the city, the Venetian (the largest tributary) passing south of Grevena and Stavropotamos.

At the western end of the county and through the body of Northern Pindos stems the Aaos River. The prefecture of Grevena is considered one of the coldest climatic regions of Greece.

Grevena is located almost in the center of the county and has radial roads communicating with Kozani, Larissa, Trikala and Ioannina. The city of Grevena is built at an altitude 534 meters, east of the Northern Pindos, on the banks of the Grevenitis, a tributary of the Aliakmonas.

## How can I get to Grevena?

Access to Grevena is only by road.

The city of Grevena is 484 km from Athens, 170 km from Thessaloniki, 100 km from Ioannina, about 140 km from Larisa and 87 km from Trikala.

Access from Northern Greece is easy via the Egnatia Motorway, while for areas south of Thessaly it is accessed via Trikala and Larissa.

## **What reasons make Grevena one of the most popular tourist destinations in Greece?**

The prefecture of Grevena is gifted with natural beauty. It is surrounded by large mountains, on the slopes of which extend rich forests with dense vegetation.

The magnificent landscapes of forests surround the rivers which flow through the county and support life in the region.

The traditional villages, stone bridges and old churches that are scattered throughout the county beautify even more the image and show the harmonious coexistence of people with the environment, which demonstrates the rich flora and fauna of the place.

The most characteristic places of the county and the main visitor attractions are "Valia Calda" National Park, "Vasilitsa" National Ski Centre and the abundance of wild mushrooms that grow in the area.

The reasons that make Grevena one of the most popular mountainous destinations in Greece during the winter months are:

1. Vasilitsa National Ski Center
2. Valia Calda Nature Reserve
3. National Park of Northern Pindos
4. Traditional Villages
5. Rivers which flow through the prefecture
6. Stone Bridges
7. Religious Tourism
8. Alternative Activities – Sports
9. Mushrooms
10. Designated Routes
11. Museum of Natural History in Milia
12. Mushroom Museum in Lavda Grevena
13. Excavations Kastri Grevena
14. Vounasas Shelter

## **Why is Grevena called "The land of the mushrooms"?**

Do you know why Grevena is called "The land of the mushrooms"?

Because more than 1,300 mushroom species grow in the area, so Grevena is the official mushroom capital of Greece. There is no end to the mushroom delicacies available at the local diners: hot mushroom soups,

mushroom pies, dishes with wild, cultivated, powdered or dried mushrooms, mushroom sauces and even mushroom liquor, it's all there to impress mushroom lovers and gourmet specialists alike.

Wild mushrooms are perfect food and the value of some species has far surpassed even the price of black caviar. Apart from its excellent flavor and unique perfume, it has the advantage of being free from chemical fertilizers, hormones and pesticides.

Moreover, they are considered suitable for a slimming diet, since they contain fiber (cellulose and mykochitini in a significant proportion of 0.8 to 7%), little fat (0.2-0.5%) and a few sugars (1-1,5 %). Generally mushrooms contain water in large proportion (80-90% approximately), proteins (from 1.5 to 5.5%), minerals and trace elements (0.5 to 1.5%), vitamins and enzymes. Furthermore, dozens species of mushrooms are attributed healing properties.

## Which routes can I do in Grevena?

### - Route in the town of Grevena

The city of Grevena, small and densely populated, allows anyone who wants to know it to see all the highlights in a few hours. Starting from one side of town - the north entrance - the visitor understands easily from the welcome sign that this is the city of mushrooms. As you walk to the city center, you will see some of the sports facilities in the city, as well as the first mushroom statue, stone-built music conservatory, and perhaps the most modern city building, which houses the Regional Unit of Grevena and other public services. Subsequently, after passing through the area of school walking down the main street you will reach the heart of town. Especially during the weekdays, the town has a lot of traffic in both vehicles and pedestrians.

Moving more centrally, the visitor encounters the second mushroom statue, just before the town hall square and vegetable market. Trademark of the square and the city is the traditional timepiece that was built in 1906, which before the emancipation was part of the Turkish mosque. Just above the vegetable market square is the Emilian square, which houses statues of local heroes in the area. Around the two squares are concentrated most of dining and recreation places. Especially in summer, the two squares and alleys all around them with cafes, traditional restaurants, snack bars, and many other modern shops are full of life.

Going over the square, the visitor passes through the most densely populated streets of Grevena, ending up in one of the places with the highest altitude where there are some of the few houses in the city. The view from this point delights the visitor, giving a feeling of freedom.

Moving more northwest, visitors will reach the northwest exit of the city, where there is a neighborhood of subsidized housing. In contrast with what can be imagined as housing, it is a beautiful neighborhood with low houses, away from the bustle of the center. In fact, many are the inhabitants who choose this area for their afternoon walk.

For guests who choose to move west after their visit to the city center, the walk will end at the exit of the city to the Vasilitsa National Ski Center, passing in front of the newly built cultural center and public lending library, the nursing home, the outdoor stadium, the gymnasium and the swimming center. On this side of the city there is also the Varosi area with beautiful homes and a beautiful view.

Visitors who want to avoid the urban parts of the city and enjoy the natural environment without being too removed from the center, as do permanent residents, can seek shelter in Kastraki, a small forest in which

one can drink his coffee, play with the kids, do sports or just walk and enjoy the peacefulness and perfumes of the forest. In the area there is a small theater, which each summer hosts plays and concerts.

Starting from Kastraki, visitors can follow some of the dozens of paths that exist in the region for longer routes in the woods or in order to arrive at the picturesque church of Saint Paraskevi or church of Prophet Elijah. The church of Saint Paraskevi is situated in the forest, so the sense of serenity that exudes in the area will satisfy the most demanding traveler. The church of Prophet Elijah is built on a hill, next to Kastraki. The climb is tiring, but the view compensates anyone who makes the effort.

## - Routes in the prefecture of Grevena

### *1st Route*

The first route takes you to Valia Caldera and along the most famous places to escape the county. The village of Ziakas, Spilaio, the gorge of Portitsa and its bridge; Mt. Orliakas with its magical colors; the bridge of Aziz-Aga (the highest of Macedonia); the Vlach villages Perivoli and Avdella and of course Valia Caldera, or otherwise "Warm Valley"; everything is here. Special routes, such as this one to the National Forest, require knowledge of the area or a driver, and of course 4x4.

You will need four wheel drive if you decide to visit the bridges of Kagkeli, Katsougianni, Thief and Portitsas especially in autumn and winter. Fans of hiking will be tested in summer at gorge (route includes swimming), in the descent and ascent to the old cobbled road that leads to the gorge from the village of Spilaio, the numerous paths of Orliakas, the ascent to the Flega lakes or dozens more routes of Valia Caldera.

### *2nd Route*

Four stone bridges, more than fifteen villages, and deserted settlements with particular interest compose the second route. Dotsiko is one village that you must see, to admire the beautiful square and walk to the arch bridge while in Kalloni and Dasillio you will find the "stone face" of the place.

The old churches and Leipsi were slowly emptied of humans while the natural environment around Mesolouri gathers more and more fans who hike forests and in waterfalls in the summer. The route is ideal for four wheel drive or hiking if you intend to go without the wheels and enjoy the countless paths.

### *3rd Route*

This route includes a visit to the village of Milia and specifically to the paleontological museum of Milia.

Nature lovers will find a scientific aspect to their interest, as the village of Milia hosts a rare paleontology collection which includes the largest mastodon tusk in the world, officially entered in the Guinness book of records.

These rare paleontological findings, testimonies to the area's unique paleontological wealth, have up to now been housed in Milia's Natural History Museum, attracting some 30,000 visitors annually.

### *4th Route*

This route goes to the region of Deskatis and continues to Elassona. But before you get there you should definitely turn into a detour from Panagia village, where 11km of paved road will take you to the Zavorda Monastery. Leave the car in the parking of the monastery, 100m from this and walk 15 minutes around the back of the monastery, arriving opposite the hermitage of Saint Nicanor.

Car with 4x4 will be necessary for the big hill that leads to the Bounasia Monastery. If your car is 2X2, then go up the slopes of Vounasas, just above Deskati, guided by the signs that say "Shelter." After 9.5 miles you can enjoy a delicious coffee at the shelter at 1500 m. or make a picnic on the slopes with water and covered

areas for barbeque. You have reached your destination, Deskati. But do not forget to load your car with local dairy products which you will not find elsewhere.

### *5th Route*

The road to Krania village is a unique tour through pine forests and large meadows 'seeded' with fern and green, which reaches the Aouu lakes next to Metsovo village. In the warm seasons, the mountains are covered with a carpet of colourful, sweat flowers. Passing the village of Krania, stop for a drink of cool water from Kypouriou Fountain at the base of Mt. Baltsas.

Four wheel drive and good tires are a must. Cool off in Gyftovrysi fountain before enjoying the meander of the watershed at the top of Mt. Baltsa. The same road before Baltsa will lead you with the wooden signs in the heart of the National Park where the walk from the Perivoli is quite short.

The road needs a lot of attention especially in the spring, as in many sunless parts there is snow yet. Do not be surprised if you see a downed pine or soils that fell in the winter. All are in the program, in this (hopefully still) wild region of Greece.

### *6th Route*

In winter, Vasilitsa needs no introduction. What the winter visitor may not know is the spring, autumn or even summer beauty of the route. With a 4x4 vehicle you can reach the top of Vasilitsa, morning or afternoon.

Most of the Greek mountains appear on the horizon: southwest to Ioannina is Gamila, rightmost Smolikias Mountain, Vitsi, Vorras, Vermio, Pieria, Olympus, Pelion, Parnassus, mountains of Karpenisi, Trigkias, Koziakas and finally the peaks of Avgo and Flega of Pindos.

After this wonderful feeling, go up to Samarina village and Valia Kirna, the valley of the devil. In all these routes the small villages will relax you; they offer snacks and tsipouro or sweets, usually under the plane tree in the square.

## **What museums are there?**

### **Mushroom Museum in Lavda, Grevena**

The Mushroom Museum in Lavda village, Grevena opened on 6 November 2011. A traditional stone building houses naturally wild mushrooms, dried, and sculptures, incorporated into displays which are nature in miniature. Information on all mushrooms is given with rich literature and audiovisual material. Moreover, there is a possibility for microscopic examination.

The place with the audiovisual equipment is suitable for seminars and workshops and converted into a presentations hall with educational and informative content. It gives the opportunity for schools and groups to visit the area and satisfy their learning quests in nature and the environment.

### **Museum of Natural History in Milia**

Grevena boasts a long and unique history, with many prehistoric finds including a set of 3-million-year-old tusks, the longest in the world.

For 17 years, systematic Paleontological research and excavations have been carried out by the University Thessaloniki, Department of Geology. A group of students and colleagues, led by Assistant Professor

Evangelia Tsoukala, first excavated at "Ambelia" region (on the outskirts of Grevena) then at Milia and Priporo, Agios Georgios and Municipal Irakleoton.

In 1997, the excavation team discovered the first pair of tusks of impressive size (length 4.39 m), which were the largest of the species found in Greece, Europe and possibly the world, according to data from the Guinness Book of Records. The continuation of research revealed the mandible of an animal, the most complete of its kind in Europe, and the rest of the bones of the skeleton.

In 2007, the relics of a fossilized animal aroused even international interest in the region, on the importance of the region of Milia. The tusks of the animal, five meters in length, are without doubt the largest that have been found in the world, while the identification of the mandible and a large part of the skeleton of the animal makes this finding particularly important for research as it provides unique evidence for evolution, the paleobiology and the evolution of the species on a global scale.

It enables us to calculate both the height of mastodons, and weight. This is a male animal, whose biological age, as shown by the teeth of the jaw, was estimated between 25 and 30 years.

The results of the excavations give us very important information about the geologic past of the area, the species which lived here, in the origin and evolution, the environment in which they lived, the climate conditions they preferred and their geographical spread. The study findings enrich knowledge about the old environment of Greece, but also the evolution of species such as proboscides, giving a new dimension to the complex picture of both the Local Area and Southeastern Europe.

Today, all findings are hosted at the Museum of Natural History in Milia, Grevena.

## How many stone bridges exist in the region?

The bridges of Grevena are the largest and most impressive of all Macedonia. In 1995, the 11<sup>th</sup> Council board of Byzantine Monuments of Veroia declared the county bridges, as protected monuments. The style is generally the same.

The bridge of Aziz-Aga is the largest in Macedonia. It was built in 1727 and has a length of 70m and height 15m.

For communication purposes, an important bridge was the Spanos Bridge which connected the Epirus and Macedonia. It is 84m tall and 10m high and is the largest of the county.

An impressive bridge, visited by many people every year, is that of Portitsa which is built at the foot of the gorge outside the village of Spilaio.

The Ziakas Bridge with the two arcs, next to the new bridge leading to the village, was built in the late 19th century in the river Velonia. The bridge of Kagkelia, which is next to the road that connects Trikomo with Monachiti, is difficult to access, especially in autumn and winter.

There are also bridges at Pramoritsa, Dotsiko and Kastro.

There are smaller and newer bridges in the county, plus the half-collapsed Pasha's bridge, which has a similar tradition to that of Arta. The bridge was demolished in 1941 by the British to stop the march of German troops.

So, there are seventeen stone bridges in the prefecture of Grevena:

1. Matsagkani Bridge (Kranias)
2. Liatissas Bridge (Spilaio or thief's)
3. Kyparissi Bridge (Papatakis)
4. Bridge of Pasha
5. Kranias Bridge (Stampeki)
6. Trikomo Bridge (Aziz Aga)
7. Prosvorou or Alatopetra Bridge (stone bridge or bridge Gavos)
8. Katsoyannou bridge (Spilaio or Milos)
9. Kastrou Bridge (Megarou)
10. Pramoritsa Bridge
11. Paliomagerou Bridge (Dasillio)
12. Stavropotamos Bridge (Kipoureiou)
13. Spanos Bridge
14. Dotsiko Bridge
15. Kagelia Bridge (Trikomo)
16. Ziakas Bridge (Tourkogefyro)
17. Portitsas Bridge (Spilaiou)

## **Where is the Vasilitsa Ski Center and what does it offer?**

The Vasilitsa National Ski Centre is located in the northwestern part of the county, in the heart of Pindos and is 42 km from the city of Grevena. The massif of Vasilitsa extends between the prefecture of Grevena and Ioannina and belongs to the Pindos Mountains. The slopes of the mountain are great slopes for skiing, while the bare peaks and lush forests that surround them create a magnificent landscape. The vegetation includes pines, beeches and tall bushes.

The ski center opened for the first time in 1975 with the construction of the first lift on the mountain saddle of Vasilitsa - Gomara, at an altitude from 1788 to 2060 m. Today this lift can carry 800 skiers per hour.

Since then, the gradual development of the ski center, the construction of additional lifts and infrastructure (buildings, parking) and the people love, brought Vasilitsa prominently into the heart of skiers nationwide, thus considered one of the best ski centers in Greece.

Today Vasilitsa operates seven lifts, of which one is an airborne three-seat, one aerial two-seat, three sliding and two lifts for children.

In addition, the ski center includes sixteen slopes with a total length of about 16 km.

## **What can lovers of religious tourism see in the area?**

Lovers of religious tourism, which in recent years is booming in our country, could truly lose themselves in the plethora of monuments that adorn the county. A few kilometers before Deskati is the famous Monastery of Zavorda, built in 1534 to 1544 by Osios Nicanor, and beside it is the hermitage of the saint over the once-rushing waters of the Aliakmonas.

The Holy Monastery of the Assumption Tornikiou, built around 1200, has recently been relocated to higher ground because of the creation of dams in the area. It deserves to be seen, from where you can go to Vounasa, where you can admire the Monastery of the Evangelistria Bounasa which was probably built in 1348. The impressive temple, with its beautifully painted dome and carved reliefs on the doors combined with the wild landscape, is easily accessed by a 5-km dirt road.

Across the county, the church of the Megali Panaghia in Samarina with the pine over the dome, enchants thousands of people in August, while at the entrance of Valia Kirna, otherwise known as the valley of the devil, stands the Church of the Transfiguration of Jesus and Aghia Paraskevi. A special religious monument for the county is the Monastery of the Dormition of the Virgin Mary or Spiliotissa, founded in 1643.

The icon screen of the church, the doors and windows are outstanding examples of 17th century woodwork. Dozens of stone temples and churches adorn every corner of the county and have open doors to worshippers and visitors of the site.

- Monastery of the Dormition of the Virgin at Tornikio
- Zavorda - Monastery of the Transfiguration of the Savior
- Monastery of St. Nicholas in Perivoli
- Archangels Monastery in Taxiarchis
- Evaggelistris Monastery (Bounasias) in Paliouria
- Monastery of Panagia in Spilaio
- Great Panagia Church in Samarina
- Monastery of Transfiguration of the Savior

## **How can I go, what can I see in Valia Calda Nature Reserve and National Park of Northern Pindos?**

### **Valia Calda Nature Reserve**

"Valia Calda" Nature Reserve of Pindos is one of the greatest and most pristine parks in Greece. It was established to protect the rich flora and fauna.

It has area of about 69,000 acres that are separated in the core and the peripheral zone of the park.

It is located in the Mountains Pindos in the county boundaries of Grevena and Ioannina.

It includes the valley of Valia Calda, which lies at an altitude of 1400 meters and is surrounded by mountains of Lygkos and Mavrovouni (Flega 2,159 meters) up to the mountain peaks Avgo (alt. 2177 m). The valley is crossed by several streams with importantly Arkoudorema, which is a tributary of Aouu.

The name "Valia Calda" means in Vlach warm valley. Obviously the park was named euphemistically, because it is one of the coldest and wet regions of Greece. The climate is Mediterranean-mountainous, one of the richest in Greece precipitations (1.500mm/year) and snowfalls. The summers are cool with several local rains. The clouding is high and frosts are usual from October to May, while the snow covers the Park from 7 to 8 months a year.

The geological setting of the park is consisted by rocks of the flysch group with enough serpentine, gabbro, limestone and dolomite with predominant appearance of serpentine. The soils of the park were formed by the weathering of the peridotite and the serpentine. They are argillaceous with clay texture; they have acid

chemical reaction and they are rich in magnesium, iron and often contain toxic concentrations of chromium, nickel, manganese and aluminum.

The Pindos National Park is one of the last biotopes of the brown bear and a location where they can find winter shelter many species of Greek flora, such as goats, deer, wild boars, vultures, woodpeckers, golden eagles, black stork, predators nocturnal birds and other birds, reptiles, amphibians and mammals. Overall 72 bird species have been counted, 6 species of amphibians and 7 species of reptiles, which are quite rare and are protected throughout the world.

Apart from the rich fauna of the park, especially characteristic is the flora. Enormous and dense forests of black and white pine and beech trees cover much of the park. Also, there are scattered trees of other species such as fir, oak, maple and other deciduous broadleaf trees. Riverside, the vegetation includes plane trees, various species of willow, alder, oak, etc. In the sub vegetation dominates the boxwood, many species of creeper plants and deciduous shrubs. Also, there are grown many protected and rare species of endemic flora. Finally, noteworthy is the appearance of two small clusters of forestalls pine (red pine) with 32 trees and 30 trees respectively in the valley and near the stream Saliatoura.

Is extremely rich and the micro flora of the park. The mushrooms are one of the most interesting and fascinating life forms that are hosted in the woodland.

Generally the landscape in Valia Calda is impressive. The dense forests are alternated with bare and rocky subalpine areas and huge cliffs, while the strong presence of water in combination with the extremely rich fauna and impressive form of many mushrooms makes the Pindos Nature Reserve unique destination annually for hundreds of nature lovers' browsers.

## National Park of Northern Pindos

The National Park of Northern Pindos was established in 2005 by the Joint Ministerial Decision 23069/14-6-05 and includes within its boundaries the two National Parks, Vikos - Aaos and Pindos (Valia Calda), eleven regions which are belonging to the European Network of Protected Areas «Natura 2000», almost the entire region of Zagori, one area of Konitsa and Metsovo and the western part of the prefecture of Grevena. This is one of the largest terrestrial protected areas in our country, with a total area of 1,969,741 acres, and is one of the most important national and European regions, and combines the natural with the man-made environment. The existence of numerous endemic species of flora, of almost all the large wild mammals that live in our country, as well as rare species of avifauna, giving the National Park of Northern Pindos special ecological value. The area is also very rich in historical and cultural elements. Traditional houses, stone arched bridges, elaborate temples and monasteries, watermills and stone stairs dominate the whole structured environment of the Park.

## Alternative Activities – What sports can I do?

The Prefecture of Grevena is blessed with all those special characteristics that are necessary for the development of mountain sports and other forms of tourism. It is the only prefecture that has one of the better organized ski resorts, one of the most virgin national parks, two rivers and various historical monuments that together all draw to them a multitude of tourists and offer a site for alternative tourism.

Various activities available today at Grevena:

- Mountain climbing on many routes.

- Trekking and hiking on old paths and highway E6.
- Skiing – Snowboard – Snowmobile and ski mountaineering at Ski Center Vasilitsa.
- Rafting - Canoe & Kayak on the rivers Aliakmon and Venetiko.
- Riding and mountain biking on routes with small inclines and of high interest.
- Archery, where Alexander the Great was trained.
- Rapell from cliffs or bridges.
- Four wheel drive excursions of interest.

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<sup>i</sup> Translation from Greek: Sofia Gioursani