what do you want to do first?
[a sneak preview of Ioannina city, Greece]
Ioannina stands as one of the best offbeat escapes in Europe because of its lake. Whether it’s strolling hand in hand on its banks, birdwatching, riding a bike in the sunset or enjoying your wine and good spirits by the serene waters, the turquoise lake (a National Park and named by some a riddle for the literature aficionados) will offer the perfect backdrop for romance, family holidays, congresses and city breaks.

The island of Ioannina lake is home to seven monasteries (the third largest group after Mount Athos and Meteora), one of Europe’s few inhabited islands (pop 250) and the only one in the world without a name of its own! The 10min crossing to the island and a genuin walk on its cobblestone alleys will send you picking up echoes of folk songs and psalms of Christians, Jews and Muslims who lived on this land peacefully for centuries.

The town is built on the Egnatia Road that spans two millennia connecting Europe to Asia. With the road aging and the region’s traditional rural economy fading pace, Ioannina stayed off-radar for decades despite its rich history as a melting pot of traditions and cultures. Today Egnatia is a state-of-the-art European highway and Ioannina is a proud host of modern hotels, convention centres, hospitals and one of the country’s most prestigious universities -the 20.000 strong academic community puts some vivid color strokes on the town’s canvas.

This is a good place for food fans with an appetite for genuine Mediterranean cuisine and home cooking. The local gastronomy you can sample almost everywhere in town and in nearby taverns includes cheese and meat from hilltop farms along the island Metsovo, venison, roast lamb, roast chicken, fresh vegetables, fish and game, fine local wines and tsipouro.

From the Stone Age, the ancient Greek civilizations, the Roman magistrates and the Byzantine despots through to the Ottoman pashas and the modern Greek democracy, the history trail leads to the unmissable attractions of today’s multicultural Ioannina: six amazing museums, a unique primordial cave, art galleries, twelve churches, one synagogue, sixteen mosques, twelve well preserved Muslim monuments, and an array of townhouses and public buildings of architectural interest.
Coastline to the west, mountains to the east. Drive west on Egnatia Road, set sail from Syvota to find a secluded cove and some privacy. Drive further south to Mikri Ammos (if you don’t mind swimming to the rhythms of the popular beach bar), take a tour on a prehistoric cave or a medieval castle, set sail in the Ionian Sea or share a bottle of wine and a fine cheese platter with friends.

WHAT DO YOU WANT TO DO FIRST?

You can lose track of time in Ioannina. Easy. Be it a three day visit or a ten day vacation, any season of the year, there is always something exciting to see and do. Enjoy the lake view sipping Greek coffee, walk the narrow corridor over a staggering 900m deep gorge, take a tour in a prehistoric cave or a medieval castle, set sail in the Ionian Sea or share a bottle of wine and a fine cheese platter with friends. So what do you want to do first?

Discover estuaries teeming with wildlife, cross dense woodlands and brave deep gorges in off-the-beaten-track adventures, marvel at the stone-built bridges, churches and cottages, taste good wine and delicious roasted casseroles in age-old village squares, camp for the night camping out gazing at the night sky or playing golf for the alpine lakes going up to 4544m. Imagine a sold-out drama (tic) performance 2300 years ago in a theatre seating 18,000 spectators! What kind of cultural life do you think they had back then? What kind of economy could afford the biggest theatre of its time? You may ponder on these questions on the way from Ioannina to Dodoni (22km) and one of the most significant archaeological sites in Greece. When there, you’ll go ‘aw.’

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