

## Walk 16: KOUMOUSTA • GHOLAS MONASTERY • RASINA VALLEY • KOUMOUSTA

**Distance/time:** 13.4km/8.3mi; 3h45min

**Grade:** fairly easy — most of the 350m/1150ft ascent is on a lovely path in the shade.

**Equipment:** water, sunhat and sunscreen, picnic. A walking stick is useful for the rocky terrain, and long sleeves/trousers for the overgrown stretches.

**Transport:** 🚗 to/from Koumousta (a detour from Xirokambi, the 115km-point in Car tour 2). Keep right, to the upper part of the

village, and park by the paved square with plane tree. There is also a 🚌 from Sparta to Xirokambi (Timetable 24), from where you could walk to Koumousta and join the walk at the 17min-point (turning left), but this adds 10km return!

**Shorter walk: Koumousta — Gholas Monastery — Koumousta.** 6.4km/4mi; 2h15min; grade as main walk. Follow the main walk to the monastery and return the same way.

The secret village of Koumousta is completely hidden in a deep fold of Mt Taygetus' eastern foothills. Its road link to Xirokambi town, snaking through the Rasina Gorge, was only completed in 1990. Most of the 50 or so houses now lie empty, although a few are being restored, and one is available as a simple hostel for rent. Historically, it was the winter quarters for farmers summering in the high meadows of Pendavli, and is marked on many maps as Pendavli. This walk starts and ends in Koumousta, following a path up to the 17th-century monastery of Gholas, a gravel jeep track along a spur of the mountain, and a dirt road back down again.

**Start the walk** from the paved square in the *pano hora* (upper village) of **Koumousta**, with its huge plane tree and gushing six-spouted spring. Follow the paved lane left (south), as indicated by the panel ('GHOLA MONASTERY 1H') and 'Japanese-flag' waymarks. The paving stops; follow the dirt track past crumbling houses and out of

the village, towards the towering cliffs of Stefani opposite. Just right of these cliffs is a narrow valley, up which you will be walking. After a right bend (4min), fork left, and fork left again after a short uphill stretch (10min). At a SIGNPOST (15min), turn sharp left along a larger track and, after 100m (17min) turn sharp right down a

*Gholas Monastery*

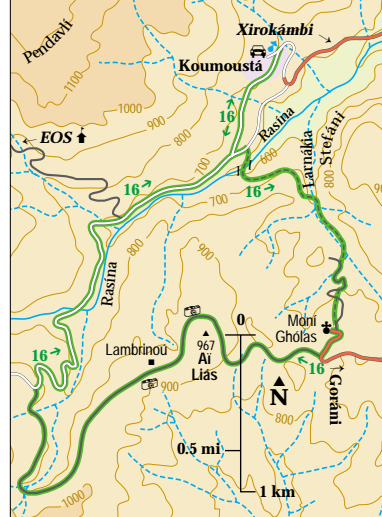


signed path. After 80m, turn sharp left into some oak woods, then sharp right and across a loose LOG BRIDGE over a seasonal trickle.

Soon you cross a more substantial stream on an arched STONE BRIDGE (22min), screened by a canopy of plane trees. The path climbs left past some boulders, then bears right into the **Larnakia Valley**, tunnelling through the thick kermes oaks. Cross a WOODEN BRIDGE over the (usually dry) gully on your left (45min), and five minutes later a SECOND FOOTBRIDGE across a side gully, bearing right. At the jeep track (55min), keep left, climbing steadily. Just after a right bend (1h), fork left up a stepped path, cross the track again, and continue up through chestnut woods. Then bear left to the track which leads up to **Gholas Monastery (1h10min)**.

Founded in 1632, the monastery once numbered over 50 monks — hence its size — but like almost all Greek monasteries suffered from 'pagan drift' in the last century. After the death of the last nun, the monastery was resettled in 2000 by three young monks from Ayios Ioannis on Evia (Euboea). During daylight hours, and so long as you are decently dressed and refrain from smoking and taking photos, they will show you through the well-tended courtyard to the central chapel, covered in frescoes by the 17th-century iconographer Dimitrios Kakavas. It is dedicated to Zoodochou Pigis (Virgin Mary the Spring of Life), celebrated on the Friday after (Orthodox) Easter.

From the monastery follow the asphalt road uphill for 500m, to a junction at a left bend (1h18min). Here turn right along a dirt track. Ignore small tracks left and right, and continue uphill, passing to the north of the 967m hump of **Ai Lias**. After 2km you pass the *mandri* (sheep barn) of **Lambri-**



*The flower-filled jeep track*

**nou (1h50min)**, and earn fine views south to the peaks of Zizali and the Laconian Sea. Another 800m sees you crossing the 980m RIDGE (2h) at the walk's highest point and looping around the head of a forested valley on the little-used, flower-covered jeep track shown above. This descends to a junction with a larger dirt track (2h35min), where you turn right. The track winds down to the floor of the **Rasina Valley**, crosses the main stream (3h) and is joined by a track coming down from the EOS refuge (Walk 17). Opposite a vertical crag on the right bank (3h20min), a path leads to a lovely spot by the water's edge. Continue downstream along the main track, then climb slightly to the fork (3h30min), where you turn left and follow your outgoing track into **Koumousta (3h45min)**.