

# Sampling the rigors of the priestly life in Greece

By **Dave Seminara**  
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

PATMOS, Greece — It's 3:45 a.m. on a Saturday and I am outside the Holy Monastery of St. John the Divine, wondering if my invitation to join the monks in an overnight prayer service will be honored. The locked gates to one of the world's most revered holy places are themselves imposing, looming high above the port of Skala on this island in the eastern Aegean.

Little do I know that before the night is over, I will be on the receiving end of an apocalyptic prophecy.

The monastery was built by St. Christodoulos in 1088 to venerate St. John, who wrote the Book of Revelation in a nearby cave after being exiled to the island in 95 AD by the Roman emperor Domitian. Now home to 15 monks, the monastery is located at the highest point of Hora, which is a spiral of whitewashed buildings, many in varying states of graceful decay, perched dramatically over the port.

Visiting the monastery was my first order of business on Patmos and it did not disappoint. The church's icons are visually arresting, the views of the surrounding islands are sublime, and the presence of black clad monks a reminder that St. John's is a magnet for devout Christians.

Locals claim that Patmos has more than 300 churches, or one for every 10 residents, and Theologos Kononis, the gatekeeper at St. John's, resolved to help me visit some of the holiest places after we bonded over the fact that we both have family in Boston.

Kononis introduced me to Father Ioustinianos, 62, a monk from Crete who has lived at St. John's for 22 years. Ioustinianos took me on a private tour of Zoodochos Pigi, an early 17th-century monastery in Hora, and invited me to an afternoon service at St. John's. I sat outside the monastery at the appointed time for an hour, but alas was never invited in.



PHOTOS BY DAVE SEMINARA FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

Father Simeon, below, at the Holy Monastery of St. John the Divine, which has this rooftop view of Patmos, Greece.

## If you go . . .

### Visiting the monasteries

**St. John's Holy Monastery** is open 8:30 a.m.-1:30 p.m. daily and 4-6 p.m. on Tue, Thu, Sun. To visit **Zoodochos Pigi Monastery** or pray with the monks of St. John's, contact Theologos Kononis (011-30-22470-31398 or 22470-31223) at St. John's.

### Where to stay

**Hotel Australis**  
011-30-22470-31576  
www.patmosaustralis.gr  
In the town of Skala, near the port and the beach, nice furnished apartments and hotel rooms from \$64.

A few hours later, my wife, children, and I were at an outdoor restaurant in Skala, and we bumped into Ioustinianos and asked him to join us. Over dinner, we learned that he had become a monk after his wife died years ago. He said Orthodox priests could marry, but those who did couldn't move up in the church hierarchy.

Before he left, I told him I had been stiffed at the afternoon service.

"Patmos," he said, with a shrug.



He told me that to get the full St. John's experience I should join them for their liturgy service the following night around 3:45 a.m.

I arrived at the appointed time. A young monk answered the door and ushered me in without saying a word.

I had butterflies in my stomach as I entered the compound and heard ritualistic singing coming from the church. The service was in progress.

The small church was lighted only with candles and two dim reading lamps. At first I couldn't tell how many monks were in the room. Two monks stood at pulpits while Father Simeon, a portly monk whom Kononis had introduced me to on my first visit, paced between two pulpits, chanting and praying.

Ioustinianos made eye contact with me but didn't smile or

acknowledge my presence. A rotating cast of monks shuffled in and out of the room to sing, pray, and read from the Bible, as I sat and watched, feeling I was witnessing something mystical and timeless.

I stifled yawns as the clock neared 4:30 and felt like a voyeur watching the spectacle and not participating. At 5 a younger monk with intense, almost black eyes began to sing from the Scriptures and I began to wonder when the service would end.

Another hour passed and, as complete exhaustion began to set in, I realized that I had no way of getting out of the locked compound. Feeling trapped, I left the chapel and climbed up toward the roof to get a peek at the rising sun. Right after I ducked back into the church, around 6:15, the monks began to exit, kissing the icons on their way out.

I approached Simeon, who was the lone English speaker, and thanked him for allowing me to attend. "Do you do that every night?" I said.

"Oh no," he said. "Only three nights per week."

He locked the church with an ancient looking key and began a rambling speech about the folly of rich people who believe they can buy their way to heaven. And as we walked, he stopped in his tracks. "We study the book of Revelation," he said, "which was revealed to St. John here on Patmos. And I know that the United States — your country — is about to be destroyed. Completely destroyed."

"Is it only the US that's going to be destroyed," I said.

"Not at all," he said. "Great Britain, France, and Germany will also be destroyed, but the US will be first."

"And what about Greece?" I asked.

"Greece will be fine," he said.

"Because God loves Greece."

And with that, he excused himself, saying he was in need of a nap.

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## The List

WHERE CARS ARE NOT KING



PHOTOS BY SELINA KOK FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

1

**BALD HEAD ISLAND, N.C.** Conservation is key at this upscale resort community, where residents, and visitors travel on foot, bike, and golf cart. Make sure to see the new Barrier Island Study Center and "Old Baldy," the state's oldest standing lighthouse.  
[www.baldheadisland.com](http://www.baldheadisland.com)

2

**GIETHOORN, THE NETHERLANDS** In the old section of this tiny, tidy, touristy village transportation is primarily by boat (above right) over one of its many canals and by bicycle on the one path through town. Bike rentals are plentiful.  
[www.ervaarhetwaterrijtje.nl/en](http://www.ervaarhetwaterrijtje.nl/en)

3

**HYDRA, GREECE** Most of the wheels you will see on this attractive island near Athens are affixed to the bottoms of suitcases. A coastal path frequented by walkers and donkeys leads from the port to compact villages.  
[www.visitgreece.gr/en/greek\\_islands/hydra](http://www.visitgreece.gr/en/greek_islands/hydra)

4

**FES-AL-BALI, MOROCCO** One of two medinas in Fes, Morocco's second largest city, this UNESCO World Heritage Site is said to be the world's biggest car-free urban area. Congestion on these medieval streets comes in the form of pedestrians, bicycles, donkey- and human-led carts, and rows of colorful retail businesses.  
[www.visitmorocco.com](http://www.visitmorocco.com)

5

**CATALINA ISLAND, CALIF.** An hour from Long Beach by high-speed ferry, Catalina is popular for dining and shopping in the quaint center of Avalon, and for golf and water sports. Golf carts and bicycles are the transporters of choice. Some residents have vehicles, but with a 14-year waiting list to own a car, not many.  
[www.catalinachamber.com](http://www.catalinachamber.com)

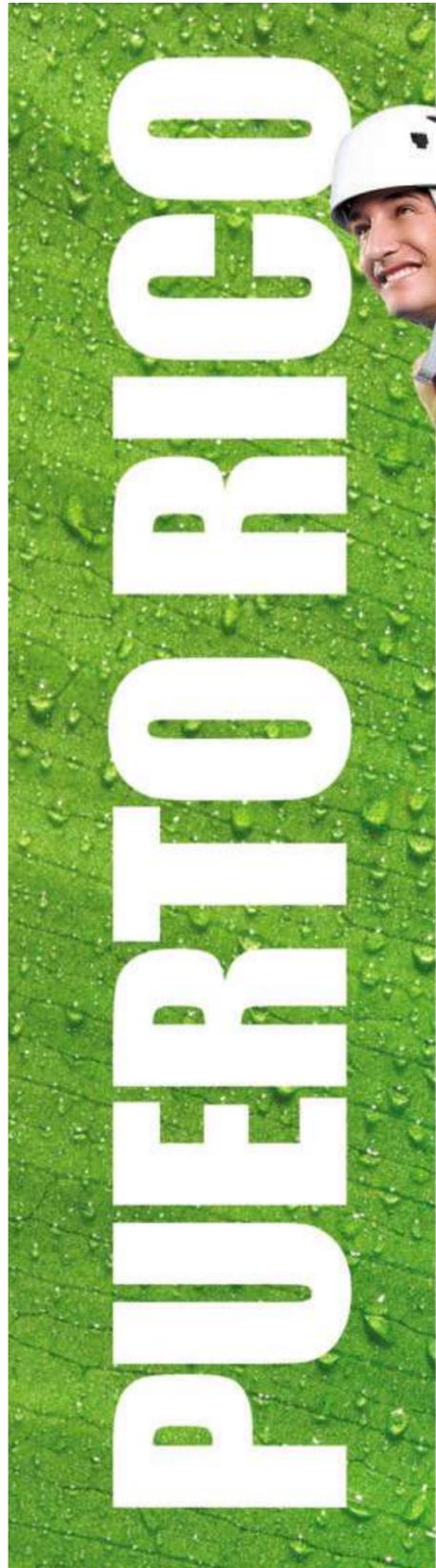
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