

Leonidio

Introduction

Leonidio has justifiably established itself as a holiday-rock destination for sport climbers from across Europe and beyond who are looking for a wide range of top-quality routes at all grades. Located on the Peloponnese Peninsula of the Greek mainland, access is a straightforward drive from Athens airport. Nick Wharton and friends visited twice in 6 months; first in mid-winter December and secondly in late spring at the end of April. They were attracted by the huge range of crags offering everything from slabs, through fingery, vertical walls to wildly overhanging caves dripping with tufa formations that allow relatively easy routes through outrageous territory.

Town & Country

The small, traditional town of Leonidio with its population of around 4000 sits on a fertile plain, nestling between towering valley sides, 4km from the coast. It is a vibrant, compact community that has embraced the influx of climbers over recent years whilst retaining its own distinct character. It is very much an active, working town. The main industry is agriculture, utilising that fertile ground to produce citrus fruits, pears, tomatoes, olives and the famous Tsakonian eggplant. There are numerous festivals throughout the year including the orthodox Easter (usually later than Easter UK) with its unusual celebrations involving hundreds of aerostata (air balloons). These large, colourful tissue-paper lanterns have a framework with a wad of paraffin-soaked rags suspended below that lifts them, glowing, into the sky. They create a remarkable sight (and no doubt, a considerable fire risk!). The inhabitants are very friendly, greeting you in the street. They make fabulous, welcoming hosts in the many homes available for accommodation and the bars and restaurants. Plaka is the small port 4 km away on the coast, sitting on the edge of the Myrtoan Sea. There are bars, restaurants and a great beach, ideal for a rest day to help you relax and give the fingers a rest from the fresh, coarse limestone.

Climbing Overview

Arriving in the town of Leonidio, one is immediately struck by the huge, south-facing, red cliffs that spectacularly tower above the town. These provide several sectors and are the site of most of the worthwhile multi-pitch adventures - all within walking distance from your accommodation. Stretching inland from the town is a long, winding valley. This is the Daphnon Gorge that leads eventually to the beautiful mountain village of Kosmas at 1150m elevation. Continuing on from here leads back down the other side of the range and eventually to the town of Sparti on the site of ancient Sparta, passing the excellent crag Geraki Wave along the way.

All the way up the gorge and its various branches, the valley sides are plastered with countless crags of yellow, orange and grey limestone. Far from all of them are developed but many are, providing a wide range of aspects, sizes and styles of climbing. Whilst the area may lack a one-off massive crag like Verdon or Ceuse, it makes up for it with the scale of the options available. All are generously and securely bolted with the equipment funded by a

mix of private individuals, donations, sales of guidebooks and the local authority. Walk-ins vary from roadside to 45 mins with the majority of crag being accessible easily within 15-30 minutes. Nearly all crags are helpfully signposted and waymarked to make finding the crag incredibly easy.

There are two main guidebooks to climbing in the area. The first is produced by the Panjika Cooperative, currently in its third edition. The alternative is produced by Aris Theodoroulos and funded by the local municipality. Both are excellent guides with clear crag and route descriptions and plenty of supplementary information. There are some discrepancies on grading between the two books. In general, the grades were found to align with other European areas. These are not all 'holiday grades'. New routes and indeed new crags continue to be developed. In the latest Panjika guide there are over 90 sectors with approx. 2400 routes. Whilst this huge number is pretty academic – you will never run-out, it does go to demonstrate how much choice is available. 10% of these are graded up to 5c, 27% 6a to 6b+, 30% fall within the range 6c to 7a+, 21% 7b to 7c+ and the remaining 12% from 8a upwards. This article is predominantly concerned with climbs up to and including 7a+. The Mar-Apr 2019 edition of Climber has an article covering the harder routes.

Areas

This article cannot hope to do justice to every crag, so I have chosen a select few in the different parts of the locality. For most of them a car will be needed. Some, around the town, can be reached easily on foot.

Up the gorge

Skiadhianiko

11.5km up the Dafnon Gorge is the fabulous, varied crag of Skiadhianiko (Ski-a-dhi-a-niko – takes a bit of practice!). The access from the parking is across the stream then wanders up an ancient drovers' path that eventually leads to the village of Vaskina. There are three parts to it: left, centre and right. The left has 25 easier grade slab climbs from F4 to F6a+. The rock here is excellent: solid and clean; the routes are really worthwhile. Up above this pleasure garden, accessed by a fixed rope, is the central area with a bunch of harder, mid-grade routes up steeper terrain with some lovely tufas. There are some much harder routes on a leaning wall up and right – something to aim for in the future? Down and right are some classic routes from 6a to 7a+. The pick of the bunch is Ramasca (F6c+) plus its extension Super Ramasca (F7a). A good crag for families. The left is in the sun in the morning whilst the right gets afternoon sun.

Bella Vista

A location that lives up to its name, it has a fabulous view down the valley to the sea. The climbing is lovely too with plenty of options throughout the F5s, 6s and low 7s. It is generally never very steep, but the rock is super-clean and fresh with edges, pockets and flakes. The crag is reached by a fairly tough, 30 min walk uphill but don't be put off by that; it is well worth the effort. It gets a lot of sun so is best visited avoiding midday, although in winter it is possible to climb here at any time.

Loupas-Acropolis

A recently developed location similar in approach time to Bella Vista but with an even quieter, more remote feel. The crag has currently been developed in two sections with a 5 min uphill walk between them. The upper area (Acropolis) having been produced by our very own Gary Gibson. The venue has a concentration of high-quality wall climbs in the 6a to 7a grade range, has shade in the afternoon and a terrific view down the valley.

Above the town

Kokkinovrachos Central

Kokkinovrachos means 'red rock', and it won't be difficult to spot which crags these are. They are an imposing sight, sat in a commanding position, high above the town. These 200m high crags are one of the iconic landmarks of the area. They provide a number of exciting multi-pitch routes in an amazing position but also there are a number of sectors along the bottom, providing mostly easy climbing up the first 40m of the walls. One of the great advantages of these sectors is that they can be easily accessed on foot, from town meaning they are ideal for anyone without a car. There are dozens of lines to choose from. All are very safely bolted and provide a family-friendly atmosphere. The sectors towards the left are predominantly easy-angled whilst to the right they become a bit steeper. The whole range faces south so best avoided on hot days, unless you grab a few routes early or late in the day but in winter they can be fabulous. The recommended sectors in this area are: Orama, Hospital and Red Rock.

Mars

The large red cliffs continue rightwards with a number of other, mainly harder sectors then curves round the corner. It is on this east-facing aspect that we find Mars. This is one of the star-attractions of the area. The beautiful red rock is compact and the steep wall is dripping with fantastical tufas. So surely there aren't any easier routes up there? Oh Yes! Right in the centre there are half a dozen lines from F6b+ to 6c+, weaving their way through the most unlikely terrain for the grade. The huge tufas can be pinched, bridged, laybacked and often provide hands-off rests. Higher up, the slightly harder extensions tend to rely on sharp pockets up steep walls. It isn't just about the steeper section, off to the left are some lovely, pocketed walls of grey limestone, which are also a delight. The crag gets the shade in the afternoon and will still be warm late in the season whereas in winter you'll want a warm jacket to belay.

Jupiter

The next rock along the range from Mars is naturally called Jupiter and it is a completely different world. It can be reached by continuing to walk up the valley that Mars overlooks but the best option is to drive to the top and walk down. The climbing is on a long, vertical wall on perfect pockets and edges. The pitches are long, very long, some of them up to 50m that need a bit of jiggery-pokery to lower off. An 80m rope is fine but do remember to take

plenty of quickdraws. The crag is best suited to those climbing at the top-end of our selected grade range. There are some brilliant lines at F7a/7a+ with a few easier options. *Warum Warum* and *Kalimero*, both weighing-in at 7a+, sit next to each other in the centre of the crag – they are some of the best routes we have done in the whole area.

Up the Zigzags

The road out of Leonidio to Vaskina heads up the hill via a series of hairpins – known as the ‘zigzags’. It eventually leads to a high plateau that sits above the big red cliffs. There are a number of crags accessible from some of the hairpins and others that are reached from the plateau.

Hot Rock

Strictly speaking this should be included in the Kokkinovrachos section as this is the left-most sector of the big cliffs, however it is best reached by driving up the road to Vaskina to the 6th hairpin from where an easy 10 min walk leads to this delightful playground. The attractions are in the form of delightful 30m face climbing at a reasonable grade. Best in the winter as it faces due south. At the right-hand end of the crag is an amazing line: *Mayor* is a 35m corner – an unusual feature in these parts and at F6a is very amenable and should not be missed.

Twin Caves

This crag has something of a split personality. In the cave there are some incredible, steep, hard lines to ogle at, whilst on the left are greys slabs and vertical walls plastered with some really good, easier and mid-grade routes. For a mixed team this is an ideal crag with hard and easier routes sitting side by side. Access is very quick and easy. All of this makes for a very popular venue meaning that it can get busy so getting there early makes a lot of sense.

Yellow Eyes

This crag sits very high up above the Dafnon Gorge, accessed from behind by taking the road up the zigzags and beyond before turning off down a long dirt track, past a farm to a delightful parking spot at the road-end. In spring, this area is carpeted with wild flowers and the herbs give the place a delicious aroma. Idyllic – and we haven’t even got to the crag yet! The easy 10 min walk around the hillside delivers you to the most stunning location and for those in search of long, fingery climbing that is never too steep, the crag certainly delivers. Only recently developed, the routes are still in pristine condition. The crag is perfect for our selected grade-range with plenty of options in the F6a to 7a+. On all our visits, the venue has always been very quiet – maybe because it is a bit of a drive or maybe, being quite new, it is still relatively unknown. It faces south so good in winter or on cloudy days.

Towards the Coast

Dornroschen & King of Thrones

Just to the east of the town and easily accessed on foot are the two sectors of Dornroschen and King of Thrones. The two are distinctly different but complementary and conveniently

sit next to each other. The easier Dornroschen faces south-west so good for some early morning routes on a hot day before heading round the corner to the slightly more testing King of Thrones, some of which stays in the shade all day. Here the routes are a little steeper and featured giving interesting challenges to be worked out, yet still, predominantly within the F6 range. The location and outlook is lovely with a view over the town and up the valley. Along with the ease of access and ideal grade-range, this is a great venue for the low to mid-grade climber.

Theos

Driving from Leonidio on the Athens Road, there are a number of big cliffs up on your left. The Theos area is one of these ideally situated venues. It has a number of different sectors. The first to be reached after a 15 min walk is Theos Pillar. The front face of this feature has some easy routes with slightly harder extensions, which give superb 40m routes. Round to the right is a vertical wall with some brilliant routes at F6c+ along with some other easier lines. Up and right from here is the magnificent Theos Cave The right side of this is the preserve of the hard climber but the left side has some splendid, interesting lines requiring a range of technique as well as strength. A great place. Further right again are Theos Mikro and Theos Right with more interesting lines, mainly in the F6 range.

Sabaton

Located close to the sea, getting shade all afternoon and being a couple of minutes' walk from the parking make this a popular venue. The routes are short but plentiful with great variety. It is also a lovely place, wandering up a gentle hillside in an old olive grove with views out to sea.

Outlying

West:

Geraki

Driving up to the lovely village of Kosmas and down the other side of the range takes you to the wonderful crag of Geraki. The compact grey walls on the left have many really good easier lines, whilst the amphitheatre to the right is steeper and harder. Well worth the 40km drive. A stop in Kosmas on the way back, for dinner at one of the tavernas in the square, is recommended.

North:

Arcadia

This friendly crag lies 30km up the coast towards Athens. The crag consists of compact grey rock that provides almost 40 routes up to F7a+ and mostly in the F5 and F6 grades. 5 min walk and afternoon shade make this a good choice – maybe on the way to or from the airport?

Agios Andreas

Ex-pats Andy Long and his wife Cheryl did a great job developing this crag which sits above the friendly village of the same name, 10km further on towards Athens from Arcadia. Here, the shade is in the morning. There are more routes in the harder grades here than Arcadia but still the majority are at the lower end. Another very short walk-in.

South:

Kapsala & Hideout

The delightful village of Kyparissi lies 1:45 mins drive south of Leonidio and the crags in this area are worthy of a trip in their own right. North of here, only 40 km from base is Kapsala, which is quite realistic for a day out from Leonidio. The shady Kapsala provides long, juggy routes with amazing views of the sea. There is also a three-star multi-pitch option at the seaward end of the crag. Hideout can be seen as an extension to Kapsala. It is littered with tafas and pockets that are navigated by many easier routes with lots and lots of bolts.

Multi-Pitch

Both guidebooks cater for multi pitch options in the area.

King Albert at Kapsala

Right of the Flag. The best of the routes appear to Mira – an 8-pitch line up to F6b. Slightly harder and just to the left is Ramisi Rock – 6 pitches up to F6c+ (albeit the second pitch feels a bit more like F7a).

Logistics

Alternative activities

Near by:

Monasteries: St Nicolas, Elona.

Kosmas and Vaskina villages,

Sampatiki Harbour and Pragmatefti village above (the café at the top of the village supplies excellent Olive oil dispensed straight from the barrel – bring your own bottle)

Poulithra village and harbour (cafés and restaurants), also walks from here: to the top of the hill with the flag pole ending at the old water mill and spring. Walk across the bay to Ekklisia Agios Georgios – stopping anywhere on route for a swim.

Further afield:

Fokianos beach (50mins, via Poulithra). The crags of Hideout and Kapsala 10 mins away.

Kyparissi, idyllic classic Greek small harbour town (1:45). Climbing centre in its own right with coverage in the guidebooks. Deserving of a dedicated climbing trip.

Monemvasia (under 2 hours)

Argos ancient Theatre (1:45)

Naphplio (20 mins further on from Argos), ancient port, first capital of modern Greece, has sport crags

Mystras/Sparti/Lagarda gorge and climbing area (2 hour drive)

There and back

The most obvious option, coming from UK is to fly to Athens (flights available from most UK airports) then hire a car from the dozens of options. The drive from the airport takes around 3 hours. The route is quite easy to follow. You might want to look out for the famous Corinth canal. A 6km long, steep-sided, narrow channel cut through the rock, that links the Gulf of Corinth and the Saronic Gulf in the Aegean Sea.

It is possible to make the journey from the airport to Leonidio by bus. Firstly a frequent bus service will take you from the airport to Athens then another bus goes to Leonidio morning and afternoon. Some are direct whilst others require a change in Tripoli. Best to do your own research as times, costs etc may change.

Many Europeans drive and take the ferry – the most popular route appears to be from Ancona in Italy to Patras. There is other climbing near Patras.

Accommodation

With a bit of effort searching, options for larger groups are available (up to 10 or possibly 12 people), lots of options for two to six. Either fully equipped or apartments with small kitchenette.

Leonidio: north bank of river in the heart, south side quieter but only a short walk into town

South of Leonidio: Plaka, on or near the sea. Poulithra, along the sea and up the hill plus Georges bay (quiet and more remote)

North of Leonidio: Sampatiki, and Livadi beach, both next to the sea. Pragmatefti hillside village. Further north Tiros and the hillside villages above. Very attractive but the 20/25 minute drive to the start of the climbing areas every day may detract some.

Food

Leonidio town has all the shops you could expect from a small, busy town including supermarkets, bakeries, greengrocers and delis. The fruit and veg is particularly appealing. Most people will stay in self-catering accommodation, however there are many excellent restaurants in the town that provide a wide range of excellent food at a price that barely makes it worthwhile cooking for yourself. The region produces some fabulous local honey, which is widely available. The best shop for this and many other local products is Rodomelo at the top-end of the high street. (There are great apartments available here also).

Equipment

Standard sport climbing kit is all that is required, however an 80m rope is recommended if you do not want to have route choice restricted. Bring sufficient quickdraws dependent on where you want to climb. Some of the longest routes, including extensions may require up to 30. The guidebook will often, but not always tell you how many are needed for your route. There are a couple of shops in town that sell a limited selection of climbing equipment, the most significant being the Panjika shop.