Stymphalia & Doxa: the two lakes of mountainous Sikyonia



Mountainous Sikyonia hides two beautiful lakes, perfect for a getaway from Kiato.

Lake Stymphalia

The mythical lake where Heracles faced the **Stymphalian birds** is today a protected **Natura** wetland rich in birdlife. Beside it, the **Stymphalia Environment Museum** (entry from €4) tells the story of people and nature.

Lake Doxa

In Feneos, the scenic man-made **Lake Doxa**, with the chapel of Agios Fanourios on its little peninsula, is one of the most photographed landscapes in the Peloponnese — great for walking in every season.

Both are on our map, with live weather and directions from Kiato.

Exploring the Secrets of Ancient Stymphalos

Beyond the shimmering surface of the water, the shores of Lake Stymphalia hold the remains of one of the most significant cities of ancient Arcadia. Ancient Stymphalos was once a thriving urban center, and today, visitors can walk among the ruins of its theater, the foundations of its temples, and the remnants of its sturdy city walls. The archaeological site offers a silent testimony to a civilization that lived in harmony with the fluctuating water levels of the lake for centuries.

Walking through the site, you can trace the layout of the streets and imagine the bustling marketplace that once looked out over the reeds. The strategic position of the city allowed it to control the passes between the Corinthian Gulf and the interior of the Peloponnese, making it a pivotal location in regional history. The blend of limestone ruins and the soft, marshy landscape creates a hauntingly beautiful atmosphere, especially during the early morning hours when the mist still clings to the Mount Zireia foothills.

The Zaraka Monastery: A Gothic Intersection

Located just a short distance from the lake's edge are the evocative ruins of the Cistercian Abbey of Zaraka. This site is a rare architectural gem in Greece, representing a moment in history when Western Gothic style

met the Byzantine landscape. Built in the 13th century by Frankish monks, the abbey was constructed using stones salvaged from the nearby ancient ruins of Stymphalos.

Today, the standing gate and the skeletal remains of the church pillars offer a striking silhouette against the mountain backdrop. It serves as a reminder of the diverse cultural layers that have settled in Sikyonia over the millennia. Exploring Zaraka feels like stepping into a different era, where the silence is broken only by the wind through the cypress trees and the distant calls of wetland birds.

A Sanctuary for Birdwatchers and Nature Lovers

As a protected Natura 2000 site, Lake Stymphalia is one of the most important wetlands in the Peloponnese. The dense reedbeds provide a vital sanctuary for hundreds of migratory bird species. Whether you are a dedicated ornithologist or a casual nature enthusiast, the observation points around the lake offer a chance to spot rare herons, harriers, and the elusive glossy ibis.

The lake’s ecosystem is unique because it is an endorheic basin—its waters disappear into underground sinkholes, or "katavothres," only to emerge elsewhere in the region. This natural drainage system has fascinated locals since antiquity and remains a central theme of the interpretive displays at the Environment Museum. Watching the light change over the reeds at sunset is a quintessential Sikyonia experience, as the water reflects the deep purples and oranges of the Peloponnesian sky.

The Alpine Grandeur of Lake Doxa

Ascending further into the mountainous territory of Feneos, the landscape shifts from marshy wetlands to alpine forests of fir and pine. Lake Doxa, though man-made, has integrated so perfectly into its surroundings that it feels like a natural crown jewel of the region. The turquoise waters are framed by the towering peaks of Mount Helmos and Mount Oligyrtos, creating a scene that many compare to the high-altitude lakes of Switzerland.

The most iconic feature of the lake is the small peninsula that reaches into its center, topped by the picturesque chapel of Agios Fanourios. A narrow strip of land allows visitors to walk out to the chapel, which stands on the site where the old monastery of Saint George once stood before the rising waters forced its relocation. In the autumn, the surrounding trees turn vibrant shades of amber and red, while in the winter, the snow-capped peaks provide a stark, dramatic contrast to the still water.

The Monastery of Agios Georgios: The Guardian of the Valley

Perched high on the slopes overlooking Lake Doxa is the historic Monastery of Agios Georgios (Saint George). Rebuilt in the late 17th century, the monastery played a crucial role during the Greek War of Independence and remains a spiritual heart for the people of Sikyonia. The climb to the monastery is rewarded with what is arguably the most spectacular panoramic view in the entire municipality.

Inside, the monastery features a stunning gilded iconostasis and vibrant frescoes that have survived through the centuries. One of the most cherished traditions for visitors is the hospitality of the monks, who often offer "loukoumi" (traditional rose-flavored delight) made from local ingredients. Sitting on the wooden balcony of the monastery, looking down at the blue expanse of Doxa surrounded by deep green forests, provides a profound sense of peace and perspective.

The Hidden History of the Feneos Basin

The area surrounding Lake Doxa is steeped in local lore. Long before the dam was constructed to create the modern lake, the Feneos valley was subject to dramatic flooding and sudden drainage. Legend tells of Herculean efforts to clear the sinkholes that drained the plain, and the locals still point out the ancient "marks" on the mountain rocks that indicate where the water level used to reach in centuries past.

Today, the valley floor is incredibly fertile, known for producing some of Greece's finest pulses. The unique microclimate of the high-altitude Feneos plain, protected by the surrounding mountains and fed by mountain runoff, creates the perfect conditions for agriculture. Exploring the small villages scattered around the basin, such as Gkoura with its stone houses and traditional square, offers a glimpse into a way of life that remains deeply connected to the cycles of the land.

Activities and Adventures in the High Lands

The mountainous region of Sikyonia is a playground for those who love the outdoors. Both lakes serve as hubs for various activities that allow you to engage with the environment at your own pace. The network of trails and paths around Stymphalia and Doxa caters to everyone from serious hikers to families looking for a gentle stroll.

- **Lakeside Cycling:** The flat perimeter road around Lake Doxa is ideal for cycling, offering constant views of the water and the mountains without grueling inclines.
- **Hiking Trails:** Well-marked paths lead from the lakeside up into the surrounding pine forests, connecting to the European long-distance trail E4. These routes offer hidden viewpoints and encounters with local flora.
- **Photography:** From the ancient ruins of Stymphalos to the reflection of the chapel in Lake Doxa, the area is a haven for photographers seeking to capture the light and texture of the Greek highlands.
- **Water Sports:** During the warmer months, the calm waters of Lake Doxa are perfect for kayaking or hydro-biking, providing a unique perspective of the surrounding peaks from the center of the lake.

The Flavors of Mountainous Sikyonia

A trip to the lakes is not complete without sampling the local gastronomy of the Sikyonia highlands. The villages of Feneos and Stymphalia are famous for their traditional tavernas where the focus is on "farm-to-table" dining long before it became a global trend. The region is particularly celebrated for its PDO (Protected Designation of Origin) products and mountain specialties.

Visitors should look for dishes featuring the famous "Vanilies" beans of Feneos or the local "fava." The mountain honey, harvested from the fir forests, is exceptionally thick and flavorful. In the winter months, the tavernas come alive with the scent of slow-cooked meats and local wine from the nearby vineyards, offering a warm and hearty conclusion to a day spent exploring the crisp mountain air. The hospitality here is authentic and generous, reflecting the enduring spirit of the Corinthian highlands.

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