



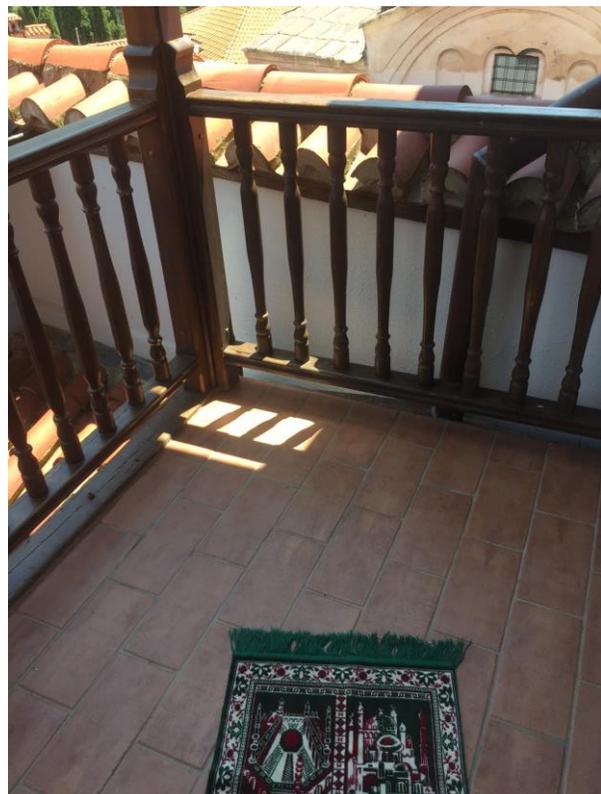
Day 1 – July 2
I watched the mountains come into view on the bus ride toward the monastery. I am in awe of the sheer magnitude and beauty of these rolling hills and cannot believe that I am going to spend a week here. The cobblestones of the monastery paint a storybook image. Flowers blossom at all corners and I am overwhelmed by the loving presence of

the nuns.

We walked through the entrance of the monastery, down the slippery cobblestones, being cautious of where we placed our feet next. A nun, Paisia, swept debris from the cobblestones by the church. A baptism was taking place as we made our way to the guest room. After the baptism, I was able to help a nun, Taxiaria, to clean out the baptismal font. Her warmth was incredible.

Day 2— July 3

I woke up at 3 am to prepare for my fast for the Islamic holy month of Ramadan. The nuns prepared food for me to have for suhur, the meal eaten before fasting begins; I was incredibly touched by this gesture. The total fasting time in Greece is very similar to that of America. I feel as though the monastery is a perfect place to fast—the world stops spinning so quickly, and I feel grounded. Praying on the balcony of the women’s room was an unbelievable sight. It was so breathtaking. My connection to God felt so much more apparent and present. When all worldly distractions fall away, I finally had clarity and peace of mind.



Day 3— July 4

We took a hike to a small chapel and abandoned village. The mountains were unbelievable. The sights were unreal. I felt that this hike was especially taxing with my fast, but the views were unexpected. The heat, dehydration, and fatigue allowed me to rely even more on my connection with God. The nuns ensured to align dinnertime with iftar, the time when the fast breaks. Their kindness and understanding was so amazing.



Day 4— July 5

Today, we went into Sérres. I found myself immediately missing the monastery and the warmth of the sisters. We had breakfast at a local café, served with filo sheets filled with a cream filling and chocolate milk. I made the mistake of entering temptation and accepting the wifi password of the café. My heart sank as I read the messages flooding in from the past three days. My stomach churned. The cream pastry wasn't so sweet anymore, and I lost my appetite. I drank my milk in silence, wishing to always feel the way I do at the monastery.

We spent the afternoon touring a church and a converted art gallery (once a mosque), and two museums. Lunch was at the best restaurant in town—plates of food piled in – fried zucchini, eggplant, salads, sardines, kabobs, sausages, pastries, and ice cream. Though delicious, I once again found myself missing the simplicity of the monastery.

On the cab ride back to the monastery, I developed a splitting headache. My presentation was today. Worry consumed me, coupled with the messages I had read at the café. I didn't know how to resolve any of this anxiety. After coffee with the nuns at 5:30, Richard gave his roundtable discussion on fasting. After his amazing talk, I was even more terrified to present. Fortunately, my presentation ended up being moved outside to the garden. The breeze calmed my nerves as

the others sat attentively beside me. I presented my paper, holding my shaky voice steady. It was followed by lively discussion and Q+A. I am so grateful for these students who have shown me their love and support. They told me I did an amazing job, and that the Q+A was an indicator of that.

Day 5— July 6

As I'm writing, a small bird flies and rests by my feet. I love too deeply and quickly for my own good. My head is spinning from a conversation I had with Sister Makrina last night. This is the perfect time to reflect: early morning, a cool breeze. The beauty of the monastery surrounding me. I don't want to leave. I already feel great sorrow and regret at the thought of leaving, but I don't want to dwell on the future. I want to enjoy the present.



I spent the morning planting beans, cutting lettuce from their stalks, and cleaning eggplants in the garden. Tonight, we celebrated our time with the Sisters and presented them with our talents. Despite a rainstorm that ruined our outdoor screening of the film tour of Princeton, we were able to move indoors and have a wonderful evening of laughter, dancing, and sweets with the sisters.



Day 6— July 7

It's impossible to think of leaving this place. Here, there are no worries. There is constantly an atmosphere of love and acceptance. I spent the final day taking in moments of the monastery. I shadowed the nun, Paisia, who is in charge of the garden. I helped her fertilize and water grass. Through the simplicity of the task, I found serenity. Dinner was bittersweet, as I wondered if I would ever have the opportunity to come back.