

Rock Climbing at Meteora

by

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If you were designing another planet you might invent a place like Meteora. Geologists remain perplexed by the towering pillars of smooth sandstone that demand a myth to explain their origin: petrified giants, perhaps, or a perfect place for Zeus to store his thunderbolts. The word Meteora means "suspended in the air".

It's a perfect name, both for the natural landscape and for the area's other attraction: the medieval monasteries that top many of the formations.

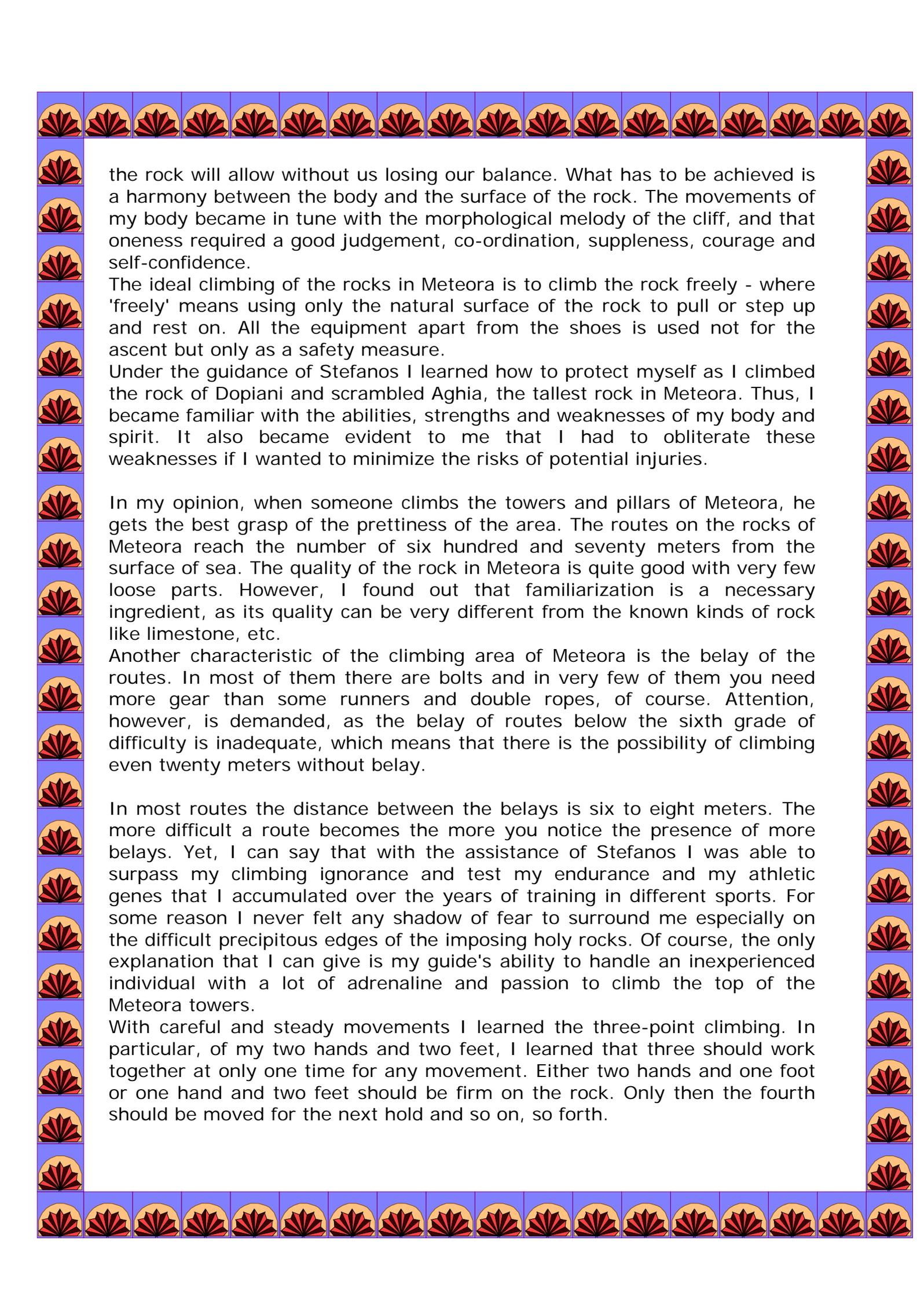
The type of rock is unique and quite different from other climbing areas of Greece. The rock is mainly pebbles, stones, gravel and frail sandstone. Hundreds of big and small pebbles are all joined together in an integrated mass creating these pillars, which are three hundred meters high. The main routes are usually cleaned and steady, while one has to be careful to stay on course to avoid non-stable stones and surprises.

The first people who climbed the Meteora rocks were shepherds; they carried their sheep up to the top to graze to ensure their survival. Moreover, there are indications that as early as the ninth century, monks had climbed to the top of the towers and monasteries were built. Monks withdrew there for solitude and spiritual communication with the divine. The place radiates a special atmosphere and that was the reason that the early inhabitants chose it, to express their ultimate communication and closeness to God.

Based on the Meteora climbing guide, there are two types of routes in Meteora: "Classical mountaineering ideals & Sport climbing routes". Firstly, those that were opened in early days traditional routes have fixed belays and in-between resin bolts. German philosophy prevails on these routes, that is, using as few as possible permanent bolts.

In the majority of routes, moderate level V / V- there are considerable run outs (four to five meters distance and above) and a sudden fall can be fatal. As mentioned above, there are a great number of routes in crack, chimney style and whoever chooses these routes needs to have his own protection. Secondly, there is a great number of sport climbing routes equipped with stainless bolts at higher degrees of difficulty.

For the first time in my life I faced the challenge to climb vertical rocks, and for the first time I felt that rock climbing at its best is vertical ballet performed outdoors, where the stage is a cliff far from the stifling smoke and din of the city. The choreography is an anticipation of the moves that



the rock will allow without us losing our balance. What has to be achieved is a harmony between the body and the surface of the rock. The movements of my body became in tune with the morphological melody of the cliff, and that oneness required a good judgement, co-ordination, suppleness, courage and self-confidence.

The ideal climbing of the rocks in Meteora is to climb the rock freely - where 'freely' means using only the natural surface of the rock to pull or step up and rest on. All the equipment apart from the shoes is used not for the ascent but only as a safety measure.

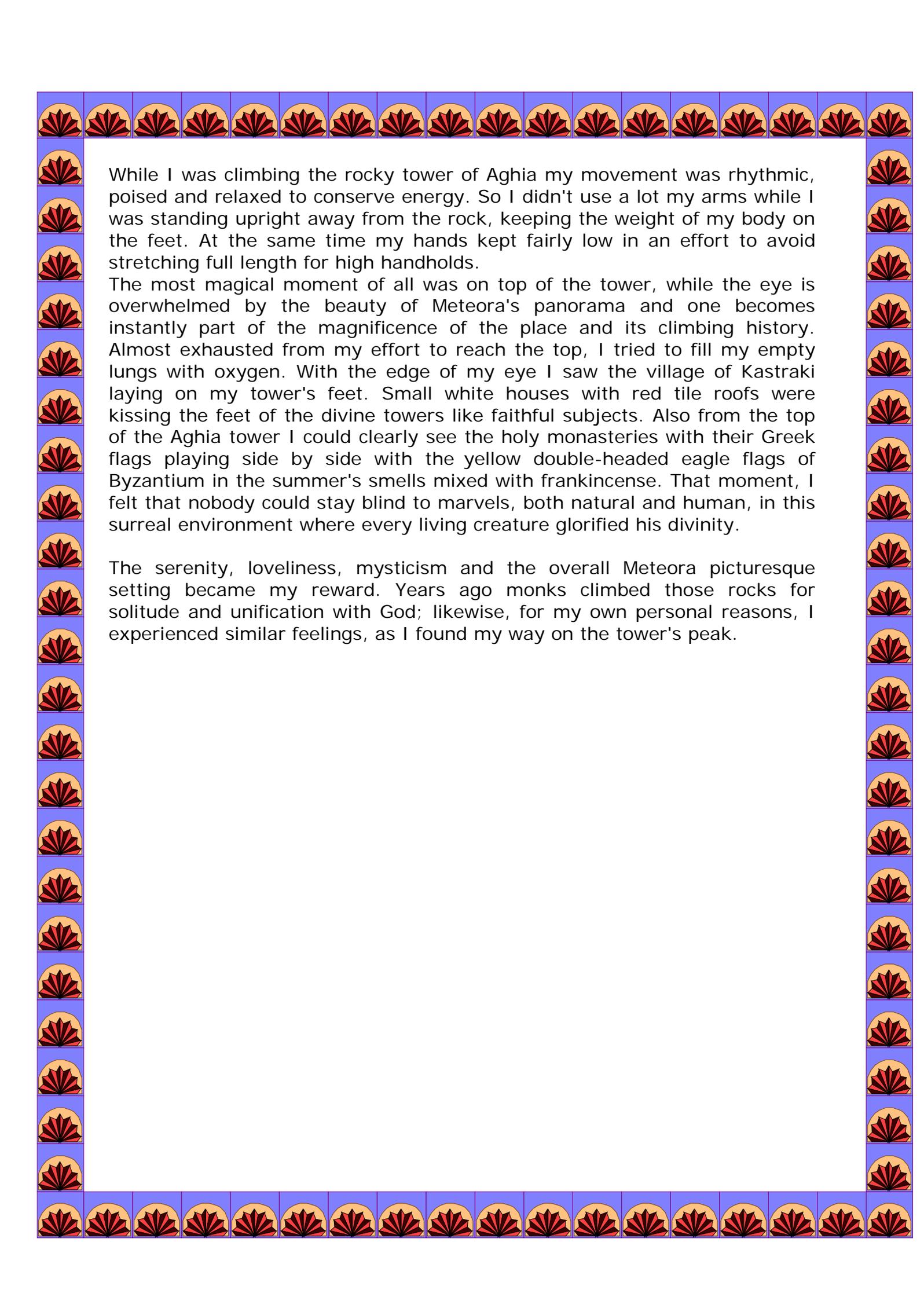
Under the guidance of Stefanos I learned how to protect myself as I climbed the rock of Dopiani and scrambled Aghia, the tallest rock in Meteora. Thus, I became familiar with the abilities, strengths and weaknesses of my body and spirit. It also became evident to me that I had to obliterate these weaknesses if I wanted to minimize the risks of potential injuries.

In my opinion, when someone climbs the towers and pillars of Meteora, he gets the best grasp of the prettiness of the area. The routes on the rocks of Meteora reach the number of six hundred and seventy meters from the surface of sea. The quality of the rock in Meteora is quite good with very few loose parts. However, I found out that familiarization is a necessary ingredient, as its quality can be very different from the known kinds of rock like limestone, etc.

Another characteristic of the climbing area of Meteora is the belay of the routes. In most of them there are bolts and in very few of them you need more gear than some runners and double ropes, of course. Attention, however, is demanded, as the belay of routes below the sixth grade of difficulty is inadequate, which means that there is the possibility of climbing even twenty meters without belay.

In most routes the distance between the belays is six to eight meters. The more difficult a route becomes the more you notice the presence of more belays. Yet, I can say that with the assistance of Stefanos I was able to surpass my climbing ignorance and test my endurance and my athletic genes that I accumulated over the years of training in different sports. For some reason I never felt any shadow of fear to surround me especially on the difficult precipitous edges of the imposing holy rocks. Of course, the only explanation that I can give is my guide's ability to handle an inexperienced individual with a lot of adrenaline and passion to climb the top of the Meteora towers.

With careful and steady movements I learned the three-point climbing. In particular, of my two hands and two feet, I learned that three should work together at only one time for any movement. Either two hands and one foot or one hand and two feet should be firm on the rock. Only then the fourth should be moved for the next hold and so on, so forth.



While I was climbing the rocky tower of Aghia my movement was rhythmic, poised and relaxed to conserve energy. So I didn't use a lot my arms while I was standing upright away from the rock, keeping the weight of my body on the feet. At the same time my hands kept fairly low in an effort to avoid stretching full length for high handholds.

The most magical moment of all was on top of the tower, while the eye is overwhelmed by the beauty of Meteora's panorama and one becomes instantly part of the magnificence of the place and its climbing history. Almost exhausted from my effort to reach the top, I tried to fill my empty lungs with oxygen. With the edge of my eye I saw the village of Kastraki laying on my tower's feet. Small white houses with red tile roofs were kissing the feet of the divine towers like faithful subjects. Also from the top of the Aghia tower I could clearly see the holy monasteries with their Greek flags playing side by side with the yellow double-headed eagle flags of Byzantium in the summer's smells mixed with frankincense. That moment, I felt that nobody could stay blind to marvels, both natural and human, in this surreal environment where every living creature glorified his divinity.

The serenity, loveliness, mysticism and the overall Meteora picturesque setting became my reward. Years ago monks climbed those rocks for solitude and unification with God; likewise, for my own personal reasons, I experienced similar feelings, as I found my way on the tower's peak.