

# Climbing MT. Olympus

By

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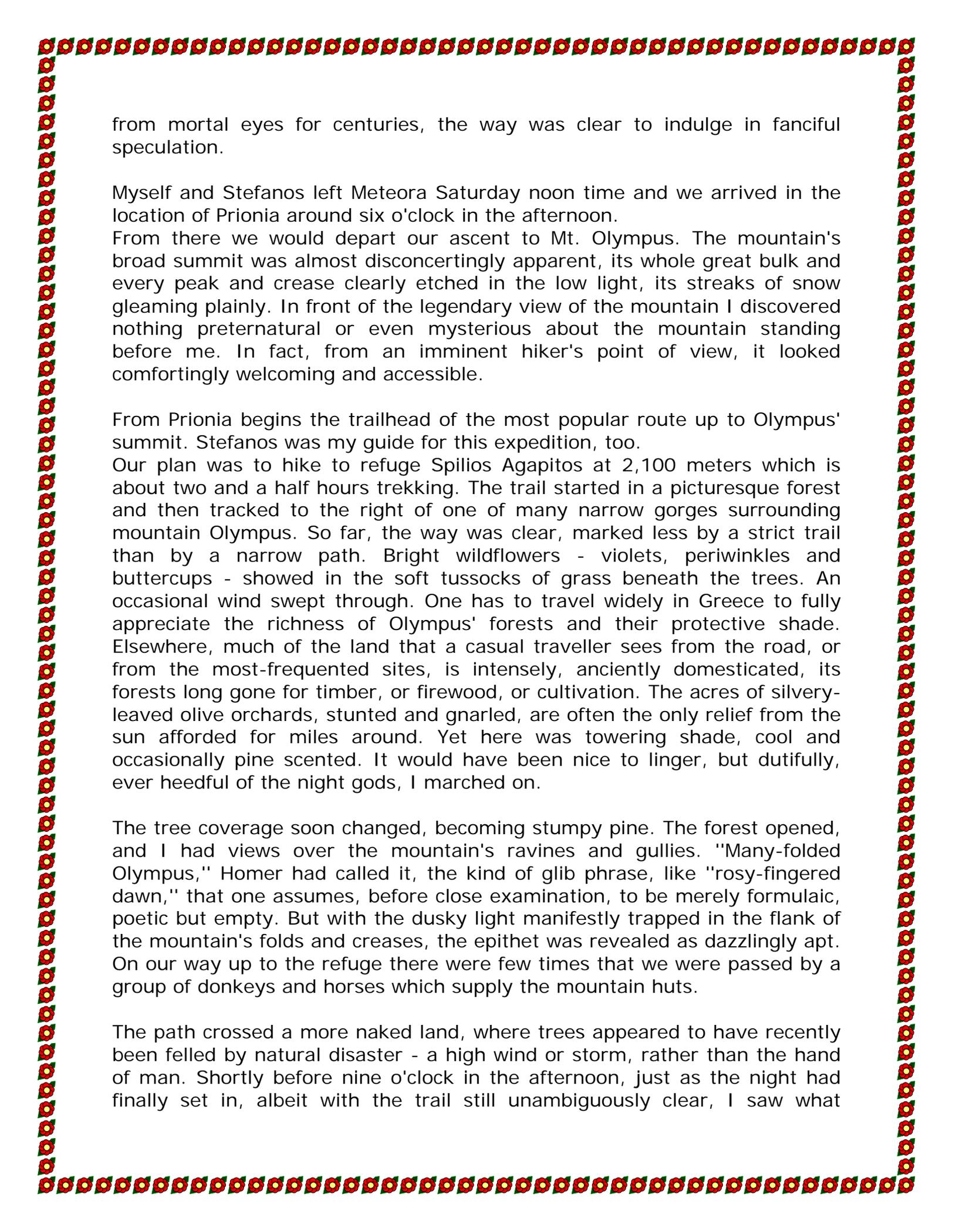
The magic of the mythical mountain Olympus cannot be described. My decision to ascend the mountain was not just a climb during my preparation weekend for Himalaya, but a special feeling to live the past and the future at the same moment. I believe that the strength of the adrenaline that a climber can pump out from this cruel mountainous massif could be the real source of the surrounding myths.

Mt. Olympus stands at 2,918 meters, and making it the tallest mountain in Greece and the second highest in the Balkan Peninsula.

Mt. Olympus is a mere third the height of Mt. Everest, a bump upon a topographical map of the planet's surface. Yet, while Everest has teased the imagination of the western world only since the mid-nineteenth century, Olympus has cast its substantial shadow over western mankind for at least the past 2,800 years. My first glimpse of Mt. Olympus was when I was seven years old, during a weekend excursion from Athens to Thessaloniki with my uncle. Although we experienced a terrible bus accident close to the city of Larissa, thank God with no injuries, I will never forget this holy mountain, like a great wall cutting and deflecting the low, late afternoon light. Its slopes were shadowy with forest and, above the tree line, its broad summit was streaked with snow, although this was October. So much for Homer, who in the *Odyssey* describes Olympus as follows:

"Olympus, where the abode of the gods stands firm  
and unmoving  
forever, they say, and is not shaken with winds nor  
spattered  
with rains, nor does snow pile ever there, but the  
shining bright air  
stretches cloudless away, and the white light  
glances upon it. "

The climate of Olympus is probably the most abruptly changeable of any mountain in Greece, with prevailing high winds and churning mists generated by moist air rising from the nearby gulf. Its summit is routinely hidden by thick clouds, a feature that undoubtedly helped develop the mountain's mythology. Since what was actually there had been shrouded



from mortal eyes for centuries, the way was clear to indulge in fanciful speculation.

Myself and Stefanos left Meteora Saturday noon time and we arrived in the location of Prionia around six o'clock in the afternoon.

From there we would depart our ascent to Mt. Olympus. The mountain's broad summit was almost disconcertingly apparent, its whole great bulk and every peak and crease clearly etched in the low light, its streaks of snow gleaming plainly. In front of the legendary view of the mountain I discovered nothing preternatural or even mysterious about the mountain standing before me. In fact, from an imminent hiker's point of view, it looked comfortingly welcoming and accessible.

From Prionia begins the trailhead of the most popular route up to Olympus' summit. Stefanos was my guide for this expedition, too.

Our plan was to hike to refuge Spilios Agapitos at 2,100 meters which is about two and a half hours trekking. The trail started in a picturesque forest and then tracked to the right of one of many narrow gorges surrounding mountain Olympus. So far, the way was clear, marked less by a strict trail than by a narrow path. Bright wildflowers - violets, periwinkles and buttercups - showed in the soft tussocks of grass beneath the trees. An occasional wind swept through. One has to travel widely in Greece to fully appreciate the richness of Olympus' forests and their protective shade. Elsewhere, much of the land that a casual traveller sees from the road, or from the most-frequented sites, is intensely, anciently domesticated, its forests long gone for timber, or firewood, or cultivation. The acres of silvery-leaved olive orchards, stunted and gnarled, are often the only relief from the sun afforded for miles around. Yet here was towering shade, cool and occasionally pine scented. It would have been nice to linger, but dutifully, ever heedful of the night gods, I marched on.

The tree coverage soon changed, becoming stumpy pine. The forest opened, and I had views over the mountain's ravines and gullies. "Many-folded Olympus," Homer had called it, the kind of glib phrase, like "rosy-fingered dawn," that one assumes, before close examination, to be merely formulaic, poetic but empty. But with the dusky light manifestly trapped in the flank of the mountain's folds and creases, the epithet was revealed as dazzlingly apt. On our way up to the refuge there were few times that we were passed by a group of donkeys and horses which supply the mountain huts.

The path crossed a more naked land, where trees appeared to have recently been felled by natural disaster - a high wind or storm, rather than the hand of man. Shortly before nine o'clock in the afternoon, just as the night had finally set in, albeit with the trail still unambiguously clear, I saw what



appeared to be a building looming ahead. Puzzled, I wondered if it was a kind of halfway house. Closer and its lighted windows showed that it was inhabited. Dripping with sweat, my pulse thumping hard, I clambered up stone steps to a paved courtyard and realized I had, in fact, arrived at the refuge Spilios Agapitos.

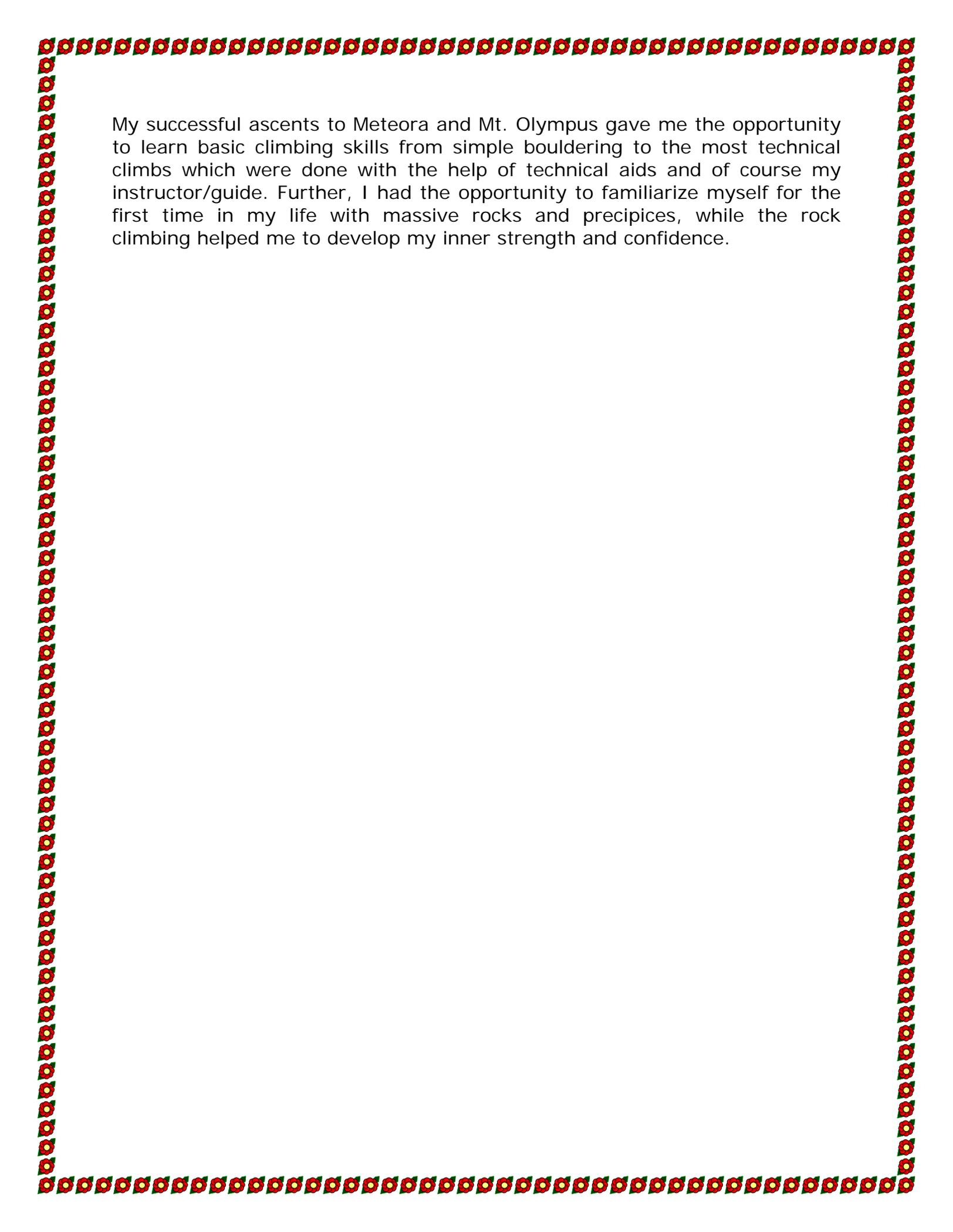
I walked into the refuge, and to my surprise, I noticed that it was professionally run and with a kitchen turning out simple but nutritious food to sustain us on the journey. No hiking boots were allowed inside the refuge, thus we had to change our boots for slippers provided at the door.

The following morning it was an early rise at five o'clock. We walked outside to see the sun rising over the Aegean Sea to the East beyond the small town of Litochoro, and by six o'clock we were back on the trail. Shortly above the refuge Spilios Agapitos the tree line ceased, and the contours of Olympus were laid bare, rolling and gentle.

We took an up-turn to the right and followed the section just beneath a ridgeline all the way to the top. This section is called Zonaria and the trail became more uncertain, stamped out now not on earth, but on pale, broken rock that slid and slipped beneath my feet. The climb became steeper, and although the day was still cool, I was conscious of the sun beating on me through the rarefied air. After about an hour of trekking we reached the location Louki from where we started our ascent for approximately forty minutes over loose scree for the final ascent to the summit. The weather was cloudy with light rains on and off, and the climbing proved to be a bit slippery but we managed to reach the summit without any major problems. As it was, I felt, again, as though I had the mountain to myself. Once on the actual rocky summit, I looked around; there was not another living being in sight.

I sat for a while, enjoying the wind that had come up suddenly and made me wonder about my ascent to Ama Dablam. In one direction, I looked down onto the plain below, with its patchwork of multicoloured fields and its one visible settlement. In the other, I looked into the heart of the mountain, with its sloping valleys of green felt, holding away the well-hidden stories of the twelve Gods of Olympus from mortals' eyes.

From there we trailed downhill, which is possibly even more of a challenge, as you are teetering in precipices. The air here was gentle and cool, while the Thessalian plain, only a few hours away, I am sure that it was murderously hot. Reaching Louki we took the route of Zonaria back to refuge Spilios Agapitos. After a quick bite for lunch at the refuge we were back on the trail to return to Prionia. It took us approximately two and a half hours of continuous trekking in the rain until we made it back to the car park at the trailhead by four o'clock in the afternoon.



My successful ascents to Meteora and Mt. Olympus gave me the opportunity to learn basic climbing skills from simple bouldering to the most technical climbs which were done with the help of technical aids and of course my instructor/guide. Further, I had the opportunity to familiarize myself for the first time in my life with massive rocks and precipices, while the rock climbing helped me to develop my inner strength and confidence.