

Mr. P. Polakis  
President  
Enosis ton Apantahou Sfakianon  
Emmanouil Benaki & Zalongou 15  
Athens 108 78  
Greece

Copy: Mr. S. Manousogiannakis  
General Secretary

Also by E-mail:  
[Pavlos.polakis@gmail.com](mailto:Pavlos.polakis@gmail.com)  
[Sifis\\_imbros@yahoo.gr](mailto:Sifis_imbros@yahoo.gr)

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### **Development and business plan for Sfakia**

Dear Sir,

We are a group of regular visitors to Sfakia with a strong interest in the area and in the development of the district, who have read with great interest about the Union of Sfakians' (*Ένωση των Απανταχού Σφακιανών*) initiative to engage a group of eminent experts to formulate a "Development and Business Plan" for the district. We are primarily walkers who enjoy the beautiful, unspoiled coast and the spectacular landscape of the Lefka Ori but also are interested in Sfakia's history and culture. All of us are concerned that these particular attractions should be developed and marketed to the best benefit of the people of the area, and we therefore wish to offer some ideas for you to consider in your deliberations.

We were very encouraged by statements made by the head of the study team, Professor Belavilas, as reported in the newspaper *Χανιώτικα Νέα* on 12 December, 2009, that the development of Sfakia should not follow the disastrous model that has been implemented in the northern parts of Crete. In the hope that the views of people who frequently use the attractions of Sfakia and the Lefka Ori will be of interest to the Union and the study team, we have prepared this brief submission for your consideration.

#### **Walkers' market profile**

There appears to be a view within Sfakia that walkers are a lower-end market segment. Since the people of Sfakia want to attract more up-market tourism, encouraging more walkers may seem to them to be incompatible with such aspirations. Nothing, however, could be further from the truth. Most of the walkers who visit Sfakia come to this area because of its natural beauty, the unspoiled environment and the unsurpassed Sfakian hospitality – not because it is a cheap holiday option. The walkers who we meet in Sfakia are mostly professional people – doctors, lawyers, business and university people, etc. – or fairly well-off retired people, who all value the area as it is now.

Walkers constitute the largest component of what is known as the "activities tourism" segment of the market, with cycling, fishing and golf well behind in terms of participation levels in the largest markets in Europe, such as the UK, France and

Germany. Activities tourism has been experiencing strong growth, while mass leisure holiday markets have recently seen a problematic downturn throughout southern Europe. A combination of an increased focus on health and fitness, a broadening of the age groups interested in activity holidays, and the relative increasing level of disposable income amongst walkers indicates a strong growth in this market for the future.

Experience elsewhere has shown that since the walkers' market is growing and many of its participants are older and more affluent, they will require better facilities and will be prepared to pay more for them. However, care will need to be taken to ensure that the facilities are more compatible with their preferences for more eco-friendly, smaller family-run type hotels with a local flavour rather than large and impersonal 4- and 5-star hotels aimed at the mass leisure markets. Larger tour-operated walking groups may require somewhat bigger establishments, but again not of the type and size seen in the northern parts of the island.

A further advantage of activity tourism for Sfakia is that generally such visitors rely more on local supporting facilities – travel to and from the activity location, accommodation, food, entertainment, etc. – so that the financial benefits penetrate more broadly into the local economy than is the case with mass leisure tourism.

Another important point is that walking holidays tend to take place in the cooler months of the year. They therefore provide an opportunity for extending the holiday season into the spring and the autumn of the year, with a consequent increase in revenue, profits and employment in the local communities.

For these reasons, promoting Sfakia as a walking destination and at the same time moving Sfakian tourist facilities in a more up-market direction is not only a most viable proposition but also a necessary precondition for the future growth of Sfakia as an eco-friendly natural environment. A well-structured and supported promotional campaign aimed at this market segment, highlighting the comforts of the good standard of accommodation to be enjoyed after a hard and satisfying day's walk, can only be to the advantage of the future development of Sfakia.

### **Infrastructure requirements**

Supporting market growth requires the provision of appropriate infrastructure that involves more than just better accommodation facilities. The walkers' market requires well-maintained, mapped and signposted paths that visitors to the area can follow easily and safely, either individually, in self-guided groups, or with a guide.

As visitors who frequently use the walking paths along the coast of Sfakia and in the Lefka Ori, we are concerned that not only is the infrastructure inadequate to support growth in this market but that it is also rapidly getting worse – which has longer-term implications. Many of the pathways and *kalderimia* that most casual walking visitors use during their holidays are deteriorating at an alarming rate and, in some places, have become downright dangerous. Should this continue, it will be only a matter of time before these visitors find better maintained and less-dangerous places to walk.

Furthermore, neglecting the walking paths is also contributing to the gradual loss of an aspect of Sfakian heritage, as the *kalderimia*, built and used over so many centuries by Sfakians, crumble and disappear. Some of the old, stone-built *mitata* that are used as shelters along footpaths are also falling into disrepair as shepherds move their activities to easily accessible points and abandon structures that have stood sometimes for centuries.

We therefore recommend that the Sfakia Development Plan addresses the need to repair parts of these footpaths and arrange for the ongoing maintenance of paths and associated *kalderimia*, *mitata* and springs in order to ensure the continued attraction of walkers to this area, as well as preserving the Sfakian heritage for future generations of local people.

Two attachments accompany this submission. Attachment 1 outlines a strategy for maintaining the more frequented walking routes, and lists some of the more popular paths and their condition. Members of our group would be happy to provide further details about these to the study team if required. Attachment 2 lists some routes that could be considered as part of a longer-term plan to further expand walking in Sfakia. Again, we could supply more information about these to the study team.

Other components of infrastructure support that should be addressed are the need for adequate way-marking, signage, and mapping and the provision of detailed information about available walks. This could also involve developing and promoting day walks along existing paths, including providing information on historical and heritage features of the walks as well as on the flora and fauna that can be seen along the way. The recent publication of high-quality and detailed maps of the district by the Anavasi company should aid the production of more specific local walking brochures, as will a few walking guides that already deal with the area. The Chania Mountaineering Club should be encouraged to upgrade its booklet for the E4 walking trail, which extends the length of Crete and passes through the Lefka Ori.

Finally, the provision of suitable transportation to the start and end points of walking paths needs to be addressed; walkers would be prepared to pay for such services, which could be provided by local, private operators. The lack of such organized transportation has been a source of great frustration to walkers in Sfakia for decades.

### **Marketing and promotional support**

Ensuring that walking paths are safe and accessible, combined with the provision of a satisfactory standard of accommodation, is the basis of a plan to attract more walkers to the area. Professional and ongoing marketing and promotion of Sfakia's coastal paths, gorges and mountains as a walking destination also need to be incorporated into the plan. Fierce competition for walking, cultural and flora-related holidays comes from many destinations such as France, Spain and the UK. Sfakia is particularly well placed to compete in this segment of the market because of its coastal walks, spectacular gorges and the wild grandeur of the mountains of the Lefka Ori. The Samaria Gorge is a major tourist attraction in Crete, but the district of Sfakia, because of access and promotional issues, receives very little benefit from day-trippers passing through the area while travelling to and from this gorge. A marketing plan should aim to develop and promote all of Sfakia's many gorges, along with coastal and mountain pathways, in a comprehensive way.

Other than the Samaria Gorge, there is little promotion of the Lefka Ori to walkers, apart from a few private web sites run by some hotel operators in the district, a few overseas tour operators, and some local web site owners. Increasingly, tourists plan and source their holidays through the internet. It is vital, therefore, that local authorities and hoteliers promote the walking attractions of the area, as well as their own facilities, in a more professional and comprehensive manner through the internet. Travel industry shows could also highlight the attraction of walking holidays in Crete alongside the more traditional focus on the leisure market.

Walking, hiking and activity holidays in general represent a major growth segment in an otherwise declining mass tourism market in Europe. Sfakia has an opportunity to benefit from this change in demand by developing and promoting an existing magnificent resource. The continued neglect of the footpaths, and a change of focus towards the leisure holiday market, will have a negative impact on the future of Sfakia. And from a longer-term perspective, if elements of Sfakian heritage such as the *kalderimia* and *mitata* of the Lefka Ori are lost, this might also have negative consequences for future generations of Sfakians as well as visitors.

Yours sincerely,

Jean Bienvenu  
Web site developer / Walking tour guide  
Antoniou Giannari 3  
Kalathas - Akrotiri  
73100 Chania, Crete, Greece  
E-mail: [jean@west-crete.com](mailto:jean@west-crete.com)  
Tel.: 6974694206

Ray Langsten  
Research Associate Professor  
American University in Cairo  
113 Sharia Kasr el-Aini  
11511 Cairo, Egypt  
E-mail: [langsten@aucegypt.edu](mailto:langsten@aucegypt.edu)

George Dalidakis  
Finance Director  
259 Dendy Street  
East Brighton, Vic.  
Australia 3187  
E-mail: [George\\_d@iinet.net.au](mailto:George_d@iinet.net.au)

Simon Stutz  
Doctor of Sciences  
University of Stuttgart  
Woerishofener Strasse 29  
70372 Stuttgart  
Germany  
E-mail: [simon.stutz@bio.uni-stuttgart.de](mailto:simon.stutz@bio.uni-stuttgart.de)

Michael Katzko  
Research & Statistical Consultant  
Rentmeesterhof 99,  
6532DD Nijmegen,  
The Netherlands.  
E-mail: [mwskatzko@yahoo.com](mailto:mwskatzko@yahoo.com)

Peter Trudgill  
Professor of Sociolinguistics  
Author of "In Sfakia"  
32 Bathurst Rd  
Norwich NR2 2PP  
United Kingdom  
E-mail: [peter.trudgill@unifr.ch](mailto:peter.trudgill@unifr.ch)

## Attachment 1: Frequently used hiking routes and a strategy for maintaining them

A strategy for maintaining and developing hiking routes in and around Sfakia should take the following matters into consideration:

a) *evaluating route quality*

Ideally, this should take place once a year.

b) *establishing the appropriate level of repair/maintenance required*

A guideline would be to retain the status of any promoted route. Thus, a *kalderimi* should be maintained as a *kalderimi*, a footpath as a footpath, etc. This is also a relevant issue if the *kalderimia* are to be preserved as part of the region's cultural and historical heritage.

c) *determining the appropriate level of trail marking (waymarking)*

This is a difficult, and subjective, issue that requires some consultation. Experienced hikers become proficient at reading the existing cairns and small painted dots that mark paths. However, if the plan is to develop selected routes for relatively inexperienced hikers, then the markings have to be made easier to follow.

Repair and maintenance programs can be classified as follows:

### *repairing routes*

1. damage to *kalderimi*, such as collapsed support walls

This involves major, skilled work. It would require yearly checks of paths.

2. collapsed paths (e.g. landslides, rain damage)

This also involves major work. Collapsed paths become a safety issue when there is no easy way around the problem spot. This type of maintenance is also important for attracting new and less-experienced hikers to the selected paths. It would require yearly checks.

### *clearing routes:*

3. removal of significant plant growth

On a route such as Loutro–Anopolis, overgrown thorn bushes are destroying the profile of the *kalderimi*. Since these shrubs grow slowly, this type of clearing operation need only be carried out every few years.

4. removal of stones large enough to require heavy lifting

These pose problems especially on *kalderimi*. Clearing such obstacles would maintain the *kalderimi*'s status. This would need to be an annual activity.

5. clearing paths of accumulated debris such as minor landslips, pine needles and branches or even fallen trees

This type of cleanup can be part of a yearly program for the promoted routes. The issue of maintenance revolves around matching the level of path difficulty with the level of experience of the hiker. If a route chosen for promotion is to be made accessible for a wider range of people, then more work has to be done to make the path truly walkable.

## **Popular hiking routes**

The following is only a selection of some currently popular hiking routes. The purpose is to illustrate the type and amount of maintenance/repair required. The first three routes are relatively easy and represent those most frequently used by newcomers to Sfakia; the last three routes are more difficult and are appropriate for more experienced hikers. Two of these latter routes are designated as “official” European E4 hiking routes.

### ***Aradena Gorge***

A route exists from Aradena bridge to the coast. One section is becoming dangerous for hikers. The recently built bypass of the iron ladder section is deteriorating, and the wooden handrails are collapsing and give only a false sense of security. The ladder section is itself deteriorating through lack of use since the new route bypass was built.

### ***Anopolis-Livaniana-Lykos***

The section crossing the western Anopolis plateau is in excellent condition, but the beginning of the route in Anopolis is poorly waymarked. The new road to Livaniana has damaged parts of the *kalderimi* which had once been the most direct path to Livaniana. Some parts of the old path are actually dangerous. A new path, intended to bypass this damage, is itself steep and not well laid-out in places. It would be more effective to repair the old *kalderimi* where the road cuts it, to make it safe and more accessible. Also, part of the *kalderimi* wall has collapsed where the route enters the cleft in the rocks going down to Livaniana. If this damage is not repaired then it will only get worse. The *kalderimi* from Livaniana to Lykos/Finix is in quite good shape.

### ***Anopolis-Loutro-Finix***

The route consists mostly of a *kalderimi*, but it is in poor condition in many places, particularly the section below Agia Ekaterini. The upper section has even been partially cut by fences very recently. Repair of the *kalderimi* support walls is necessary. The *kalderimi* needs to be cleared of overgrown thorn bushes which almost completely block the route in some spots.

### ***E4 Sougia-Agia Roumeli***

The section from Sougia to Profitis Ilias Tripitis is mostly in quite a good condition. Plant growth could be cut back in one place, and repair to one short collapsed section of path is required. The waymarkings are not abundant and could be improved. The descent into the Tripiti Gorge is in poor condition, and the path to Domata requires major repair in one place to make it safe. The next section of path to Agia Roumeli requires improvement in a few spots; the waymarking in this section is poor in some places and needs to be improved.

### ***Agios Ioannis-Kroussia-Pirou***

The section from Agios Ioannis to Kroussia is poorly waymarked but the route is obvious through the ravine. The route from Kroussia to Potamos and Pirou (consisting of *kalderimi* in places) is in good condition in some places (around Zaranokephala), but elsewhere is in average or even poor condition at some places. The path as a whole is deteriorating and in some places is even starting to vanish.

### ***E4 Livadha-Niato-Askifou***

This difficult route needs to be improved in some sections. The section from Livadha to Kastro is well marked, but the section around Kastro is poorly marked.

## **Attachment 2: Routes for future development**

The following are a selection of routes which could be targeted for future development. Our examples were chosen from possibilities which (i) take advantage of existing *kalderimia*, (ii) where some route-marking is already in place, and (iii) where the new routes can be easily extended from existing popular routes.

### ***Eastern Anopolis plateau***

This area could be developed around the existing route connecting Anopoli to Kaloi Lakkoi and the Niato plateau. There is also scope for connections to and circular walks of both the Sfakiano and Ilingas gorges. The *kalderimia* at the eastern end of the Anopolis plateau is overgrown and is of no better quality than the surrounding hillside; there are cairns and paint markings in some places.

The Sfakiano gorge provides a relatively easy walk up from Sfakia to Agios Pavlos chapel. From there various possibilities exist. The recently marked path up a ravine to Trikoukia is in poor condition (weather damage). An alternative is a *kalderimi* to Kaloi Lakkoi, which provides a circular link back to Anopolis. There is also a small road leading towards Imbros.

The Ilingas gorge offers possibilities for routes between Sfakia and Anopolis and further north to the Kaloi Lakkoi route. However, while still walkable, there has been a lot of rain and flood damage in recent years, and some path repairs are required. The waymarkings – especially in two tricky spots – need to be improved to help walkers find the route.

### ***Western Anopolis plateau***

There is also some potential at the western end of Anopolis plateau, including Agios Ioannis, and new walks could be developed around existing popular routes to Livaniana, the Aradena gorge, and the route to Agia Roumeli via Selouda. Old *kalderimia* still exist in places but are of mixed quality, sometimes in good condition, but often overgrown with plants through disuse. Paths on both sides of the Aradena gorge could be waymarked to allow day tours of the plateau. In addition, there is a footpath from Aradena up a ravine to Kroussia which is marked with cairns and some blue dots.

### ***Agia Roumeli's eastern forts***

A *kalderimi* exists in the lower section from the floor of the Eligia gorge heading towards Angelokampoi, but in the higher section this has vanished. This section must be waymarked. The old route from Palaia Agia Roumeli should also be waymarked, which would result in a nice circular walk.

### ***Omalos plateau***

A circular route can be promoted which follows the upper east side of the Agia Irini gorge from Agioi Theodoroi towards Koustogerako, then to Achlada and continuing to Strifomadi and back down to Omalos. Parts of this route are either poorly known or neglected. The footpath from Agioi Theodoroi is in good condition and the waymarking has been improved recently. The route from Achlada to Strifomadi is an E4 route. However, it is poorly maintained and has become dangerous and almost unusable where the route follows the eastern flank of Strifomadi.

### ***Askifou plateau***

In addition to being a starting point for the Imbros gorge hike and for routes west to Anopoli, some additional hiking routes to the east of the plateau can be promoted. The route Askifou–Goni–Asfendou–Kallikratis is primarily on roads but can serve as a lead-in for hikes down the Asfendou and Kallikratis gorges. The latter is part of the official E4 route and includes a *kalderimi* which is in good condition in parts.

### ***North-south connections***

As a way to attract hikers who want to walk in the high mountain areas, some possibilities for routes from the north could be considered for development and promotion. There are already some existing routes which could be developed or improved:

Livadha–Volikas: No defined path exists; waymarking is necessary.

Livadha–Kolokithas–Therissos: No defined path exists for the Livadha–Kolokithas section; waymarking is necessary. There is a faint path in the lower section coming up from Therissos.

No defined path exists in the upper section to Kolokithas; waymarking is necessary.