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Two ladies from the revived village of Vamvakou Laconia, an older and a newer resident of the village, talk to Marie Claire



What is it like to see your almost deserted village revive? And in what ways has your life changed after moving from Exarchia to a settlement with only a handful of residents? Roula Alexandri, president of the Women's Cooperative, and Eleni Mami, Communication Director of Vamvakou Revival



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Once you read the program of events in **Vamvakou Laconia** – top-notch theatrical and musical productions, unique educational activities for the young and old – you will find it hard to believe that this all takes place every **weekend** in a small community in the Peloponnesian region and not at the **Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center**.

The comparison, however, is not a coincidence: The **Niarchos** family has roots in the village and through the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, has chosen not only to support it, but to launch an unprecedented, by Greek standards, effort to revive it, not with fragmentary activities, but with a comprehensive plan to create an infrastructure and to provide incentives to more and more people, to select it as their place of permanent residence. Among them is **Eleni Mami**, who in 2019 left the center of **Athens** with her partner to live and work in Vamvakou as a member of the **Management Committee**, as the Secretary of the **Vamvakou Revival Social Cooperative** and Director of Communication and Marketing of the revival initiative. About eight months ago, the couple had a baby boy, the first child born here in decades. Among the older permanent residents of the village, Eleni found a valuable ally, **Roula Alexandri**, who embraced the project from the first moment and took over

as president of the newly established **Vamvakou Women's Cooperative**. The two women talk to Marie Claire about the before, now and after of the village.



Vamvakou Laconia. ©Vamvakou Revival

Roula Alexandri:

*"I was born in Vamvakou in 1955. I grew up, went to school, got married and had three children here. My whole life was in Vamvakou, until ten years ago, when I started going back and forth to **Skala of Laconia**, where we have an olive grove.*

*" When I finished school in Vamvakou, we were **70 children**. When my kids went to school, they were **30-35**. The village had life back then, **two or three shops** and the **forestry department**, from which Vamvakou made a living. When my children grew up, I did farm work and participated in clearing the forest. I ran the **café** in the square for ten years and the **guesthouse** for three years which was donated to the village by Tsochonis, [**Georgios Tsochonis**, member of the parliament (MP) and entrepreneur of the 19th century, with international activity, who was born in Vamvakou]. **Spyros Niarchos** brought us electricity in the '60s, when it was nowhere to be found, directly from Megalopolis. Then he brought us running tap water. **Eugenia Niarchou** donated very good food, clothing and bathrooms to the school, where we bathed twice a week.*

"During the '90s-'95s the village began to empty, very few children lived here. The older ones went down to the flatlands, where they had land, and then they did not return easily because it was secluded. Only a few pensioners who lived in Athens, Sparta and the surrounding areas would go to Vamvakou during the summer.

*" When I found out about the **revival** effort, I thought that our village would have great growth, because we knew **Niarchos** and what it has **offered**. And I, as a patriot who grew up here, feel great joy and help the team[the Vamvakou Revival team] in*

whatever they need. When the **Lyric** [GNO] came to Vamvakou, I even gave them **home-made kneaded bread**, they went crazy! So delicious, traditional bread, with sourdough. These people live in Vienna and come to find it in Vamvakou.

"Eleven women have gathered in the **Women's Cooperative**. The foundation will help us a lot because, truth be told, things are difficult here. Now we are talking about making, with genuine ingredients, pasta, bread, rusks, sweets. A **traditional dessert** of ours is the '**Karydato**' [a walnut-based dessert], because we produce a lot of walnuts, the best in Greece! It is oily, not dry, and has a unique taste. And our chestnuts are very tasty, so in the cooperative we will make walnuts and chestnuts into sweet desserts.

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"My life in Vamvakou has **changed** a lot. We go out, we have a very nice café, an amazing **restaurant**, very polished. The **school** has become a cultural center, with robotics, information technology where children are involved in various activities, we see theatrical **performances** that you do not easily see in the countryside, and foreign **films**. Families come here and children play on the playground without parents being afraid, because everything is **carefully designed**.

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"What advice would I give to the younger people who come here? Patience and hard work. And to preserve the rural life of the village. Because, truth be told, it's hard to handle by a young person" says Roula Aelxandri (photo)

Eleni Mami*:

*"I started visiting Vamvakou in **2008** for **summer holidays** with my husband, who is from the village. It was our retreat. But we lived permanently in **Exarchia**.*

*"The initial idea was to do something better for the place during the **summers**. But when we went to the **Stavros Niarchos Foundation** in **2016**, the president of the Foundation [Andreas Dracopoulos], who believed very much in the project and still*

believes in it, said to us: "Guys, should you maybe think of doing something **bigger** and get yourselves involved in it?"

"When we discussed this with the team about moving permanently to live in the village, my first **reaction** was: 'Are you **crazy**? No way!' But as this plan began to take shape on paper and become bigger, the **challenge** of creating something from **scratch** in a place that meant something to all of us became great. I think that made me decide to come here, as well as, of course, the different living conditions. And the truth is, I don't regret it.

"I may miss my **friends**, my **mom** and some things from **life** in **Athens**, but the working conditions are the same, since we work with a large organization. I do not miss anything, for example, in terms of office equipment, the Internet or networking. On the other hand, when you finish from your work pressure and go out into such a calm environment, you see the trees, you hear the birds, you immediately **calm down** and discharge.

"When we first arrived, the village was vibrant only in the **summers**, when about **200 people** gathered. In winters it was deserted, it had **9 permanent residents**. We are now **25 permanent residents**, most of them young, and operate a **restaurant-café** and a **guesthouse**, while soon a **second** one will be added. The **playground** and the **school** have been renovated, which functions as a technological center, we have hiking and cycling routes. An agricultural cooperative and a women's cooperative have been established and I estimate that by autumn we will have the first local **products**. Now a business incubator is being created, which will bring new jobs. All with donations from the Niarchos Foundation.

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"In the early days in Vamvakou I had to adapt to a different lifestyle and a different way of thinking. Here, for example, you cannot say "I forgot to buy something from the supermarket and I quickly run out to get it": once a week or in a fortnight I will go for supplies to Sparta or Tripoli. Or that I have to keep the house warm while the temperature outside is minus ten degrees. Or, if it snows, because it's a remote area, I know I can't easily **leave the house** before a **snowplow** passes by, say, ten o'clock in the morning.

"However, a **typical day** in Vamvakou is almost the same as in Athens: **work, home, child**. Our weekends are quite active, in the sense that many visitors come, so we meet people, exchange opinions, give us ideas. In the summer, when the weather warms up, we take **walks** in the **forest**, and other things are added that may be more difficult to do in Athens.

"I miss a few stimuli from Athens, such as a **theater**, a **cinema**. The truth is, of course, that because we also organize cultural activities here, within a very short

*period I have attended various theatrical performances and concerts. We somehow **create** or **bring** what we like ourselves.*

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*"My son is the **first baby** born in **Vamvakou** after about **30 years** and **the only one** growing up here. Our goal is to reopen the school, so hopefully there will be more children. I'm lucky enough that my best friend has a **baby** too. They live in Athens, but we go through all this, in a way, together. And on weekends most of the visitors are families, so there is contact between my son and other children.*

*"Apart from the **beauty** and **history** of a place, which definitely play a significant role because they make their own **storytelling**, in order for any project to work, it needs people with an appetite for work and a vision for the future. That is why the **project** in Vamvakou is **people-oriented**.*

*"The **initial reaction** of the inhabitants who already lived in the village was **distrust**. We went through several stages and now we are at the stage of "**Bravo to the guys!**". Most are strong supporters of our project and wish to get involved in it. There are always people who do not support you, but that's how it is in every society, but you also need them, because you identify your mistakes and become better. So, one way or another, everyone is doing their **bit** in this '**social experiment**,' as we call it."*



"In one way or another, everyone is doing their bit in this 'social experiment', as we call it," says Eleni Mami (photo).

Info

More **information** about the **initiative** and the **activities** organized in Vamvakou throughout the year can be found at vamvakourevival.org

See more photos from Vamvakou today:



Restaurant – Café “Voureiko”. ©ETSI Architects / Ioannis Promponas



Family Activities. ©Giannis Georganes



Guesthouse "Rouga of Vamvakou" . ©Julia Klimi



Hiking. ©Giannis Georganes



Suite at "Rouga". ©Julia Klimi



Movie Screening. ©Giannis Georganes

**Eleni Mami was one of the personalities presented at Marie Claire March 2022, in the tribute "Women who speak with actions».*