

A visit to Mount Athos & Monk Apollo SV2ASP/A

By Neil Carr G0JHC – April 2015



Monk Apollo SV2ASP/A & Neil G0JHC (Fresh lemon's available for picking in the Monastery garden)

A google search on Mount Athos and amateur radio will find a good selection of articles and history. I won't repeat much of that here, but thought GMDX members might like to read about my recent visit and time spent with Monk Apollo. I will even tell you a few things you may not have read on the internet!

Earlier this year I was invited to be part of a group visiting the Autonomous Monastic State of the Holy Mountain, as it is officially known. The group was made from members and friends of The Radio Amateur Association of Western Greece. The purpose of our visit was to repair, improve and maintain some of Monk Apollo's antenna system as well as experience life as a pilgrim for a few days.

We all gathered in Thessaloniki on the evening of Thursday 16th April. Some had made the long trip by Car (5 hrs) and others had taken a short flight from Athens. I'd taken a direct 3 hour flight from Manchester, UK at £39 each way with good old EasyJet.

The 1st evening we stayed in Ouranoupoli a two hour drive from Thessaloniki. Ouranoupoli is a small town on the Greek side of the peninsula where the ferry sails for Mount Athos (for west coast monasteries). There is no road access.

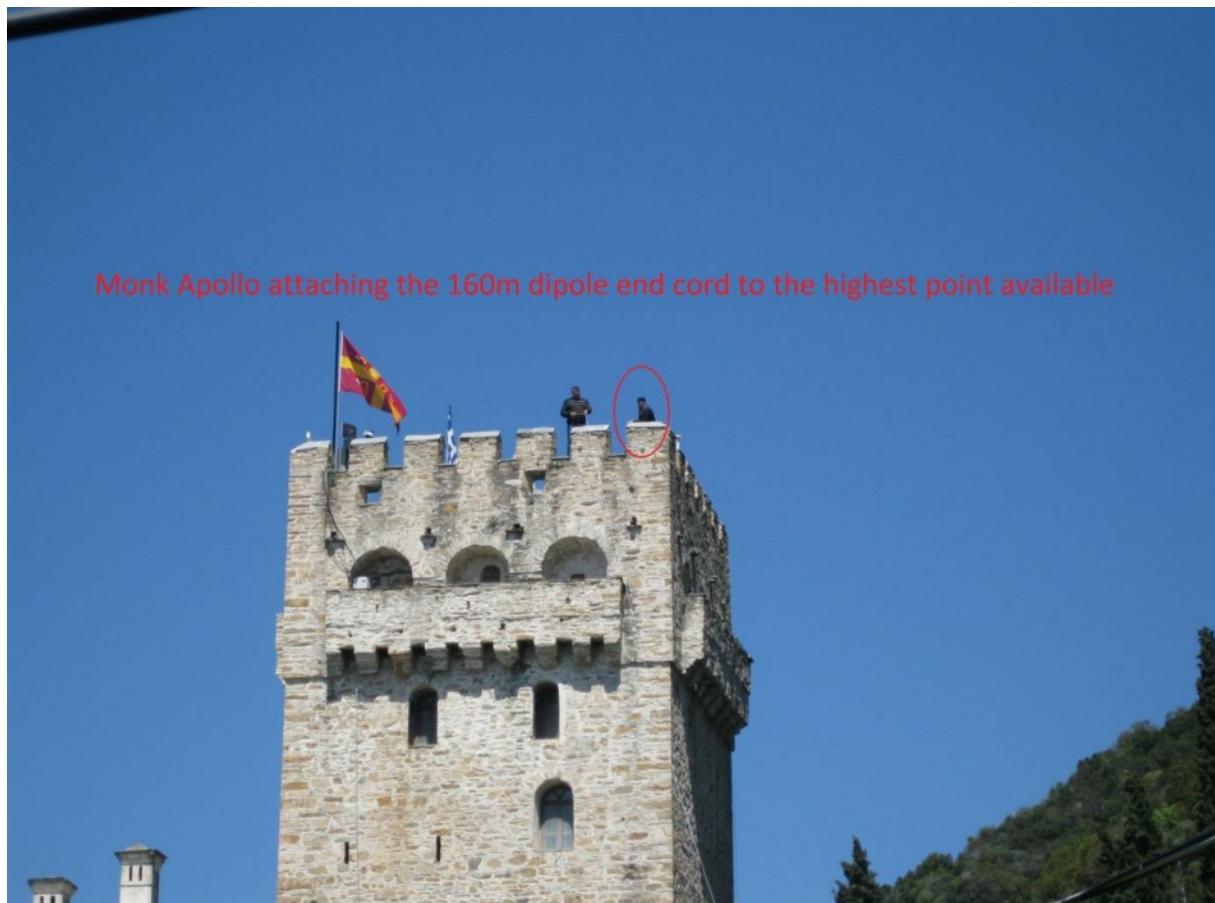
Before embarking on the boat to Mount Athos (the only way in) all visitors must have been issued a *diamonētērion*, a form of visa written in Greek, dated using the Julian calendar, and signed by four of the secretaries of leading monasteries. The ferries require reservations, both ways. We were fortunate to have Monk Apollo make visa arrangements in advance for us. Luckily all I had to do was send a scan of my passport along with the rest of our team of 8 and collect the “visa” at the port of departure from the Pilgrims' Bureau next to the ferry. On boarding the ferry, your ticket, passport and visa are checked by the Mount Athos police. It’s a 2 hour journey to Dochiariou Monastery , ferry stop #4.

On arrival, as is procedure when visiting any Monastery on Athos you head for the welcome room where you are greeted and offered refreshment. Monk Apollo was waiting with a warm smile and traditional greeting.

Most Monks prefer to speak a form of ancient Greek, not easily understood even by the Greeks. I had no chance but did manage to pre-rehearse a greeting “Christos Anesti “ which is used the week after Easter. “Christ is risen”.

After the exchange of gifts it was soon 11am, we decided to take advantage of the nice day and get straight to our antenna maintenance tasks. Some of the team focused on climbing the tower and removing the 6m beam (broken element) while others reviewed and checked out the 3 element steppIR. My task was to advise and assist with improving the 160m signal. For the next 6 hours the 8 of us worked hard in the sun along with Monk Apollo and quickly the 6m antenna was repaired and back on the tower. The steppIR was tested and working well. It includes the 30 and 40m dipole element. There is also a 40m 2 element beam on a short mast, but due it its height the SteppIR dipole is often a better performer.

It was agreed we could hang the 160m dipole from the very top of the Monastery tower,



SV2ASP/A 160m dipole April 2015



The far leg goes to a pole at about 30ft close to the Monastery Bee Hives. Don't get too close there! The 80m dipole (not shown) is quite low at around 20ft and was resonant at 3.9MHz. We didn't get time to work on higher supports but did extend it and it is now resonant at 3.7MHz. Monk Apollo prefers RTTY and some SSB. His tuner matches the antenna down at 3.5MHz. Monk Apollo uses an old TNC PACii to TX/RX rather than a soundcard and software. When you hear him on RTTY he is most likely to be using a 200Hz shift rather than the more standard PC/software/ soundcard 170Hz. If signals are weak you may not decode him. Try switching to 200Hz if you can. Both myself and others have been unsuccessful finding a way to chance the PACii to 170Hz, any ideas?

The (SP) view to JA is poor with a large hill directly behind the antenna. JA stations are mainly via the LP.

We were invited into Monk Apollo's shack for a few hours on the Friday evening and enjoy some good conversation about the radio and LP to JA. I found it interesting for SV2ASP/A to put a call out for a few minutes with no takers. Then we spotted from the shack on the cluster a large pileup quickly developed. I guess no one tunes the bands these days? Monk Apollo is usually watching the DXcluster while operating and does review his spots and comments.



In “The shack” with Monk Apollo on 17m RTTY

On the Saturday we were kindly loaned one of the Monastery Vehicles. We were to go on a day’s sightseeing and visit 4 other Monasteries.

There are roads in Mount Athos between some Monasteries and the “capital” Karyes. There are two types of road (in my opinion), one that is passable and one that is not. Some roads can also just disappear with no warning.

Monk Apollo had heard there might be some difficulties driving, but suggested we gave it ago and we could navigate over the hazards in the jeep. We opted not to try and turned back.



Roads in Mount Athos can often be a challenge!

The “passable road” had us driving on pebbled beaches, through the sea and down large pot holes. In fact to give an idea of the ride, when we stopped we had to bolt back down the seats as the frames had come off the chassis and the seats were all over the place.

The capital of Mount Athos is the administrative centre and where The Iera Epistasia or “Holy Council” which represents the 20 Monasteries make decisions. Standard decisions, for example to allow a vehicle a permit are made by a small 5 monk committee. More complex decisions require the full sitting of 20, each Monastery sends a representative and a 14/20 majority is required to pass any proposal. In Theory to obtain permission to operate you would require at least 14 of the 20 Monasteries to vote in favor. This presents quite a challenge especially with many activities considered not in keeping or compatible with worship and Monastic life at Mount Athos. By far the better solution is to encourage and support Monk Apollo and remain patient regarding activity between his many other duties. There are times of the year where he is off Mount Athos and also periods where he gets no time to operate for months on end. Usually if you see him spotted it is likely he is around for the next couple of days, so it is worth being vigilant at those times. Each morning we were up and in the church for 6am for the service followed by what is called “lunch” at 8am. The monks eat fresh, seasonal food with a high intake of vegetables, beans and rice (no meat). Their strict adherence to this diet has meant that cancers, strokes and heart attacks are almost unheard of. Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s are also very rare and the monks tend to live longer than their compatriots in Europe. A lesson to be learnt? Meals are in silence while one of the Monks stands at a Lectern and gives a reading from an ancient book.

You may be surprised to learn that there are a few Monks on Mt Athos who have studied and passed the Radio Amateurs exam. However Monk Apollo is the only one active. Most Monasteries have 2-way radios as a popular way of communication.

If you are looking for a low band contact with Monk Apollo, next winter, I’d hang around the RTTY ends of the band, especially on 30/40/80. The new 160m dipole comes with about S3-4 noise level on the Icom 756 Pro3 and hopefully some SSB QSOs will now be available there next winter. It is rare to find him on CW these days and my guess (although I didn’t ask) is that the TNC decoder does not cope well with many stations calling at the same time, on top of that, even when a call sign is answered the pile does not QRX, making it hard work to decode CW with any accuracy.



(Take off issue to JA from the Dochiariou Monastery on the west side of the Peninsula. The first DXped's from Mount Athos in the 80s were conducted from an east side Monastery (good to JA poor to NA).

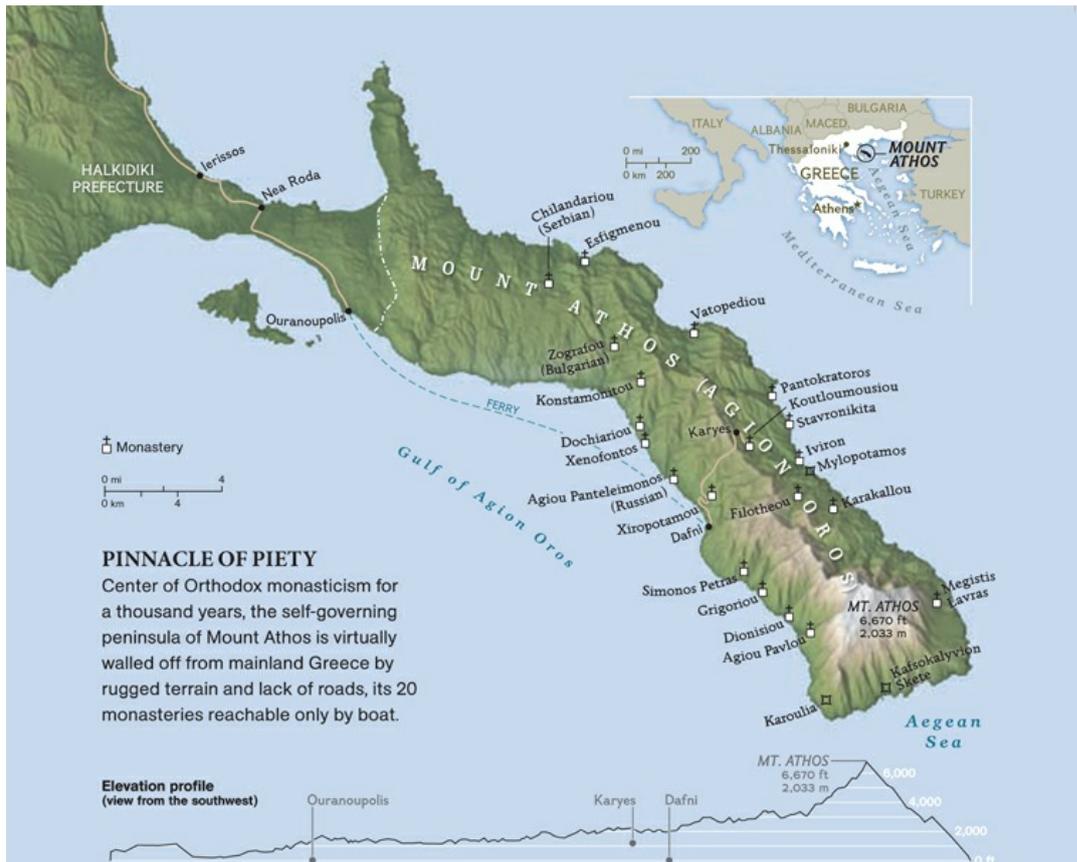


(The view from new 160m dipole. The UK is over the centre of the peninsular. NA through the sunset.)

The day we left Mount Athos the sea was rough and the flat bottom ferry was not running. We ended up calling the mainland and hired a speed boat which took 20mins instead of 2 hrs, we had a plane to catch. As we departed and looked back in the boats wake at the white trail from the monastery it reminded me of a scene from a James Bond movie, a most spectacular landscape. If you ever have the opportunity to visit any of the monasteries on the 30 mile peninsula I would certainly recommend it.

Neil Carr G0JHC

Some more info from the Editor.....



Άγιον Όρος