

Alexandroupolis, a multicultural city



The lighthouse of Alexandroupolis was built by the French Company of Ottoman Lighthouses and was inaugurated on June 1, 1880.

Alexandroupolis, the capital of the Prefecture of Evros and the largest port in northern Greece after Thessaloniki, has been described as “the crossroad of peoples, cultures and beauty”. A multicultural city in which the Orthodox, Catholic, Muslim and Armenian community coexist. The key position of Alexandroupolis that joins Europe and Asia, West and East is the point of contact of different cultures.

The surrounding area has a rich history, as the ancient settlement of *Sali*, which is mentioned by Herodotus, used to be here, as well as *Ancient Messimvria*, *Roman Traianopolis* and *Byzantine Vira* are located within short distance.

Its first name was *Dedeagats* and legend says it took its name from a muslim priest who lived and was buried under the shade of an oak (*Dede* means grandfather and *ağaç* means tree in Turkish).

The development of the settlement dates back to the mid 19th century, when the area was part of the Ottoman Empire, due to the operations of foreign companies that made infrastructure. In 1870 a railway station was built in order to serve the line Edirne–Aegean Sea and a port. Thus, Greek merchants from the surrounding areas (Aenos, Maronia, Makri, etc.) gathered while the population mosaic was composed of Ottoman Turks, Bulgarians, Armenians, French Levantines and Jews, who built religious monuments most of which survive until the present day.

Russian design

Very early the city acquired a modern street design by engineers of the Russian Army during the Russian-Turkish war of 1877-1878 when the Russian forces occupied and settled in the town. In the late 19th century the town became a major transport hub of the wider Thrace, connected with Thessaloniki and Istanbul and with the largest ports in the Mediterranean Sea. By the end of the Balkan Wars and the Treaty of Bucharest in 1913, Bulgarians occupied the area and when Bulgaria was defeated in the World War I the town was released on May 14, 1920 and it was incorporated into the Greek national territory. A few months later it was renamed Alexandroupolis in honor of the visit of King Alexander I of Greece.

Monuments

Some of the buildings and monuments showing the multiculturalism of the city are the *Armenian Church* (1875), the *Mosque* (late 19th century), the *Catholic Church* (1901) and the *Cathedral of*

Saint Nickolas (1901).

The **Armenian Church** of Alexandroupolis is dedicated to Saint John, "Carabet" as called in Armenian. With the creation of the new town on the coastline of Evros, around the mid 19th century, several workers from the declining Ottoman Empire reached Dedeagatch in order to work in infrastructure projects – mainly the railway. Among them, there was quite a large number of Armenians who erected in 1875 the Armenian Church in which the entire community used to gather. The Armenian community has rapidly evolved from a community of workers at the railway and the port to a community of traders and artisans of the town.

The church is a basilica without a dome and it is made of stone. At the top of the entrance of the church there is a marble inscription with the foundation date and the inscription "Orthodox Armenian Church". Nowadays, Saint Carabet is under the care of a small Armenian community and it works to serve the city's needs.

The **Muslim Mosque** of Alexandroupolis dates before 1895 when the small port at the edge of Evros, Dedeagatch, was inhabited by Muslim citizens and was under the Ottoman rule. It was built of stone and its initial use was educational, as it used to house the religious school of the region.

The minaret of the Muslim mosque is located on its west side, while its interior is dominated by a square prayer hall for the Muslim believers. It has a marble structure, with elaborate decoration and many engraved inscriptions and is considered a remarkable example of the art of sculpture on a marble of that time.



The **Catholic Church** of Alexandroupolis, the Church of Saint Joseph, is a basilica and it was created by the city's Catholic community, which consisted mostly of employees of consulates that were founded at the new port, as well as merchants and businessmen of the West who came here to do business with the East.



The Catholic Church was built in 1901. It is a parish church, made of chiseled stone and it has three aisles with two rows of pillars made of green marble with a rich decoration. It is the only Catholic church in the Western Thrace. It has exceptional acoustics and after its renovation in 2006 it often hosts cultural events of religious character.

The **Cathedral of Saint Nicholas** is dedicated to the patron of sailors, which was the occupation of the residents of Alexandroupolis in the early 20th century. It is a magnificent basilica made of stone with a dome and two bell towers. It was founded in 1892 and was inaugurated in 1901.

The icon of "Panagia Trifotissa", which was brought here by the refugees of Aenus and it is work of art which dates back to the 13th century, is hosted in Saint Nickolas' Cathedral. The official religious celebration for the liberation of the city took place here on May 15, 1920.



Sources:

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