

Tour Report

Greece – Pelicans of Lake Kerkini

5 – 9 January 2023

Dalmatian pelican



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Compiled by Sean Weekly

Day 1: Thursday 5 January 2023

Weather: Cloudy, 9° C

It was an early start to get to Heathrow airport at 04:30 ready for a 06:30 departure to Frankfurt.

The flight to Frankfurt was fine and on arrival I met three other guests at the gate at Frankfurt just before we boarded for Greece. Our flight was delayed a little but nothing too tedious. Everyone was in great spirits and excited to get to Lake Kerkini. I had arranged to meet the final two guests in the arrivals area at Thessaloniki airport as they were both travelling from Switzerland.

We landed in Thessaloniki at 15:20 – the weather seeds really mild (14° C when we were getting off the aeroplane) which is really very odd for this time of year. Typically when I get off the plane it's winter jackets straight on! We met our driver and one of the guides, my good friend Babis, who drove us to our hotel at Lake Kerkini, a drive of around an hour and a half. We drove past the lake just after sunset with still enough light around to see and enjoy the scenery on route.

On arrival we checked into our rooms, with dinner around an hour later. Over dinner I gave a briefing about what to expect on the days ahead. I also gave a short presentation with some of my photos to help give them some inspiration for their photography and it was soon time for bed to rest up for an early morning start.

Day 2: Friday 6 January 2023

Weather: Clear, 7° C

It was an early morning start with a quick coffee break at the hotel before leaving to drive to the harbour at around 06:45 to board our boat at the local harbour for the boat trip. This would be our daily routine for the duration of the trip.

It didn't take long before our boatman, Giannis, found us some birds. Lots of them in fact - around 40 pelicans that spotted the boat and flew in. We spent the morning concentrating on portraits of the birds before sunrise, getting cameras low to the water for some nice perspective. We then waited for the sun to come up before working on some in-flight photography in nice morning light against the mountain backdrop. I was giving the group constant settings and guidance with the change of situation and light. We had soon nearly finished our first boat trip and switched the engine off and floated in the middle of the lake during our coffee and cake stop before heading back to shore. This was again our usual routine over the next few days.

Once back on shore we headed back to the hotel for a late breakfast. We then had a brief bit of down time before lunch of a nice homemade soup for lunch. Yes, the Greeks like their food and also like to feed us well.

It was soon time to load up the vehicles and head north of the lake ready for our shoreline feed. It takes around 20-30 minutes to get to the flat bit of shore that we use for this. Annoyingly and for the first time in years, the pelicans did not come to the shore for the feeding session. Between Giannis (the hotel owner and local ecologist), Babis (the local guide) and myself we had never seen this before. We put it down to the very mild temperatures that were preventing fish from going deeper into the lake, which is what they do in cold temperatures. This meant that the pelicans were still feeding themselves naturally out on the water and were no longer reliant on the fish that operators and fishermen were offering them. The fishermen have been feeding the pelicans on this lake for decades during the winter months to help them survive the cold temperatures, and in turn help them to breed successfully in spring.

So sadly we made our way back to the hotel, where I gave the group an impromptu Lightroom editing session.

Day 3: Saturday 7 January 2023

Weather: Sunny, 3° C

Another early start following the same format, starting with the morning boat trip. It was a cold one this morning, just 3°C although it felt more like 0° C and was a little chilly. The lake was fairly calm with just light ripples. It wasn't long before we had lots of pelicans waiting for us on the water - which gave some nice opportunities for some silhouettes. We then had a gorgeous sunrise, so I told the group to get nice and low and concentrate on some golden light portraits of the birds. We then started some in-flight imagery a little later on. Towards the end of the morning there was no wind at all, resulting in a very calm lake which produced some mirror reflections that were perfect for habitat-based shots including the mountains.

We attempted another shoreline feed and started at an area known as the Fishermen's Huts. Sadly after 30 minutes of trying the pelicans evaded us. I recced a small known inlet a bit further around the lake with another local guide called George and luckily we found a small group of birds in the water close to the shore, and rushed back to collect the group from the fishing huts.

The afternoon turned out to be a fantastic success with over 40 pelicans in front of us - first of all in strong golden light, then later in nice soft pastel light. This was the group's first experience of the shoreline feed and they were blown away by how nice it was. We concentrated on tight portrait images of the pelicans and also some wider shots with the mountains as a backdrop.

Day 4: Sunday 8 January 2023

Weather: -1° C

The conditions were perfect today! It was a really crisp still morning with some low lying mist, and a nice group of pelicans came to the boat first thing by around 07:10 and we were provided with lots of nice silhouette opportunities until sunrise. The blue hour just before sunrise then produced some really gorgeous soft blue/pink hues for portraits and some cracking in-flight shots. All in all it was a really successful morning which gave everyone some really great shots!

This afternoon was the last shoreline feed for this group. We returned to the same location on the northern part of the lake and luckily for us the birds came in instantly. We made sure we arrived a little earlier in case it took a long time for the birds to come close and feel safe. Once again we concentrated on more portraits in late afternoon's hazy light with around 50 pelicans, we got some nice close-up wide-angle shots of the birds too plus soft portraits in nice pastel late afternoon light. I was so glad we managed to have another successful shoreline feed!

Day 5: Monday 9 January 2023

Weather: Cloudy 5° C

There were really beautiful conditions for the group's last boat trip with lots of light fog and haze hugging the mountains, and a very still lake that was great for reflections and allowed us to take environmental shots within the landscape. Everyone got some cracking photos and enjoyed their time here in Kerkini.

It was sadly then time to head back to the hotel to pack and depart for Thessaloniki ready for our flight back to Heathrow later that afternoon.