

# Tour of the Holy Lands - Meteora

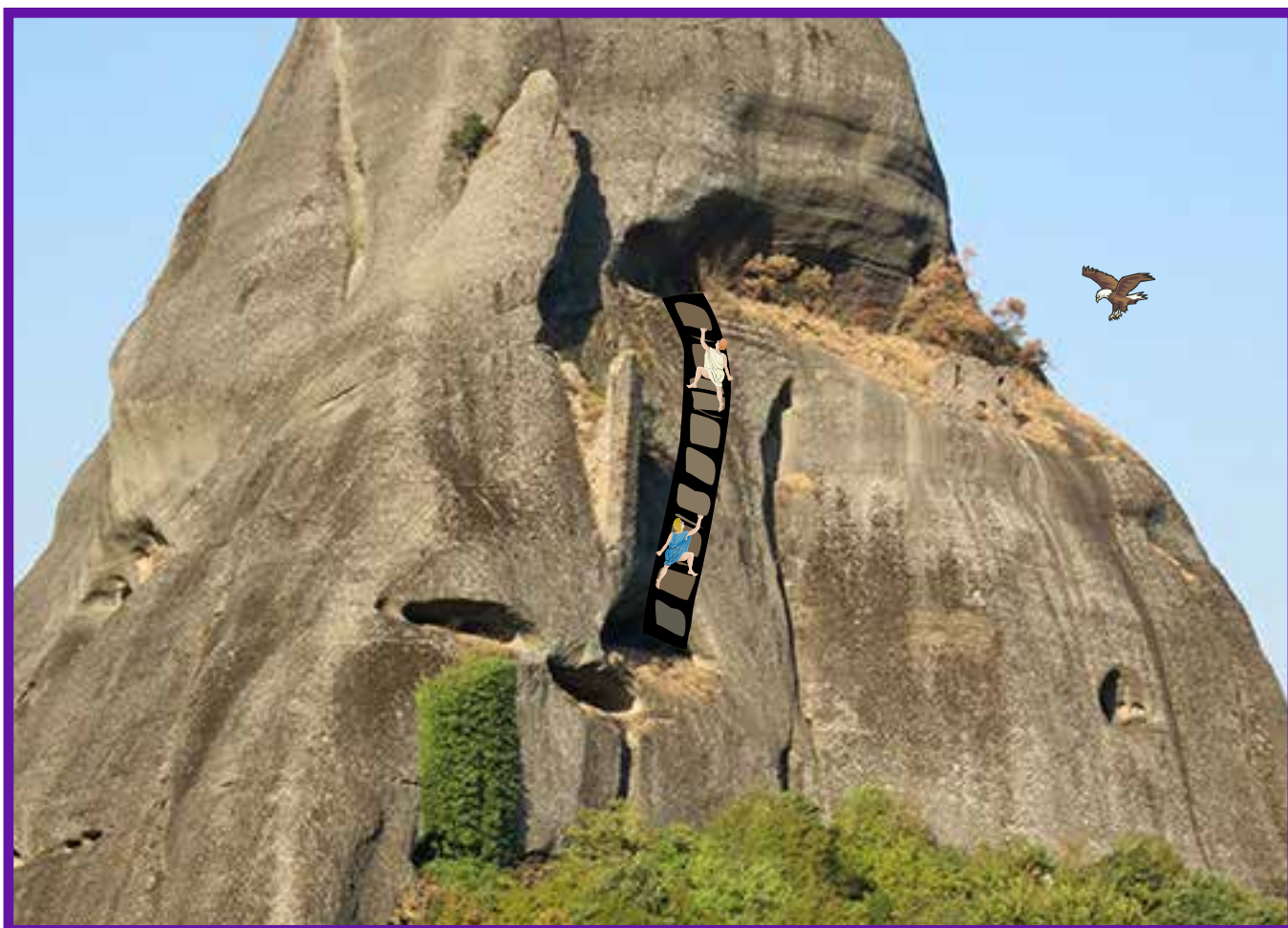


As we leave Berea and drive through the olive groves, look carefully among the trees. What do you see? Something that looks a little scary! In the middle of the miles of gray-green trees, there are huge, dark rock formations sticking up into the sky. Let's get off the bus and look around.



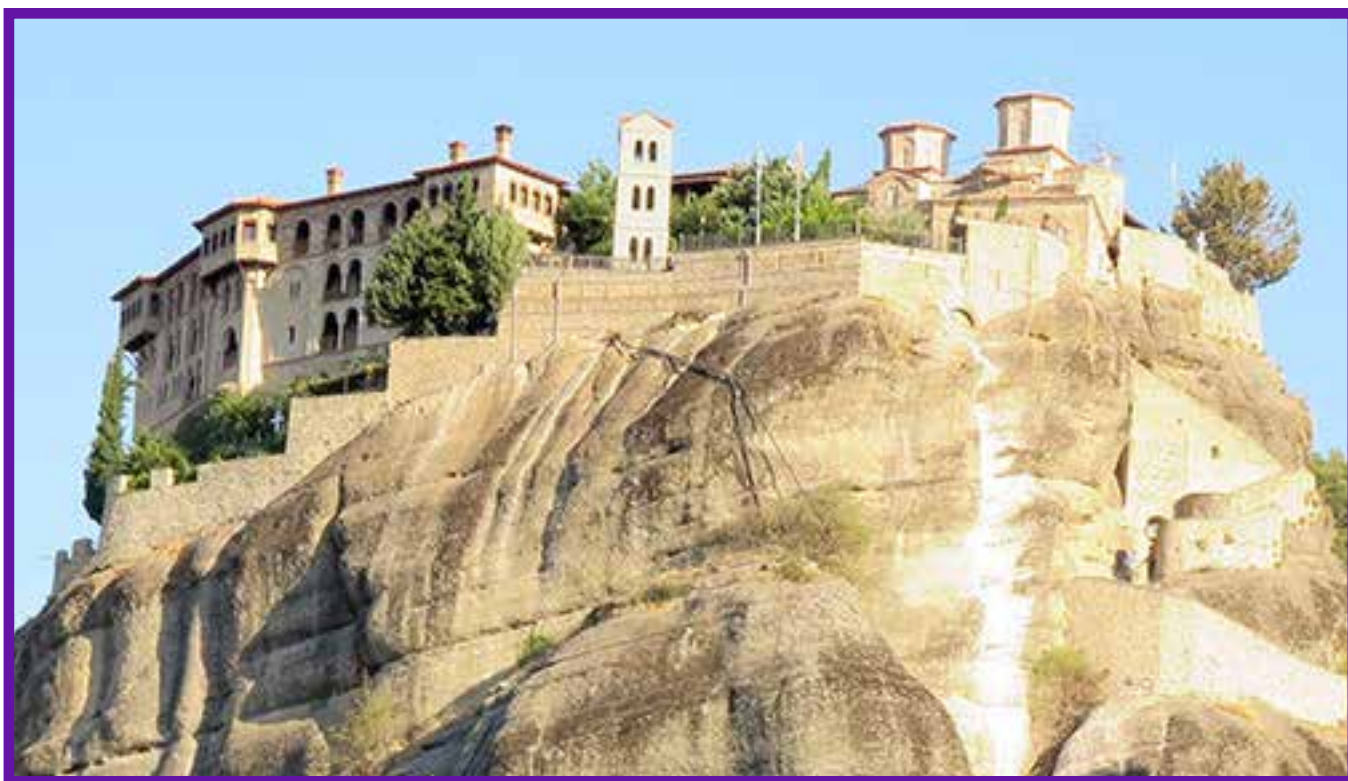
Now, look up! Do you see the buildings sitting on top of those high rocks? Unbelievable, right? The buildings look like they are hugging the very edge of the stone. This area is called Meteora (Me-tay'-or-a), meaning "hovering in the air." What a perfect name for this unusual site!





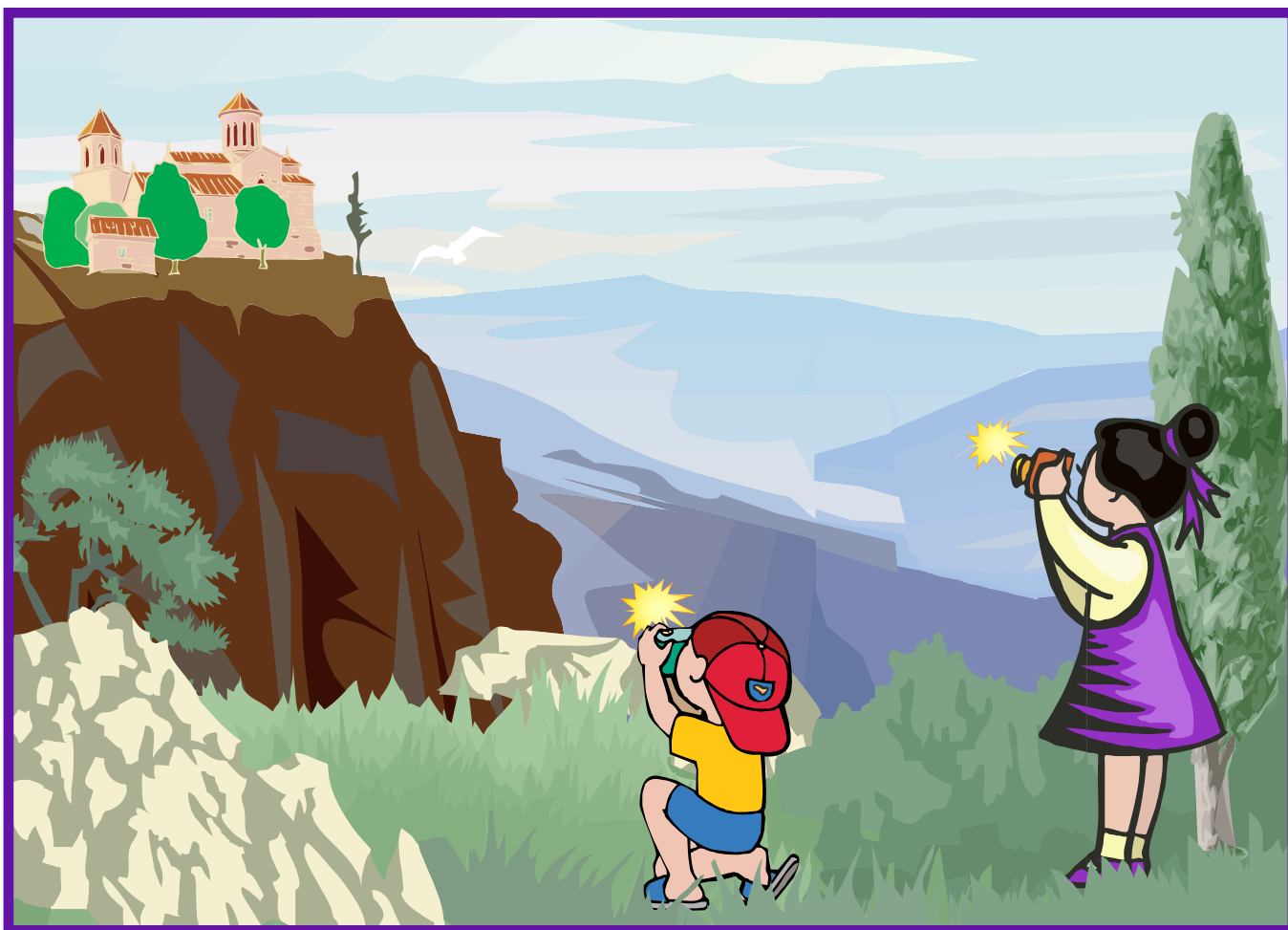
The story of Meteora begins 800 years after Jesus was born. Men called “hermits,” who were searching for places to live where they could get away from the world, discovered these formations that had deep caves cut into their sides. The caves were so high above the ground that eagles raised their young inside them. In those days, hermits climbed these steep rocks using ropes and rickety ladders.

Looking for a life of peace and godliness, they settled in the caves. They promised God that they would live and obey His laws for the rest of their lives. They turned away from everyday things – like human comforts and money – and thought only of spiritual things.



As time went by, they built structures, called monasteries, on the very top of the rock formations. They lived in these monasteries, and that's where they worked and prayed. The hermits called themselves "monks." They formed brotherhoods and appointed leaders, called "abbots." For two or three hundred years, monks lived in peace, worshiping God. In the 1200's and 1300's, however, the monks were disturbed by nations that tried to conquer their territory and take away their religion and their language. Inside the monasteries, the monks found hiding places from enemy raiders. They were able to save the Christian traditions for themselves and for the people of Greece by holding regular church services.

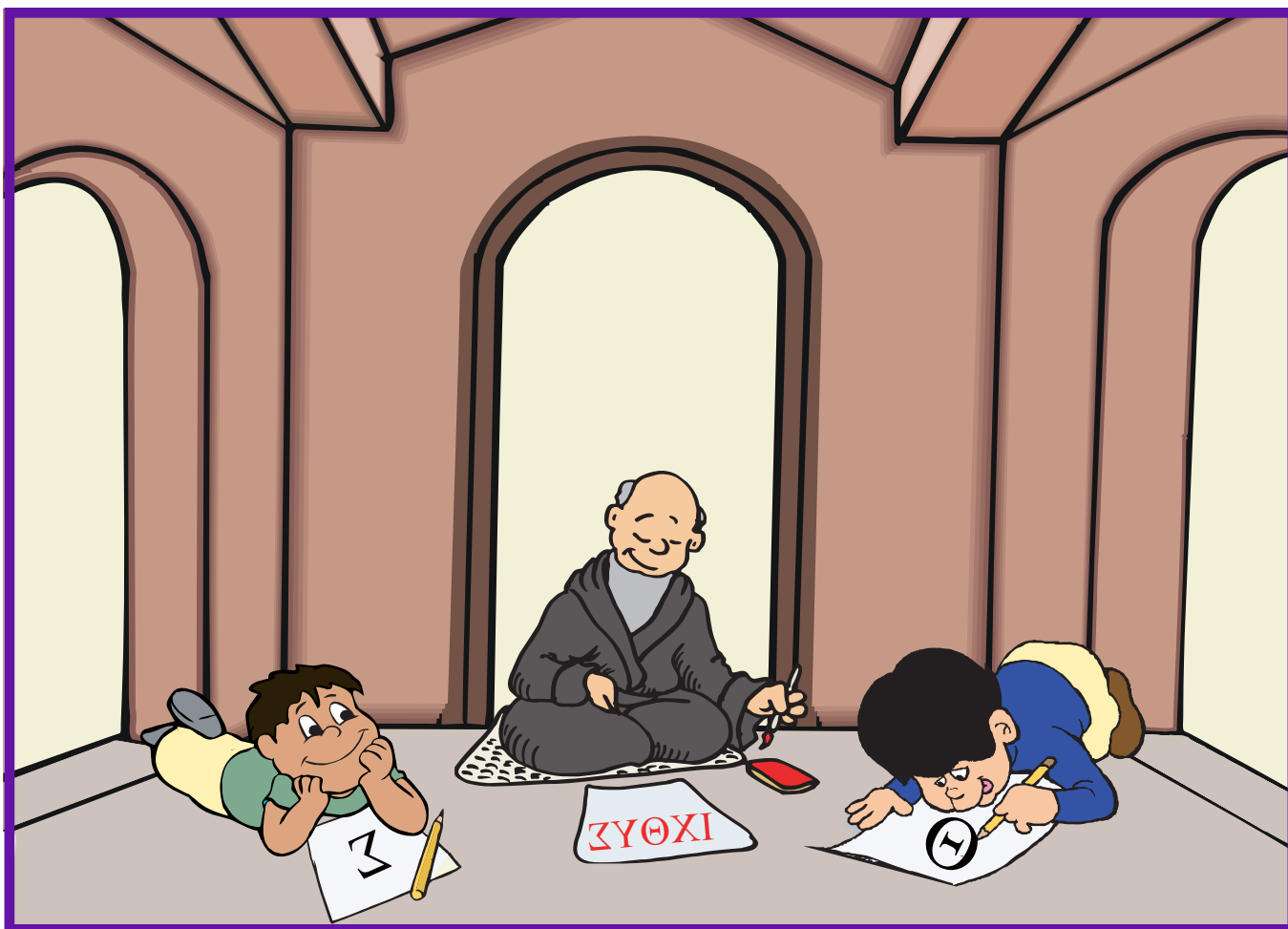




While we stand among the trees and towering rocks, the monks are busy way up there behind closed doors, studying, praying, carving wood or painting “icons,” which are pictures of holy figures. The money the monks make from selling their carvings and paintings is not for themselves, but for charity. That means the money is given to the poor and the sick or to one of the monastery schools.



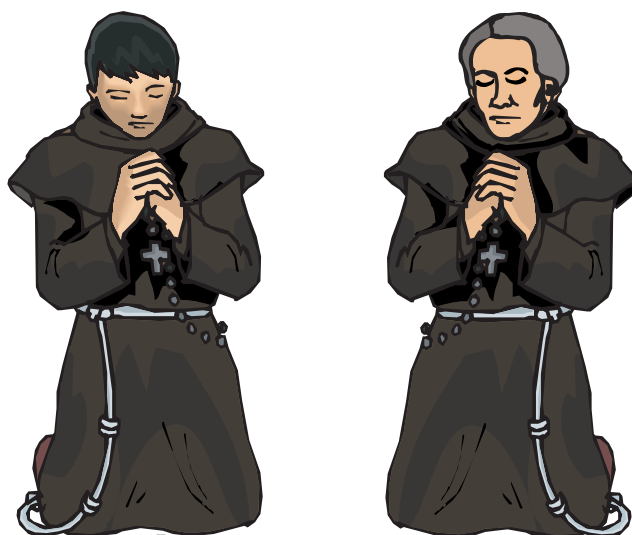




Years ago, these schools, run by the monks, were secret because they taught the Greek children about their native language, their religion and their country. Nations that won wars against Greece would take over the country and ban all of these important subjects from being taught. When these enemies discovered how much the monastery schools were helping the citizens, they burned down many of the monasteries and hurt many of the monks. There used to be twenty monasteries, but many of them have crumbled away over many, many years.



From where we are standing, we can hear the birds singing and the wind whispering through the trees. But we can hardly see the monasteries, nor can we hear the monks as they pray six or seven hours every day and eleven hours on Sunday. Imagine spending that much time focused on God!





We're not leaving today without visiting the monks. But how will we ever get up there? Long ago, brave visitors would climb up very long hanging ladders. Those who were not so brave would climb into nets woven from rope or into baskets made of wood and be pulled up by ropes, spinning in the wind. This would take 30 fear-filled minutes. Happily today, we will climb those solid steps over here!





See how the monks are dressed in long black robes? Covering the shoulders and legs is important before entering many holy places in Greece. That is why boys and girls, and grown-ups, too, must pull on long skirts before they enter. We'll be given skirts before we enter the monastery.



As soon as we enter the monastery, we'll see paintings and icons by artists who were no doubt inspired by the surrounding scenery and by their closeness to God. We'll also see ancient holy books and robes decorated ever so carefully and beautifully.



How grateful the Greeks must be to the monks of Meteora for saving their language and their religion. Meteora was not here when Paul was spreading God's word, but he would have been just as grateful that the brave monks saved Christianity for future followers.

We will not see something like this in any other place in the world! You will be able to tell the stories of the first monks as well as of those who live here today. And you will be able to show your family and friends pictures, telling them about men who dedicated their lives to serving God and to preserving Christianity.