

Islands in the sun

Simple food, sunny days and turquoise seas ... Greece is about rediscovering life as it should be lived.

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The chunky shot glasses had seen better days. So, for that matter, had the wiry taverna owner, whose leather-handbag visage spoke of one too many Mediterranean summers. He didn't speak much English; most of his clientele couldn't even say "thank you" in Greek. But as each sat down, he welcomed them, grinning toothlessly, sloshing a decent tot of ouzo into each shot glass before selecting one and holding it to his lips. "Yia'sou" [cheers], he cried, before tossing the contents down his throat.

As a guest at his table (so to speak), you follow suit, savouring the slow burn as the sweet aniseed liquor comes to rest in your belly. In the distance, the bay twinkles with its impossible shade of blue. The pungent whiff of garlic and calamari stings your nostrils. The evening breeze is warm against your legs. And as the leather handbag grins and leaves you to your menu, so begins the slow seduction, the dissolution of your other life.

The ouzo shot is a traditional Greek courtesy carried out in many restaurants – and it's all the more special because the host shares it with you. Leaving a world of fast cars, business meetings and endless email alerts, you can't help but feel, in Greece, that you're sinking into a culture of "slow", that hasn't changed in centuries. A culture deliciously easy to embrace.

There are about 3,000 islands in Greece and only 169 are inhabited. Split into groups such as the Ionian, the Sporades and the Dodecanese islands, it's the Cyclades that are arguably the best known, famous for their squat, whitewashed houses, cobbled streets and blue-domed churches. Although still simple, rustic and beautiful, in recent years the islands have gone from being a cheap destination to one that can – and

does – bleed your budget dry. But most travellers to this slice of paradise will agree it's worth every euro.

Island hopping is easy on the huge passenger liners that chug through the Mediterranean, but it's far nicer to hire your own yacht and do it yourself – if you have the time and the experience. The same goes for accommodation. You can haggle for a clean but basic room at port, but Greece isn't behind on the luxury front, especially in Santorini (or Thira, as the locals call it), arguably the most beautiful island in the Cyclades. It's here you'll find cliff-top accommodation, such as the child-free Katikies, a member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World; or the intimate Kapetanospito (The Sea Captain's House), which is synonymous with pampering. Volcanic hot stone massage, anyone?

Santorini was created by one of the biggest volcanic eruptions in recorded history. In fact, legend suggests that the island is the last existing fragment of

Part of the Greek island dream ... a whitewashed cliff-top house at Oia, on Santorini.



Clockwise from above: Houses at the edge of the ocean on Mykonos; an ancient Greek inscription on the sacred and uninhabited island of Delos; the ruins of the temple of Isis on Delos; the cliffs of Santorini - legends suggest that the island could be all that remains of the fabled city of Atlantis.



the fabled city Atlantis - and there is a certain mysticism to the place, from its towering cliffs to the dramatic, submerged caldera. Days here are long and languid. You can walk along the cliff-top, visit the archeological site of Akrotiri, float in dazzling aqua seas, beach yourself on the black sand of Kamari Beach, or at spectacular Red Beach, swim out to flat volcanic rocks, warmed by the sun. At dusk, the roar of many mopeds fill the air as everyone rides to Oia, the island's most westerly point, to watch the sun go down, before the tavernas spill over with muted conversations, clinking of glasses and the heady aroma of seafood.

Each island has a different feel, a different story. Paros, the undisputed windsurfing capital of Greece, is also famous for its marble - in fact, the Venus de Milo (presented to the Louvre by Louis the XVIII) was carved from marble found

here. The island has a friendly, frenetic feel. You can lunch on fresh fish along the port in Parikia, then shop for jewellery and souvenirs in the bustling backstreets. In the evening, the revellers emerge to pack Naoussa's tiny clubs, many perched above waves crashing on the rocks below. Cosy chats, on the other hand, take place in the intimate coffee bars, which serve up cool, coffee-flavoured frappes - a real Greek favourite.

Popular with the rich and famous, and the gay community, is Mykonos. There are very comfortable rooms to be found in the hills overlooking the colourful harbour, where fishing boats nestle amongst luxury yachts. Get lost shopping for silver jewellery or traditional Greek ceramics in the maze of tiny streets; kick back in the cafes that curve around the bay or explore the churches - there are 365, one for each day of the year. Fancy a little history? Catch a ferry from Hora port to the uninhabited,

sacred island of Delos, home to the famous Terrace of the Lions, and spend an afternoon traipsing through the ruins. Here, you can almost sense the Greek gods hovering amongst the temples, altars and shrines - as if, any moment, Apollo himself will step into view.

Once you're sorted with a room, a moped and a bag of mandarins, it's easy to imagine immersing yourself forever in the islands' slow-moving lifestyle. In Greece, simplicity is everything. It's about meandering along the tavernas on the seaside strip, joking with the waiters and deciding where to eat. Waking up with the sun on your face, peeking over your white-washed balcony and listening to the chickens pecking around in the garden. It's enjoying halted half-Greek, half-English banter with the local shopkeepers, who respect any attempts however minor, to speak their language



Clockwise from left: A blue-domed church on Mykonos forms an iconic Greek island image, a fleet of fishing boats in Mykonos port, Perissa beach on Santorini.



'Efharisto' (thank-you) will go a long way, as will a simple 'Yasas' (hello).

Soon, without warning, your days start to revolve around swimming, siestas and good food. In fact, it may become a little ritual to walk to the corner store in the morning and fill a string bag with oranges, freshly baked bread, goat's cheese and yoghurt. Eating light during the day leaves you free to splash out at night on Greek delicacies such as creamy eggplant moussaka, sweet baklava, revitha keftedes (fried chickpea balls) or dolmades (stuffed vine leaves). However, for the most part, you can eat as if you're in one of the world's best health farms. Mediterranean people have one of the lowest rates of heart disease and cancer in the world, and it's apparently thanks to the humble olive. Extra virgin olive oil, the Greeks' main source of fat, is one of the few oils made without chemical processing, so it retains

more of the vitamins and minerals of the olive fruit. Seafood, cereals and home-grown fruit and vegetables are also key parts of the Greek diet, so the fresh ingredients, lashings of olive oil and abundance of tasty salads found on almost every menu make for a diet you won't ever want to give up.

Once you're completely seduced – by the food, the people, the beaches, the scenery – it's invariably time to go home. As you chug towards the mainland, the airport and a long-forgotten reality, you'll no doubt be lost in the Greek island dream – of riding a donkey, buying a whitewashed house, and tending your olive grove. After all, isn't that how life is supposed to be lived? ●

FACT FILE

Getting there: Qantas, Olympic Airways and Thai Airways fly regularly to the Greek islands. You can fly direct to Athens and get a connecting flight to Paros, Mykonos or Santorini. Call Qantas on 13 13 13; Thai Airways on 1300 651 960 and Olympic Airways on 02 9251 2044.

When to go: The best time to visit the Cyclades is from May until August. Outside of these warmer months, the islands can be quite cold and many of the restaurants and hotels close down, especially on the smaller islands.

For more information on accommodation *Katikies in Santorini* visit www.katikies.com
Kapetanospito visit www.santorini-gr.com
The Greek Island Specialists visit www.greeka.com