

1 The Aegean island oasis Andros, Cyclades

What's its secret?

Andros is not your typical rocky, arid Cycladic island: it's lush, woody, etched with mountain paths and watered by mineral springs (bottled and sold across Greece). The capital, Chora, can feel exclusive and well-heeled with its museums and art galleries. It's home to several ship-owning families — rub shoulders with them at the Yacht Club, where, after 8pm, the first-rate restaurant opens to non-members (00 30 228 202 9072, noa.com.gr; mains about £19). The feisty Andriots have succeeded in keeping their eastern shore pristine and this is where you'll find the best beaches. Visit Achla, a perfect arc of white sand, overlooked by a New Age eco-lodge, Onar — settle in for a long lunch and sample your way

through its organic restaurant menu (00 30 211 800 2912, onar-andros.gr; mains about £18).

How do I get there?

Take a taxi from Athens airport (about £32, or £44 at night) to Rafina for one of the daily boats (ferries.gtp.gr; 1–2hr, from £13). Planet Holidays (planet-holidays.co.uk) has seven nights at Paradise Art Hotel in Chora from £643pp, B&B, including flights, ferries and transfers. Or try inntravel.co.uk.

Where can I island-hop?

From Andros, it's easy to island-hop down the east of the Cyclades and return home on a flight out of Mykonos — the ferries and catamarans that transported you to Andros from Rafina continue onwards to Tinos (45–90min; from £7) and Mykonos (1hr 10min–2.5hr; from £13).

Crete Beyond the crowds

In terms of terrain, the touristy north coast pales by comparison to the drama of the southwest, particularly between tiny beach village Sougia and the pretty port of Chora Sfakion, which is served by buses from Chania. The massive Lefka Ori mountains come down in brown folds to the sea, ruling out roads and making boats the way to travel. As a result, places like Loutro feel like time-warped islands. Take a room at the Old Phoenix (old-phoenix.com; doubles from £40, room-only) and you'll feel you're in the Med of the '50s.

Rhodes Beyond the crowds

The island's southern headlands are among the loveliest, least-visited corners of Rhodes. Their cliff-clinging lanes have an Amalfitan feel, culminating in the solitary, dreamy Venetian castle of Monolithos, where a gorgeous view reveals outlying islands, and beyond them sunny nothingness. Half an hour away near another Venetian castle, Kritinia, is your lunch stop. Cliff-top Mylos Cafe Snack-Bar (mains about £6) does deeply satisfying bean soups and yoghurt with honey and rosehip.



2 The sleeping beauty of the Dodecanese Halki, Dodecanese

What's its secret?

Looking for time-stood-still charm? You've come to the right place. Halki's town clock was stopped decades ago — because its chiming kept everyone awake. With just one settlement, a harbour town tiered with pastel houses, it's only 75 minutes by ferry from Rhodes, yet light years away in every other respect. Nothing much happens here, but Pondamos, one of a handful of quiet beaches, has incredible sunsets. There's a string of waterfront tavernas: try Magefseis for charcoal grills (00 30 224 604 5065; mains about £7); or, for home-fired pizzas, Remezzo (00 30 224 604 5368, remezzochalki.gr; mains about £9). Inland, a monastery, a castle and a ruined village rise, stone-silent, amid fig trees, beehives and goat-pens.

How do I get there?

Ferries from Rhodes to Halki (or 'Chalki') leave from the port of Kamiros Skala on the west coast (30 minutes and £48 by taxi from the airport). Three boats make the crossing several times a day in high season (£10 one-way; leave the airport by 4pm to be sure of catching the last boat; see mbc-travel.com for tickets and timetables). Nissia Holidays (nissia-holidays.com) arranges bus/ferry airport transfers (£62pp return) and has self-catering properties on Halki; a one-bedroom place starts at £460 a week.

Where can I island-hop?

A day return to Tilos on the Dodekanisos Seaways catamaran (12ne.gr/en) gives you five hours to explore (40min; £22 return; Tues and Thur). The inter-island Prevelis calls at Halki on Thursday and Sunday mornings en route to Karpathos, Crete and Santorini (www.anek.gr).



3 Poseidon's love nest: the romantic hideaway Paxos, Ionian

What's its secret?

Pint-sized Paxos — 10km by 3km, coated in emerald forest, fringed by little pebbly beaches and coves — is a magic retreat for loved-up couples. In legend, it was formed when the trident-wielding Poseidon carved off the lushest corner of nearby Corfu so he could frolic in private with the sea-nymph Amphitrite. All three coastal villages — Gaios (the capital), Lakka and Loggos — are exquisite, but chocolate-box Loggos is the gem. It's a five-minute walk from Levrechio Beach, where you dine under olive trees at Taverna Bouloukos, on tables wobbling in the sand (00 30 266 203 1336; mains about £11). At sunset, head west to canoodle over cocktails at Erimitis bar/restaurant, and watch the cliffs light up like a curtain of shot silk (00 30 697 775 3499, erimitis.com; mains about £15).

How do I get there?

Ferries and hydrofoils to Paxos leave from Corfu's New Port (10 minutes and £13 by taxi from Corfu airport). The 95-minute ferry costs £9, one-way; the one-hour hydrofoil is £17.50, one-way (paxos-greece.com). Simpson Travel (simpsontravel.com) has a range of accommodation: a week at Loggos's Waterfront Apartments starts at £877pp, with flights to Corfu and transfers.

Where can I island-hop?

Visit vine-clad Antipaxos, Paxos's even tinier neighbour. It's 20 minutes by shuttle boat (£13 return) from Gaios. Head for Voutoumi Beach, where the Bella Vista Taverna (00 30 697 778 4133) is perched up 200 steps. For boat excursions, see paxos-holidays.gr. *Island reviews continue on page 52* ➤

Floats our boat

Who said three's a crowd? Naxos, Paros and Antiparos together create a heavenly odyssey, says **James Ellis** — and you'll scarcely see a soul

When I was a teen growing up in Greece, holidays were never like those of the pals I'd left behind in England. Not for me a cheap charter flight to Marbella or Magaluf. Instead my Greek friends and I would jump on a sun-baked ferry and hop from one island to another until our money ran out.

That sense of adventure is what my wife and I are hoping to instil in our eight-year-old twins, 35 years later, as we plan our first trip to the islands as a family. It's been decades since my last visit, and unsure of where to head to, we spend hours poring over maps, trawling the internet and quizzing friends for recommendations. Finally, we settle on Naxos, Paros and Antiparos. All are within a child-friendly 90 minutes' sail of each other and, crucially, are accessible by ferry from Mykonos, which has direct UK flights. Large and fertile Naxos, with its green interior and great beaches, and Paros, best-known for its busy ferry terminal, but beautiful beyond it, are both new to me. Antiparos is a concession to my youth — I came nearly every summer as a teenager.

A few weeks later we're standing on the dock in Mykonos, waiting to board the 45-minute ferry to Naxos. The sun is burning off the morning mist, gulls scream and dock workers yell as the boat pulls up. It seems chaotic, but the hulking ferry manages to disgorge its passengers and swallow us up in a matter of minutes.

Naxos is one of the larger Cyclades islands, but on arrival it feels vastly more intimate than Mykonos. Our 20-minute taxi to the seaside town of Agios Prokopios whizzes us past long stretches of sandy beach with few people in sight. Along the way, Mount Zas, the highest point in the Cyclades and supposedly the birthplace of Zeus, looms above us, 1,000 metres high in the sky.

Owner Maria greets us like long-lost friends when we arrive at Birikos Studios & Apartments (birikos-studios-naxos.gr; doubles from £45, room-only). We chat over ice-cold coffee frappés and she offers dining tips, including their beachside taverna Nikos and Maria (00 30 226 504 2670, nikosmaria-naxos.com; mains about £10), 9km away. After an afternoon poolside, we head there to eat early. As the waves wash in and the sun dips behind the rocks, we feast on platters of prawns, octopus and squid.

Next day the girls hit the beach, while I tackle Mount Zas solo. Sane people take a cab (30 minutes from Agios Prokopios) to Filoti village, before joining the Agia Marina trail for a stunning two-hour climb. But I arrive at the trailhead in a sweaty mess, having decided to complete the first stretch (21 km!) on foot. I carry on up the pine-forested route to the barren peak and 8km later I'm rewarded with hazy watercolour views over the Aegean.

It's over those waters that we sail again the next day, bound for Paros, 90 minutes away. Port town Parikia is a

main ferry hub and thronged, but hopping in a taxi we soon leave it behind for the sleepier northern village of Naoussa. Its Venetian-era buildings line a small port packed with fishing boats, and stone-paved streets lead around a quayside lined with tavernas. We spend a couple of days kicking back on local beaches, bobbing in the terrace hot tub of the Parian Boutique Hotel (parianboutiquehotel.com; doubles from £84, room-only) and polishing off octopus in tavernas. Axinos (00 30 228 405 3388; mains about £10), with its perfect sunset view, is a winner.

Paros's lesser-known neighbour, Antiparos, is our final stop, just a 15-minute boat ride from Parikia. A decade ago, this Cycladean speck briefly gained fame when Tom Hanks bought a house here, but despite the celebrity endorsement, it's pleasing to find little has changed. The quaint port town of Chora consists of just one main street covered in bougainvillea, a small square reverberating with cafes, and a ruined Venetian-era castle. Our quayside hotel Kouros Village (kouros-village.gr; doubles from £86, room-only) has a pool area, ideal for the twins when they tire from our daily explorations by hire car (antiparos-cars.com).

Of all the lovely spots we find, our favourite is Agios Georgios village, home to a white-sand beach and fish taverna, Captain Pipinos (00 30 228 402 1823, captainpipinos.com; mains about £10). In my youth, this was little more than a beach shack; a craggy-faced captain would pull up and pass his catch to the cooks. Sadly, Pipinos is no longer with us, but the excellent seafood remains.

That evening, back in Chora, we visit souvlakia house To Oikogeniako (00 30 228 406 1328; mains about £3) for a final street-food hit before heading home. Amazingly, the lady who runs it remembers me from decades ago. 'Hey, weren't you a regular?' she asks, as she carves off another slice of dripping pork *gyros*. 'Why did you stop coming?' I don't really have an answer. ■

How do I get there?

Hellenic Seaways (hellenicseaways.gr) sails between the bigger islands. Jump on the local boat between Paros and Antiparos. Ten nights'

island-hopping, between Naxos, Paros and Antiparos, staying in the same hotels featured, costs from £907pp, room-only, with flights, ferries and transfers with Sunvil (sunvil.co.uk).

Scenic route: clockwise from top left, olive grove at Filoti village with Mount Zas in the background; Agios Prokopios Beach on Naxos; animal magic at a little church near Mount Zas; Naoussa Harbour, Paros, at dusk; outside a Greek restaurant at night; typical Greek church; the port at Antiparos; alley in Naoussa; octopus left out to dry





7 Laid-back, family-friendly hideaway

Leros, Dodecanese

What's its secret?

The tiny, craggy island of Leros is the Dodecanese island for keeping things low-key — at 54sq km, it needs no busy to-do list. It's great for families who don't mind the two-step journey here (see below): hire a car at Lakki harbour to explore bays and coves. Parents can relax at Gourná, on the west coast, with its lovely beach sloping gently into the water and the welcoming, family-run Gourná Taverna (00 30 224 702 2956; mains about £12) — order the squid *saganaki*. Krithoni, a couple of kilometres away on the east coast, is another fine sandy stretch and a good place to base yourself in one of the handful of small hotels. And for the best sunset views? Drive up to Platanos Castle for 360-degree island vistas as the sun does its technicolour thing, then wander along to the nearby View Bar for cocktails in one of several old converted windmills on the headland.

How do I get there?

From Kos, the 1hr 40min ferry runs three times daily between April and October (12ne.gr; from £20 return). Sunvil Holidays (sunvil.co.uk) has seven nights at Nefeli Apartments in Krithoni from £1,007pp, B&B, including flights and ferry.

Where can I island-hop?

It may be remote, but Leros is relatively well connected to the island of Kos, where you'll find more mainstream bars and nightclubs. Otherwise, take the high-season daily ferry to Lipsi — it's small, but pulls in visitors for its blue-domed churches. It's like a quieter version of Santorini, with better (non-volcanic) beaches.



8 The little island with big ideas

Meganissi, Ionian

What's its secret?

Meganissi means 'big island', but you'll be hard-pressed to find someone who can tell you why this tiny speck in the southern Ionian has such a grand name. Still, you'll discover much to enjoy: three traditional villages; a wild interior with herb-scented walks on ancient donkey paths; beautiful beaches such as shallow, sandy Fanari; and a blissful disregard for commercialism. British billionaire Lord Rothschild liked it so much, he bought part of a southern peninsula here to develop posh homes. Despite that, life is a sleepy affair: a bar or two in the port villages of Spartochori and Vathy, and some great restaurants right on Vathy's quay: Greek-Italian Tilevoes (00 30 264 505 1055, tilevoes.gr; mains about £17); or, for fish, Erikkos (00 30 264 505 1125; mains about £16).

How do I get there?

From the port of Nidri on Lefkada (40 minutes' drive from Preveza airport), a 25-minute car ferry runs to Meganissi four times a day in summer (ferryboat meganisi.gr; foot passengers £1.60, cars £11, both one-way). GIC The Villa Collection (gicthevillacollection.com) has seven nights' self-catering on the southeast coast in the Limonari Villas (three separate properties, each with its own pool) from £889pp, including flights and car hire.

Where can I island-hop?

Neighbouring Lefkada is much more touristy, but you can return on the ferry and take another boat to visit either Ithaca, legendary home of Homeric hero Odysseus, or Italian-influenced Kefalonia.



Hire a car to explore the pretty villages tucked within Kos's mountainous forest, just a few kilometres from Kos Town. Aim for Pyli, with its giant lion-spouted fountain, Hellenistic family tomb and Taverna Il Palia Pyli (00 30 22 420 1510), where simple homemade meze and local cheeses come in at about £6 a dish. A few kilometres on, at Paleo Pyli, once the Byzantine capital, you'll hike past the abandoned town en route to its medieval fortress.



9 Rugged mountainous terrain with village traditions

Karpathos, Dodecanese

What's its secret?

Almost unheard of, yet the third largest island in the Dodecanese, Karpathos is wild, divided in two by spiked mountains. Base yourself in one of the handful of hotels in the harbour resort of Pigadhia. Here in the south of the island, it's all about the beaches and crystalline waters for scuba-diving and wind- and kite-surfing. In the north there are forested trails to hike — aim for the isolated Byzantine hamlet of

Olymbos, where the women still dress in traditional goatskin boots, colourful headscarves and handwoven aprons over black dresses, and speak their own dialect. Try *makarounes* (pasta with onions and cheese) in Restaurant Avalona on the mountain road (00 30 224 505 1046; mains about £8), or graze on island cheese, sausage and aubergine meze at Esperida, on Amooopi Beach in the south (00 30 224 508 1002; dishes about £6).

How do I get there?

From Athens, Sky Express runs a daily one-hour flight to Karpathos, June to

September, from £108 return. Olympic Holidays (olympicholidays.com) has six nights at Panorama Hotel in Karpathos Town from £718pp, B&B, including flights and ferry.

Where can I island-hop?

Got a taste for rugged nature? Hop over to Kasos (a 20-minute Sky Express flight, from £96 return) to explore gorges slashing through lunar terrain, and the five remaining inhabited fishing villages. You have to stay overnight — try Evita Village (00 30 224 504 1731; studios from £60) in Fry, the capital. *Island reviews continue on page 60* ➤

10 The super-secret one:

Baby blue

You *could* holiday on busy Rhodes. But why not pick Kastellorizo, its tiny sibling, says **Richard Waters**, and be deliciously all at sea?

Photography: **Jonathan Perugia**

Within minutes of docking, the Blue Star ferry has pattered away again – likely off to a much bigger, more important island – churning the navy water aquamarine in its wake. There’s only one road on teensy Kastellorizo, just one taxi – and my hotel, on the opposite side of the port. Looks like I’m walking. As I follow the harbour’s narrow *kordoni* (walkway), restaurants and *kafenions* on one side, swarming fish and bobbing boats on the other, I inhale a confusion of aromas: grilling squid, souvlakia, ground coffee and cigarette smoke (having fallen out with the EU, the Greeks are defiantly back on the fags). I catch my reflection in the windows of Stratos Cafe. Maybe it’s the interplay of light here, with saffron fishing nets piled high on the quayside and cherry-pink bougainvillea bursting vividly beneath a robin-egg sky that has me

grinning – Kastellorizo celebrates colour as unashamedly as one of my daughter’s felt-tip drawings.

Mention Kastellorizo to any Greek and you elicit wistful veneration. It’s a remote speck of an island lying just off the Turkish coast, a paradise the Greeks fantasise about escaping to should the bank manager (or bailiffs) come calling. But how has it remained so unspoilt compared with its popular siblings Rhodes and Kos? Well, for one, Kastellorizo is *very* far away – on some Greek maps the island even has its own locator box. Then there’s the politics. Sitting at the edge of two continents, it’s been constantly caught in the crossfire, a piece of flotsam tossed from one invading wave to the next: medieval Knights, the Ottoman Empire, Venetians, Italians and Brits. Its darkest days were during World War II: before the island was flattened by German bombing, the Brits evacuated the entire 15,000-strong population ➤

MORNING PITSTOP

Stratos Cafe, with its exposed piping and brick walls, is a lively spot for your morning shot of freshly roasted coffee. And it’s opposite where you’ll catch your ride to the Blue Cave

Port calling:
heading back to
Kastellorizo harbour



On a curve:
the village spread
out along the
horseshoe-shaped
harbour. Opposite,
clockwise from top
left, moored-up
fishing boat; detail
on a house in the
harbour; turtles at
play; seafront

house; diving off
the rocks outside
town; breakfast on
the balcony of the
Mediterraneo
hotel; in the Blue
Cave; grilled
octopus at
Alexandra's;
local posing for
a photograph

to Egypt and Gaza in Palestine, from where they sailed to Australia and the US. Families were torn apart, left ignorant of each other's fate. In 1947 Kastellorizo was handed back to its rightful owners. People's memories and traditions remained; the rest was rubble.

And yet arriving by ferry at its harbour, you'd never believe its tragic back-story. I've had my fair share of Greek-island first impressions, but none has been as arresting as this. Vibrantly coloured Italianate buildings huddle around a turquoise bay backdropped by cypress trees and cliffs. That initial glimpse epitomises the essence of why we travel – that moment when you see something so perfect you catch your breath. Looking at the village reflected in the Aegean, I feel as if I've stepped into a Kodachrome version of reality.

Walking in the sunshine, I meet Marie Rivalent, a Parisian architect who restores derelict villas here to their former glory, and the owner of Mediterraneo, the little boutique hotel I'll be staying in over the next few days. Mediterraneo's facade is vivid: mango walls, blue columns and lime shutters and doors. Its suntrap terrace looks out to sea, there's a vine-shaded arbour, *mataki* (evil-eyes) embedded in the steps, and wild flowers to greet you daily on the breakfast terrace. My room gives onto the harbour and the Anatolian mountains beyond.

Next morning I am off to the island's Blue Cave with Captain Nikos Matzos, a gentle bear of a man whose T-shirt struggles to retain his nut-brown bulk: 'Please watch your head and climb down in the boat,' he asks his

An aperture appears like a half-submerged eye. We squeeze in and, after seconds, a radiance of purest blue develops under us

few passengers. We drift idly toward a striated cliff. Just moments before the prow hits rock, an aperture appears like a half-submerged eye and we squeeze in – there's maybe 5cm clearance between the gunwales and the cliff. For a few seconds we bob in darkness before a radiance of the purest blue develops beneath the hull. Above us, towering stalactites picked out by the sapphire luminescence take form. It's light refraction, but it feels like magic, as if we're floating through the Milky Way.

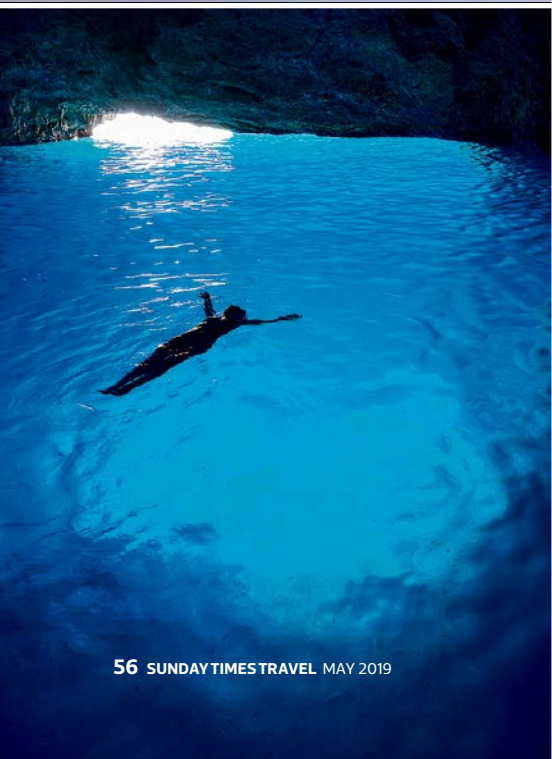
'Monk seals, they come here to make love,' murmurs the Captain with a piratical wink. I can't imagine anywhere better.

Back on land I wander up the hill to the old red castle built by the Knight Hospitallers, from which the island's name springs. Climb to the top of the steps and there's a stunning panorama of the Turkish coastline and, closer, the harbour. It's often compared with the stunning harbour town of Kastellorizo's Dodecanese sibling Symi, and architecturally speaking the two are not dissimilar – except you won't find luxury yachts here. Perhaps it's this modesty that makes the island so special.

I grab a bite to eat at Alexandra's, its linen-topped tables host to the best seafood on the island – squid-ink risotto ➤

SUNDOWNER SPOT

Beneath the red castle, and housed in a former lighthouse beside the mosque on the edge of the harbour, Faros Bar is perfect for shallow dips in the turquoise before sundowners and nibbles (tapas available after 6pm)



today. I've been here only 24 hours and yet I've done almost everything there is to do. Only the punishing hike to the fortified monastery of St George – up a series of zigzag pathways and 400 steps – remains. The waiter advises doing the walk either first thing in the morning or late afternoon. I'll wait. I need to fill my week's to-do list somehow.

Back at Mediterraneo, I flop on a waterside sunlounger as the sun goes into its third act, before taking a dip. Kastellorizo has no sandy beaches, so the water's as clear as can be. Beyond the narrow shelf that gives the natural harbour its turquoise halo, the ocean plunges 40m or so and more. So instead of beaches, you'll find swimming platforms just like this one to the east of the island in Plakes, Faros and Kavos. It's as if the Mediterranean were a giant swimming pool, bathing ladders leading down from the quayside into the sea. A week might not be enough after all. ■

Twilight zone: sun setting over Turkey; pre-dinner aperitifs; Greek salad; chilling alfresco; house on the harbourfront; table setting at Alexandra's

How do I get there?

Olympic Air flies from Rhodes to Kastellorizo from £116 return. (For flights to Rhodes, see Factfile on page 72.) Blue Star Ferries (bluestarferries.com) sails from Rhodes's commercial harbour to Kastellorizo twice weekly (£23, one-way, 3hr 30min), while Dodekanisos Seaways' (12ne.gr/en) catamarans

leave Rhodes's Kolona harbour once a week (£34, one-way, 2hr 20min). The Mediterraneo hotel (mediterraneo-megisti.com) has doubles from £86, B&B. Or try Megisti Hotel (megistihotel.reserve-online.net/about; doubles from £57, B&B). Blue Cave trips with Nikos Sea Wolf Taxi (00 30 6934 523917) cost £8pp for a group of four.



11 The craggy island out on its own

Kythira, Peloponnese

What's its secret?

Most islands we Brits clamour for fall into the famous Cyclades, Dodecanese or Ionian groups, which may be why Kythira remains resolutely off-radar. It's a challenge to reach, lying off the southeast coast of the Peloponnese peninsula. But your reward is a verdant, mountainous landscape of traditional hamlets and deep river gorges. Rocky cliffs and semi-submerged caves define the coast, along with beaches such Diakofti, its sands evocative of the Seychelles. You'll probably stay in the

capital, Chora, with its ruined Venetian-era castle, coastal Avlemonas or sleepy inland Mylopotamos, where you dine by a mountain stream at Platanos (00 30 273 603 3397; mains about £10). At Kaleris (00 30 273 603 3461, kaleris.gr; mains about £9) in Agia Pelagia, tables spill onto the sand. Visit the Temple of Aphrodite Paleokastro — locals say it's the goddess of love's birthplace.

How do I get there?

Sky Express (skyexpress.gr) has daily 50-minute flights from Athens, from £41, one-way. Or drive from Athens to Neapolis in the Peloponnese and take the 75-minute ferry (tritonferries.gr; foot passengers £11, cars from £38,

both one-way). Pick up a hire car from drakakisrentacar.com, annarentacar.gr, panayotis-rent-a-car.gr or kythiracar.rental.gr; from £17 a day. Sunvil (sunvil.co.uk), the only UK operator serving the island, has seven nights in the Anemes Hotel in Avlemonas from £832pp, B&B, including flights and transfers.

Where can I island-hop?

Through Neapolis you can explore the southeast Peloponnese mainland. Pack a snorkel and day-trip from Kythira to swim over the ruins of Pavlopetri, the world's oldest known submerged town. Move on to stay in Monemvasia, an incredible medieval fortress on an islet joined to the mainland by a causeway.

Corfu Beyond the crowds

High on the rocks on the northeast coast, the shrine of Saint Arsenius overlooks a top swimming spot for day-trippers. To make it your own, come on foot, early morning or evening — you'll be following in the steps of Lawrence Durrell, who lived in nearby Kalamí in the '30s. The path from his home, the White House, leads through olive groves to Agni Bay and on to the chapel. In Prospero's Cell, he describes throwing cherry stones into the water for his wife to retrieve 'like an otter'.

Santorini Beyond the crowds

Thought this pin-up island was packed with cruise hordes at every turn? Hop on the bus to Vlychada (£2.20) and be surprised. The beach unravels so far under a pockmarked, wheat-coloured cliffside that you're guaranteed a solitary sunbathing spot somewhere. At sundown, walk to Vlychada village and watch the fishing boats dock with the day's catch. Much of it goes to the reassuringly local clientele at taverna To Psaraki (00 30 228 608 2783, topsaraki.gr; mains about £15) overlooking the marina.



12 Greece with an oriental flavour

Chios, North Aegean

What's its secret?

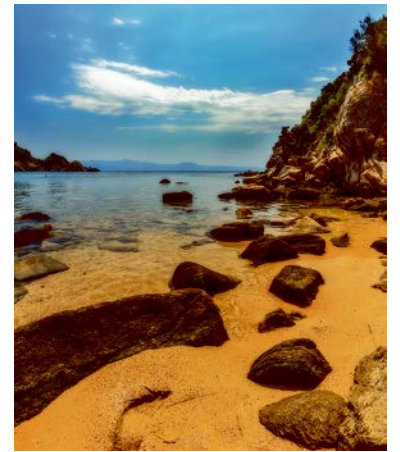
The first thing you notice about Chios is the delicate pine-like scent — that's *mastiha*, the aromatic sap of the mastic trees that are cultivated here. The second thing is its unhurried Middle Eastern culture — it's said to be Homer's birthplace, but feels more Istanbul than Ithaca, and visitors are Greek and Turkish more than British. Taking it easy is the idea: on pristine beaches, such as Mavra Volia, with its smooth black pebbles; or pootling through medieval villages of the south with their grey-on-white geometric sgraffito houses; and lunching at Mestousiko (00 30 227 107 6458, mestoutsiko.com; mains about £10) in Mesta village. After dinner, try *mastiha* — served as a sweet mousse, a digestif in a glass of water, or an ingredient in cocktails at Oz Bar (ozcocktailbar.gr) in one of the buzzy back alleys in Chios Town.

How do I get there?

The daily ferry from Piraeus (ferries.gtp.gr; 8hr; £72.50) involves a night crossing and 4am arrival, so instead take a same-day flight with Olympic Air from Athens, from £51. Greek Sun Holidays (greek.sun.co.uk) has a week's fly-drive from £975pp, B&B, including international and domestic flights, car hire and accommodation in traditional houses and two-star hotels.

Where can I island-hop?

A lazy week on Chios is easily filled (it's bigger than Corfu), but for £222 return you can slink off on the 30-minute ferry to Çeşme, one of Turkey's most sophisticated resorts. You'll see its lights flickering tantalisingly at night from Chios Town.



13 Step back in time on Halkidiki's island

Ammouliani, Halkidiki

What's its secret?

Unlike tourist-thronged Halkidiki, the nearby island of Ammouliani is a teeny time warp. It's so small you're never more than two kilometres from the sea, while the 'bus' to its mind-blowingly good beaches, such as Alykes and Megali Ammos ('big sand'), is a horse and cart that makes a couple of trips a day. Stay in the port town (you've few other options, to be honest) — home to a handful of bars and cafes, as well as a couple of very good restaurants, such as Klimataria (00 30 237 705 1151; mains about £8), which serves traditional slow-cooked lamb, and Taverna Tzanis (00 30 237 705 1322, facebook.com/tavernajanis; mains about £10), a fish restaurant with excellent sea views.

How do I get there?

Fly into Thessaloniki, then drive two hours to the small port town of Tripiti, from where a 30-minute car ferry makes trips to Ammouliani about every two hours (visitammouliani.com; foot passengers £2, cars £9, both one-way). Sunvil (sunvil.co.uk), the only UK tour operator covering the island, has seven nights in the three-star Kastalia Hotel from £750pp, B&B, including flights and transfers.

Where can I island-hop?

The best way to visit is on a twin-centre holiday with mainland Thessaloniki, enjoying a couple of nights in Greece's super-cool second city before hitting the beaches to relax. Otherwise, stop off in Olympiada, a pretty, laid-back resort town, also on the mainland — it's a short drive from Tripiti, and there are some good hiking opportunities in the surrounding area. ➤

14 The pretender to Santorini's crown

Folegandros, Cyclades

What's its secret?

Local whispers predict that rugged Folegandros will be the next Greek island to go stratospheric. Until then, luring select escapees from Santorini (and Mykonos) are olive groves, roaming goats, secluded beaches backed by dramatic cliffs (most notably Katergo) and hilltop churches against orange sunsets that turn into amethyst dusk. Completing the beauty is the lovely capital, Chora (pictured), with its blue-balconied alleys, and To Asigrito, serving local tagliatelle-ish *matsata* (00 30 228 604 1467; mains about £11). In fishing port Karavostasi, be led by aromas of barbecued bream and grilled octopus to tavernas such as Kalymnios (00 30 228 604 1146; mains about £18)

and you begin to realise that those locals' predictions may well be true.

How do I get there?

Most of the three to four daily ferries from Piraeus depart around 7am (ferries.gtp.gr; 4hr-9hr, from £34.50), but the last leaves at 3.45pm (5hr, £61). Sunvil (sunvil.co.uk) has seven nights' self-catering at Folegandros Apartments from £1,055pp, including flights, ferries and transfers.

Where can I island-hop?

As Folegandros is the furthest away from Piraeus down the western Cyclades, start or finish your island-hopping there. It's easy enough to dash across to Milos (see page 67), with three ferries daily (1hr, from £30), or to Sifnos (see page 68), with at least two daily (2hr, from £40).

Island reviews continue on page 66 ➤

15 The not-what-you-thought one:

On the quiet side

Beyond the self-contained backpacker scene, Ios is a place of solitude, silence and serene sunsets. **Liz Edwards** goes it alone



OK, strictly speaking, Ios is not one of Greece's most secret islands. Plenty of backpackers, interrailers and footloose post-A-levelers over the past 50 years know all about it, even if memories of what they did there are either hazy or unrepeatable. So if you *have* heard the name (and not assumed it was something to do with iPhones), you've probably written Ios off as the hippies 'n' ravers party island. But that's exactly what makes it such a delicious secret. It hides in plain sight, a ferry-hop from Santorini or Mykonos, but with none of their dense development or sprawling crowds. The Ios herds are self-contained, they stick to July and August (between revision and freshers' week), and stick to the hotels and campsites behind Milopotas Beach – a lovely sandy west-coast stretch, just one of 36 beaches here. What's more, they stick to the night shift: the Jägerbombers only get going at 2am.

So what's left for the rest of us, I found last September, is a little-known idyll of windmills and white cubes, blue domes and even bluer waters. The island's settlements largely hug the port, Yialos. I stayed across the bay in Tzamaria, looking back towards the harbour and little limewashed houses tripping up the hill behind to Chora, the main town. There were historic sites for when I felt active, dreamy beaches for when I didn't, and only an iffy line in souvenir T-shirts to hint at the town's alter ego.

BRILLIANT VISTAS

On the road down to Psathi, follow the path along the hillside to the 14th-century castle; the views are incredible

'We want to thank all the '80s Norwegians who broke a bottle on someone's head and gave the island a bad reputation,' said Angelos Michalopoulos, the man who, with his wife Vasso, bought up a quarter of the island a decade ago, and has since opened a handful of hotels, bars and restaurants. That bad rap meant mainstream tourism never arrived, he said. Cynics might question the couple's intentions, but they seem serious about protecting the island's landscape (they've pledged not to develop more than 1% of what they own) and making it more upmarket without changing its 'youth, energy and optimism'.

There certainly seemed plenty of that about at Pathos, the pair's Ibiza-y sunset lounge where cocktails flowed, selfies were snapped, and the DJ paused his party tunes to give the sun a classical send-off. Swan Lake's theme segued into *Nessun Dorma*, the final 'Vincerò!' timed impeccably to coincide with the sun's stage exit.

But even this fairly restrained party scene was easy to avoid. The next day, a half-hour's wiggly drive away on Ios's east coast, I found Psathi, a tiny village with a wild beach backed by pines and tamarisks. There was a cute £25-a-night guesthouse, a lone taverna, Alonistra, and little else. Sea-hazy views of neighbouring Heraklia could have kept me on Alonistra's lovely terrace all day; I ate cheese from the goats jangling out back, sipped island-distilled *tsipouro* and got chatting to Nikos, the owner.

'The party people are not for me,' he said. He'd once worked in his uncle's bar in Chora, but had had enough. 'If they come here, I'll close up and go to the mountains.'

The mysterious, vertiginous north was where I drove another day, to find Homer's grave – cairns like abstract garden gnomes collected around the spot, high above the white-horsed Aegean. Back in the island's centre, I visited Skarkos, an astonishingly well-preserved settlement from the 3rd millennium BC. Work to uncover its sparkly mica pathways and marble lintels only began after 1984, when starchaeologist Marisa Marthari stood on a nearby hilltop and spotted its contours beneath barley fields. Up close, she found 5,000-year-old pottery fragments on the surface; in 2008 the site won an EU cultural heritage prize.

You can only be near that luminous Aegean for so long before you have to dive in, and Ios has some cracking beaches. *The Big Blue* was filmed at southerly Manganari, and on a boat trip down the west coast I found empty scoops of sand backed by scrubby hills. At one, a bearded billy goat strutted over slabs of rock and left hoofprints in the sand. At another, private terraces sat up on the rocks (the Michalopouloses' work). Solitude was easy to come by – my morning dips from Tzamaria Beach, with just one or two other swimmers for company, were bliss.

And Chora, the Old Town, won me over. Outweighing the dodgy T-shirts, and bars called Slammer and Disco

69, were the teeny bougainvillea-shaded squares, bouzouki-playing *kafeneions* and shops selling traditional Ios sweets. Following plant-lined steps up through the town late one afternoon, I emerged by the belltowered Panagia Gremiotissa church. Three more chapels crowned the hill above; with its views of Sikinos across the wave-dimpled sea, this was *the* place to watch the sun sink. Other people came along as the sky ripened from sherbert lemon to peach to mandarin, but this close to Santorini, I wasn't sure two dozen constituted a crowd. So never mind 'Vincerò' ('I will win'). I just had. ■

Is there anyone there? Opposite, deserted beach on Ios. Above, clockwise from top left, overhead view of Skarkos, a 3rd-millennium BC settlement; terrace at Agalia hotel in Tzamaria; typical church overlooking the sea; Greek staples at Alonistra; windmills and Chora at sunset

How do I get there?

Ferries from Santorini take 30–50 minutes (sea jets.gr; from £27 return), and it's a £30 taxi from the airport (for flights, see page 72). In Tzamaria, Agalia (agaliahotel.com) has distinctive modern doubles from £129, B&B. Angelos and Vasso's

tucked-away luxurious resort, Calilo (calilo.com), opens this year; suites from £301, B&B. Acteon.gr has cars from £26 a day, and boats for about £125 (6hr). Eat in Psathi at Alonistra (00 30 697 389 8855; mains about £10), and at Erego on Koumbara Beach (erego.gr; mains about £14).



16 The Cyclades' most laid-back island

Kythnos, Cyclades

What's its secret?

Far from the hurly-burly of Mykonos or Santorini, sleepy Kythnos is time-warped Greece to a T. You'll find the capital, Chora, a winsome one-donkey town, and the tiny port, Merichas, no more than a fishing-boat dock — fill up here with *sfougata* (local cheese croquettes) for £4.50 at Kandouni (00 30 228 103 2220). There's certainly a retro yachty feel to the hot-spring spa resort, Loutra — the only one in the Cyclades. Dip for free in the seaside stone tub or in the waves themselves, then eat at Sofrano (00 30 228 103 1436, sofrano-yachtingclub.com; mains about £13). Postcard-pretty beaches (often reached via dirt roads) are ten a penny. The most glorious of all is Kolona, a 250-metre sandbar joining Kythnos to St Luke islet. The long trek here from the nearest parking spot turns your swim outing into an audacious adventure.

How do I get there?

A ferry leaves Piraeus daily at 7am (3hr; £22), but later ones depart from Lavrio, much closer to Athens airport (ferries. gtp.gr; from 1hr 40min; £14). Planet Holidays (planet-holidays.co.uk) has seven nights at Porto Klaras in Loutra, and a night in Lavrio, from £1,172pp, B&B, including flights and transfers.

Where can I island-hop?

You can sail to nearby Sifnos (see page 68; 2.5hr; £8) pretty much daily in season. Or combine Kythnos, Sifnos and Folegandros on a yacht trip with Seamaster Yacht Charter (seamaster.co.uk), from £738pp, bed only, based on six people, or £827pp based on four, including skipper, flights and transfers.



17 Old-fashioned Greek-island culture

Tinos, Cyclades

What's its secret?

Religion meets art meets sun-worship on Tinos, one of the last bastions of old-school island culture. Pilgrims flock to the 'miraculous' icon of the Virgin at the church of Panagia Evangelistria and, even if you don't join them climbing to the church on their knees, you should try the island dishes catering to the meat-abstaining devout. At Metaxi Mas (00 30 228 302 5945, metaximastinos.gr; mains about £11), try bitter wild artichoke ragout or aubergine soufflé. Baked pigeon, *pitsounia*, is the island staple (look out for the villa-sized dove-cotes strewn over the countryside, remnants of Venetian rule). You'll want to visit Pyrgos, the 'marble village' of sculptors and museums. The day before you go, order *pitsounia* from Myronia restaurant (00 30 228 303 1229; mains about £15). Of the beaches, go for north-coast Kolimbithra, with its butterscotch-coloured sands.

How do I get there?

Fly to Mykonos: it's a half-hour ferry ride (ferries. gtp.gr; £8.50). Avoid the Feast of the Dormition (August 15), when crowds camp in the streets and fill hotels. Planet Holidays (planet-holidays.co.uk) has seven nights at Aeolis Tinos Suites in Triantaros from £1,123pp, B&B, including flights, ferries and transfers.

Where can I island-hop?

Frequent catamarans mean you can day-trip to Mykonos (or go for an all-night-party bender) to avoid paying the island's OTT accommodation rates. And if your eyes tire of the bare-rock sun glow of the landscape, curl up in the shade of the trees on the next island up, leafy Andros (see page 48; 45min; £13).

Mykonos Beyond the crowds

The party island has its secrets, but for the full-on desert-island vibe, take a day-trip to the archaeological site Rhenia. Only accessible from Mykonos, the islet is flat, stony and inhabited by goats and sheep — walk a little inshore and you'll feel really marooned. Its crumpled shoreline ensures you'll always find a sheltered, sandy beach for a lazy swim and snorkel. Sunfoss Alessia (sunfosalesssiayachting.gr) has six-hour trips from £82pp, with lunch and transfers.

Skiathos Beyond the crowds

Finding a beach on hit-with-Brits Skiathos isn't a problem. Finding a quiet one is. At Maratha, a dainty cove at the bottom of a pine-forest track, you'll find a solitary line of loungers for hire, waders rather than water sports, and a little taverna serving freshly brewed iced frappés and chunky Greek salads. The local red-route bus from Skiathos Town drops you at the top (bus stop No. 22). The only other people are guests from the nearby Skiathos Palace Hotel — bag a sunbed while they're at breakfast.



18 The multicoloured volcanic beach wonderland

Milos, Cyclades

What's its secret?

This spectacularly volcanic island has more than 70 beaches, and the question for its chilled-out British set is not where to swim, but what colour beach you prefer. Will it be Sarakiniko's ivory-satin honeycomb of rocks, the iridescent craggy fjord of Papafrangas or the psychedelic cliffs of Paleochori, which look as if a naughty teen had been let loose with a spray can? The trapped geothermal energy comes in useful, too: the melt-in-the-mouth lamb stews at Sirocco, in Paleochori (00 30 228 703 1201, restaurantsirocco.gr; stews £13), are buried in the sand and left to cook overnight. Take a boat trip to the west coast and Kleftiko — the sandy cove used to be a notorious pirate lair. Afterwards, tuck into baked goat at the

gourmet Alevromylos (00 30 228 702 3117; mains about £12) in Adamas.

How do I get there?

Olympic Air runs daily flights from Athens in season, from £49, but the closest international airport is Santorini. From there you reach Milos by ferry (5.5hr; £16) or catamaran (2hr; from £42); the last one leaves about 7.15pm (ferries. gtp.gr). Sunvil (sunvil.co.uk) has seven nights in Pollonia at Apollon Rooms, from £904pp, B&B, with flights via Athens.

Where can I island-hop?

Take a ferry across the Pollonia strait to Kimolos (30min; £2.20) for a day-trip; most of this island is a nature reserve, so it's as close to the raw Med as you can get. Or head on to Folegandros (see page 62; 2h 35min by ferry, £7; 55min by catamaran, from £25) or make your way to Sifnos (page 68; 45min; £13). ➤

19 The bargain that's the Greeks' favourite

Sifnos, Cyclades

What's its secret?

Since its overwhelmingly Greek clientele started cutting back on holidays, this beach-fringed island has leapt to the top of the best-deal lists. But value for money is not the main reason you'll fall for it at first sight. Sifnos welcomes you with a yawn of fine golden sand by the port, lapped by sparkling waters and flanked by two boho beach bars. Welcome to the island's blue-flag beach, Kamares. For a more rarefied swim, head to the tamarisk-shaded strip of Fasolou,

home to Yorgos-Dimitris (00 30 228 407 1493; mains about £9), a taverna rightly proud of its impeccably fresh fish. NB food-lovers: Sifnos is deemed the birthplace of gastronomy by many, for the ancients believed that good food should be cooked in a Sifniot clay pot (*gastro*). The tradition continues today, as you'll discover at Drimoni, beyond Apollonia, the capital — order the rich pork stew with figs (00 30 228 403 1434, drimoni.gr; mains about £11).

How do I get there?

Fly into Athens and you've plenty of time to catch the ferry from Piraeus — the last crossing leaves at about 5pm (ferries.gtp.gr; 2hr 55min; £44).

Alternatively, Olympic Air has Athens-Paros returns from £55. There are also plenty of ships to Sifnos (50min; £4.30). Sunvil (sunvil.co.uk) has a week at Efrosini Hotel on Platys Gialos, from £928pp, B&B, including flights, ferries and transfers.

Where can I island-hop?

Island-hop to Milos (see page 67), which is only 45 minutes away by catamaran (£13). You can combine Sifnos and Milos with Ramblers Walking Holidays (ramblersholidays.co.uk) on a two-week half-board trip from £1,599pp, B&B, including flights to Athens and transfers on to Milos, a guide and dinners at local tavernas.

Kefalonia

Beyond the crowds

Few tourists make it down to the southern tip of Kefalonia's lesser-known Paliki Peninsula — which suits the locals just fine. In unspoilt Vatsa Bay, laid-back Spiaggia Taverna comes with tables set right on the sand and buckets of eccentric, rustic charm. Follow Spyros's wooden signs warning of kangaroos and crocodiles, bag a table under the straw roof streaming with fishing nets and assorted knick-knacks, and order fresh fish grilled on the open fire (00 30 697 968 0516, vatsa-spiaggia.gr; mains about £15).



20 For hiking and picture-pretty street scenes

Symi, Dodecanese

What's its secret?

Colourful Neo-Classical mansions tumble almost into the sea from Symi's upper town, Chora, their yellows, reds and oranges bright reminders of a rich merchant past. It's like a Greek version of the Amalfi coast, only with occasional lazy wanderers instead of speeding cars and crowds. That makes it all the more romantic, too: honeymooners and loved-up couples are wooed by small boutique guesthouses and converted mansions, many situated around the harbour, though hikers love the hidden monasteries and mountainous terrain inland. The island's not big on beaches (try pebbly Pedi Beach), but there's clear-water swimming to be had off jetties along the coast. Seafood fans will love the garlic prawns at Pantelis on the harbour (00 30 697 726 1710; mains about £18), while in Pedi village, the aubergine and feta casserole at the Secret Garden (00 30 224 607 2153; mains about £6) is another winner.

How do I get there?

From Rhodes, three or four ferries run daily between May and October (12ne.gr; 50min; from £26 return). Olympic Holidays (olympicholidays.com) has seven nights at Nireus Hotel on the harbour from £608pp, B&B, including flights and ferry.

Where can I island-hop?

People tend to stay put on Symi, but you might want to spend a little time in Rhodes, where there are any number of boutique hotels within the Old Town walls. Symi isn't far off the Turkish coast, either, so it's easy to day-trip to Datça to buy spices, clothes and crafts at its lovely Saturday market.



21 The Cyclades' last lost outpost

Koufonisia, Cyclades

What's its secret?

Of Koufonisia's two main islands, Ano Koufonisi is on the '*agones grammes*' line of (unprofitable) subsidised ferries to a series of tiny isles off Naxos. With a population of about 400 (it's said there are more fishing boats!), the rugged outcrop has a sprinkling of cubic white houses, very few cars and some fabulous beaches. Summer visitors will likely be cultured bohemian types from Athens. Hire a bike to visit Italida, a lovely stretch of sand, or take a water taxi to its uninhabited sister isle, Kato Koufonisi, for wild camping and nudist beaches. Back on the main island itself, dine in Mikres Cyclades (00 30 228 507 4500, mikrescyclades.com; mains about £10) for modern Greek cuisine, and at the shack-like Neo Remezzo (00 30 228 507 4203; mains about £10) for seafood.

How do I get there?

It's a 7.5hr ferry from Athens's port, Piraeus, to Ano Koufonisi (bluestar ferries.com or seajets.gr; foot passengers £32, cars from £67, both one-way). Sailing times are seasonal and can be infrequent, so do check well in advance. Stay in converted windmill Anemomylos (koufonisia-rooms.com; doubles from £51, room-only).

Where can I island-hop?

The '*agones grammes*' line opens up a world of islands with a similar feel to Koufonisia, including Donousa, Schinoussa and Heraklia. Or take a day-trip to uninhabited Keros. Once one of the most important centres of Cycladic civilisation and said to be one of the Gates of Hades, Keros today is pretty barren, with two small chapels and some good swimming spots. ■