





# A CLASSICAL TALE

In all the best Greek island experiences, myth merges with reality. The country's endless archipelago may be ever-changing but its ancient stories are always present... if you know where to look. Words by Chris Deliso >>

**J**AGGED ARCHIPELAGOS,  
SLOPING BAYS AND ISLAND  
CONSTELLATIONS, EACH  
ACCOMPANIED BY THEIR OWN  
IMMORTAL LEGENDS... GREECE

CAPTIVATED ME AS A CHILD, AND  
WITH A LOVE FOR UNUSUAL MAPS  
AND MYTHS, NOTHING COULD  
COMPETE WITH GREECE. READING  
THE CLASSIC D'AULAIRES' BOOK  
OF GREEK MYTHS, THE TALES OF  
GODS AND MORTALS ARE BROUGHT  
TO LIFE, RECOUNTED WITH SUCH  
BEAUTY AND GRACE.

Still, I only visited the islands themselves much later in life as a graduate and for research purposes, and the Greek islands, with their stunning contrasts of endless sea, sky and rugged, wild terrain, provided the ideal setting for a truly classical adventure.

Since then, my pursuit of these goals has included swimming in cerulean coves, gazing out at sunsets from cliff-top monasteries and plenty of white-knuckle drives on precipitous mountain roads. Not to mention much feasting on local specialities accompanied by what is, to my mind, the world's finest olive oil.

Yet above all it is the people that have always accentuated my travels here. Some of the most memorable characters I have ever encountered have been in the Greek islands; the undeniable spontaneity, stubbornness and eccentric optimism of the Greek people always bring me back.

#### THE 'FAMOUS' ISLES

Like many other visitors, my first island travels began among the masses on the docks of Athens' port, Piraeus, where we clambered on to one of those grand, lumbering old ferries that ply the Greek seas day and night, in fair and foul weather. For Greeks, the moment of boarding is well-practiced and natural. For others, it can be confusing, what with the staccato barking of orders from ferrymen and grandmothers forging doggedly ahead, using overstuffed bags as shields, while packages being tossed through the air flash by thick, salty docking ropes being flung back to deck with the deep bellow of the horn sounding departure.

The first time, the whole scene struck me as chaotic; now it seems an oddly dependable, even communal sort of disorder — as if somehow, somewhere deep in the Greek traveller's subconscious mind lay an adaptive skill acquired during the great Greek-Turkish population exchanges of 1923. At the time, boatloads of confused and often destitute emigrants, clutching what little they had left, flooded those very docks.

Out at sea, these imaginings fell away with the receding shadows of the Attica coastline. I concentrated on the adventures ahead with a couple of Greek friends, who were taking me to one

specific island chain, the Cyclades, that for many is the embodiment of the Greek islands in general.

Think of it: stark, arid terrain inflected with rocks and the occasional olive tree; blue-shuttered, white-plastered cubist dwellings clinging to hillsides; private yachts and bronzed bathers on packed, sandy beaches. If this is what comes to mind when imagining the Greek islands, then you're thinking of the Cyclades — so-named because they form a circle around Delos, an isle sacred in ancient times. The most famous of these are certainly Santorini, with its vibrant architecture and striking volcanic landscape, and the gay-friendly, scandalously pricey Mykonos.

At the first island we visited, Paros, I was amused, almost to the point of concern, by the nonchalance of my cohorts, whose only priority was to sip their frappé — the cold, foamy, caffeinated drink that breeds indifference and is to be found in every cafe, company, bus station and bureaucrat's office across the land.

Perhaps because they have the sea so close, many Greeks actually use the sea surprisingly little. Indeed, on a typical summer's day in the Greek language, the term 'go for a bath' is heard much more frequently than the verb 'to swim'; certainly, the latter would require effort.

And so, despite the existence of an undeniably beautiful beach below our cafe table, my first lesson was that resisting the enforced relaxation of island life was futile; some things just come with the territory and there is always time for everything.

There was plenty of time for action on nearby Ios, the stony Cycladic outpost made notorious by the annual hordes of young international partiers — not terribly Greek, but historically an important part of the tourism that's formed, and sometimes deformed, Greece today. Yet after a bout of hedonism there, something more classic and iconic lay ahead in Santorini. Sometimes what the travel guides say is bang-on, and indeed the view of Santorini's multi-coloured cliffs, slowly coming into view from the deck of the big ferry, is stunning. In around 1613BC, a volcanic eruption







sending a plume of ash 22 miles into the atmosphere collapsed part of the island, creating a vast caldera, while a massive ensuing tsunami destroyed nearby Crete's Minoan civilisation.

Volcanic activity has continued since, occasionally reshaping Santorini further; I experienced this while blissfully bathing in the sea's hot sulphuric baths off an islet facing Santorini's cliff-top capital, Fira.

The cluster of sugar-cube houses jutting from Fira's volcanic rock assume different shapes and colours as the sun makes progress across the sky. Nowhere is this effect more dramatic than further north along the coast, in elevated Oia; visiting this village of immaculately plastered homes and churches is, as it was then, an obligatory evening ritual for all those who visit here.

Gazing out as the sun sank into the sea, I marvelled as the pastel glow of the conjoined rooftops and domes dissipated into the gathering dusk. I was one of many among the throngs, with Japanese tourists excitedly clutching cameras and

the Italians murmuring their approval as if at a rousing opera.

After a few days on Santorini's black volcanic sands, I crossed the Aegean to the Dodecanesian chain and another famous island — and, in its own way, one that's equally as earth-shattering: Patmos. According to the legend, St John wrote the *Book of Revelations* in a cave here. This cave grotto, now known as the Monastery of the Apocalypse, has been spruced up considerably since then, and is now a visitor attraction in its own right.

I found it on the wooded path leading from the sumptuous Monastery of St John the Theologian, one of Greece's essential sacred sites. This massive fortified structure, built in the late 11th century, struck me with its sense of fullness and living geometry.

Everywhere I looked it was full of angels — from the arches under which I walked, to the side chapels and stairways along which black-clad, bushy-bearded monks briskly strode. Inside the church,

a riotous burst of colour emerged from the walls and apses in myriad Byzantine frescoes.

Patmos did indeed represent another dimension of the island experience with its unique and appropriately spiritual feel. Yet, having started my journey amid the masses, I wanted to end it somewhere in total solitude. There were a few *caiques* (fishing boats) that shoved off for the tiny islets of Arki and Marathi, just above Patmos. I hit the former — nothing more than a hilly scrubland where the only sound came from the occasional tinkle of a goat's bell. With very few inhabitants, Arki was the perfect place to enjoy total serenity. Exploring it, I eventually reached the islet's far side, where below me the land dropped off into a cove of astonishingly aquamarine blue. I took a deep breath and dived in; the water proved deeper than it had appeared, such was its remarkable clarity. All alone and floating in the protected warmth of the bay, I enjoyed the first of many singular moments in Greece's islands. >>

**Previous page:** Plaka, Milos island

**Opposite:** Patmos Island, Chora, Monastery of St John

**This page:** Oia Town, Santorini at dusk



**ON THE SOUTH COAST, A  
STUBBORN GEOGRAPHY  
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## THE GREATEST OF THEM ALL

My decision to actually live in the Greek islands occurred somewhat later, in January of 2000. I hit upon a not-exactly-mathematical formulation that eventually led me to Crete. I inscribed this under candlelight at the place I happened to be staying at the time: the Mt Athos monasteries in northern Greece, where Byzantine rites and liturgies have been preserved uninterrupted for more than 1,000 years. It seemed as good a place as any to make a sweeping life decision. I ended up spending only about a year in Crete, though it gets better with each trip back — simply, perhaps, because so much of it has stayed the same.

Arriving, I instantly realised Crete was an altogether different commodity. The fifth-biggest island in the Mediterranean, it is full of mountains and, unlike most Greek islands, has enough life to keep it interesting year-round. Indeed, it could have been its own country and the pride of its people, who through the centuries have occasionally called for just such a status, is legendary throughout Greece. While tourists would inundate it in summer, this could hardly affect Crete's real local character — something I was ready to enjoy and explore to the full.

I first spent time discovering Heraklio, the island's north-coast capital marked by impressive Venetian fortifications; the once-mighty Venetian Republic

controlled Crete from 1204 to 1669. With around 250,000 people, it verges on city status and is known for its stylish, open-air dining and young motorcyclists roaring recklessly through the streets. Outside of town, however, things are quieter, with signs of agricultural life — from orange and lemon groves to innumerable olive trees. In fact, apart from the north coast, home to Crete's package-tour hotels, the island is wild. On the south coast, particularly its western half, a stubborn geography of bare mountains reaches more than 7,874ft high before crashing into the sea; a natural wall against overdevelopment.

There, I lived near a long beach at the half-hearted 'resort' of Plakias in a little house amid the olive trees. The paper-thin walls shuddered whenever the wind blew hard, which was most of the time, but the rent was a reasonable \$22 (£14) a month. From there it was easy to explore the south.

One of my favourite trips started after hitching a lift in a farmer's pickup. It was full of grapes, and we munched as the rattling old truck ripped through small villages, the signs announcing them becoming increasingly pockmarked with bullet holes the further west we went (target practice for kids rather than anything more sinister). We pass the magnificent Venetian castle, Frangokastello set above an alluring

beach, and cross the invisible border into a new territory.

Here, local Sfakians, named for the stony Sfakia region between the Lefka Ori (White Mountains) and the Libyan Sea, are a special bunch, even by Cretan standards. Fiercely independent as theirs was the only area in Crete never conquered by the Turks during centuries of Ottoman rule, the Sfakians are proud of a heritage as mysterious as it is indomitable. In the area's main town, the whimsical port of Hora Sfakion, we got an unexpected history lesson at a bakery.

"We come from the ancient Dorians," pronounced the woman who was, quite unusually for a Greek, blonde-haired and blue-eyed. "Yes, here even before the Greeks!" she exclaimed proudly. This sense of distinctiveness is preserved even in the language: in a local shop, I discovered a 200-page book of local terms, some from ancient and Byzantine Greek or with Italian influence, not found elsewhere in Greece.

From Hora Sfakion, we boarded the small ferry that makes the regular run along the south-west coast — some settlements are inaccessible by car — for a larger south-western town, Paleohora. As the scent of mountain thyme gave way to the invigorating smell of sea-spray, we passed Loutro, a tiny hamlet of gleaming white houses stacked up in the shadow of bald rolling cliffs. >>

**Opposite:** Ancient olive trees, Crete island

**This page:** Sheep on Frangokastello beach with Venetian castle

We stopped in Agia Roumelia, where the 10 mile-long Samaria Gorge exits into the sea. Europe's longest gorge, it's a five-to-six hour hike when starting from the northern entrance at Omalos. Home to hawks and Crete's endangered wild goat, the kri-kri, Samaria is one of the island's major draws for the active-minded.

Southern Crete was once popular with hippies and Paleohora still had that vaguely-1972 feel about it. This laid-back place is beset by ferocious winds that satiate visiting windsurfers during the day and blow up the tablecloth edges on streetside tavernas in the evening, waiters rushing merrily to clamp the corners back into obedience. On certain summer nights, open-air concerts featuring traditional Cretan music are held. I was transfixed by the haunting sound of the lyra, the Cretan violin, in turns dolorous and melancholic then darting ahead in lively runs, accompanied by the quicksilver bouzouki and gravelly vocals of old-school Cretan singers. They sang *mantinadhes* — repetitive, bluesy lyrics that, like the Byzantine folk poetry from which they are derived, are sung in 15-syllable verse. This was music meant to be accompanied by the potent local red (dubbed 'black' in Greek) wine or stronger stuff like raki (something like Italian grappa), the national firewater.

Raki was just what the two old men were sipping when, on another trip through the west of Crete, I stopped for dinner. It was late, and from the only public house still lit up came the desolate sound of the *bouzouki* one of the men was strumming echoing through the air, accompanied only by crickets. It was exactly the kind of place where, as happened to me on a recent trip, you ask to buy some olive oil and the proprietor says: "How much you want? Fifty kilos or 100?"

The modest white walls were bare, save for some faded religious icons, and the only thing they could make was a salad. But then the owner's eyes lit up: "Wait one second — let me look in the back."

After a minute, the village elder returned clutching a wild but very dead rabbit by the foot. "I just shot it today," he beamed. "Should be very tasty!"

## ALONNISOS AND BEYOND

For me, random encounters with local characters are what make Greek island exploration so fun. I came across another one with my wife in 2006, when visiting



**From top:** Ferryboat from Hora Sfakion; a banana stall on Vai beach. This part of Crete has Europe's only outdoor banana plantation

the Sporades, a string of islands further north, the most famous of which is Skiathos, with its endless, and endlessly photographed beaches. Here we visited the unusually green and relatively non-touristy Alonnisos. As a host of the endangered Mediterranean Monk Seal ('monachos monachos' in Greek), Alonnisos is regaled as the site of Greece's only 'marine park'.

This status has meant some satellite islets, and the waters surrounding them, have been declared off-limits by government decree — a situation that greatly exasperated Ioannis, a local fisherman and captain of the sightseeing boat that took us along the Alonnisos coast to swim in the exquisitely clear

waters of Peristera. This islet faced the tranquil fishing village of Steni Vala, where we had rented a room.

"When I was a kid we used to row every day to the islands, to check the nets or just for fun," he complained. "Now these damn Europeans tell us we can't go in our own sea." We report our conversation the day before, with two young women who were collecting money on the beach for endangered seals. "They tell us that it is almost impossible to see these seals now."

But as lithe dolphins jump just off the boat's bow, captain Ioannis groaned and slapped his forehead. "Those damn seals are following my boat every day!" he said. "These environmental people just >>>





want to make a story so they can collect the money! I guarantee you will see a seal if you stay here long enough.” And so it was that when leaving Alonnisos a few days later, from the main port of Patitiri, we finally saw it: the monachos monachos, brown and sleek, cavorting in the waters below, apparently unafraid of the boats all around.

Through the years I have enjoyed many such unexpected experiences, and am always eager to return for yet another Greek island adventure. No matter the size, each island is its own cosmos, and both reality and imagination expand to fit its particular contours. And you always feel you’re at the very centre of the world — even, or perhaps especially, in those islands that feel the most remote.

There is so much left to discover. Learning more about light, for example, is very important. It would be a shame to stop at only Santorini’s sunsets. How about such oddities as the purple lanterns-to-be that I saw a young Belgian couple making from sea urchins plucked out of the Cretan seabed? And the pure stealth of dusk, I discovered, is a key part of visiting Fourni. This tiny archipelago was once favoured by pirates for its sheltering, elliptical bays and its high cliffs exemplifies the eccentric cartography that initially drew me to the islands of the Aegean.

And in another way, a unique quality of light is what they say makes Folegandros so special, though I have never been; put it on the list for the future. And there is also remote Astypalaia: the name alone would get me to go. I bet there must be a good myth behind it.

**Above:** Fishermen at Fourni island harbour

## essentials GREEK ISLANDS

### GETTING THERE

Direct flights operate to more than 15 island and mainland destinations, mainly by charter and no-frills services. Main operators are Thomsonfly, Thomas Cook, Monarch Airlines, Viking, EasyJet and Jet2. Full-service scheduled flights serve only Athens and Thessaloniki and are operated by Olympic Air, Aegean Airlines from Heathrow and British Airways (Heathrow and Gatwick).

» **Average flight time:** 3.5h

### GETTING AROUND

Greece has a strong network of domestic flights from the Athens hub, the main operators are Olympic Airlines and Aegean Airlines. From November to April, the only flights to the islands are via Athens, with Olympic and Aegean offering many connections. Greece has a major network of ferry services to the islands and mainland ports. The

main ferry hub is Piraeus, near Athens. Most islands are small enough to get around on foot even the smallest have local buses (or at least ‘us’).  
[www.olympicair.com](http://www.olympicair.com)  
[www.aegeanair.com](http://www.aegeanair.com)

### WHEN TO GO

The season in resorts runs May to October, when most direct flights operate. Despite the bad press Greece has received lately for strikes and anti government protests, the country is very safe, the islands especially so.

### NEED TO KNOW

» **Currency:** Euro. £1 = €1.20.

» **Time:** GMT +2.

» **International dial code:** 00 30.

### MORE INFO

Smaller islands have few or no ATMs and are dependent on imports, delivery can be weather-dependent, so plan accordingly.  
[www.greekislandhopping.com](http://www.greekislandhopping.com)

### HOW TO DO IT?

» Peter Sommer Travels offers yacht tours with a cultural flavour, led by expert guides; the 15-day Dodecanese cruise costs £3,195 per person all-inclusive apart from flights.  
[www.petersommer.com](http://www.petersommer.com)

» Sunvil offers trips to the less-known Greek islands, sailing holidays and island hopping. Two weeks on three islands costs £958 per person including flights, ferry transport and transfers plus B&B hotel accommodation.  
[www.sunvil.co.uk](http://www.sunvil.co.uk) ☐



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