

The Greek Islands

The land of Gods and Goddesses

Story and photography by Cheryl F. Hendrick

“They are the most gorgeous blue,” my husband, Greg, exclaimed as we strolled hand-in-hand on the fourth day of our honeymoon. Our surroundings: the island of Santorini, Greece. I turned away, blushing with the love of a newlywed just complimented by her new husband, when I realized with a start that my eyes aren’t blue. They’re hazel.

When I turned to calmly explain his oversight, I realized that it wasn’t my baby browns that had captured his baby greens...his wonderment was drawn from two gigantic picturesque blue church domes in front of us. It was a bright azure I have seen captured only in oil paintings of dramatic fantasy skies. Now it was actually in front of us upon the signature domes of the Cycladic Islands of Greece. We had stepped into a postcard.

Abandoning Athenian gods and goddesses a few days earlier, we mere mortals left from Port Piraeus to traverse the Aegean sea via cruise ship, in search of warm beaches, whitewashed villages and walled fortresses, with a few glasses of ouzo along the way.

We chose the best way to visit four of the Greek islands. From island to island we sailed—Mykonos, Delos, Santorini and Rhodes were awaiting our discovery.

MYKONOS

Brightly painted balconies draped with brilliantly colored flowers and vines greeted us as we leisurely walked the narrow lanes of Mykonos. A new adventure was seemingly around every white-washed corner. Even the pathways were out of a fairytale—

brought to life with whitewash outlining the large circular stones beneath our feet. Fun-loving and fashionable, full of boutiques and tavernas, Mykonos is the most expensive and heavily visited of all Greek islands. Known for its sophisticated nightlife, you will certainly find excitement on this party island.

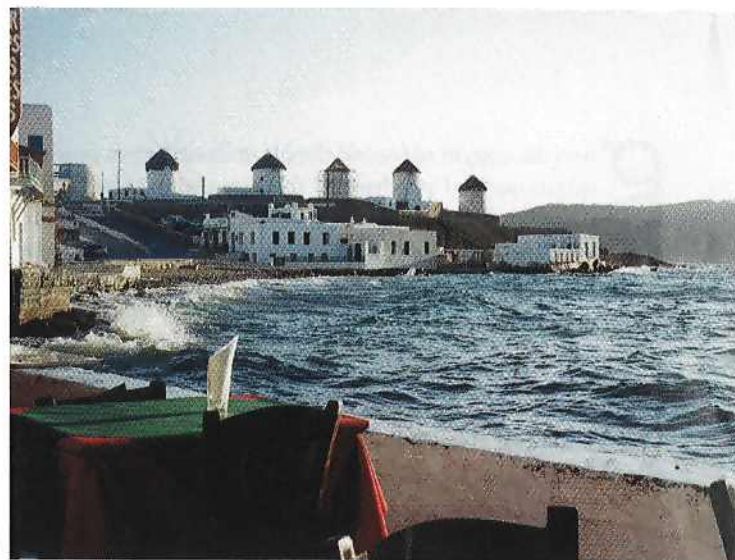
The first place to hit when you visit Greece? The beach. Busy mostly in the spring and summer, Mykonos beaches have a celebratory atmosphere with tunes and lively beach-goers, but you can certainly find an isolated refuge. We went in search of that quiet getaway and found it at Ornos Beach. Whether it was our timing (we were there in late October) or the petite size of this sandy slice of heaven, Ornos was exactly what we wanted—quiet. Somewhere between crazy and calm is Megali Ammos, closest to town as you walk past the windmills on the southwest side of the harbor. Paradise Beach is probably the liveliest, with dance music pumping over the beach, watersports and a young crowd; and Super Paradise Beach isn’t far. All beaches are reachable by taxi, some even by local bus transport, but check schedules so you aren’t stuck holding your beach towel and bag for hours at a bus stop.

For those who aren’t interested in the beach or the hubbub, even quieter times await you as you visit the Archaeological, the Craft & Folklore and the Maritime museums.

If you can tear yourself away from the beaches and trendy shops, don’t ignore the island’s fare. We enjoyed an incredible dinner at a small taverna (Little Venice) that overlooked the sea and the town’s famous five windmills. With waves crashing over a low



Palace of Grand Masters, Rhodes



View from Little Venice restaurant, Mykonos

wall 10 feet from us, and a sunset saying goodnight to the horizon, we dined on linguine and fresh shellfish, coupled with the “fruits” of a local vineyard’s labor—a crisp, dry white wine.

DELOS

The barren view of Delos as you sail towards its rocky terrain is a bizarre site, especially among all of its colorful surrounding islands. But this almost tree-less island is not one to be ignored. One of the most important archaeological sites in Greece, and certainly the most important in the Cyclades, Delos lies three miles from Mykonos and is a mere 2.5 miles in length. This sacred desolate island, known as the birthplace of Apollo and Artemis, touts an eerie collection of fallen ruins guarded by the Avenue of Lions.

Be advised that the remains of ancient Delos, together with the museum, are the island’s only attraction. No one is even allowed to stay on the island overnight. In fact, millenia ago, it was declared illegal for anyone to be born or die on the island, today a national park for Greece.

Important sites within the Archeological site of Delos: The Agora of the Competaliasts, one of the main markets of the Hellenistic city; The Temple of the Delians or Grand Temple, the latest and largest of the three temples dedicated to Apollo; Terrace of the Lions, where only five out of the original marble lions dedicated to Apollo still roar; Temple of Isis, which overlooks the harbor and is usually the first temple guests see as they approach Delos; and the impressive Temple of Hera.

SANTORINI

From our ship’s port, there were two choices of how to get to the main town area of Thera, a thousand feet above the Bay of Santorini—walk up hundreds and hundreds of stairs or let a donkey do the work for us (there was also a tram, but who wants to visit an ancient island and then take advantage of modern technology?). After jumping off of the donkey and handing its reins back to its guide, you would think that we had walked up—we were breathless. The island’s white cubic houses clinging to cliffs, punctuated with blue church domes and pink bell towers, created an amazing panoramic view over the sea-filled caldera. As we strolled through this quintessentially Greek paradise, the tiny maze of cobblestone lanes wove tightly between the descending cliffside houses, seemingly almost on the rooftops of these sun-bleached homes below.

There is a mythical air on Santorini as you venture further out of Thera and the beach communities. Once a round, ordinary

island, an ancient volcanic explosion left nothing but a crescent-shaped rim, causing some to claim Santorini as the “real” Atlantis. Search for this lost Minoan city at Akrotini, where ongoing excavations testify to this major eruption 3,600 years ago. Here you’ll explore the mesmerizing ruins, a surprisingly gentle layer of volcanic ash that left walls and artifacts intact.

If you have the time, travel by cab or bus the few miles from the rather bustling Thera to the traditional Greek village of Oia. From trinkets to fine oil paintings to handmade fisherman sweaters, this quiet colony is home to several local artists and is rich with galleries and boutiques.

RHODES (RODOS)

Known as the Island of the Sun, Rhodes is a complete change from the typical Greek island. The largest of the 12 Dodecanese off the coast of Asia Minor, Rodos boasts an incredible walled medieval town (Old Town) and is the largest inhabited medieval settlement in Europe.

Standing tall at the pier of famous Mandraki Harbor, the ram and the deer have become synonymous with this 2,500-year-old main harbor, as they peer over the waters. We relaxed for a while and watched the ships pull into port by these graceful statues.

Walking through the Gate of Freedom brings you into the walls of the city, with imposing towers and grand facades. The Avenue of Knights within the walls is lined with magnificent medieval buildings and leads to the most impressive Grand Master’s Palace, built in the 7th Century to act as the citadel of the Early Byzantine Fortress.

Across from Mandraki Harbor is New Town. Center yourself in the town’s center with lunch or dinner at any of the bustling tavernas of Cyprus square. Around the square, you’ll also find many fashionable boutiques, jewelry stores and pottery shops. Known for a long tradition of manufacturing ceramics, don’t hesitate to abandon the historical side of Rhodes and do a little shopping.

Most off-ship tours include a visit to the lovely village of Lindos in the middle of Rhodes. The imposing Acropolis shares its rocky outcrop with a Crusader castle above winding streets with white-washed, elaborately decorated houses.

The beautiful frescoed Minoan palaces in Crete (Greece’s largest island), cypress trees rising out of shimmering olive groves on Corfu, the rich remains of ancient times on Milos—we were of course unable to see them all. But what we did see of the Greek Islands left us with amazing memories. We will never look at the color blue quite the same. ■

