

The spectacular view
from Oia, Santorini

Greece Is the Word

Europe's financial woes might be making news headlines, but **Sarah Fung** finds that the Greek islands are as popular as they always were—and now they need your tourist dollars more than ever. Photographs by **Malcolm Minns**.



Archipel Club

When we decided to vacation in Greece at the end of May, people thought that we had gone mad. “You’ll get caught up in the riots!” warned one friend. “Don’t tell your grandmother where you’re going!” a family member cautioned. We paid little attention. With the extensive and dramatic news coverage of the bailout focused on Athens, we confidently believed that the Cyclades—the island group where we would focus our trip—would remain unscathed. But as the day of our departure drew closer and the news of the riots intensified, we began to doubt ourselves. What if the ferries went on strike and we got trapped on one of the islands? What if the guesthouses closed overnight and we had nowhere to sleep? We were racked with uncertainty, but despite countless hours spent online trawling holiday forums, we could not find a definitive assessment of the situation in Greece that would put our doubts to rest... or convince us to cancel our trip.

We needn’t have worried though, because—at least by this piece’s date of publication—visitors to Greece have little to fear. In fact, the Greeks are relying on tourism to keep their local businesses afloat and are welcoming visitors with open arms. The islands, especially, remain lovely. Other than a preponderance of anti-government graffiti (a result of high youth unemployment) there are few overt signs of a recession out there. Thanks to tourism, shops on the islands are doing a brisk trade, tavernas are hopping and holidaymakers still rattle around the coastal roads on rented mopeds. Of course, if you’re planning a trip to Greece, it would be wise to monitor the political situation there and talk to your local consulate or travel provider if you’re feeling skittish. But judging by the time we spent there, there’s no reason to avoid this spectacular destination.

Come Sail Away

If you love the sea, the best way to explore the Greek islands is to charter a yacht. A combination of calm waters and plentiful sunshine means that a sailing trip is possible for even the most novice sailor—and if you’re lucky, a pod of curious dolphins might decide to follow your boat as you sail from one island to another. Boating needn’t be cripplingly expensive (although luxe options are plentiful) as there are several companies that offer (relatively) economical cabin charters where you can book a berth and make friends with your shipmates as you sail. One such company is **Archipel Club** ((+30) 69793-66016, www.archipelclub.com), which owns a splendid four-room catamaran. Basic but comfortable, each berth comes with a double bed, an ensuite bathroom and hot water—but not much else. On the six-night voyage around the Cyclades, you sail for around three hours a day and eat breakfast and lunch on the boat. Then you dock in the afternoon for a swim before heading for shore in the late afternoon to explore an island and have dinner at a local taverna. The itinerary is decided by the skipper and depends on the seasonal winds, but a standard trip will take you around several islands, each with its own sense of identity and character. From the famous party islands of Ios and Mykonos to the mountainous, agricultural Naxos and even the tiny, sparsely populated Iraklia, each island is surprisingly different yet maintains that Cycladic aesthetic of pristine whitewashed houses. The trip costs 1,860 euros per couple outside of the peak months of July and August, or 2,080 euros within those times. If you’re a very adventurous solo traveler (or a third wheel with not much money), the tiny pilot cabin can also be hired for 465/520 euros. The kitty for the entire journey—which pays for groceries, evening meals and fuel—usually comes to 220 euros per head, or slightly less. The trip starts and ends on the island of Paros, which is easily accessible from Athens, Crete and other Cycladic islands.

The Island Life

If your sailing trip has given you a taste for more Greek islands, here are some that are not to be missed.

Mykonos

This well-known party island might be best known for its glamorous, all-night parties, but its charming town center is postcard-perfect. Getting lost in its narrow, warren-like streets is the quintessential Cycladic experience; restaurants and shops spill forth from immaculate whitewashed houses and bright pink bougainvillea blossoms tumble out of window boxes. The Little Venice waterfront strip is where you’ll find cocktail bars aplenty. Grab a drink and watch the stylish island-hoppers sashay past.

Another big attraction in Mykonos is the beaches. Small but perfectly formed, Paradise Beach and Paranga Beach are two of the best-known; the former plays host to all-night parties where bottles of champagne are de rigueur, while the latter takes on a more relaxed vibe (nudists at the far end, families near the entrance). If you’re looking accommodation near the beach, the **San Giorgio Mykonos** ((+30) 22890-27474, www.sangiorgio-mykonos.com) is situated between Paradise and Paranga. A recent addition to the Design Hotels stable of properties, San Giorgio underwent a dramatic rebranding and reopened earlier this year. It caters to a young, laid-back crew, with super stylish digs that take the island’s traditional Cubist architecture and furnish it with low-key luxe fixings. The pool bar and restaurant are surprisingly reasonable for the area, and it’s definitely worth spending an evening sitting at one of the communal tables with a pizza and a carafe of wine—especially given the many tourist trap restaurants on the island. The hotel is actually a sister property to Paradise Beach Club, and if you book at San Giorgio, you’ll get VIP access on special club nights and free transportation to and from the event. Rates here are surprisingly reasonable, starting at 120 euros per night for a basic room in off-peak season, though it increases to 260 in July and August.



San Giorgio, Mykonos



Mykonos old town



Venetian architecture in Naxos

Santorini

Probably the most famous island in the Cyclades, Santorini's spectacular landscape is the result of multiple volcanic eruptions that have taken place over thousands of years. The resulting sheer cliff faces and the multicolored cave homes that dot the ridge of the massive caldera are probably one of the most famous sights in the world, and is most likely the image that springs to mind when one thinks of the Cyclades. Yes, Santorini is very touristy—you're almost guaranteed to see a couple from Hong Kong posing for their wedding photos—but luckily the throngs of visitors do little to detract from its charm.

Many people make their base in the busy, touristy town of Fira, but for a more laid-back experience, we recommend staying in the more picturesque village of Oia. There, you can book delightful cave houses via a local letting agency (we booked through www.oia-santorini.gr). Make sure you're feeling fit, however, as these are accessible only by steep, winding stairs.

Naxos

The biggest island in the Cyclades, few people outside of Europe know much about Naxos—but it's not going to remain undiscovered for long. Fertile and mountainous—while the rest of the Cycladic islands are barren and rocky—this beautiful spot is best explored by renting a moped (you need a European or international driver's license) and setting off for the mountain and coastal roads. Its old castro, or walled city, is steeped in history, and as a former Venetian stronghold, it's pretty enough to rival the old towns of the better-known islands. As with anywhere in Greece, priceless ancient sculptures and buildings lie causally strewn around and can easily be found and photographed. The Gate of the Apollo Temple, which dates back to the 6th century B.C., can be seen from the port, though frustratingly there are precious few signs and little information to be found. Accommodation and food is cheap, good and easy to find—for dinner, rather than staying on the crowded waterfront, it's best to head into the labyrinthine castro to find hidden restaurants where you can eat in beautiful grapevine-canopied courtyards.

Getting There and Away

Emirates flies from Hong Kong to Athens via Dubai daily, with prices starting at \$9,167 roundtrip, all-inclusive, until September 17. Emirates has an open-jaw policy for all its European destinations, meaning that you can fly into any of the 31 European cities that the airline services and out of a different city at no extra cost. This makes it extremely easy to fit in a side trip to Greece—or Rome, London, Dublin, Istanbul, Barcelona, Paris or Prague, to name just a few—on your next visit to Europe.

Find a full list of Emirates' European destinations, as well as more ticketing information, at www.emirates.com.

Getting Around

The Greek islands are well serviced by ferries, with fast and slow boats connecting all of the islands mentioned here with Piraeus, Athens's main port. Traveling between the Cycladic islands, the mainland and Crete is easy, but to get to other island groups, you'll have to go into Athens and back out again, which is expensive and time-consuming. Generally you'll be able to book your onward tickets when you get there, but Santorini is wildly popular, so if you're on a tight schedule, be sure to book well in advance.

When to Go

We traveled in late May. There are few tourists around, and rates for accommodation are still low. The nights are cool at this time so a sweater is recommended, and the sea water is quite chilly at around 21 degrees. However, it noticeably warms up coming into June. The peak seasons are July and August, where you'll be sharing the islands with a multitude of visitors and prices for rooms can almost double. The weather at this time can be extremely hot, with temperatures rising to 40 degrees (though it's mercifully not humid). September is probably the best time to visit; the crowds have thinned, the weather is balmy and the sea is pleasant after being warmed up over the summer months.



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