

Islands in the sun

ANCIENT GREEK PHILOSOPHERS INVENTED HEDONISM SO MAYBE A HOMERIC QUEST TO FIND THE ISLAND OF ONE'S DREAMS COULD BE THE ULTIMATE LUXURY ESCAPE?



Forget the bucket and spade brigade of Blackpool and Benidorm: Mykonos is the kind of place I always wanted to go to when I was a child. Rows of fairytale white washed windmills look down upon Little Venice, Lego block houses bundle up haphazardly and a dolly mixture of churches and gelato parlours line the cobbled streets, seemingly strung together by a childlike scrawl of blue and white crayon. I would eat ice cream every day for breakfast and stay up until 6am in the morning drinking Coca Cola cocktails without anyone dragging me by the ear, kicking and screaming, to bed. As an adult I plan to do just that.

Mykonos's mazy streets are filled with kaleidoscopic characters straight out of a storybook: there is the mascara-eyed Greek with the clip earring and tiara who sells peacock feathers; Carolina, the island's famous painter, who hides behind day-glo sunglasses and a Zorba the Greek flat cap; there is the tall, beautiful blonde Eliana who touts her pareos at Kalo Livadi; the Argentinean Xavier, who sells vintage hand made jewellery in Chora; and cuisine magician Matshuhisa Nobu who has graced the island with his after dark treats. In another fairy story, it would be the cast of L Frank Baum's *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*.

Yet on today's Mykonian streets, amidst the Greek guitar arpeggios, oversize pelicans and Panama hats, there are more familiar names too, which squeeze out of the luxury yachts and designer tavernas onto the island's very own Champs-Élysées, Matogianni. Tommy Hilfiger, Frank Muller, Chopard, Roberto Cavalli are all present, intent on spreading their fingertips throughout

PEOPLE GO TO GREECE
FOR ULTIMATE LUXURY:
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THE ONLY TIME THE ISLAND'S VIPS LOWER THEIR SUNGLASSES IS WHEN A NEW HELICOPTER LANDS IN PSAROU

Chora's old town like the world's most exquisite spider web.

This is how I see Mykonos for the first time; as an excitable 30-something adult, not as a restless 10-year-old screaming, "Are we there yet?" from the back seat of a family saloon car. With an ice cream cone glued to my hands, I can't contain myself, everything is just so – ehm – very, very blue: the sea, the sky, the churches, the postcards, the fenced gates; even the Coca Cola cocktails. Locals say that the blue in Mykonos is different from any other blue in the world, and I believe them: one of the hotels has its very own blue donkey.

The Greeks are seriously onto something. Zeus and the gods created the world's most beautiful woman, Aphrodite, they gave the world tzatziki and feta cheese, and they fashioned hedonism, the art of simply having so much fun that your head will eventually blow off or you opt for a quieter life like Lindsay Lohan, Hugh Hefner or Motley Crue. Less extreme, but more decadent, people come to the Greek Islands for ultimate luxury: to indulge in acts that would bring a smile to the face of Dionysus himself.

Comprising 220 islands, the Greek Cyclades in the southern Aegean have been giving the run around to St Bart's, St Tropez and Capri for years. Still managing to keep their cool and remain accessible for all, they are undoubtedly the most international part of Greek soil. The islands of Greek brothers and sisters may have originally been popularised on the international lifestyle scene in the 1960s, but their magnetism remain as powerful as ever. True, Elizabeth Taylor and Grace Kelly have come and gone but these islands of the winds will continue to blow the most cosmopolitan people to them from around the world – and it's a luxury and

romance that will endure. With a dissipating sun, it really is a vision of a gentle coast.

"Nobody comes from Mykonos," says Kostas Mavrogiannis, manager at the Mykonos Grace, a jewel amongst the island's boutique hotels. "Everyone is from somewhere else. I'm from Athens but this island attracts so many people, believe me. Artists, millionaires, party-goers, celebrities, everyone wants to come here in the summer." Looking out from his exclusive vantage point, overseeing a glorious infinity pool and an absolute white cocktail bar, he's not wrong: Riva yachts circle the beach of Agios Stefanos, bars labelled Babylon and Jackie O line Chora's harbour and the cafes are decorated by the light of extravagant chandeliers and the glimmer of the golden age from black and white photos of Aristotle Onassis and Maria Callas.

Legend even has it that George Bush – Senior, of course, he's the cooler of the two – sent his entourage into Filippis' restaurant kitchen to request the recipe for his homemade white taramosalata. More recently, Sarah Jessica Parker couldn't restrain herself from belly dancing on the oceanfront tables at Sea Satin – Mykonos has that kind of effect on people. As I look down to Little Venice from the windmills, which grind the Greek blue sky, I see the world's coolest clubbers sharing sunglass space with a tour group from Japan. Perhaps the only time that the island's VIPs lower their sunglasses is when a new helicopter lands in Psarou, and they ask: just who is the latest celebrity in town?

"This place gets crazy," laughs chef Pavlos Simotopoulos, whilst we dine on sundried tomato balls and calamari at Nammos, one of the most celebrated restaurants on the island. "In summer we can have lines of celebrities from Greece and all over the world lined up under the umbrellas here. The girls who reserve the beach chairs have the most popular phone numbers in town, for sure."

Below us, the yachts at Psarou are so common that they look like the bobbing uncorked necks of vintage Bollinger bottles. Saint Tropez has Paris, The Hamptons have New York and the Costa Azzura has Milan but Athens, on the other hand, is seasick green with envy: Mykonos is effervescent blue and dangles its pink pedicured toes in the water. The island is so laid back that



Facing page, top to bottom: Santorini Grace's panoramic jacuzzi view of the caldera and a glistening pool on Santorini at sunset
Above: Mykonos Blu's blue and white donkey

SANTORINI IS A CROSS BETWEEN A COLOURFUL MEXICAN PUEBLO, A CORAL-FRINGED PARADISE IN POLYNESIA AND THE EASTERN REALM OF INDONESIA

if it could cheekily poke Athens from afar with a pointy Poseidon trident from a sun lounger it'd probably reach for the suntan lotion instead. Some day, it may even be to the locals advantage to declare the island independent and demand passports from visitors. That is, if it could be bothered.

As I depart for the next stop on my tour of the great and graceful Greek islands, I look back towards the island, imagining how Hemingway would have

viewed the Caribbean from his rum punch. I know that I have sealed my relationship with the island by virtue of a multi-million Euro contract. I am tanned from the ruthless Cycladic sun, salted by the sea's thick salty lips and I'm as happy as a restless 10-year-old.

Forget the solarium and minimum face movements from Botox of Club Med: Santorini is the kind of place I always wanted to go to on the road to being an adult. It is a cross between a colourful Mexican pueblo in San Cristóbal de las Casas, the coral fringed paradise islets of Moorea and Bora Bora in French Polynesia and the far eastern realm of Indonesian Flores, mixed together and tossed out into a salad bowl. This is Santorini; an adult haven for luxury jetsetters and year-long honeymooners. Greek philosopher





Cornelius Castoriadis said, "You can't ask from the most beautiful woman in the world, more than she's got". If Santorini was female, she would have everything.

Burned by volcanic coals over the centuries, the island is the black pearl of the Aegean. Some 3,600 years ago, Santorini was the site of one of the largest volcanic eruptions the planet has ever seen. The eruption left a large caldera surrounded by volcanic ash and may have led indirectly to the collapse of the Minoan civilization on the island of Crete, 110 km to the south, through the creation of a gigantic tsunami. Another popular theory holds that the Thera eruption is the source of the legend of Atlantis. "One kind of stone was white, another black and a third red," wrote Plato from his academy, and rocks and sands like this make up Santorini's multi-colour beaches and quarries. Whether true or not, it fits the bill for me: there is an ethereal light and an aura of mist on the horizon, as though it were the rising spray from a waterfall, which falls off the side of the world. It feels like the ends of the earth: judging by the camera fireworks that go off when the Apollonian sun crescendos into the water, it may as well be.

Along the cliffs of Imerovigli, hangs Santorini Grace, sister hotel of the Mykonos boutique inn, one of the world's newest luxury hotels. Greek style service when a steak is thrown onto the plate like an Olympic discus and a waiter growls like a bear with a headache won't be found here

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– Martina and Joseph are the most gracious hoteliers one could ever meet. Delves into the side of the island's porous rock, it forms part of an impossible village somehow sellotaped to the side of a sheer cliff on the caldera's edge. Although it feels like it has been built for the Gods, it can still be enjoyed by mere mortals like me. If Zeus was in town he'd have the honeymoon suite on a block booking.

Of all the Cyclades, Santorini's religious altars have become the country's Achilles Heel and are more emblematic of the Greek nation than anything else. "They are the colours of Greece," says Panos Roussis, my tour guide for the day. "The absolute white shows purity and the blue is the Aegean." Apart from the odd Greek orthodox minister, wandering like an out-of-sorts movie extra, the crowds have long since changed since the last church was built.

"There's the famous blue church," says an American tourist tottering past. She has come straight off a Poseidon-sized cruise ship anchored in the wine-deep sea of the caldera below. "No, it's that one over there." She flails her camera around like an octopus with a bad case of tourist tourette's. "Jeez, there's another." Behind her is an oncoming army of whooping and wheezing day-trippers; Jason and his Argonauts would be terrified.

As we slip away from the ensuing melee, I hear the battle cries continue. "No, this is the right church from the postcard", "Oh, I'm not so sure Norm, what about this one?" It fades into the distance behind the crash of waves

below and the calls of hawkers selling blue and white jewels and – yes – those ubiquitous photographs. Despite traveling the world on a postcard, Santorini's famous blue and white churches are not as unique as one would first think; there are at least 350 of them.

Back at the Santorini Grace, with a select congregation of one, I am free to enjoy the world's most beautiful sunset; or so I have been told. Like a massive submerged diamond ring, with Imerovigli its beating gem, Santorini and its volcanic caldera span out before me like Aphrodite's backyard. So while the bucket and spade brigade clamber over rocks and the piled-up limbs of other visitors, I instead share the sunset the way the ancient gods would have done. Wrapped in a white bathing robe as though it was a golden fleece, and with the finest of Santorini's dry white wines, I peer out over the edge of my outdoor jacuzzi rim to see a temple of perfect solitude below. I see the sheerest of cliff faces, the volcanic islands offshore, every blue and white church and a sunset so perfect I almost believe what I have been told is true. The Greeks never had it so good. Under the archaic eyes of Apollo, I tell you by Zeus, I wouldn't want to be anywhere else in the world. Please Mum and Dad, do I have to leave? ❁