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# Island-hopping

# IN GREECE

It's time to start dreaming about travel again! And where better to kick off than a trip around some of Greece's most beautiful islands?

The delightful  
port and  
town of Batsi  
on Andros.






THESE ISLANDS  
MADE IT ONTO  
OUR SHORTLIST:

Folegandros, Serifos  
(Cyclades), Skiathos  
(Sporades), Paxos,  
Cephalonia, Corfu  
(Ionian) and Symi  
(Dodecanese)



The Seven  
Martyrs Church  
at Kastro on  
Sifnos



**T**hirty-one years ago, my husband Sybrand and I were on an emotionally fraught backpacking trip through Europe. Exasperated with each other, we opened a guidebook, pointed to a lesser-known Greek island called Sifnos and made a make-or-break date to reunite there in three weeks' time.

Last year we returned to our (obviously successful) place of reunion and found beautiful Sifnos much the same. The little port of Faros, where we'd stayed so long ago, had hardly changed, looking like something out of a Fellini movie.

It was all still there: the Cycladian homes perched on a hill between two small beaches, a smattering of restaurants, a single supermarket and a bus that ran every two hours. Blissfully untouched by tourism and hordes of beachgoers. We spent days lazing in the sun all those years ago, eating lunch with our feet in the sand and enjoying morning hikes to Chrisopigi, the beautiful monastery, where we spent hours sunning ourselves and swimming off the rocks. And it was great to be back – a happy return to the islands of Greece.

**WHEN** you elect to go island-hopping in Greece, the choice of islands – of which there are 200 – can be intimidating: how to decide? You have to see the iconic Santorini at least once, with its town perched atop the huge caldera and falling cliffs. But islands like Mykonos, Rhodes, Paros, Kos and Crete are too popular, and you'd



**Left** Feeding time for the local cats of Hydra. **Below** Linda in the sparkling seas off Syros. **Right** Apollonia, the capital of Sifnos, is an iconic whitewashed Greek town.

have to elbow your way through the crowds in high season, specially once lockdown lifts: tourists will be raring to get back there. (Those islands are expensive, too.)

The six island groups cover a huge swathe of ocean spread over the Aegean and the Ionian Seas and share a similar culture, history and climate. So the first thing to consider when making your choice is the island group you want to visit – you can travel most easily within an island group. Each group has its own character, as does each island – that’s what makes island-hopping such fun.

We spent most of our time in the Cyclades: rugged hilltop villages built to withstand piracy; raffish fishing villages with a taverna or three set alongside a cobbled beach; and stark, tiered fields dotted with olive trees and goats and framed by hand-built stone walls. Small local populations live on these islands (which are in the middle of the Aegean) through winter, and visitors flock over summer. The Cyclades, for me, epitomise Greece.

Our rather arbitrary choice of Sifnos all those years ago was fortuitous. It’s a bit off the beaten track, so it’s fairly quiet. And it’s a good size, with six villages and a hilltop capital to visit, good beaches and a range of accommodation to choose from. Plus – the food!

Known as the food island, Sifnos has an array of local dishes that made us wish we could fit in more meals a day. There are several

good restaurants in the charming capital, Apollonia. One speciality dish, revithada, simply consists of chickpeas and olive oil with a touch of lemon, cooked in a traditional clay pot for six hours (pottery is big in Sifnos). It was absolutely delicious, and we ordered it four or five times. Mastello is a Sifnian delicacy of roast lamb, also made in a clay pot – a simple explanation that belies the meat’s succulent, moist flavours.

Saganaki, or fried cheese, is another dish I ordered during our month-long holiday – juicy, textured cheese drenched in lemon juice. Stuffed aubergines, sea bass, squid and moussaka also all called to us from menus. And, of course, you’ve never really tasted a real Greek salad unless you’ve had it in Greece... those tomatoes are glowing red and full of flavour, and the feta is sublime. Why our restaurants insist on adding greens astonishes me!

Our choice of islands for the rest of the trip in the Cyclades was dictated largely by the ferry route from Sifnos back to Athens, as we had set our

hearts on a return to the idyllic island of Hydra, famed ’70s hang-out of Leonard Cohen, among other famous creatives. Hydra is in the Saronic group, so we had planned to head north for Syros, then Andros, Athens, and then on to heady Hydra.

Just as we were gearing up to pack for Syros, rumours of the arrival of the dreaded meltemi winds started swirling. We watched the weather forecast as winds of more than 7 and

## TIPS TO MAKE

### Ferries

If you want to visit several islands, be sure of your ferry connections. The main ferry routes run within island groups, and there are very few connections (if any) between, say, a Cyclades island and a Saronic island. (Also consider flying – especially between Athens and the islands.)

There are fast ferries (catamarans) and slow ferries. But before you book anything, check the schedules, especially if you’re visiting an isolated island, as the ferries don’t always run every day. We realised this having already secured our accommodation, and had to do a lot of island-hopping to get to our destinations. A bit of forward planning would have saved us a good number of hours at sea.

8 on the Beaufort scale (0 is calm; 12 is hurricane force) were predicted.

'Don't eat breakfast before your ride tomorrow,' our landlady ominously advised. At the port the following day, the winds were gusting at more than 70km an hour as we stood in a snaking queue on the quayside. The sea looked ominous, the wind whipping foam off seething waves in the usually calm Aegean.

The fast catamaran ferry eventually arrived, hours late as it had been battling the winds, but could not dock. People were stuck onboard, and we were stuck on the quayside. After an hour, the news spread fast: the catamarans would be going nowhere for at least three days. We watched the hordes of travellers desperate to get to Athens for their flights home start fighting to book the next spot out on a slow single-hull ferry, which was just about able to handle the weather conditions.

Leaving the quayside chaos behind

us, we headed for Apollonia. Wind-free, it sits high on the island, with sweeping views across the water. And there we stayed for three days,

*You've never really tasted a real Greek salad unless you've had it in Greece...*

delighted that we could extend our sampling of Sifnos cuisine. It's tough being stuck on a Greek isle...

**NEXT** stop was Syros. The fascinating port of Hermoupolis is lined with beautiful 19th-century buildings, a throwback to the strong Venetian influence. It's also the most cosmopolitan island, with grand marble streets and imposing stone villas. The island has a choice of more than 10 prime beaches and smaller villages (like Kini). We made the

most of our two days on a swimming deck attached to a nearby restaurant that served you while you toasted on your sun lounger. At night we hit the

very upmarket shops and ate excellent seafood in the pedestrianised side streets (Kouzina is particularly good!).

Andros is close to Athens and has few international tourists, but it's very popular with the Greeks. It's big, lush, and has high mountains and great beaches. It's known as the 'captain's island' because Greek shipowners who have made fortunes dominate the town of Hora with their imposing sandstone mansions on a slim peninsula that stretches out to sea.

The weather wasn't that good as the winds had started blowing again, so

## YOUR TRIP EASIER

Faced with making several connections, we handed all our ferry bookings over to a Piraeus travel agency ([filippistours.gr/en/filippis-tours-greece](http://filippistours.gr/en/filippis-tours-greece)). All we did was pick up our tickets from them.

Catamarans are 10 times the price of the old, slow ferries, and twice as fast. While Linda much preferred the 'cats', I loved strolling the decks as the old-timer thumped her way across the sea.

In high season, the ferries are crammed, so consider booking first-class seating if you don't want to be scrumming with grey-haired Greek *tannies* who will elbow you out of the way when boarding. (They could teach

the Boks a thing or two about rucking.)

Beware the unpredictable winds. Never book a ferry back to Athens on the same day as your flight. If there are any weather issues, you might be stuck for days. The notorious meltemi winds are meant to blow in July/August, yet we were stranded in mid-September.

### Car hire

Plan ahead. We hired a Fiat 500 cabriolet for seven days on Andros for R577 a day. There were several options when we emailed car hire firms from South Africa – not so easy when we tried once we were on an island. On Sifnos, only one of the five car

hire firms replied and said they had no cars – and this wasn't even high season.

If you need a taxi or a shuttle when you arrive at a port, it's best to book ahead. We assumed that taxis would line the port at Kamares on Sifnos, and they did – but they were all pre-booked.

### Prices

Costs vary widely depending on the island. Sifnos, Syros and Hydra were more expensive, and Andros about a third less. (Mykonos is really pricey.)

In terms of food, mains on the more expensive islands were about 16 euros for sea

bass or squid, 10 euros on the cheaper islands, and about 18.50 euros for prawn saganaki.

A bottle of wine is between 22 and 30 euros, but almost all restaurants offer a *carafe* of wine for about nine euros. And it's good wine, so stick to that!

Dinner in Sifnos, Syros and Hydra was between 45 and 56 euros for two; this included two main courses, a salad and a *carafe* of wine. Andros averaged 36 euros for the same food and wine combinations.



Sybrand bracing as the meltemi winds roar through Sifnos.

## TRAVEL



**Left** Idyllic Hydra is a favourite of wealthy Greeks. **Right** Linda and a friend in the pedestrianised streets of Kastro. **Below** The view from the apartment on Sifnos.



### Where to stay

we hired a car for our seven-day stay to enjoy roads that wound through incredibly green mountains. But don't expect your GPS to choose the best course. We were running out of petrol so we chose the shortest route back home after a day trip, and it turned out to be no more than a donkey track. With no way to turn around, no way to get out of the way of any oncoming cars and no space to pull off if we ran out of petrol, we *just* made it into our coastal town and the only petrol station for miles. Phew.

Most of our days on Andros were spent in Batsi, a quaint, up-and-coming beach town close to our rental. It has a lovely harbour, beach and town lined with tavernas. We found the prices on Andros to be the lowest of all the islands we visited.

Hydra was next. Arriving there was like returning to a welcoming familiar friend. It has arguably the most beautiful waterfront in all of Greece, and it exudes a special, singular atmosphere. While the bohemian Leonard Cohen set has mostly gone, Hydra attracts wealthy Athenians and yacht owners who line the harbour with their craft. One of the best aspects of the island is that there are no cars or scooters – all

We searched for accommodation mainly on [homeaway.com](#) and [Airbnb](#).

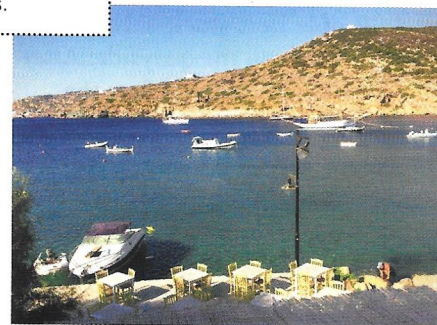
**SIFNOS** We rented a one-bedroom apartment with a balcony and views over the bay for R830 a day. We found it on [roomsinsifnos.com](#) (search for Gianna's apartments – Gianna is lovely.)

**APOLLONIA** We stayed at Pension Geronti ([gerontisifnos.gr/en](#)), hosted by Nikoletta, in a comfortable studio room with a balcony view over the island; R800 a night.

**SYROS** Oasis Apartment Syros (which we found on [Airbnb](#)) is a lovely one-bedroom apartment in the smartest Syros suburb, Vaporía, with a walk down to a deck on the sea; R1960 a night.

**ANDROS** The Bay View at Pelagaia Villas, also booked through [Airbnb](#), was our home in Andros, a two-bedroom villa with a sea view; R1716 a night.

**HYDRA** We stayed in a stunning old two-bedroom apartment with great views over the bay, an airy balcony and a well in the kitchen. [homeaway.com/vacation-rental/p8951468](#); R2200 a night.



you hear is the clip-clop of donkeys doing daily restaurant deliveries, or hauling tourists' bags to their accommodation. There aren't loud bars or music. It is quiet. Beautifully quiet. And you walk everywhere.

On Hydra, you chill on the waterfront with a book, people-watch, explore the winding alleyways or head to a beach. Tucked away in cobbled streets are an array of places that serve typical tasty Greek fare. The beaches lie east and west of the town, and are within easy walking distance. But in the heat of the day we opted to hop onto the water taxis that serve the beaches. They cost eight euros per person for a return trip.

The boats drop you at beaches with loungers and wonderful small tavernas, with the local mamas cooking up gorgeous Greek dishes for lunch. After eating your fill, it's back to the recliners and cooling off in the clear Med waters. Hydra is cool.

Greece has history, a unique culture, a vast choice of destinations, great natural beauty and good food. We'll be going back again – soon! ❖

*There are no cars or scooters on Hydra. It's beautifully quiet. And you walk everywhere.*