

# ISLAND-HOPPING IN greece

Whatever takes your fancy – ancient history, aquamarine waters, isolated beaches or pulsating nightlife – there's an island here with your name on it, says **JANE FOSTER**.

## best boutique hotels SANTORINI

A part of the Cyclades group of islands, Santorini, one of the world's most dramatically beautiful islands, is also home to Greece's top boutique hotels. You'll find them in the neighbouring whitewashed towns of Thira and Oia, perched atop spectacular black cliffs that plummet 300m down to the deep-blue waters of a caldera, formed by a massive volcanic explosion that blew out the island's centre some 3,600 years ago. The majority of these chic hideaways offer less than 20 rooms and suites, and occupy former cave dwellings, traditional Santorini houses carved into the rock face. Expect whitewashed spaces with vaulted ceilings, antique furniture, private terraces with infinity pools overlooking the caldera, exquisite restaurants, and extras such as massage, sauna and beauty treatments.



MAIN PHOTO: Santorini, one of the world's most spectacular islands. INSET, FROM TOP: The island's Perivolos Hotel in Oia town; luxury suite with pool at Firostefani in Santorini.



best old town

## RHODES

Rhodes is a part of the Dodecanese group of islands. Its charming, pedestrian-only Old Town nestles amid four kilometres of robust 14th-century fortifications built by the Knights of St John, a military religious order who landed here on their return from the Crusades in 1309, and ruled the island until 1522. Today a UNESCO world heritage site and Europe's largest inhabited mediaeval town, it is a warren of cobbled streets lined with tavernas, cocktail bars and souvenir shops, and boasts a population of 6,000. The Knights also constructed the monumental gothic Palace of the Grand Masters, now housing two museums tracing the island's complex history. For their part, the Ottoman Turks, who ruled from 1522 to 1912, added the elegant Suleymaniye Mosque, built in 1522 in honour of Suleyman the Magnificent, who conquered the island, and the Mustafa Hamam, a still-functioning Turkish bath.

best archaeological site

## DeLos

Supposedly the birthplace of the sun god, Apollo, and his twin sister, the moon goddess, Artemis, Delos, in the Cyclades group of islands, is Greece's most impressive archaeological site. A UNESCO world heritage site, the ancients believed it to be sacred, and decreed that no one should die or give birth here, so as to keep it 'pure'. Look out for the Lion's Terrace (guarded by a row of 7th-century BC white marble lions), the Sanctuary of Dionysus (decorated with huge marble phalluses) and three crumbling temples dedicated to Apollo. You can't stay on Delos; access is from the nearby island of Mykonos.



best sailing charter base

## CORFU

Clad in olive groves and cypress trees, Corfu is the northernmost of the Ionian islands. Here, Gouvia marina is one of Greece's top charter bases, and makes an ideal starting point for sailing down to the islands of Paxos, Lefkada and Kefalonia, or across to Sivota and Parga on the mainland. If you're a beginner, you'll be happy to know that the Ionian Sea is more suitable for inexperienced sailors than the Aegean, offering milder winds and calmer waters. While on Corfu, take time to explore the elegant UNESCO-listed capital, Corfu Town, with landmarks including two sturdy Venetian-era fortresses, the 19th-century Liston arcade, which houses old-fashioned cafes, and the neatly-mown green Spianada, where locals play cricket.



THIS PAGE: Happy sailing off Corfu's coast. OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP: History lives on the streets of Rhodes' Old Town; Delos is a major archaeological site.



best authentic local food  
**Crete**

Crete is Greece's largest and most southerly island, lying on the same latitude as Tunisia. The Cretan diet is based on local, seasonal produce (much of which is organic), with plenty of vegetables and bread, but little meat. In summer, favourite dishes include *gemistes* (tomatoes and peppers filled with rice) and *dakos* (bread rusks drenched in olive oil and topped with freshly chopped tomatoes), plus staples such as *horta* (wild greens), *mizithra* (a creamy cheese made from sheep's milk), *htapodi* (octopus) and *katsiki* (goat). Everything is prepared with virgin olive oil, seasoned with aromatic herbs, sweetened with honey and accompanied by wine. Cretans are renowned for their hospitality and toast their guests with a glass of potent *raki* (a spirit made from distilled grapes). In most restaurants, a small carafe of *raki* is offered on-the-house at the end of a meal.

best for local folk customs

**Karpathos**

Rising up from the sea, half-way between Rhodes and Crete, long, skinny, mountainous Karpathos remains something of a backwater destination. In the remote north, the windswept mountain village of Olymbos was founded in Byzantine times as a refuge from marauding pirates. It now has a population 761 people. Due to its extreme isolation, locals have retained their traditional dress, music, crafts and dialect more than anywhere else on the Greek islands. Electricity arrived here only in 1980 and the local economy is based on farming and milling wheat and barley. In contrast, the island's capital and main port, Pigadia, is a prosperous and modern settlement, funded by islanders who emigrated to the US during the last century.



best beaches  
**Skiathos**

Much loved for its unspoilt beaches, Skiathos, a part of the Sporades group of islands, appeals to those in search of sea and sunshine rather than high-brow culture. Its best-known beach is Koukounaries, a 1½km stretch of fine golden sand backed by fragrant pinewoods (*koukounaries* means 'pinecones' in Greek). It comes complete with sun beds and umbrellas for hire, plus water sports facilities and snack bars. However, for a complete escape, take a taxi boat to Lalaria on the isolated north coast. Undoubtedly Skiathos' most photographed beach, it's made up of smooth white marble stones giving onto a crystal-clear aquamarine sea, and backed by rugged cliffs.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: For a true taste of Greece, take a bite of this – wheat bread topped with tomatoes, feta and oregano and drizzled with olive oil; women in traditional dress in Olymbos, Karpathos; famous Koukounaries beach in Skiathos.

best nightlife

# mykonos

Glamorous Mykonos, in the Cyclades group of islands, is best-known for its hedonistic nightlife. Cocktail bars and shabby-chic eateries centre on Mykonos Town, a delightful labyrinth of cobbled streets and whitewashed cubic buildings draped with bougainvillea, overlooking a pretty harbour. For a mellow sunset aperitif, try a waterside bar in Little Venice. Mykonos' best open-air dance clubs lie on Paradiso beach, where party people mingle at Paradise Club, centring on a pool rimmed by canopied double beds with scatter cushions. Afterwards, move on to Cavo Paradiso, an after-hours venue hosting international DJs through to sunrise.



FROM TOP: Little Venice on Mykonos is famous for its sunsets, best enjoyed with a cocktail in hand; the charming Museum of Contemporary Art in Andros.

## FAST FACTS

### CURRENCY

Euro  
US\$1 = 0.63 Euro

### VISA

Log on to [www.mfa.gr](http://www.mfa.gr) for information.

### BEST TIME TO VISIT

It depends on what you're looking for. High season, July to August, sees the Greek islands packed with visitors. The nightlife is buzzing, the days are long and sunny and the sea is warm. On the down side, the beaches are heaving, hotel prices rise accordingly and reservations are essential. For a more restful stay, come in May to June or September to October, when you can expect mild weather perfect for swimming, but without the crowds. Note that many establishments close completely from November to April.

### GETTING THERE

Singapore Airlines flies 3 times weekly to Athens, from where you can fly to the larger, more popular Greek islands. Alternatively, catch a ferry or catamaran from Athens' port, Piraeus, to the islands not served by an airport.

### MORE INFORMATION

[www.gnto.gr](http://www.gnto.gr)

## best for modern art lovers ANDROS

Andros, one of the Cyclades islands, is home to the delightful Museum of Contemporary Art founded by Basil Goulandris, a wealthy shipping magnate and avid patron of the arts who was born here. Its permanent collection includes works by Auguste Rodin, Alberto Giacometti, Barbara Hepworth and Andy Warhol. Each summer (late-June to late-September), the museum organises a world-class exhibition focusing on a major 20th-century artist – 2007 featured French painter Andre Masson while 2008 showcases Greek painter Yannis Moralis. You'll find it close to the 13th-century Venetian fortress in Andros Town, the island's capital. ☒

