

Aegean Greece: Eternal bliss

***Rachel Howard* says civil unrest in Greece has not spoiled the perfect idyll of its islands**

Rachel Howard 29 December 2012

There's nothing like a financial crisis to bring out the worst in people. Witness the shocking rise of Golden Dawn, a bunch of Nazi thugs masquerading as a nationalist party, currently rampaging through the streets of Athens. Ironically, another unfortunate side effect of Greece's colossal debt mountain has been a drop in the number of German tourists, deterred by angry locals burning effigies of Chancellor Merkel in SS gear. This is bad news for Greece's tourism industry, as Germans traditionally top the visitor table; but it's good news for British philhellenes, who won't have to fight Fritz for the best sun-bed next summer.

The brutal austerity measures imposed by Greece's creditors are making things difficult in the capital, but outside Athens life remains as blissfully peaceful as ever. Lord Byron was right about the isles of Greece: 'Eternal summer gilds them yet.' Crete recently launched a clever viral campaign contrasting sensationalist headlines about civil unrest with the idyllic reality of island life. Fewer visitors also mean lower prices and emptier beaches. So despite the far-fetched speculation that Greece will have to sell off its islands to stave off financial ruin, you won't have to fork out millions to find your own private paradise.

There are hundreds of islands in Greece and most of them are surprisingly unscathed by development. You just have to know where (and when) to go. The first rule of thumb is to avoid August, when prices shoot up and holidaymakers arrive en masse. The second general rule is to stay away from islands with airports — although there are some lovely exceptions, such as rugged Ikaria, where the eccentric locals sleep all day and stay up all night — even though most of them are centenarians. 'I was two hours late for my own wedding; when I did finally arrive, the priest was still on his way,' says Diane Kochilas, a food writer who runs a brilliant cooking school from her home on Ikaria, with organic ingredients plucked straight from the garden.

These days, extortionate ferry prices — fixed by the non-dom ship-owners whose fortunes have been unaffected by the financial crisis — make island hopping a very expensive pursuit. The high-speed

catamarans that cruise the Aegean are for Flash Harries rather than the hippies of yore. However, if you're brave enough to board one of the wonky old rust-buckets that zigzag between remote islands in seemingly random directions, the destination will reward you for the long journey.

The far-flung isles serviced by these slow boats are collectively known as the *Agoni Grammi* — literally, the 'barren line'; so-called not because the islands are infertile, but because they aren't profitable for the aforementioned ship-owners, who receive generous state subsidies to run these routes. Nevertheless, ferry schedules are erratic at best, as I discovered when I was stranded on Folegandros for a week until the boat finally showed up. There are far worse places to be marooned than this Cycladic stunner, its cliff-top Hora a maze of whitewashed alleys that eventually lead back to four interconnected squares, where locals loll about in a merry fug, fuelled by shots of rakomelo, warm grappa and honey.

Or perhaps you might alight on Koufonissi, one of a cluster of isles known as the Small Cyclades, renowned for their translucent turquoise waters. There's no bank. When the only cash machine ran out of money, we just ran up a tab at the local tavernas for a week. On Kato Koufonissi, an even smaller offshoot, goats outnumber humans, although the four-legged inhabitants often end up in the wood-fired oven at Venetsanos, the island's exceptional — and exceptionally ramshackle — taverna. The lobster pilaf is delicious too.

The local priest runs the taverna overlooking Roukounas beach on Anafi, a craggy outcrop only an hour south of super-swanky Santorini. The priest's wife, the Papadia, isn't a particularly accomplished cook (macaroni pie is one of her signature dishes), but the banter over backgammon is delicious. So is the view of the dazzling sandy beach, where naked ad execs and actors unwind around campfires.

Low-slung Antiparos, scalloped by shallow coves just big enough for a handful of bathers, is another favourite with off-duty actors. You might even spot a few Hollywood stars at the delightful open-air cinema, Cine Oliaros — Tom Hanks has a house here, and his celebrity guests shuffle about trying to look inconspicuous in baseball caps and flip-flops.

In contrast with the fierce beauty of the Cyclades, where the light is

so bright it's almost blinding, the pastel-coloured harbours of the Dodecanese islands have a more sophisticated charm. Dangling dangerously close to the Turkish coastline, these islands were only reunited with the rest of Greece in 1948. They bear the scars — along with some rather glorious landmarks — left by a long succession of marauders, from Ottoman sultans to Knights Templar to Mussolini's Blackshirts.

There are plenty of offbeat islands in these parts, too. The main draw on sleepy Nisyros is the smouldering volcanic crater at its heart. At Therma Loutra — the municipal 'spa' that's barely changed since it was built in 1872 — you can soak in the sulphurous hot springs with rheumatic geriatrics for just a few euros. On tiny Agathonisi, there's only one road sign: up to Big Village or down to Little Village. Tinier still is Marathi, the ultimate castaway island, with nothing but two rival tavernas on opposite ends of a sandy bay. Michalis (better known as 'The Pirate') is excellent, but it can't compete with Pandelis, where everything from the brown bread to the baklava is home made. Marathi is so remote it isn't even on the *Agoni Grammi*. To get there, you'll have to catch a caique from Patmos, or charter your own yacht — which isn't a bad idea at all if you want to explore several islands and don't have several weeks to wait for the next ferry to come along.

Here's a tip (and no charge): For an exhaustive and erudite guide to Greece's lesser-known islands, invest in Nigel McGilchrist's *Greek Islands*, a series of 20 guides that cover 70 different islands.

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