

GREECE SPECIAL 2019

Andros: Greece's hidden hiking hotspot

Leisurely amblers and hardcore hikers will be enchanted by this Cyclades island

Rachel Howard

January 27 2019, 12:01am, The Sunday Times



You can hike the island of Andros year-round GETTY

It's late autumn on Andros, and my fingers are stained purple from plucking figs from trees bursting over dry-stone walls. I pick my way over fallen pomegranates, their blushing seeds scattered like beads. Ripe quinces, fragrant and plump, dangle from branches in the surrounding orchards. Geckos slink off with stolen grapes and swallows duck and dive in the golden twilight. This is an island that seems so ripe with promise, it would be rude not to help yourself to some of its bounty.

I'm limbering up for a few days of hiking by taking a gentle circular trail through Livadia, a valley dotted with magnificent manor houses, where some of Greece's most illustrious shipping families hole up for the summer. It feels a long way from the blue-and-white Greek-island cliché.

Andros is the second largest island in the Cyclades, with mountains that rise to more than 3,000ft, but, unlike its parched Cycladic neighbours, it is lush. The forested peaks are ribboned with streams and ravines careen down to wetlands teeming with wildlife. One third of it is a nature reserve, there are dozens of stone villages camouflaged in the hills and it has about 70 beaches, many of the best accessible only by boat or on foot. So it's hardly surprising that Andros is carving out a niche as a year-round hiking destination.

Nearly 200 miles of footpaths are etched into the landscape, a network once used by farmers, shepherds and travelling salesmen when the main form of transportation was the donkey. Many of these dramatic paths are now easily accessible to rambblers, thanks to volunteers at

the non-profit organisation Andros Routes. So far, they have cleared and waymarked just over 100 miles of trails. The most ambitious, the Andros Route, is a 162-mile, 10-day hike that takes you from the north of the island to the south, with overnight stays in guesthouses along the way.

In 2018, Andros Routes organised the first Andros on Foot festival, a 23-day hike-a-thon with home-cooked feasts and Greek dancing at the end of each walk. “The villagers who cooked for us often joined our hike the next day and saw places on their own island they’d never seen before,” says Olga Karayiannis, the quiet force behind the festival.

If you prefer a less strenuous adventure, you can make forays into the wilderness from Ktima Lemonies, a smattering of farmhouses on an organic estate tucked away down a dirt track, not far from the island’s capital, Andros Town (doubles from £105, B&B; ktimalemonies.gr).

Footpaths lead straight from the guesthouse gardens to the villages of Lamyra and Menites, with tinkling freshwater springs and wild berries to sustain you along the way. Alternatively, take a hike up to the Panachrados Monastery — if you catch the jolly abbot at home, he might treat you to a bowl of garlic spaghetti.

It’s a leisurely half-hour walk from Ktima Lemonies to Andros Town, where you can explore modern Greek culture at the Museum of Contemporary Art (£4.50; moca-andros.gr/en), pick up handmade leather sandals, jewellery and embroidered tunics at the chic Waikiki boutique (waikikiandros.tumblr.com), and have a long lunch at Nonas, a cute *ouzeri* on the waterfront (mains from £11; facebook.com/mezedopoleio.ononas).

While the capital is genteel and urbane, there’s little trace of the 21st century. Venture towards the highlands and you’ll stumble upon abandoned watermills, medieval watchtowers and cascading waterfalls. It’s easy to imagine Pan charging through the woods, but you’re more likely to meet a farmer threshing with an ox or frying sausages and potatoes in pork fat in an outdoor wood-fired oven.

That’s what Kyria Despina is doing when I meet her on the six-mile hiking trail from the mountain village of Vourkoti down to Achla, one of the most beautiful and remote beaches on Andros. She breaks some warm, freshly laid eggs into the pan to make a *frountalia*, a typical local omelette. With a tomato salad, some tiny olives and a glass of fiery home-brewed raki, it’s one of the best meals I’ve ever had.

I leave with a whole *volaki*, a conical cheese made on Andros, and a jar of preserved lemon blossom (utterly delicious over a dollop of Greek yoghurt), and continue towards Achla beach. The path follows a wide river, framed by stone slabs that double as stepping stones, and I stop to cool off in a bright-green swimming hole, alone but for a chorus of cicadas.

After a lazy afternoon at Achla beach, you could take a boat back to Andros Town if you don’t feel like sweating it uphill; but it’s wiser to stay in one of the 15 stylish cottages at Onar, an eco-retreat set back from the beach. Five new villas with pools, their planted roofs wedged into the hillside, are opening this spring. Meals such as a salad of feta, mint and watermelon straight from its organic farm are served at communal tables under the plane trees. Better yet, a local fisherman will grill the catch of the day around a campfire on the beach (cottages sleeping three from £148 a night, B&B; onar-andros.gr).

Al fresco dining is even more of an occasion at Melisses, an antique-filled guesthouse above the Bay of Paleopolis, on the west coast of Andros. Bloggers and authors come here to present cooking workshops and creative retreats such as illustration and travel photography, hosted by Allegra Pomilio, a glamorous Italian food stylist and a wonderful cook (from £109, B&B; melisses-andros.com).



The Melisses guesthouse, above the Bay of Paleopolis ALLEGRA POMILIO

“The Andros trails are magical because you have the ancestral feeling of stepping on the same paths as the ancient Greeks,” Allegra says. “And you have that final, special reward of a beautiful swim in crystal waters, with hardly anybody around.”

To prove her point, she packs me a picnic hamper that’s almost too pretty to eat (courgette-flower tart, scotch eggs with pesto and feta, grissini, tahini and salted chocolate cookies, and a bottle of Andros spring water) for the soothing hike down to Paleopolis, the ancient harbour of Andros, submerged just beneath the surface of the sea. The water is so clear, I can pick out

2,500-year-old shards of terracotta on the seabed. It's an underwater museum and I am the sole visitor.

For walks on the island and maps, visit Andros Routes (androsroutes.gr). Inntravel has a six-night Secret Andros walking holiday from £635pp, B&B, including route notes and maps, and luggage transfers, but not flights and transfers to and from the island (01653 617002, inntravel.co.uk). Andros is two hours by ferry from the port of Rafina (from £33 return; for schedules, [see ferries.gr](http://seeferries.gr)), which is a 25-minute taxi ride or a 50-minute bus ride from Athens airport (£2 one-way). Fly to Athens with British Airways or easyJet