

## Ionian island-hopping

Charter a yacht, hop on a ferry, zip around by speedboat. These calm, clustered isles make an ideal combo

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Kioni harbour, Ithaca GETTY

“Happy is the man ... who, before dying, has the good fortune to sail the Aegean Sea.” Zorba the Greek was right on the money. Unless you have quivery sea legs, like me, in which case you’ll probably be much happier sailing the Ionian Sea. Huddled close to Greece’s western mainland, and not far from each other, the Ionian isles are perfect for hopping between. They are greener, balmier and calmer than the other Greek islands, and there’s no meltemi wind whipping the sea into queasy peaks.

Running from the tip of Italy’s boot to the northerly shores of the Peloponnese, the Ionian islands have been occupied by the Venetians, French, Russians and British. It’s the Italians who have left their style and swagger on everything from the architecture (stately towns painted in shades of ochre and amber) to the food (including *bourdeto*, a spicy fish dish, and *mandolato*, almond nougat) and the dialect (Greek with a Venetian twang).

Yet each island has its own distinct personality, from cosmopolitan Corfu, with its marching bands and country estates, to Zakynthos, which appeals to both lads on tour and luxury seekers with places such as the new Olea All Suite Hotel (suites from £138, B&B; [oleaallsuitehotel.com](http://oleaallsuitehotel.com)). Midway between the two, Lefkas is famous for its limpid beaches backed by limestone cliffs, but inland you’ll find scenery to rival the Alps. Cephalonia has a little of everything: lively resorts, wonderful wineries — particularly the

Haritatos vineyard, family-run since 1863 ([haritatosvineyard.com](http://haritatosvineyard.com)) — upmarket moorings and smart lodgings like NorthPoint, a stone guesthouse near Fiskardo (doubles from £94, B&B; [northpoint.gr](http://northpoint.gr)). Homer described Ithaca as “rough, but a good nurse of men”. Magically, Odysseus’s island has resisted the siren call of the tourist dollar and retained its rugged beauty and healing aura.



If you can’t decide which island to choose, or you simply want to see as much of this enchanting archipelago as possible, chartering a boat is the way to go. The joy of cruising the Ionian under your own steam is that you can drop anchor at electric blue caves, hidden coves and drowsy harbours at your own pace, and often in blissful solitude (except in August, when sailboats and superyachts crowd the bays).

Lefkas, which has one of the most modern marinas in the Mediterranean, is a good place to start. And Idilli, offering seven bright villas with shared or private pools, is a great place to stay (two-bed junior villas from £137 a night; [idillivillas.gr](http://idillivillas.gr)). There’s a whole chain of smaller isles to explore. The Thinking Traveller can arrange skippered day trips, bareboat charters and sailing lessons (from £350 for a day trip or £1,000 for an overnight adventure; [thethinkingtraveller.com](http://thethinkingtraveller.com)).

A skippered craft is the easy option. In a single day, you can swim through sea caves on Kalamos; try seal-spotting from Mylos, a bar in an old windmill on Kastos, an island so small there’s no bank, ATM or chemist ([facebook.com/myloskastos](https://www.facebook.com/myloskastos)); and eat sea bass at the Errikos fish taverna, on Meganisi, alongside sheikhs scouting for private islands (mains from £9; 00 30 26450 51125). Jacob Rothschild, affectionately nicknamed “Grandpa” by the locals, has bought a swathe of Meganisi. The daughter of the Russian billionaire Dmitry Rybolovlev recently snapped up nearby Skorprios, the old stomping ground of Aristotle Onassis.

Keeping up with this kind of company doesn't come cheap. If you want to play the part, Five Star Greece can set you up with any type of vessel, from a gaily painted fishing boat to a gin palace. Its founder, Ileana von Hirsch, also has exclusive access to some of her friends' spectacular beachfront villas. Ithaca 1J, a dreamy villa above a pebble beach, is a top pick. It comes with a speedboat moored on a private pontoon below the house, perfect for finding pine-fringed coves (sleeps 12; from £9,847 a week; [fivestargreece.com](http://fivestargreece.com)).



Peaceful: a cove in Paxos EDWARD STAINES

Good news for travellers on a tighter budget: a new ferry service, which launched last summer, now connects six of the seven main Ionian islands. The High Speed Azimut Joy Cruises is not a cruise and it's not especially joyful. The boat, which operates from May to October, is basic and usually packed (from £13 one-way; [corfu.joycruises.gr](http://corfu.joycruises.gr)), but it's much cheaper, quicker and more convenient than zigzagging back and forth to the mainland, or even flying via London to get from one Ionian island to another, as I once had to do.

The inter-island ferry has another advantage: you can hop off at any harbour that tickles your fancy. The first stop from Corfu is Paxos; if you alight here, you'll probably never go any further. This lusciously green island, covered in olive groves that shimmer in the gauzy light, strikes just the right balance between simplicity and sophistication. If you can't get a room at Zakspitaki, a fabulously offbeat B&B run by an English couple (from £109, B&B; [zakspitaki.com](http://zakspitaki.com)), ask the local villa specialists Scott Williams about Patroclus. This is a sensational new property surrounded by lime, pomegranate, almond and fig trees, with a pool hovering above chalky cliffs that blush furiously at dusk (sleeps six; from £5,500 a week; [scottwilliams.co.uk](http://scottwilliams.co.uk)).

So many islands, so little time... If you can relate to Zorba's famous last words — "I've done heaps and heaps of things in my life, but I still did not do enough" — there's one more thing

you must do. Charter the Circe, a gleaming teak ketch built in 1915 and based on Paxos, for an overnight trip to neighbouring Antipaxos, the smallest of the Ionian islands (from £871 for four people; [scottwilliams.co.uk](http://scottwilliams.co.uk)). After the day-trippers have gone, you'll have the pure white beaches to yourself, and your skipper, Markos, knows the best secret places to swim.



The luxury Ithaca 1J villa

### **One to watch: Kithira**

Marooned off the Peloponnese, Kithira is overlooked by most visitors to the Ionian islands. It's hard to fit into an island-hopping itinerary, but with a couple of flights a day from Athens, it's becoming more popular. German ramblers go in the off season, Italians kayak the craggy shores and Greek architects are buying up ruins to restore. Try Hipaway for a villa on the island; Aroniadika Residence is the summer hideaway of a gallerist (sleeps 10; from £1,392 a week) and Avlemonas Seafront House is in a pretty seaside village (sleeps four; from £913 a week; [hipawayvillas.com](http://hipawayvillas.com)). Or try Sunvil (see below), which has added Kithira to its portfolio for 2019. Aegean has daily 45-minute flights from Athens to Kithira ([aegeanair.com](http://aegeanair.com)); the ferry from Piraeus is seven hours (from £44 return; [ferries.gr](http://ferries.gr)).

### **Getting to the Ionians**

Aegean flies to Corfu, Cephalonia and Zakynthos, with stopovers in Athens. British Airways, easyJet and Ryanair fly to Cephalonia. The closest airport for Lefkas and Meganisi is Preveza Aktion, served by easyJet, Norwegian, Thomas Cook and Tui.

Sunvil offers a range of holidays across the Ionians. A week on Corfu at Kalami Bay, followed by a week on Paxos at Livadi Studios, starts at £892pp in May, self-catering, including flights and transfers ([sunvil.co.uk](http://sunvil.co.uk)).