

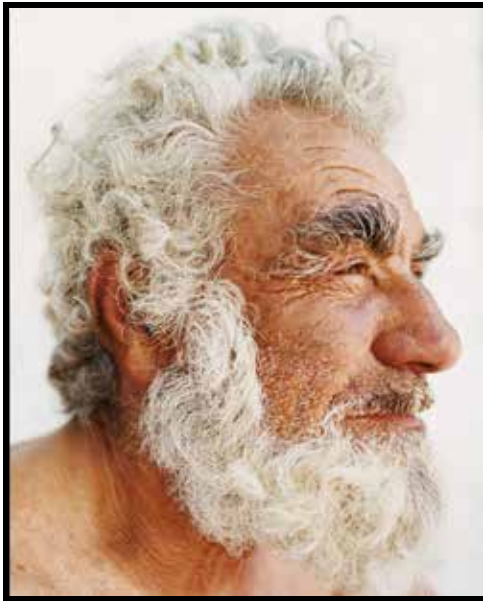


The sunlit terrace at the Perantzada Art Hotel on Ithaca. Opposite, guests from Villa Skinos jump off the *Allegro*

ISLANDS FIT FOR HEROES

ODYSSEUS WAS KING HERE, BYRON WANTED TO BE. ITHACA AND NORTHERN CEPHALONIA HAVE ENOUGH BAYS AND PRIVATE VILLAS FOR YOU TO CREATE EPIC JOURNEYS OF YOUR OWN

BY RACHEL HOWARD. PHOTOGRAPHS BY JULIEN CAPMEIL



Clockwise from left: the Kathara monastery on Ithaca; a fisherman in Kioni; Ileana von Hirsch in the grounds of Villa Skinios; the breakfast room at the Perantzada Art Hotel; the waterfront at Fiskardo, Cephalonia; lunch at Cemetery Beach, near Kioni. Opposite, sunbathing in Kioni



I WAS IN A TAVERNA on Crete recently and the owner asked me where I was from,' recalls Ileana von Hirsch, whose maiden name, Gratsos, is a byword for shipping in the Ionian islands. "Ah, Ithaca," the man sighed. "They say people from Ithaca and Cephalonia are all bad and all mad, but I can never remember which is which." That just about sums it up.'

A strait just three miles wide separates Ithaca from Cephalonia's northern tip, but the two islands are very different in character. Cephalonia is now associated with the suave Captain Corelli; for centuries Ithaca has been synonymous with a hero of epic proportions, Odysseus. He spent his best years fighting monsters and bedding nymphs in far corners of the Mediterranean, all the while intent on



returning to his rugged kingdom in the Ionian Sea. Thousands of Odysseus' fellow islanders have fled pirates, Turks, and earthquakes to set up Ithacan enclaves around the world, where they, too, yearn for their homeland. Many have now come home, regenerating crumbling villages deserted since the earthquake of 1953.

Although its local legends have become universal, Ithaca has long lived in the shadow of Cephalonia, the largest and most self-confident of the seven Ionian islands. 'We Cephalonians consider the people of Ithaca to be suffering from inter-family marriages,' says political strategist Pavlos Yeroulanos. 'The harbour of Vathy, Ithaca's capital, is like a snailshell – the boat has to do a 360-degree turn to leave the port, so no one can find their way out.' Yeroulanos has blue eyes and strawberry-blond hair:

WALKING ALONG THE WATERFRONT, IT'S HARD TO BELIEVE THAT

FISKARDO HAD NO ELECTRICITY UNTIL 1970



Yachts fill the harbour of the upmarket town of Fiskardo

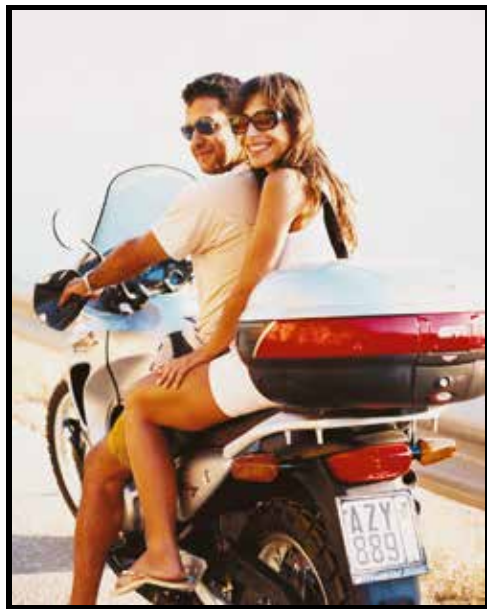
Cephalonians regard their Aryan features as another sign of their superiority to the swarthy Ithacans.

DISAPPOINTINGLY, THE ferry from Patras to Ithaca disgorges us not at Vathy, but Piso Aetos – scarcely a port at all, just a couple of shacks and a small shingle beach beside a sea of emerald green. ‘A rough place, but a good nurse of men’ was Odysseus’ assessment of Ithaca, and it has the same tough terrain and healing peacefulness some 26 centuries later. A sheer road rides over densely wooded hills down to a sweep of bay, its polished white pebbles incandescent in the midday blaze. We have arrived, in late June, in a heat wave.

Vathy, Greek for ‘deep’, is on a broad bay lodged within an even broader bay, cocooned from the outside world. Its waters are still as an oil slick. Ripples of heat haze blur pretty, pastel-coloured houses, rebuilt after the earthquake in the style of the Venetians, who ruled Ithaca from 1504 to 1797. Cafés and tavernas cluster along the waterfront. A few kids kick a football around the square, eyed by grizzled locals who are knocking back the ouzo, although it’s 43 degrees in the shade.

It was here in Vathy that Ithaca’s proud shipping history was launched. In the 19th century, more than 200 steamboats were built at the shipyard in nearby Loutsá. Graduates of the Stathatos Naval Academy made fortunes ferrying goods around the Black Sea and up the Danube. One of them, Costas Gratsos, became an associate and confidant of Aristotle Onassis, securing employment for hundreds of captains and crew from Ithaca. Onassis was a regular visitor at Skinós, the Gratsos family’s 400-acre estate. The memory of Onassis’ yacht pulling in, with an entourage of glamorous high-fliers and hangers-on, is as much the stuff of local lore as the escapades of Lord Byron, who strutted around Vathy kitted out like a Scottish Tartan.

Byron was so enamoured of Ithaca that he told his friend John Hobhouse, in 1810: ‘I have some idea of purchasing the Island of Ithaca; I suppose you will add me to the Levant lunatics.’ When Madonna stayed at Skinós a few years ago, she set her sights on the barren islet of Atokos, which gives you an idea of the soaring price of property these days. For decades, locals depended for their survival on limited cultivation of olives and currants, bolstered by money sent from relatives overseas. Now, tourism has made



Clockwise from top left: on the road in Ithaca; Stavros Drakopolous, owner of Villa Stavros; the lobby at Emelisse Hotel, Cephalonia, and the hotel firepit; a starter at Tassia's restaurant in Fiskardo; diving in at the Emelisse Hotel. Opposite, Ithaca's Perantzada Art Hotel



have been snared by Ithaca's gentle allure. Thirty years ago she boarded a ferry to Paxos and ended up on Ithaca. She met her Greek husband, Zikos, at a church festival, and never looked back. Perhaps she drank deeply from the secret well at Kalamos: allegedly, those who drink from here will always be happy, healthy and return to Ithaca.

Locals laughed when I tried to buy a map: 'But there's only one road!' It's impossible to get lost on Ithaca if you don't stray from this narrow squiggle of asphalt. Should you feel adventurous, there are wonderful 400-year-old footpaths, made by the Venetians and recently cleared for ramblers. Or you can pay homage to Homer at the cave of the nymphs, where Odysseus supposedly stashed his booty on his return to Ithaca, or at the archaeological site of Pilikata,

probable site of Odysseus' palace. From this vantage point, you can look down on the bays of Frikes, Aphales and Polis.

Academics have been squabbling about the location of Odysseus' kingdom for centuries. Amateur archaeologist Robert Bittlestone has infuriated Ithacans by claiming the Paliki peninsula in Cephalonia is really Homer's Ithaca. It might be wisest to adopt Lord Byron's approach: 'However sceptical he might have been as to these supposed localities,' said a female tourist who visited soon after the poet, 'he never offended the natives by any objection to the reality of their fancies.'

It was far too hot to take to the hills, so we stuck to the precipitous road with its glimpses of pebble coves far below. Ithaca is an island of two curvy halves, joined by a slender waist. This isthmus, 180 metres above sea level, affords giddy views to east and west. Beyond Stavros, a lively hub for the scattered settlements of the north, the landscape softened a little, the terraced hills shimmering with olive groves, the cottages ablaze with bougainvillea. We didn't have high expectations of the tiny port of Frikes, whose name translates as 'Horrors', but it wasn't as bad as all that. Yachts bobbed beside tightly packed restaurants hoping to make a buck from passing sailors. You can even get a hot shower at The Gods mini-market.

The road petered out at Kioni, where houses painted in ice-cream colours hug a scooped-out harbour. Spavento's tables were so close to the water that drinking alcohol would be asking for trouble. So we sipped iced coffees, eavesdropping on Greek-Australians, whose accents twanged the hot, still air. As a boat spewed out its cargo of day-trippers from Lefkada, we slipped away, following the path around the headland to a string of scrappy coves, with ample opportunities to filch plums and apricots from fragrant gardens along the way. At the end of the trail was a graveyard so near the beach that the dead must get drenched in winter. A makeshift café with a few rickety tables stood beneath the trees; cold beer and Greek salad never tasted so good.

Ithaca's two most spectacular villages are high in the mountains: Anogi ('top of the world') and Exogi ('out of this world'). With their mind-boggling views and ruined splendour, it can be only a matter of time before developers gobble them up. The centrepiece of Anogi is the church, covered with extraordinary Byzantine frescoes. The bushy-browed owner of the *kafenion*

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ITHACA & NORTHERN CEPHALONIA

GETTING THERE

By air British Airways (0870 850 9850; www.ba.com) flies from Heathrow to Athens from £160 in March.

EasyJet (0871 244 2366; www.easyjet.com) flies from Gatwick and Luton to Athens, from £93. From May to October there are various charter flights direct to Argostoli airport, Cephalonia, from £210. Otherwise, **Olympic Airways** (0870 6060 460; www.olympicairways.com) flies daily from Athens to Argostoli, from €50.

By boat From **Patras**, ferries depart twice daily to **Cephalonia**

trees and olive groves, this fully-staffed, two-storey villa is ideal for wealthy recluses. The waterfront location is fabulous: a path leads through the garden to the village beach and the terrace overlooks Kioni bay – and many memorable sunsets. But the interior is just as impressive: the large living room is filled with art, guests have three bathrooms (including a wet room) and a courtyard garden for lazy afternoons. Sleeps eight. Price on request (020 8422 4885; www.fivestargreece.com).

Levendis Estate

At this eco-chic retreat everything is organic and home-grown, from the fruit preserves to the homeopathic toiletries. Four cottages nestle in glorious gardens with dramatic views to the sea. An infinity pool with a marble colonnade is a grand setting for moonlit barbecues. There's massage for grown-ups, hammocks slung between cypress trees for children. Sleeps 2–20. Book the whole estate – your own private paradise for €18,000 a week. From €3,650 per week for a two-bed cottage,

bathrooms with glass walls. Top-floor suites have the best views of Vathy harbour. Doubles from £810 per person per week, including flights (0845 811 6502; www.simpsonstravel.com). **Petrino House** This secluded stone house is packed with character. Exposed beams and lace curtains offset antiques in the cosy living space. But the walled garden is the highlight, with its gnarled olive trees, shady nooks, and secret plunge pool. Sleeps five. From £532 per week per person, including



(2.5hrs) and **Ithaca** (3.5hrs). From **Piso Aetos**, ferries go to **Sami** (30 mins) and **Fiskardo** (1hr). Daily services run from **Frikes** to **Fiskardo** (45 mins). **Tour operator Simpson Travel** for the **Perantzada** and **Emelisse** hotels (see below): 0845 811 6502; www.simpsonstravel.com

ITHACA WHERE TO STAY Ithaca 1C

At the end of a track, hidden among cypress

Kandiliotika

Wake up to a chorus of goat bells at these two snug cottages overlooking the Ithacan straits. Interiors are stylish, with saffron floor tiles, antique chests and piles of patchwork cushions. Terraces are scented with jasmine and lavender. Unlike with so many purpose-built rental villas, you'll really feel at home here. Sleeps four, from €600 per week. (00 30 210 614 9456; www.kandiliotika.webeden.co.uk).

including car hire and transfers (00 30 26740 31648; www.levendisestate.com).

Perantzada Art Hotel

Two boutique hotels rolled into one. Some rooms display a colourful twist on country-house chic – four-poster beds with striped drapes and playful art installations – but can be cramped and viewless, and most share balconies. Six new, open-plan suites, however, have a decidedly modern edge: concrete floors, Eames rockers,

flights and car hire (020 8232 9780; www.greekislandsclub.com).

Villa Skinos

This historic estate is occasionally available to rent. Price on application (020 8422 4885; www.fivestargreece.com).

Villa Agrampeli & Villa Agrapidia

High in the hills, these neighbouring villas are decorated in smart country-house style, with wooden floors, brass beds and well-equipped kitchens. Each has a large pool and terrace. ➤