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'Summer lingers longer in the gorgeous countryside of the Lot in southwest France'

The Med destinations where the sun shines into autumn



Antiparos Port

Welcome to boho Antiparos

It has celebrity residents and ritzy new places to stay, but the laid-back Greek island has retained its soul, says **Rachel Howard**

In my youth I spent several summers on the tiny Greek island of Antiparos. A gang of us — long-haired boys and long-limbed girls — would rent a little house on the main street of the dinky port town. Days started in the early afternoon with iced frappés at Margarita's café next door. Several cigarettes later we'd wander to the nudist beach near by or squeeze three-a-piece onto mopeds to stake out our own secret cove, where Spee, a local bartender and spearfisherman, would catch our lunch. After sunset we'd snooze until midnight, then hit up the pint-sized bars clustered around the square, eventually stumbling down the starlit path to Disco La Luna, an open-air club near the campsite where we'd dance until Nina Simone's *My Baby*

Just Cares for Me signalled that it was time to stumble out into the sunrise.

While other Greek islands (including Paros, just across the strait) have developed almost beyond recognition, Antiparos has stayed true to its quietly cool nature. Margarita's is still a mainstay for idle people-watching, Spee continues to catch fish, and La Luna is still going strong. The *pantofla* — slipper, as the ferry that plies the strait is affectionately known — still costs just €1.20, not much more than it did in the 1980s.

Of course, not everything on this 13 square mile Cycladic island has stayed the same. Boutiques selling pricey sandals and sarongs have replaced the hardware



A flower-filled street in Antiparos Town

stores on main street. SUVs outnumber mopeds on the island's scant roads. Low-slung but ultra-luxe villas have snuck up along the sheltered southeast coastline (Tom Hanks owns one of them, as every local will tell you). You could say the Antiparos scene has evolved from hippy hedonism to high-end bohemian.

That evolution was propelled by the property developer Iasson Tsakonias, who snapped up a swathe of land 20 years ago and enlisted ambitious young architects to build headline-grabbing summer houses for affluent Greeks and Hollywood players. Tsakonias also owns Beach House on Apantima bay, the closest the island has to a beach club, ▶

► with a handful of simple suites, a bamboo yoga pavilion and a boutique that stocks handmade sunglasses and limited-edition stools by Martino Gamper.

Then there's the Rooster, a secluded retreat that arrived on Antiparos this summer. Sound-healing sessions, chakra-balancing massages and Ayurvedic shirodhara (a hypnotic stream of herbal oil poured on the forehead to awaken the third eye) are some of the profoundly restorative treatments offered at the sunlit, plant-filled spa. A self-styled "wellness and lifestyle resort" — buzzwords that normally fill me with dread — the Rooster isn't pretentious, self-righteous or full of poseurs in yoga pants, as I cynically suspected it might be. Take it from a pandemic-battered sceptic — I can tell you that it really does have powerful healing properties.

Hunkered in a gentle valley embracing the crescent bay of Livadia (popular with surfers because it catches the northwesterly swell), the 16 stone houses blend into the sunburnt terrain. There's nothing much but shaggy goats, the white specks of distant farmhouses, blue sky and the heat-hazy horizon as far as the eye can wander. Pink drifts of bougainvillea, fragrant fig trees, swaying rushes full of birdsong, and flowering shrubs busy with bees don't so much complement the landscape as



complete it. If the expansive gardens appear to be fully grown, that's because the project has been germinating for seven years.

"The whole thing evolved organically. Initially I planned to build a handful of serviced villas. I didn't want a restaurant. I didn't want yoga," says the owner, Athanasia Comminos, a shipping heiress who always dreamt of being a hotelier. "But after I got divorced I went to Chiva-Som in Thailand, where I discovered kundalini yoga and an amazing healer, and I was cured of a health issue in three days." This physical and spiritual awakening inspired the name and the concept behind the Rooster — it was a wake-up call to change her life.

Comminos came to Antiparos "to escape Mykonos" when her eldest daughter was nine months old, fell in love with the island and bought a house in the hills from a Swiss couple. She gradually acquired the entire valley while land was still cheap. "It's not any more," she deadpans. To build her dream hotel, Comminos enlisted Vois, a small architectural practice run by two women who also own houses on Antiparos and share Comminos's deep affection and respect for the island. "The whole idea was not to disturb or change the landscape. We want to preserve it rather than exploit it," she explains.

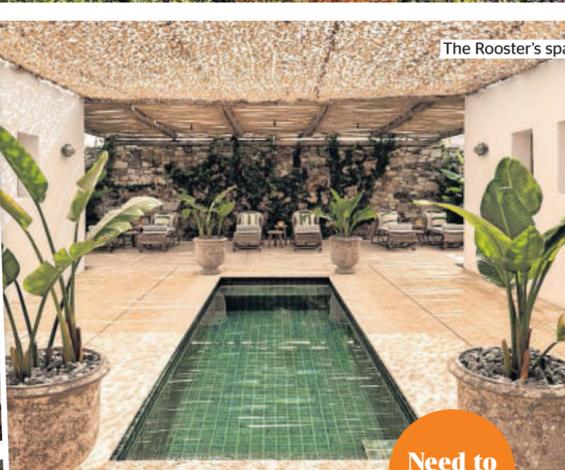
True to the local architectural idiom, but free from Greek-island clichés, the interiors have a nomadic aesthetic: pressed plaster walls, driftwood four-poster beds, velvet cushions from Turkey, wooden divans from Bali, herringbone cotto tiles in outdoor showers screened by banana



A church on Antiparos



A garden-view suite at the Rooster



The Rooster's spa

Need to know

Rachel Howard was a guest of the Rooster, where one night's B&B in a garden-view suite starts at £490 (theroosterantiparos.com). Fly to Athens then take a connecting flight to Paros, or fly direct to Mykonos and take a ferry to Paros

plants. "It's not just about good design. Everything has to have soul. I hand-picked every single thing here," says Comminos, a self-confessed "perfectionist and control freak".

She tapped up many of her talented friends to deliver the finer details. The ceramic artist Melina Xenaki made the mosaic room numbers, the saffron beach towels are by Sun of a Beach, a Greek brand co-founded by a childhood friend, and walls are hung with black-and-white

prints by the photographer Calliope, whose boldly patterned kaftans and velvet slippers are for sale in the small shop.

From the shoreline, the stand-alone villas are invisible. Only the main building rises like a weathered stone from a hillock. A skylit atrium with a fountain full of floating flowers leads to the reception — a solid hunk of white marble and a pair of 1960s Platner armchairs — where the sea view is framed in an open doorway. The bar and restaurant extend across a series of

courtyards, punctuated by big and small apertures that are more like invitations to new perspectives than picture windows. Wooden pergolas create a choreography of light and shadow; built-in seating provides shelter from the meltemi, the cooling (sometimes maddening) wind that sweeps restlessly through the Cyclades.

There are oversized daybeds for lolling with a perilously smooth margarita as the sun dips behind the headland, and the Secret Garden, strung with glowing gar-

lands of light, where you can graze on delicate, distinctly untraditional tapas: mizithra goat's cheese with blood oranges, toasted coriander seeds and lavender oil, grilled cauliflower with turmeric mayo and crumbled carob rusks, buckwheat and mung bean salad with grilled apricots and krasotiri cheese from Paros.

Many of the ingredients (including the eggs, naturally) come from the Rooster's fledgling organic farm, which is located a couple of miles inland. Inspired by a stay at Babylonstoren in South Africa, the farmhouse has a huge outdoor kitchen for cooking sessions and is available to rent if you would rather stay somewhere completely self-contained.

Privacy, though, is never an issue at the Rooster. Because unlike your average seaside resort, there's nothing so banal as a buffet breakfast or kids' club, no annoyingly loud music on the beach — or indeed any music, sunloungers or bar on the beach at all. No matter: the kitchen crew will pack you a picnic basket, beautifully presented with sprigs of lavender and starched linen.

There's no main pool where irritating guests leave sodden towels on the deck chairs when they've gone for a siesta; instead, all suites and villas have their own pool, as well as a generously proportioned patio and alfresco dining area. There's no need to mingle with others if socialising with strangers is likely to trigger a post-lockdown panic attack. Staff dressed in olive and sand-toned linens and Vans shoes will purr over on electric scooters bearing whatever you need. You could slip off the radar altogether, if so inclined.

For me, the sense of freedom, space and calm was the perfect antidote to months of being cooped up with a nine-year-old. Despite the focus on wellness, the Rooster is surprisingly great for families — much like the island itself, with its easy-to-navigate town, shallow coves and compact size. The joy of Antiparos is that you don't feel that you have to rush around sightseeing because there are barely any sights worth seeing. There's a vertical cave encrusted with ancient stalactites (a disaster for claustrophobics), a squat medieval castle in town that occasionally doubles as a gallery or event space, and the magical ruins of Apollo's temple on uninhabited Despotiko island, a short boat ride from Agios Georgios bay. (On your way back, stop at the Captain Pipinos taverna to taste the grilled octopus, sun-dried on a fishing line dangling over the quayside.)

Once you've ticked those off in a day or two, there's no reason not to slow down and simply be present. From early morning yoga practice with the radiant Lexi Dranidi (the soundtrack to those alfresco sun salutations is, of course, a crowing rooster) to quiet nights observing the constellations, serenity is impossible to avoid. The superlative spa treatments simply accelerate the process. "I feel like Odysseus when he landed on Calypso's island," Konstantinos, a young waiter from northern Greece, tells me one morning as he sets a bowl of tahini granola and a turmeric and ginger shot on my breakfast table. Konstantinos gazes at the mesmerising view, as though seeing it for the first time. "How am I ever going to leave this place?"

5 more nature-inspired Greek retreats

Skinopi Lodge, Milos
Less is more at this isolated cluster of stone bungalows, camouflaged on a seaside slope beside an archaeological site. Retractable glass façades, along with outdoor kitchens and showers, bring nature into the understated interiors. As well as widescreen views of hazy sunsets, guests have exclusive access to the owner Nausika Georgiadou's boat to explore the secret coves and islands near by. **Details** B&B bungalows from £249 (skinopi.com). Fly to Milos via Athens



Onar, Andros

Metohi Kindelis, Crete
Crete's coastline is awash with huge all-inclusive resorts. Go inland and you'll find intimate, family-run lodgings amid unspoilt landscapes and a more traditional way of life. The Kindelis clan share their 17th-century farmhouse on the outskirts of Chania with a handful of guests. With an archaeologist, photographer and agronomist in the family, they can also arrange private cultural tours and cooking sessions. Each of the three self-contained guesthouses has a private pool, secret garden and kitchen filled with mangoes, avocados and strawberries organically grown on the estate. **Details** B&B apartments from £240 (metohi-kindelis.gr). Fly to Chania

Kamaroti, Sifnos
Designed and run by the dashing Spanish brothers David and Victor Gonzalez, Kamaroti is refreshingly free from the usual island vernacular — rather than whitewashed curves, boxy suites come with midcentury consoles, mosaic-tiled bathrooms and striped towels; instead of salad and chips you get gazpacho and tortillas at the pool bar, a peaceful retreat enclosed by olive groves. It's a gentle stroll to the rock pools of Panagia Poulati in one direction or the lively village of Artemonas in the other. Like the perfect little island of Sifnos, Kamaroti is unshowy and effortlessly stylish. **Details** B&B doubles from £85 (kamaroti.com). Fly to Athens then take a ferry from Piraeus to Sifnos



Monastery of Panagia Poulati, Sifnos

Onar, Andros
Burnt out by the jet-setting life of an industry scion, Mateo Pantazopoulos built a few stone cottages overlooking his favourite beach on Andros where he and his hard-partying pals could unwind. Fast-forward two decades and Onar (ancient Greek for "dream") is an unpretentious eco-retreat, with 15 stone cottages and villas overlooking the still pristine bay of Achla, a bone-rattling drive down a rocky road, and surrounded by protected wetlands and organic orchards. Though chilling with nature is what most people come for, shared tables under the plane trees and full-moon beach barbecues offer opportunities to be sociable. **Details** B&B cottages for three from £197 (onar-andros.gr). Fly to Athens then take a ferry from Rafina to Andros

Euphoria Retreat, Peloponnese
Attached to the Greek mainland by a narrow land bridge, the Peloponnese has a wild beauty that befits its storied history. The peninsula was home to the fearsome Spartans, but is now better known for restoring the mental and physical strength of stressed urbanites. It's also home to one of Europe's best destination spas, Euphoria. As well as an ancient Greece-inspired fitness programme focusing on outdoor exercise, guests can take part in yoga sessions, guided hikes and forest bathing. There's also a pool and a less-than-spartan restaurant, which serves exceptional dishes infused with local olive oil and — unusually for a spa — coffee and alcohol. **Details** B&B doubles from £308 (euphoriaretreat.com). Fly to Kalamata