

# Luxury Greece

## Where the boho beach crowd stay

Rachel Howard checks out two new places to holiday on the hip islands of Hydra and Aegina

Old-fashioned electricity meters are a fixture outside almost every Greek island home, their carapaces brightly painted, their counters quietly ticking beneath a shower of jasmine. These meters double as a handy place to hide house keys when the residents are away. At Dimitrios Antonitsis's house on Hydra the meter is in a small wooden cupboard painted silver and etched with the word "Poems". Every summer Antonitsis puts together a slim volume of verses that passers-by have left in this literary letterbox.

Antonitsis has a knack for bringing thought-provoking art to unexpected places. In 2000 he founded Hydra School Projects, a summer-long exhibition in the island's dilapidated high school featuring artworks by a mix of Greek and international artists. Collectors, critics and curious tourists traipsed up the hundreds of steps from the horseshoe harbour to view the pieces, each of which had been carefully carried up the hill by stoical donkeys and sweaty porters. There are no cars, motorbikes or even bicycles on Hydra, a parched shard of rock separated from the Peloponnese by a narrow strait. The handsome town ascends from the shoreline in angular tiers of grey stone and incandescent limewash.

"Back in the 1990s art would only be shown in galleries and museums — there was no fluidity. Twenty years later what was an oddity is now mainstream," Antonitsis says over iced coffee at Isalos, a quayside café where he habitually holds court. A case in point: this summer Jeff Koons is staging a site-specific show at Hydra's old slaughterhouse, now an outpost of the billionaire collector Dakis Joannou's Deste Foundation.

A few seasons ago Hydra School Projects relocated to the waterfront Merchant Marine Academy, established in 1749. Moody comic strips by the choreographer Dimitris Papaioannou — "painted in

squats in the 1980s, before he became a superstar", Antonitsis says — hang beneath vintage photographs of uniformed cadets while blobby little canvases by the Austrian artist Erwin Wurm lean on top of model ships. One whole classroom is occupied by a dinosaur sculpture made of smashed-up plastic chairs. Salty-haired visitors in flip-flops wander in on their way back from the beach; others float in on the enormous yachts moored offshore, carrying Chanel pochettes and lapdugs.

Next door, on the top floor of the Historical Archives Museum, an enterprising and well-read American named Josh Hickey has set up the Hydra Book Club. Inside Hickey's "community bookstore and cultural project" half a dozen tables are stacked with new, old and rare books written or inspired by the poets, painters, writers and troubadours for whom Hydra has been a muse. "It's like this never-ending story that starts in the 1930s and still goes on today," Hickey says.

When the modernist painter Niko Ghika returned to Hydra in 1936, having lived in Paris for almost 20 years, he set about restoring his ancestral home, a 40-room mansion built in the 18th century by his seafaring forebears. His brilliant coterie soon followed: Patrick and Joan Leigh Fermor, John Craxton, Henri Cartier-Bresson, Walter Gropius, George Seferis and Henry Miller. "We sat on the terrace under the starry sky and talked about poetry, we drank wine, we swam, we rode donkeys, we played chess — it was like life in a novel," Ghika recalled.

"Ghika created this artistic aura on the island, a salon philosophy," Hickey explains. "The cross-pollination of Greek and foreign minds was very fruitful." By the time Leonard Cohen arrived in 1960 a straggle of nomads with literary and artistic ambitions had settled on the island, forsaking electricity and running water for naked swims, boozy lunches and creative freedom. "The society was far more conservative than on Mykonos or Mallorca. But there was more of an engaging intellectual life here. It wasn't so much about drugs or debauchery, but there was plenty of wife-swapping," Hickey says.

Now, as then, it is difficult to be anti-social on Hydra. There is still "a diverse and tantalising collection of human beings sprawled about these rocks and ledges on a hot cliff far from their native lands" Charmian Clift noted in *Peel Me a Lotus*, her evocative account of bringing up three children on erratic royalty cheques here in the 1950s. The island's geography and atmosphere encourage an easy intimacy.



Hydra, one of the Saronic Islands

You can't help running into the same intriguing characters drinking at inappropriate hours at the Pirate Bar by the port, diving off the rocks below the café-bar Hydronetta or dangling off the water taxis that service the pebbly beaches — although the crowd is more exclusive now and the tab considerably more expensive.

Go into the upper part of Hydra town and you'll discover the more introspective side of the island. Languid cats stalk the sun-dappled alleys and pomegranates hang low over white-washed walls. In the home (now a museum) of Panayiotis Tetsis, the late painter whose tender portraits and ethereal landscapes soften Hydra's austere lines and intense light, everything is as his grandparents left it: red marble floors, wacky wooden ceilings, dusty bottles of cherry brandy and hand-dipped beeswax candles. Hydra is one of the few places in Greece where the architectural fabric is intact — the island is under archaeological protection, a living monument inhabited by dreamers.

One of these is Stephan Colloredo-Mansfeld, a rare-vinyl dealer who grew up here in the 1980s. "The children went to the village school, slept under the taverna

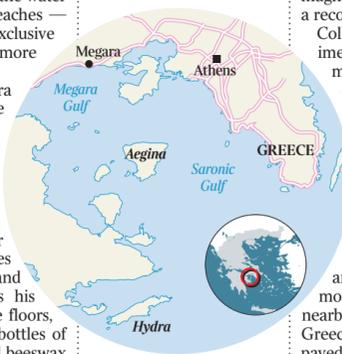


table. Life was cheap and more communal, so it was easy to be a bohemian artist," he recalls, gazing at the mauve dusk seeping into the harbour from the veranda of his magnificent house, which moonlights as a recording studio and artists' residence.

Colloredo-Mansfeld encourages experimentation and collaboration, charging musicians and artists whatever they can afford to pay. "I went round the world, then came back here. I wanted to bring back the purity and innocence of freely existing and creating — the joy of being disconnected." It's a romantic notion, a yearning for a simpler way of life threatened by technology, tourism and commercialism.

Hydra attracts the contemporary art elite and is no longer affordable for most charismatic dropouts, but the nearby island of Aegina draws artists from Greece and beyond. Whereas Hydra's paved alleys commemorate naval heroes, on Aegina the streets are named after the writers and artists — Nikos Kazantzakis, Yiannis Moralis — who adopted this unassuming isle an hour from Athens.

Many discovered Aegina because of Nikos Nikolaou, a prolific painter and set designer as well as a master host and bon viveur. Born on Hydra, Nikolaou and his family moved to Athens after his young father

GETTY IMAGES; LAURENT FABRE; ALAMY; COSTAS PICADAS



Nikolaou Residence



A street on Aegina



Dimitrios Antonitsis's property on Hydra

died in the 1920s. His mother opened an antiques shop, buying and selling the furniture of refugees. Nikolaou acquired a taste for ancient, folk and Byzantine art, which decorates the charming seaside home on Aegina where he spent time from the mid-1960s until his death in 1986. "Nikolaou built it after he married my Aunt Angela," says Theodore Zoumboulakis, an architect who has transformed the stone and concrete outhouses where he spent his boyhood summers into three exquisitely calm suites. "They had dinner parties every night and spoke endlessly about art, philosophy and politics. This house is a beautiful time capsule of a more innocent age."

Camouflaged by olive and pistachio groves, the suites are decorated with original antiques and works by Nikolaou as well as designer lamps and furniture from the Zoumboulakis family's gallery in Athens. An arresting metal sculpture by Nikolaou's best friend, Moralis, stands on the shoreline by the entrance, a continuing dialogue between the two artists and the island they loved.

It is soothing to wake up to the muffled honk of a passing ferry and a visit from the two resident cats, fluffy white Schnuffel and slinky black Kitsos. "My uncle had 47 cats. Every morning he'd go to the market to buy food and he'd always get cheap fish

for the cats. When there was a holiday, he'd buy them red mullet as a treat," Zoumboulakis tells me over an alfresco breakfast on the veranda. The scent of ripe figs drifts in on the sea breeze.

En route to the archaeological site of Kolona, a 15-minute stroll along the coastal road, paths between the pine trees lead to rocky perches and tiny coves where you can swim in solitude. An old man clatters ashore with an octopus poking out of his trunks. The scene is like a movie set that doesn't quite know what period it's in: turreted 19th-century piles shrouded in flourishes of bougainvillea, seaside motels straight out of the 1970s, a horse and carriage bearing a bride.

Aegina's port town was briefly the first capital of modern Greece. The neoclassical grandeur has faded to something infinitely more comfortable: snug cafés in thick coats of vivid paint, fruit stands on fishing boats, children racing up and down on bikes, and exceptional *ouzeri* such as Skotadis, where gourmards gather for crisp red mullet and battered zucchini dipped in whipped tarama.

"Lots of well-known artists, poets and writers have moved here, but they like being anonymous. Nobody bothers them," says Nektarios Kontovrakis, a painter and sculptor to whom Nikolaou was a mentor and lifelong friend. Kontovrakis inherited

### Need to know

Rachel Howard was a guest of Nikolaou Residence, which has room-only doubles from €68 a night ([nikolaouresidence.gr](http://nikolaouresidence.gr)). Seven nights' self-catering for three at Dimitrios Antonitsis's house from £1,310 ([hipawayvillas.com](http://hipawayvillas.com)). Fly to Athens, then take a boat to Aegina and Hydra

his teacher's generosity and *joie de vivre*: he picks me up and drives me to his home high above the harbour for tea, cake and raisin buns. The garden is a trove of sculptures and mosaics. Sunbeams spotlight the grey-blue sea beyond.

"For some reason people think of Aegina as second class, but all the Athenian intellectual elite would decamp here for the summer," Kontovrakis says. "Foreigners made Hydra what it is — the American artists and wealthy outsiders who bought houses there. Aesthetically and architecturally, Hydra is purer, it's better preserved, but Aegina is more accessible in every way. You have everything within easy reach: a lively town, country walks, antiquities and secret beaches."

He's absolutely right. Over one weekend I meditate in the frescoed chapels of Paleochora, slip into the hollow trunks of 2,000-year-old olive trees at Eleonas, listen to pale nouns chant in Byzantine tongues at Chrysosfontissa Monastery, eat the biggest beef chop of my life in the mountain village of Anitseo, boat-watch in the molten twilight and swim by a sliver of moon. Rounding a headland, there is Athens — a twinkling blur on the horizon. The painter Yannis Tsarouchis, another of Nikolaou's pals, put it best: "Hydra is a princess, but Aegina is the most beautiful girl next door."

## 3 more arty places to stay in Greece

### Shila, Athens

A 1920s townhouse on a pedestrian street in downtown Athens, Shila feels more like an artists' salon than a six-suite hotel. With original terrazzo floors, bespoke chandeliers, velvet divans, and salvaged marble and copper sinks, it's an ode to ethereal sensuality. Distressed pressed plaster walls are hung with a rotating collection of paintings, photographs and ceramics by contemporary artists such as William Roper-Curzon, Drew Escriva and Jasmine Deporta. All works are for sale and shipping can be arranged. The sultry parlour and tranquil roof garden often host art happenings, gatherings and pop-up exhibitions, curated by Shila's creative director, the photographer Eftihia Stefanidi, whose delicate work has a frisson of eroticism.

**Details** B&B doubles from £165 ([shila-athens.com](http://shila-athens.com)). Fly to Athens

### Sterna, Nisyros

Not much was happening in the hilltop hamlet of Emporeios, on the far-flung Dodecanese island of Nisyros, until the artist and designer Greg Haji Joannides came along in 2014. He converted the 17th-century stone tower that crowns the village — and has commanding views over the volcanic crater and the Aegean archipelago — into an artists' residency that is occasionally available to rent. Faithfully restored and daringly modernised, the interiors are an eye-catching blend of whitewashed stone walls, upcycled antiques, and vintage kilims in vivid hues — a joyful exploration of creative experimentation and collaboration.

**Details** Seven nights' self-catering from £1,485 ([hipawayvillas.com](http://hipawayvillas.com)). Fly to Kos, then take the ferry to Nisyros



### The Writer's Home, Serifos

Vici Theodoropoulou, an author, journalist and radio producer, fell in love with the unspoilt Cycladic island of Serifos and eventually built herself a stone house. Simple, secluded and soulful, her home is a short stroll from sandy Karavi beach in the pretty hamlet of Rammos. The little guesthouse, above, in the garden is a peaceful retreat, perfect for writers and artists, but also for families. Guests can dip into a growing library of Greek literature in translation and help themselves to fruit ripening in the verdant gardens.

**Details** Seven nights' B&B in the main house, which sleeps five, from £1,605 ([thewritershomeserifos.com](http://thewritershomeserifos.com)). Fly to Athens, then take the ferry to Serifos