

# 1 Family Highlights of the Greek Islands



**S**ince I first visited the country in the summer of 1965, with a group of fellow students in a battered old van, I've been in love with Greece. A month after returning to England, I met a Greek girl. We married. We honeymooned in Greece. Through my mother-in-law's cooking I learned to love Greek food. My wife and I often drove around Greece – with toddlers, then teenagers, then on our own, then with our grandchildren. Eventually, I started to write for *Greece Magazine*. My passion for Greece is no fad.

I can't begin to say how beautiful Greece is. Physically, of course – all those rugged mountains, cobalt seas and picturesque fishing boats. But it's not just that. The Greeks successfully combine 21st-century savvy with a deep feeling for what's important in life. Thought and argument. Politics. Honour. Philosophy. Above all, family and children. In what other country would restaurant staff hold a baby so that the parents could finish their meal, or a group of adolescent youths stop to play with, dandle and admire a three-year-old boy? Both these things happened to my daughter and her kids when holidaying in Greece.

It's undoubtedly the case, too, that the Greeks seem to be well disposed towards Brits. This is partly because of British support for Greece during its War of Independence from the Turks in the 19th century (you'll come across many streets, and Greeks, named after Lord Byron), partly because the British and Greeks were comrades-in-arms during World War II. Whatever the reason, there is often a genuine warmth in the way in which Greeks greet Brits which hasn't been tarnished by the over-familiarities of mass tourism.

Okay, so much for Greece, but why the islands? First some statistics: there are 3000 Greek Islands, about 170 of them inhabited. They are scattered across a staggering 750 000 square kilometres of the Eastern Mediterranean.

The cold facts, however, don't come anywhere near reflecting the grip that this scattering of islands has on the European imagination – especially on those who live in colder northern climes. Consider: sea so clear that boats seem to float in mid-air. Craggy men in tavernas, playing *tavli*. Old women leading donkeys laden with firewood. Blue-and-white cottages climbing steeply from azure seas, crescents of golden sand beneath lofty bare grey mountains. You know the kind of stuff.

There's another side to the Greek Islands, it's true. Mass tourism, giant hotels, coast-to-coast villas, battery-farm holidays and dance-til-you-drop, alcohol- (and worse) fuelled youth excess.

Fit all this around the range of things you do on holiday – sightseeing, barbecues on the beach, arcade games, going to the pictures, buying presents, having family arguments – and the task of organising a successful trip starts to seem like the labours of Hercules. Don't fret – that's where we can help.

So, which islands are the best for families? Out of 170 inhabited islands, only very few are big enough to cater for the variety of tastes and ages found in the average family. If you're looking for beach-and-taverna simplicity almost any one will fit the bill. If you just want a sea-and-sun resort holiday, almost any country on the Mediterranean can give you what you want. Or the Caribbean.

But if you want that balance of a comfortable place to stay with lots to do, some interesting trips out, some Greek history and culture, nice views and good places to eat (or fix your own packed lunch), together with information about everything from car hire to Internet cafés, or where the best playgrounds and theme parks are – in other words, a family holiday which can appeal to everybody in the clan – look no further.

The islands that come up with a string of hits are Corfu, Crete and Rhodes. They have all got a terrific tourist infrastructure, yet they're big enough to have retained their own Greek culture. They have an extended and complicated history with all sorts of interesting back-waters to explore. That they all have strong – and positive – connections with the UK is an added plus. That's why you can watch cricket on the green in Corfu, visit the site of the British-led kidnap of a German General in Crete, or climb Mount Smith in Rhodes.

The fourth island covered here, Evia, has everything that I love about a holiday destination. It's interesting in itself. It has lots of history. It's typically Greek – though most inhabitants in the south of the island are Albanian in origin. It's totally untouristy – many guide-books don't even include it – yet, owing to its popularity as a destination for Greeks, it has a reasonable tourist infrastructure, and offers access to other wonderful places like the Sporades, the Pelion peninsula, the area around Marathon, and Athens itself.

Enough said. Let's take a look at the pick of the bunch.

## BEST FAMILY EXPERIENCES

**People-watching** on the Esplanade in Corfu Town at one of the Liston's cafés (see p. 47).

**Looking down** from Kanoni at the jets thundering in across the convent of Vlacherna to land at Corfu Airport (see p. 55).

**Spending** a family day at one of Corfu, Rhodes or Crete's splendid water parks (see p. 4).

**Spotting** Jersey tiger moths from the paths, steps and bridges of the Valley of the Butterflies in Rhodes (see p. 112).

**Walking** through the damp, dark tunnel (or not!) at Epta Piges in Rhodes (see p. 111).

**Riding** a donkey up the hill to the Acropolis at Lindos in central Rhodes (see p. 103).

**Sweating** in the Mustafa Hamam Turkish Baths in Rhodes Town (see p. 93).

**Wandering** around Chania's wonderful Naval Museum, looking at the fascinating exhibits (see p. 139).

**Having** family competitions at ten-pin bowling, pool, go-karting or mini-golf in Golden Fun Park, just outside Chania, whilst the younger children are being entertained by staff (see p. 142).

**Feeding** the animals or riding a pony at 'The Ark', just outside Vamos in Crete (see p. 147).

## BEST CHILDREN'S ATTRACTIONS

**Aqualand (Corfu)** A huge water park right in the centre of Corfu, accessible from everywhere on the island, with a wide range of slides, tubes, pools, food and drink outlets – the works. A great family day out (see p. 57).

**Lunar Park (Rhodes)** A noisy funfair in the centre of Faliraki,

with all the rides and stalls you're ever likely to want (and some that have disappeared from the UK). You'll either love it or hate it (see p. 102).

**The Water Park (Rhodes)** This has all the slides and rides that now seem standard in holiday water parks – perhaps they're all built by the same firm. Wherever you're staying in Rhodes, it's worth a day trip (see p. 102).

**Hydropolis Water Park (Corfu)** Almost on a par with Aqualand, with many of the same slides and rides, Hydropolis, on the north coast of Corfu, is less accessible and less widely advertised, and usually less crowded. It also has the advantage that it's next to the Gelina Village Resort, with a small zoo and a nice beach (see p. 63).

**Golden Fun Park (Crete)** A brand new facility, with enough to do for all the family, outdoor (bouncy castles, go-karts) and indoor (pool, ten-pin bowling)

Aqualand, Corfu







Asterakia, Evia

to make it an all-weather attraction (see p. 142).

**Asterakia (Evia)** A lovely little funfair on the banks of the Euripos – a bit like a travelling fair that stays put. Particularly suitable for younger children, with enough to keep teens and adults happy as well (see p. 187).

## BEST CASTLES

The Greeks don't make much of their castles – many are just shells, slowly crumbling under the assault of time and the weather. Yet it needs only a little imagination to bring them back to life, and, for obvious defensive reasons, they usually have wonderful views.

**The Old and the New Fortresses (Corfu)** Corfu Town's two huge fortresses are worth visiting, not only in their own right, but also for the

terrific views they offer across the town, the surrounding countryside and the sea (see p. 41).

**Gardiki Fortress (Corfu)** Totally abandoned in the middle of the countryside near Corfu's Lake Korission, the Gardiki Fortress, with its overgrown stonework and goats, is wonderfully atmospheric (see p. 70).

**The Palace of the Grand Masters (Rhodes)** Looking like a fictional fairytale version of what a medieval castle should be (thanks in part to restoration work done by the Italians), the Palace of the Grand Masters gives an idea of the presence and sheer bulk of ancient fortifications (see p. 95).

**Monolithos Castle (Rhodes)** Though there's not much to see when you actually get into it, from a distance the castle has a fairytale aspect, perched on its impressive crag above the Mediterranean (see p. 107).



Palace of the Grand Masters, Rhodes

**Fortezza (Crete)** Within walking distance of the centre of Rethymnon, the Fortezza represents an enticing combination of warfare and piracy (see p. 157).

**Frangokastello (Crete)** On the south coast, Frangokastello is an impressive shell dominating a lovely sandy beach. It comes with a scary ghost-story, too (see p. 154).

**Kara Baba (Evia)** Massive and empty, Kara Baba Fortress stands high above Evia's capital, giving wonderful views across the narrow straits (see p. 187).

## BEST WILDLIFE EXPERIENCES

**The Shell Museum (Corfu)** On the outskirts of Benitses, the Corfu Shell Museum has a fine collection of seashells, stuffed

sharks, crabs, lobsters and other denizens of the deep (see p. 68).

**The Hydrological Institute (Rhodes)** Otherwise known as the Rhodes Aquarium, it sits on the northernmost tip of the island, and offers close-up views of fish you might otherwise only glimpse whilst snorkelling (see p. 98).

**The Ostrich Farm (Rhodes)** Ostriches, of course, but also lots of other animals, including camels you can ride (see p. 113).

**The Bee Museum (Rhodes)** All you need to know about our honey-producing friends – including hives made of Perspex so you can see what's going on inside (see p. 114).

**Valley of the Butterflies (Rhodes)** Not butterflies but Jersey tiger moths, fluttering in their thousands in this stunning little valley (see p. 112).



A resident of The Ark, Crete

**The Ark (Crete)** Though principally an ostrich farm, the Ark has lots of other animals to look at and ride, all set in beautiful grounds with views of the White Mountains (see p. 147).

**Nautilus (Evia)** A well-organised little shell and sealife museum just outside Agiokampos on Evia's north coast (see p. 193).

**Diving (all islands)** Whichever island you're on, there's always the opportunity of seeing wonderful Mediterranean fish swimming in crystal clear waters, either with your own snorkelling equipment, or with one from the many diving schools.

## BEST PICNIC AREAS

You can have a pleasant picnic virtually anywhere in the Greek

Islands, especially on beaches or in woodland – all you need is a place to sit and some shade.

**Mon Repos (Corfu)** Acres of woodland with free access just south of the capital; pick your spot and tuck in (see p. 56).

**Epta Piges (Rhodes)** Streams, rocks and waterfalls, ducks quacking and peacocks keening, all under the shade of the trees (see p. 111).

**Spili (Crete)** Spili's platia (square) is a lovely place to unpack the sandwiches – lots of shade and plenty of cold running water from 25 lion-head spouts (see p. 162).

**Prokopi (Evia)** The road between Prokopi and Madouni is ideal picnic territory, with little pebble beaches along the river and lots of shade (see p. 190).

## BEST BEACHES

The Greek Islands have hundreds of great beaches – part of the fun is finding your own favourite. A few, though, have something extra special.

**Sidari (Corfu)** Unique because of the sinuous shapes of the sandstone cliffs. Older teenagers might want to swim the *canal d'amour* to find eternal love; parents, of course, have already found it (see p. 62).

**Paleokastritsa (Corfu)** One of Corfu's loveliest villages, Paleokastritsa also boasts a choice of wonderful beaches and

coves – not particularly sandy, but in the most perfect setting you could ask for (see p. 64).

**Agios Gordios (Corfu)** On Corfu's west coast, the beach at Agios Gordios is sandy, the view of the cliffs delightful, and if teenagers get bored, they can wander up into the village (see p. 69).

**Prasonissi (Rhodes)** A great vista of sand, sea and windsurfing right on the southern tip of Rhodes, the double bay of Prasonissi is a delight (see p. 117).

**Elli Beach (Rhodes)** If your ideal beach is packed with holidaymakers and locals sunning themselves, Elli Beach, which stretches from Mandraki Harbour to the Aquarium in Rhodes Town, is for you. Ablaze with sun-umbrellas, electric with the *zeitgeist*, it's perfect for people watching. Don't expect peace and quiet, though (see p. 98).

**Trianda Bay (Rhodes)** The pebbly beach itself at Trianda Bay, on Rhodes' northwest coast, isn't up to much, but when you consider the wealth of things for kids to do – a playground at one end, Planet Z indoor play area at the other, and lots of restaurants and cafés in between – you can begin to appreciate its family potential (see p. 105).

**Loutro (Crete)** Loutro, on Crete's south coast and accessible only on foot or by boat, has a lovely little beach right in front of the stacked white and blue houses of the village. It's a sheltered spot, you can get drinks and food at the cafés and tavernas, and there are boats for hire. You couldn't be anywhere else but a Greek island (see p. 153).

**Maleme (Crete)** Facing north along the coast, west of Chania, the beach at Maleme is long and uncrowded, with loads of child-friendly cafés and bars – there's

Paleokastritsa, Corfu







Loutro

nowhere better to watch the sun go down (see p. 141).

**Loutra Edipsou (Evia)** Do what the Greeks do in this town in northern Evia – bring your kids to the beach, let them swim or play on the sand or in the children's playground, whilst you have a drink in the adjacent cafés and bars (see p. 193).

**Karystos (Evia)** The beach west of Karystos, on Evia's southern tip, goes on for miles, and is therefore never crowded. It's one of the best beaches anywhere in the Greek Islands: clean, sandy, with parking along its whole length (see p. 200).

## BEST VIEWS

### The Kaiser's Throne (Corfu)

If it's good enough for Kaiser Wilhelm II, it's good enough for us. Above Pelekas in western

Corfu, the views of country, coast and the Ionian Sea are spectacular (see p. 71).

**The Monastery of Theotokou (Corfu)** From the terrace of this beautiful monastery, enjoy vistas of surf-ringed rocks and cliffs like something out of an 18th-century Romantic painting (see p. 65).

**Filerimos (Rhodes)** Climb up the spiral staircase inside the giant cross and, vertigo permitting, look out across Rhodes' west coast – terrific (see p. 115)!

**Monte Smith (Rhodes)** After a gentle climb (or road-train ride) to the summit of Monte Smith, Rhodes Town lies before you like a pictorial map (see p. 99).

**Askifou (Crete)** As you top the rise and start to drive down towards Askifou, your first glimpse of the plateau's patchwork of fields—so unexpected in the arid mountains of western



The Kaiser's Throne, Corfu

Crete—takes the breath away (see p. 150).

### **The Venizelos Graves (Crete)**

Eleftherios Venizelos chose this site for his grave partly because of its historical significance, but also, surely, for the view across Chania. Try to be there at sunset (see p. 140).

### **Derveni Gorge (Evia)**

Approaching the Derveni Gorge from the south, mountains hang

against the sky, and everywhere is the smell of pine and the clang of goat bells (see p. 190).

**Myli (Evia)** The drive up to Myli, above Karystos, opens up a view of the town and the sea beyond. If you're feeling fit, climb up to Castel Rosso, or even to the summit of Mount Ochi – the view gets even better as you get higher (see p. 200).