

The Best of the Greek Islands

Greece is, of course, the land of ancient sites and architectural treasures—the Acropolis in Athens, the amphitheater of Epidaurus, and the reconstructed palace at Knossos are among the best known. But Greece is much more: It offers age-old spectacular natural sights—from Santorini's caldera to the gray pinnacles of rock of the Meteora—and modern diversions ranging from elegant museums to luxury resorts. It can be bewildering to plan your trip with so many options vying for your attention. Take us along, and we'll do the work for you. We've traveled the country extensively and have chosen the very best that Greece has to offer. We've explored the archaeological sites, visited the museums, inspected the hotels, reviewed the tavernas and ouzeries, and scoped out the beaches. Here's what we consider the best of the best.

1 THE BEST OF ANCIENT GREECE

- **The Acropolis** (Athens): No matter how many photographs you've seen, nothing can prepare you for watching the light change the marble of the buildings, still standing after thousands of years, from honey to rose to deep red to stark white. If the crowds get you down, think about how crowded the Acropolis was during religious festivals in antiquity. See p. 172.
- **Palace of Knossos** (Crete): A seemingly unending maze of rooms and levels, stairways and corridors, in addition to frescoed walls—this is the Minoan Palace of Knossos. It can be packed at peak hours, but it still exerts its power if you enter in the spirit of the labyrinth. King Minos ruled over the richest and most powerful of Minoan cities and, according to legend, his daughter Ariadne helped Theseus kill the Minotaur in the labyrinth and escape. See p. 230.
- **Delos** (Cyclades): This tiny isle, just 3.2km (2 miles) offshore of Mykonos, was considered by the ancient Greeks to be both the geographical and spiritual center of the Cyclades; many considered this the holiest sanctuary in all of Greece. The extensive remains here testify to the island's former splendor. From Mount Kinthos (really just a hill, but the island's highest point), you can see many of the Cyclades most days; on a very clear day, you can see the entire archipelago. The 3 hours allotted by excursion boats from Mykonos or Tinos are hardly sufficient to explore this vast archaeological treasure. See chapter 9.





2 THE BEST OF BYZANTINE & MEDIEVAL GREECE

- **Church of Panagia Kera** (Kritsa, Crete): Even if Byzantine art seems a bit stilted and remote, this striking chapel in the foothills of eastern Crete will reward you with its unexpected intimacy. The 14th- and 15th-century frescoes are not only stunning but depict all the familiar biblical stories. See p. 264.
- **Nea Moni** (Hios, Northeastern Aegean): Once home to 1,000 monks, this 12th-century monastery high in the interior mountains of Hios is now quietly inhabited by one elderly but sprightly nun and two friendly monks. Try to catch one of the excellent tours sometimes offered by the monks. The mosaics in the cathedral dome are works of

extraordinary power and beauty; even in the half-obscurity of the nave, they radiate a brilliant gold. Check out the small museum, and take some time to explore the extensive monastery grounds. See p. 422.

- **A Profusion of Byzantine Churches in the Cyclades:** The fertile countryside of the island of Naxos is dotted by well-preserved Byzantine chapels. Parikia, the capital of Paros, has the Byzantine-era cathedral of Panagia Ekatondapiliani. Santorini boasts the 11th- to 12th-century church of the Panagia, in the hamlet of Gonias Episkopi. See chapter 9.

3 THE BEST BEACHES

- **Plaka** (Naxos, Cyclades): Naxos has the longest stretches of sea and sand in the Cyclades, and 4.8km (3-mile) Plaka is the most beautiful and pristine beach on the island. If you need abundant amenities and a more active social scene, you can always head north to Ayia Anna or Ayios Prokopios. See p. 316.
- **Paradise** (Mykonos, Cyclades): Paradise is the quintessential party beach, known for wild revelry that continues through the night. An extensive complex built on the beach includes a bar, taverna, changing rooms, and souvenir shops. This is a place to see and be seen, a place to show off muscles laboriously acquired during the long winter months. See p. 325.
- **Lalaria Beach** (Skiathos, Sporades): This gleaming, white-pebble beach boasts vivid aquamarine water and white limestone cliffs with natural arches cut into them by the elements.

Lalaria is neither nearly as popular nor as accessible as Skiathos's famous Koukounaries, which is one of the reasons it's still gorgeous and pristine. See p. 441.

- **Myrtos** (Kefalonia, Ionian Islands): Although remote enough to require you come with your own wheels, this isolated sand-pebble beach has long charmed countless visitors. It does lack shade and it offers limited refreshments—perhaps bring a picnic—but the setting makes up for these deficiencies. See p. 483.
- **Vroulidia** (Hios, Northeastern Aegean): White sand, a cliff-rimmed cove, and a remote location at the southern tip of the island of Hios combine to make this one of the most exquisite small beaches in the northeastern Aegean. The rocky coast conceals many cove beaches similar to this one, and they rarely become crowded. See p. 424.

4 THE BEST ISLANDS

- **Hydra** (Saronic Gulf Islands): Old-timers keep waiting for Hydra, with its handsome stone mansions overlooking a picture-postcard harbor, to be spoiled. After all, even before Mykonos and Santorini, Hydra was one of the first Greek islands to be “discovered.” So far, so good: Donkeys still outnumber motorcycles, and the day-trippers who blitz through the appealing harborside shops leave at twilight. That means you can almost always find the table you want at one of Hydra’s pleasant small restaurants. See p. 212.
- **Crete:** Whether for its rugged mountains or its countless beaches, its ancient remains or its ultramodern hotels, its layered history or its intense people, Crete cannot be denied. It is not just a distinctive Greek island—it is a world unto itself. See chapter 8.
- **Santorini** (Cyclades): This is undoubtedly one of the most spectacular islands in the world. The streets of Fira and Ia are carved into the face of a high cliff, overlooking the circular caldera left by an ancient volcanic eruption and now filled with the deep-blue waters of the Aegean. The site of Akrotiri offers a unique glimpse into life in a Minoan city, frozen in time by the eruption 3,600 years ago. Be sure to find out if this spectacular site, which was partly closed to the public at press time, has completely reopened when you visit. Add to this the Fira nightlife scene, and you’ll see why this is one of the most popular (and overcrowded) summer vacation spots in the Aegean. See p. 268.
- **Siros** (Cyclades): This tiny island has it all: a vivacious, cosmopolitan capital town; thriving beach resorts; and a starkly beautiful region of farming communities, archaeological remains, and remote beaches to the north. Siros is also one of the centers of *rembetika*, a form of Greek traditional music with roots in Asia Minor. The *Fragosiriani*, a classic known throughout Greece, was composed by the Siriot Markos Vamvakaris, and you’re sure to hear its simple and infectious rhythms many times during your stay here. See p. 353.
- **Tinos** (Cyclades): The island often called the “ Lourdes of Greece,” because of the church, Panagia Evangelistria (Our Lady of Good Tidings), with its healing icon, also has Venetian dove-cotes; farm fields set off with handsome stone boundary walls; and Pirgos, the village of marble. See chapter 9.
- **Rhodes** (Dodecanese): The island of Rhodes has everything a visitor could want: dazzling ancient and medieval ruins, great food, spectacular beaches, and some of the hottest nightlife outside of Athens; the one drawback is that everyone knows it. See chapter 10.
- **Skyros** (Sporades): Winding roads and remote beaches, one main town and a few minor villages, some ancient legends and 20th-century tales: Skyros’s charms remain perhaps the most elusive of the four Northern Sporades. But though the island remains a bit difficult to access and not overstocked with touristy amenities, Skyros also offers both a living local culture and some natural wildness. See chapter 12.
- **Corfu** (Ionian Islands): With lush vegetation, some still-undeveloped interior and unspoiled coast, ancient sites and a 19th-century presence, a dash of Italy and a dose of the cosmopolitan, Corfu is a Greek island like no other. Tourism may be rampant, but Corfu’s attractions have survived worse. See chapter 13.

- **Hios** (Northeastern Aegean): You'd think that an island with such gorgeous beaches, exquisite medieval towns, and remarkable scenery wouldn't remain a secret for long. Despite the qualities that attract a small group of devotees year after year, Hios remains surprisingly quiet. If you like the idea of getting away from the tour buses, being alone on a beach to rival any in the Cyclades, and exploring towns that preserve the contours of medieval life, Hios is for you. Another benefit: The local hospitality hasn't worn thin here, as it has on many of the more heavily toured islands. See chapter 11.
- **Sifnos** (Cyclades): Sifnos is a green island of ravines, mountaintops, and pristine beaches. Despite its small size (a hardy walker can explore the entire island on foot), Sifnos has numerous attractive small towns that can be used as bases for your explorations. Apollonia, in the central hills, offers elegant small-town civility, with the added benefit of being the hub of an excellent public transportation system. The *kastro* (castle), on its seaside rock, is the medieval locus of the island, whereas Platis Yialos is a bustling beach resort. Don't visit in August, when the island is mobbed with vacationing Athenians. See chapter 9.

5 THE BEST PLACES TO GET AWAY FROM IT ALL

- **National and Zappeion Gardens** (Athens): It's all too easy to overlook this oasis of calm and cool in the heart of Athens. In 2006, more than a thousand new trees and hundreds of roses were planted in the National Gardens, in its first major makeover since 1854. You'll discover shady benches, a small cafe, the excellent Aegli restaurant in the adjacent Zappeion Gardens, and lots of opportunities to enjoy watching Greek families out for a stroll. Keep an eye out for the balloon sellers on weekends. See p. 134.
- **Mount Likavitos, aka Mount Lykabettus** (Athens): Walk up Likavitos at dawn and enjoy the sunrise over the hills that surround Athens. Come back for sunset, and you may encounter others strolling here, with the city laid under your feet like a sparkling map, the sounds of its ferocious traffic pleasantly distant. See p. 134.
- **Folegandros** (Cyclades): Most visitors to Greece once sailed past the formidable Folegandros cliffs en route from the mainland to Santorini and other islands; they'd catch a glimpse of the white-washed *kastro* walls perched 300m (984 ft.) above the sea. The beauty of Hora, the fine beaches, and the great walking trails are no longer secrets, but if you arrive during the off-season, Folegandros still offers a restful retreat. Largely free of the commercialism that has engulfed so many Aegean isles, Folegandros is now appearing on insider lists as *the* new place to visit. See p. 285.
- **Milia** (Crete): Here is a true retreat from not only the hustle and bustle of mass tourism but of most modern distractions: It's a once-abandoned village off in the mountains of western Crete, where you live in a renovated stone house and spend your days hiking, enjoying the wildlife, eating simple meals, and just plain relaxing. See p. 242.
- **The Road Not Taken** (Greece): Don't fret if you take a wrong turn in Greece, whether it is on a street in Athens or a road somewhere in the country. Go with it! This may be the highlight of

your trip—the Athenian shop-owner who shows you pictures of his aunt's family in Chicago when you stop to ask for directions; the *yiayia* (granny) next to you on that boat that you caught, after the boat you wanted to catch had

left; the schoolchild who quizzes you about why you came to Greece when you bump into him at an ancient site; or the little village you chance upon because you stumbled onto the road you did not mean to take.

6 THE BEST MUSEUMS

- **New Acropolis Museum** (Athens): Athens's newest museum is also its most stunning. This impressive five-story building handsomely displays the riches that adorned the Acropolis in its heyday. Stunning sculptures, statues, free-standing objects, and 36 of the original 115 frieze panels that remain in Greece are on display. On the lower levels, visitors can peer through glass panels at the ongoing excavations of an ancient Athenian neighborhood and an early Christian settlement. See p. 183.
- **National Archaeological Museum** (Athens): This stunning collection, which reopened after a major renovation in 2004, has it all: superb red- and black-figured vases, bronze statues, Mycenaean gold, marble reliefs of gods and goddesses, and the hauntingly beautiful frescoes from Akrotiri, the Minoan site on the island of Santorini. See p. 181.
- **Museum of Popular Greek Musical Instruments** (Athens): Life-size photos of musicians beside their actual instruments and recordings of traditional

Greek music make this one of the country's most charming museums. On our last visit, an elderly Greek gentleman listened to some music, transcribed it, stepped into the courtyard, and played it on his own violin! See p. 181.

- **Archaeological Museum of Iraklion** (Crete): Few museums in the world can boast of holding virtually all the important remains of a major culture. This museum can do just that with its Minoan collection, including superb frescoes from Knossos, elegant bronze and stone figurines, and exquisite gold jewelry. The museum also contains Neolithic, Archaic Greek, and Roman finds from throughout Crete. See p. 229.
- **Archaeological Museum of Chania** (Crete): Let's hear it for a truly engaging provincial museum, not one full of masterworks but rather of representative works from thousands of years, a collection that lets us see how many people experienced their different worlds. All this, in a former Italian Renaissance church that feels like a special place. See p. 243.

7 THE BEST RESORTS & HOTELS

- **Andromeda Hotel** (Athens; ☎ 210/643-7302): The city's first serious boutique hotel, located on a wonderfully quiet side street, the classy Andromeda offers charm, comfort, and a reassuringly helpful staff. See p. 153.
- **Grande Bretagne** (Athens; ☎ 210/333-0000): Back for a return engagement and better than ever, Athens's premiere hotel still overlooks the best view in town, if you have the right room: Syntagma Square, the Houses of

Parliament and, in case you wondered, the Acropolis. See p. 150.

- **Atlantis Hotel** (Iraklion, Crete; ☎ 2810/229-103): There are many more luxurious hotels in Greece, but few can beat the Atlantis's urban attractions: a central location, modern facilities, and views over a busy harbor. You can swim in the pool; work out in the fitness center; send e-mail via your laptop; and then, within minutes, enjoy a fine meal or visit a museum. See p. 233.
- **Doma** (Chania, Crete; ☎ 28210/51-772): A former neoclassical mansion east of downtown, the Doma has been converted into a comfortable and charming hotel, furnished with the proprietor's family heirlooms. Although it's not for those seeking the most luxurious amenities, its atmosphere appeals to many. See p. 245.
- **Astra Apartments** (Santorini, Cyclades; ☎ 22860/23-641): This small hotel, with handsomely appointed apartments, looks like a miniature white-washed village—and has spectacular views over Santorini's famous caldera. The sunsets here are not to be believed, the staff is incredibly helpful, and the village of Imerovigli itself offers an escape from the tourist madness that overwhelms the island each summer. This is a spot to get married—or to celebrate any special occasion. See p. 280.
- **Anemomilos Apartments** (Folegandros, Cyclades; ☎ 22860/41-309) and **Castro Hotel** (Folegandros, Cyclades; ☎ 22860/41-230): The small island of Folegandros has two of the nicest hotels in the Cyclades, both with terrific cliff-top locations. The Anemomilos has all the creature comforts, traditional decor, and a good location (it's just out of town), with a pool and sea views that seem to stretch forever. The Castro, built into the walls of the 12th-century Venetian castle that encircles the village, has lots of character and the necessary modern comforts. See p. 287.
- **S. Nikolis Hotel** (Rhodes, Dodecanese; ☎ 22410/34-561): This small hotel in the Old Town of Rhodes combines such modern amenities as Internet access and Jacuzzis with the experience of living in a renovated centuries-old Venetian mansion. The decor and furnishings maintain the sense that you are indeed in a special place and the proprietors' warm hospitality enhances this feeling. See p. 370.
- **Hotel Nireus** (Simi, Dodecanese; ☎ 22410/72-400): Perfect island, perfect location, unpretentious, and tasteful. The views from the sea-facing rooms, framed by the fluid swirls of the wrought-iron balcony, define the spell of this little gem of an island. You'll never regret one more night on Simi, and here's the place to spend it. See p. 386.
- **White Rocks Hotel & Bungalows** (Kefalonia, Ionian Islands; ☎ 26710/28-332): For those who appreciate understated elegance, a shady retreat from all that sunshine, a private beach, and quiet but attentive service, this hotel, a couple of miles outside Argostoli, can be paradise. See p. 481.

8 THE BEST RESTAURANTS

- **Varoulko** (Athens; ☎ 210/522-8400): In its new Athens location, with a menu that adds tasty meat dishes to its signature seafood, Varoulko continues to win plaudits. Everything here is so good that many Athenians believe chef/owner Lefteris Lazarou serves not only the finest seafood in Athens, but some of the best food in all of Greece. See p. 164.

- **Vlassis** (Athens; ☎ 210/646-3060): This small restaurant with a loyal following (ranging from prominent ambassadors to struggling artists) serves traditional (*paradisiako*) Greek cooking at its very best. It's a tempting choice, if you have only 1 night in Athens, but be sure to make a reservation. See p. 153.
- **Selene** (Santorini, Cyclades; ☎ 22860/22-249): The best restaurant on an island with lots of good places to eat, Selene is one of the finest restaurants in all Greece. The reason: Owner George Haziyanakis constantly experiments with local produce to turn out innovative versions of traditional dishes. Inside, the dining room is elegant, while the terrace has a wonderful view over the caldera. See p. 283.
- **Brilliant Gourmet** (Iraklion, Crete; ☎ 2810/334-959): Only opened in 2007, this restaurant immediately positioned itself as the most stylish restaurant on Crete, with food and wine to match its decor. Admittedly, a restaurant for special treats or occasions, but it's worth inventing one for yourself at least once. See p. 235.
- **Mavrikos** (Lindos, Rhodes; ☎ 22440/31-232): Don't be fooled by its location at the crossroads of tourists and its moderate prices—this 70-year-old family restaurant serves some of the most elegant and innovative dishes in all of Greece. See p. 379.
- **Petrino** (Kos, Dodecanese; ☎ 22420/27-251): When royalty come to Kos, this is where they dine. Housed in an exquisitely restored, two-story, century-old, stone (*petrino*) private residence, this is hands down the most elegant taverna in Kos, with cuisine to match. This is what Greek home cooking would be, if your mother were part divine. See p. 395.
- **Venetian Well** (Corfu, Ionian Islands; ☎ 26610/44-761): A bit severe in its setting at the edge of a small enclosed square in Corfu town, with no attempt at the picturesque, this restaurant gets by on its more esoteric, international, and delicate menu. It's for those seeking a break from the standard Greek scene. See p. 473.

9 THE BEST NIGHTLIFE

- **Theater Under the Stars** (Athens and Epidaurus, Peloponnese): If you can, take in a performance of whatever is on at Odeion of Herodes Atticus theater in Athens or the theater at Epidaurus. You'll be sitting where people have sat for thousands of years to enjoy a play beneath Greece's night sky. See chapters 5 and 6.
- **Mykonos** (Cyclades): Mykonos isn't the only island town in Greece with nightlife that continues through the morning, but it was the first and still offers the most abundant, varied scene in the Aegean. Year-round, the town's narrow, labyrinthine streets play host to a remarkably diverse crowd—Mykonos's unlimited ability to reinvent itself has assured it of continued popularity. Spring and fall tend to be more sober and sophisticated, whereas the 3 months of summer are reserved for unrestrained revelry. See chapter 9.
- **Rhodes** (Dodecanese): From cafes to casinos, Rhodes has not only the reputation but also the stuff to back it up. A good nightlife scene is ultimately a matter of who shows up—and this, too, is where Rhodes stands out. It's the place to be seen, and if nobody seems to be

looking, you can always watch. See chapter 10.

- **Skiathos** (Sporades): With as many as 50,000 foreigners packing this tiny island during the high season, the many nightspots in Skiathos town are often jammed with the mostly younger set. If you don't like the music at one club, cross the street. See chapter 12.
- **Corfu** (Ionian Islands): If raucous nightspots are what you look for on a holiday, Corfu offers probably the largest concentration in Greece. Most of these are beach resorts frequented by young foreigners. More sedate locales can be found in Corfu town. Put simply, Corfu hosts a variety of music, dancing, and "socializing" opportunities. See chapter 13.

10 THE BEST SHOPPING

- **Traditional Arts & Crafts:** So many places in Greece pride themselves on their needlework that it is hard to single out even a few, but among those few would be Crete, Rhodes, and Skyros. Two places in Athens deserve mention: **The Center of Hellenic Tradition** (59 Mitropoleos and 36 Pandrossou) and the **National Welfare Organization** (6 Ipatias and Apollonos). The Center offers ceramics, woodcarvings, prints—and one of the finest views of the Acropolis in Athens. The National Welfare Organization contains hand-loomed rugs and silk embroidery done by village women, as well as excellent copperwork and ceramics.
- **Leatherwork:** Both Rhodes and Crete feature local leatherwork, from sandals to handbags, from belts to jackets. Pay attention to quality.
- **Jewelry:** It now seems that half of Greece's retail stores sell jewelry, so shop around. Much of it is really no different than what can be found in cities all over the world, but Athens does have major, internationally known jewelers such as LALAO UNIS and Zolotas. Try Chania, Crete, for sophisticated local artisans' work. Islands such as Hydra, Mykonos, Santorini, Skiathos, and Rhodes have scores of stores appealing to the tourist trade.
- **Ceramics:** As with needlework, pots and ceramics of all kinds are to be found throughout Greece. Some of the more traditional may be found on Chios, Crete, Mitilini, Sifnos, and Skopelos.
- **Rugs/Weavings:** Crete probably offers the largest variety of rugs and weavings. Metsovo has some distinctive textiles. If you like rag rugs, keep an eye out for *kourouloudes* on sale at small shops as you travel the Peloponnese.
- **Wood:** Corfu seems to be the center of olive wood products—carving boards, bowls, and utensils. Rethymnon, Crete, also has a selection. In the Peloponnese, woodcarvings and utensils are often found in the villages of Arcadia. Chios and Mitilini also boast woodcarving traditions.
- **Icons, Ecclesiastical Books & Items:** On the streets around the Greek Orthodox Cathedral (Metropolitan) in Athens, you'll find many shops selling votive offerings, candles, and reproductions of icons. In Thessaloniki, **Apostolic Diakonta Bookstore** has a wide selection of religious items. Many of the most important religious shrines, such as Panagia Evangelistria, on Tinos, and many convents and monasteries, sell reproductions of icons and other religious items. On Crete, the Petrakis couple in Elounda paint internationally sought traditional icons.

- **Museum Reproductions:** Fine replicas of many famous museum pieces may be purchased at the Archaeological, Byzantine, Benaki, Goulandris, and LALAoUNIS museums in Athens; and at official archaeological service stores in Rhodes Old Town and in Chania and Rethymnon, Crete.
- **Books:** Whether you're looking for books about Greece or books for vacation reading, in Athens, the places to go are **Eleftheroudakis**, **Compendium**, **Reymondos**, and **Folia tou Bibliou**.