

# The Best of the Greek Islands

**F**rom Santorini's dramatic caldera to the reconstructed palace of Knossos on Crete, the Greek Islands are spectacular. There aren't many places in the world where the forces of nature have come together with the ancient sites and architectural treasures to create such dramatic results.

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 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 scouted 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, remember how crowded the Acropolis was during religious festivals in antiquity. See p. 154.
- **Palace of Knossos** (Crete): A seemingly unending maze of rooms and levels and stairways and corridors and 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. 197.
- **Akrotiri** (Cyclades): Santorini is undoubtedly one of the most spectacular islands in the world. The site of Akrotiri offers a unique glimpse into the life of a Minoan city, frozen in time by a volcanic eruption 3,600 years ago. Be sure to find out if this site, which closed to the public in 2004, has reopened.
- **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 8.

## Greece





## 2 The Best of Byzantine Greece

- **Church of Panayia Kera** (Kritsa, Crete): 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. 227.
- **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-obscure 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. 372.

- **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 Panayia Ekatondapiliani. Santorini boasts the 11th- to 12th-century church of the Panagia in the hamlet of Gonia Episkopi. See chapter 8.

## 3 The Best Beaches

- **Plaka** (Naxos, Cyclades): Naxos has the longest stretches of sea sand in the Cyclades, and Plaka is the most beautiful and pristine beach on the island. On its 5km (3-mile) stretch of mostly undeveloped shoreline, you can easily imagine yourself as Robinson Crusoe alone on his island (bending the plot to include a few sunbathing Fridays). If you need abundant amenities and a more active social scene, you can always head north to Ayia Anna or Ayios Prokopios. See p. 278.
- **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. 285.
- **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 not 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. 396.

- **Megalo Seitani** (Samos, Northeastern Aegean): Megalo Seitani and its neighbor, Micro Seitani, are situated on the mountainous and remote northwest coast of Samos. There aren't any roads to this part of the island, so the only ways to reach the beaches are by a short boat ride or a rather long (and beautiful) hike. You won't regret taking the trouble, since both beaches are superb: Micro Seitani's crescent of pebbles in a rocky cove, and Megalo Seitani's expanse of pristine sand. See p. 366.
- **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. 376.

#### 4 The Best Scenic Villages & Towns

- **Chania** (Crete): Radiating from its handsome harbor and backdropped by the White Mountains, Chania has managed to hold on to much of its Venetian-Renaissance and later Turkish heritage. Wander the old town's narrow lanes, filled with a heady mix of colorful local culture, and enjoy its charming hotels, excellent restaurants, interesting shops, and swinging nightspots. See p. 205.
- **Hora** (Folegandros, Cyclades): In this town huddled at the edge of a cliff, one square spills into the next, its green and blue paving slates outlined in brilliant white. On a steep hill overlooking the town is the ornate church of Kimisis Theotokou, often illuminated at night. The church's icon of the Virgin is paraded through the streets of Hora with great ceremony and revelry every Easter Sunday. Mercifully free of vehicular traffic, Hora is one of the most beautiful and least spoiled villages in the Cyclades. See p. 250.
- **Yialos** (Simi, Dodecanese): The entirety of Yialos, the main port of the tiny, rugged island of Simi, has been declared a protected architectural treasure, and for good reason. This pristine port with its extraordinary array of neoclassical mansions is a large part of why Simi is known as "the jewel of the Dodecanese." See p. 336.
- **Ermoupolis** (Siros, Cyclades): In the 19th century, this was the busiest port in the Cyclades. Today, it is still a hub for island travel and retains an

astonishing number of handsome neoclassical governmental buildings, ship sheds and factories, and elegant town houses. Walk uphill from the harbor to Ano Siros (upper Siros) and you'll find an old *kastró* (fortress) and a miniature whitewashed Cycladic village. See p. 306.

- **Skopelos Town** (Skopelos, Sporades): The amazingly well-preserved Skopelos, a traditional whitewashed island port town, is adorned everywhere with pots of flowering plants. It offers some fairly sophisticated diversions, several excellent restaurants, a couple good hotels, and lots of shopping. See p. 404.
- **Corfu Town** (Corfu, Ionian Islands): With its Esplanade framed by a 19th-century palace and the arcaded Liston, its old town a Venice-like warren of structures practically untouched for several centuries, its massive Venetian fortresses, and all this enclosing a lively population and constant visitors, here is urban Greece at its most appealing. See p. 418.
- **Piriyi & Mesta** (Hios, Northeastern Aegean): These two small towns, in the pastoral southern hills of Hios, are marvelous creations of the medieval imagination. Connected by their physical proximity and a shared history, each is quirkily unique and a delight to explore. In Piriyi, every available surface is covered with elaborate geometric black-and-white decorations known as *Ksisti*, a technique that reaches extraordinary levels of virtuosity in the town square. Mesta

has preserved its medieval urban fabric and conceals two fine churches

within its maze of narrow streets. See p. 375.

## 5 The Best Museums

- **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. 162.
- **Museum of Greek Popular 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. 168.
- **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. 196.
- **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. 206.

## 6 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. 144.
- **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. 142.
- **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. 199.
- **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. 210.

- **Astra Apartments** (Santorini, Cyclades; ☎ 22860/23-641): This small hotel with handsomely appointed apartments looks like a miniature whitewashed 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 touristic madness that overwhelms the island each summer. If you decide to get married here, you have but to speak to the manager, George Karayiannis (before you arrive, unless you want to tie the knot on a return visit). See p. 243.
- **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 delicious pool and sea views that 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. 252.

- **Rodos Palace** (Rhodes, Dodecanese; ☎ 22410/25-222): The largest five-star hotel in Greece and possibly in the entire Mediterranean, this "palace" was decorated by the famed designer of the movies *Ben Hur* and *Quo Vadis*. Located in Iksia, just outside Rhodes city, it offers all the amenities imaginable, including a family center—a resort within a resort designed to provide the ultimate holiday for travelers with children. See p. 325.
- **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. 339.
- **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, located a couple of miles outside Argostoli, can be paradise. See p. 433.

## 7 The Best Restaurants

- **Daphne's** (Athens; ☎ 210/322-7971): As well as Pompeiiian-style wall frescoes and one of the nicest gardens in Athens, Daphne's offers consistently delicious food. It makes you wonder why other Greek restaurants can't make supposedly simple dishes like eggplant salad or yogurt with

quince taste this distinctive. Added to all this are strolling musicians—and the owners and staff are so delightful that you hate to leave, even when you can't eat another prawn with toasted almonds. See p. 147.

- **Vlassis** (Athens; ☎ 210/646-3060): This small restaurant with a very loyal

following (ranging from prominent ambassadors to struggling artists) serves traditional (*paradisikiako*) Greek cooking at its very best. A tempting choice if you have only one night in Athens—but be sure to make a reservation. See p. 154.

- **Varoulko** (Athens; ☎ 210/522-8400; [www.varoulko.gr](http://www.varoulko.gr)): 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. 153.
- **Nykterida** (Chania, Crete; ☎ 28210/64-215): We're not saying that the location may influence your taste buds here, but the spectacular views from this restaurant high above Chania and Soudha Bay can definitely make you feel as if you're eating a meal like few others in Greece. See p. 211.
- **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: Owners George and Evelyn Hatzziannakis constantly experiment with local produce to turn out their own innovative versions of traditional dishes. Inside, the dining room is elegant, while the terrace has a wonderful view over the caldera. See p. 247.

- **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. 347.
- **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. 426.

## 8 The Best Nightlife

- **Theater Under the Stars** (Athens): If you can, take in a performance of whatever is on at Herodes Atticus Theater in Athens. You'll be sitting where people have sat for thousands of years to enjoy a play beneath Greece's magical night sky. See chapter 5.
- **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, while the 3 months of summer are reserved for unrestrained revelry. See chapter 8.

- **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 9.



- **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 11.
- **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 12.