

THE CYCLADES



THE GREEK RENAISSANCE

Dazzling seas, whitewashed villages, blushing bougainvillea... The Cyclades is every bit the archetypal Greek paradise, but look more closely, off-season, and a different story unfolds, full of surprising twists and turns

WORDS PÓL Ó CONGHAILE

IMAGES: PÓL Ó CONGHAILE; GETTY



THE FOODIE ISLAND
SIFNOS

Sifnos is just 15 miles long, but its rich traditions and contemporary edge combine to create the Cyclades' hottest food scene



"It's easier to realise dreams in small places," says Ronia Anastasiadou. We've spent the morning touring Sifnos, dipping into sleepy streets and blue-domed churches, and are parting ways by her Fiesta in

Apollonia, the island's main town. Ronia's mother was Sifnian, she tells me, while she herself was born in Athens but moved to her great-grandparents' house on this small island in the Western Cyclades 23 years ago.

"When I came from Athens, I had pills for headaches and an inhaler," she tells me. "But after six months I stopped all medicine. It was a hard year, but after that year it was finished... No more chemistry." She waves around, seeming to catch the island air, the landscape, the community, in her gesture. "You're surrounded by water. It's not up to you whether you leave the island. If there's a boat, you can leave. If not, you can't. For me, that was a reason to come."

And then there's the food. In Artemonas, Ronia takes me to sample sweet *amigdalota*, a soft almond cookie rolled in sugar, at Theodorou, a family-run sweet shop still using copper pots and wood fires to make its treats. Here, Vasilodimos Theodorou gives me tasters of velvety *loukoumi* (Turkish delight) and *halvadopita* (nougat wafers dotted with almonds and laced with island honey — you'd be tempted to stay on the island for this alone). "Historically we've been culturally close to Istanbul, where lots of pastry shops had Sifnian owners and staff," he tells me.

Is that where his recipes come from? "No, no, no!" Vasilodimos says, "I stay with my grandfather's recipes."

Mention food on Sifnos, and you'll soon hear about Nikolaos Tselementes, who wrote a seminal Greek cookbook in 1926 and went on to become the country's first celebrity chef. The book remains a staple on Greek shelves, but the Sifnian culinary tradition is richer than one man. Think of the fishermen, for centuries taking their catch along donkey paths to its villages. Or the terraces lined with beehives, olive and almond trees. Or the clay pots for slow-cooking stews. You still see old men foraging in cracks and walls for tough, wild capers.

At Tsikali tavern, on Vathi Beach, I go for a swim before tucking into a lunch of falafel cut with marjoram, flat-leaf parsley and onion; a snap-fresh salad with tomatoes and creamy manoura cheese, and a goat stew made with meat from the tavern's own farm. At Simos, in the modest port town of Kamares, waiters in jeans and hoodies ferry trays across the street while local kids whizz

PREVIOUS PAGES: Door, Limas, Milos; house in Oia, Santorini, painted in traditional white and blue
FROM LEFT: Priest in Kamares; freshly baked pastries; George Bairamis, a potter; Simos; Church of the Seven Martyrs



by on bikes. I ask whether the calamari needs a side. "You can have rice, potato, anything you want," the waiter says, slightly dismayed by the question. "For me, I have just calamari on the plate."

I defer, and am soon cutting into a whole squid in a wafer-thin batter with a charcoal bang to it. No rings. No frills. Just a wedge of lemon. When I walk inside to pay, I find myself in a room where yellowing family photos sit alongside portraits of saints and a blaring old TV. The waiter reaches around to the back of the till, hitting a clasp to open a drawer held together with sellotape.

Sifnos is a small island with a population of around 2,500, and one I cover easily in a day's drive with Ronia and Giannis, another

affable local guide. We venture from the hilltop ruins of Agios Andreas, an ancient Mycenaean town, to Kastro, a Venetian citadel built in the early 13th century. Island life is revealed in layers, from the flowing purple robes of an Orthodox priest walking through Artemonas to George Bairamis, a potter whom I watch moulding wet, orange mulch into the terracotta pots that will hold the delicious Sifnian stews of the future. When he's not working, George likes to go spearfishing, he tells me. And yes, he cooks his catch.

It's not all rustic and unassuming, of course. The Sifnian secret has travelled, like the sweet whiff of bakeries in its lanes. In summer, visitors range from Athenian weekenders to wandering stars. Tom Hanks is a fan of the

cooking at Omega 3, on Platis Gialos, I'm told. The beach is also home to the Lost Bay Beach Bar, whose barista Konstantinos Tsekouras has twice been named Greece's best. In September, a three-day 'Nikolaos Tselementes' Cycladic Gastronomy Festival sees islanders from across the archipelago share their takes on traditional food. The sophistication is simmering away, but still feels understated, authentic. Sifnos is famous for not being famous, as a recent *New York Times* story put it. Ronia was happy with that.

"Food is a good way to know people," she muses as we tour. "It's hard not to eat well on the island, because everybody feels they have to work up to that reputation. Visitors expect to eat nice."

Did you know // The colour blue dominates many buildings in the Cyclades, from church domes to door shutters. The reason? In ancient times the colour of the sky was supposed to ward off evil spirits

Did you know // The Greek language doesn't have a soft 'c' sound. That means the Cyclades are pronounced 'Kyklades'

THE STUNNER SANTORINI

Santorini is every bit as spectacular as it seems on Instagram. But you need to get your boots on to escape the crowds

I wish all days could begin like this. I'm sitting on the clifftop balcony at Aigialos Hotel, a series of restored former sea captains' mansions in Fira. The morning light is laying a shine on the Cycladic whites; waiters are ferrying breakfast trays up steep steps. Hundreds of feet below, in the volcanic crater around which Santorini is wrapped, tenders zip back and forth to a cruise ship.

For now, it's quiet. But that will change. When I checked in the previous evening, I asked the hotel receptionist when to expect sunset. "7pm," she said. "That's the time you'll fall in love." It's also when the terraces in the towns of Oia and Fira are most crowded; when the sun sinks into the caldera and a slow-mo explosion of colour lights up the sky. I want to see that, of course I do. But I also want to seek out Santorini's secrets.

They don't come easy.

"You're on the beaten track here," deadpans Craig Walzer, one of the owners of Atlantis Books, in Oia. This busy little

bolthole crammed with nooks, crannies and quirky flourishes (a history of the store is handwritten on its ceiling) and it gives me hope. Santorini's extreme beauty has made it one of the most expensive stays in the Cyclades. Cruise visitors are limited to 8,000 a day. Visiting brides pose for photo after photo. But it does off-radar, too.

After breakfast, I meet Vicky Matsaka, of WalkAbout Tours & Adventure, a small company she runs with her husband. The day before, we walked part of the cliff path that rims the caldera's lip from Oia to Fira. Now, we're headed east, starting at the island's highest point, in Pyrgos, and hiking an hour or so to Emporio. It doesn't take long to lose the crowds. Shortly after tramping through Pyrgos's maze-like streets to a Venetian castle on a hill, we pass a donkey with its ears rolled back and ornamental seashells on its forehead. We push on into the parched countryside, past dry stone walls, and whiffy bushes of rosemary and thyme that puff to dust in my fingers. There are views of mountains and

twinkling seas. We pass abandoned cave houses, a pomegranate tree, a crying rooster, before easing back into civilisation.

As we walk, we discuss Santorini's status as a small but serious producer of wine, with a dozen or so wineries harvesting from vines woven into the shape of wreath-like baskets to fend off wind on the volcanic slopes. In the south east, we visit the partially excavated ruins of Akrotiri, an ancient settlement linked with the legendary Lost City of Atlantis (hence the name of Craig's bookstore). Akrotiki was buried by a volcanic eruption in 1620 BC, and today, you can stroll through and around a section of its petrified, Pompeii-like streets.

The volcano last erupted in 1950. Is it extinct now, I wonder?

"Erm... it's dormant," Vicky laughs.

After our walk, we drive down a dirt road to meet Michalis Alefragis, a shepherd tending his goats in a lone valley. With his peaked cap, handlebar moustache and blue denim jacket, Michalis is the picture of a traditional Cycladic Islander — an

increasingly exotic species on Santorini. With a loud, gravelly voice, he tells me about his farming. "Goat droppings are more precious than gold," he chuckles, clearly enamoured of this all-natural fertiliser. "If you take a five-euro note from your wallet and put it in the ground, you'll get nothing."

He still enjoys working the land, watching his animals, producing everything from tomatoes to aubergines and wine for his family restaurant (The Good Heart), nearby. After our chat, that's where he heads, standing in the doorway to greet customers and offer them crackers topped with his wife's homemade tomato sauce.

Later, Vicky and I catch the sunset on top of the hill behind Michalis's goat pen, peering down over the sun-blushed cliffs near White Beach. As the sun morphs into an orange coin on the horizon, I'm glad I'm not jostling for space on the terraces of Oia and Fira, but equally, I know that right now, everyone on the island is bound by the same, enchanting spell. I check the time on my phone. It's exactly 7pm. ▶

THE NATURAL NAXOS

Naxos is the Cyclades' natural playground, with a diverse landscape capable of disarming even the most avid island-hopper

I really don't want to write about Naxos.

It takes just 48 hours to come to that conclusion. After which, I want to stow this beautiful island away, zip my lips, keep it for myself. If Santorini and Mykonos shout, Naxos whispers. And now, it's whispering to me. Its subtleties are not immediately obvious. Naxos is the biggest island in the Cyclades. It boasts the archipelago's highest peak (Mount Zeus, at 3,294ft). It's easily accessible by ferry. It's not short on resorts or Airbnbs, and come July and August, its restaurants spill over like any holiday town on the Med.

So what sets it apart? I put the question to a waitress at a waterside restaurant. Before us, boats bob in the harbour. Behind, the Venetian Kastro rises like a hilltop labyrinth.

"It's not spoiled," she says after some thought. "We're simple here. Tourism is young. We have other resources."

Not like Mykonos, then?

She smiles. "No. Not like that."

Naxos is a natural. It ripples with mountains and valleys. It reveals surprising lushness and greenery. Look closely, and you'll see walkers in the folds of its terrain. Maybe a peloton of cyclists will whoosh past. Unlike some Cycladic islands, where arid ground and tourist development mean most produce is imported, Naxian agriculture is thriving. Foodies rave about its sweet tomatoes, small, super-tasty potatoes, its citron and honking farmhouse cheeses. Tourism is slowly making an appearance, but outside of peak season, it doesn't feel choked by or beholden to it.

"Growing up, we had the kind of freedom that kids who live in big cities don't have," says Eleni Kontopidi, my guide on the island. "We'd take our bikes and disappear all day and our parents wouldn't be worried."

Mirrored sunglasses perch amid her thick streams of brown, curly hair, as she drives us around in a little blue VW Polo. Eleni had to go away to come back, of course — leaving after high school to spend time in Rhodes,

Athens and France, distancing herself from the smallness of the Cyclades.

"I was one of those people who said I am never going back to Naxos."

Now here she is, back in Naxos.

We drive towards the heart of the island, where coastal dust gives way to a leafier interior cut with switchbacks and hairpin bends. Snow-white villages remind me of the Moroccan mountains or Las Alpujarras in Spain; I marvel at sparkling churches perched on high peaks. Eleni tells me that each of Naxos's 44-odd villages has its own dance; that Keramoti, hidden like a berry in a forested valley, was the only one to elude the Nazis during the Second World War.

At Halki, the inland town that served as the capital under Venetian rule, we stop at a family-run citron liqueur distillery. En route to the pretty mountain village of Apiranthos, we pull over to pick up a hitchhiking shepherd. Within seconds, he and Eleni have found a common link: he knows her grandmother. Walking into thin streets dotted with geraniums, I watch kids on bikes move around the shepherd like fish. Apiranthos's main square is the size of a postage stamp, but you know you're in a living, breathing Cycladic town.

"Some people say that once you go to two or three Cycladic islands, they're all the same," Eleni muses. "I don't agree. Sometimes it's the beaches, sometimes the food, sometimes folklore. There's always something different."

For Eleni, on Naxos, it's the sea. During her time away from the island, she tells me, the blueberry-blue Aegean was calling. Her father loved to go spearfishing, and she took to the water as a toddler. I ask Eleni to show me one of her favourite beaches, and we venture off-track towards Aliko in the south east, where a small cove beckons beneath the concrete husk of an abandoned, half-built hotel. I grab my fins and mask and head into the blue, while Eleni sits on the beach and rolls a cigarette.

PREVIOUS PAGE:
Sunrise overlooking the caldera, Santorini
RIGHT: Traditional backstreet





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FROM TOP: Old Market Street, Old Town; a Naxian shepherd in Apiranthos

Afterwards, she recalls the time a tourist once asked her where to find the best swimming pools on this natural playground. "Are you kidding?" she laughed. "You're on Naxos and you want to swim in a pool?"

That evening, I walk over the short spit of land connecting Naxos town with tiny Palatia Island, home to Naxos's most iconic feature: a 2,500-year-old arch that, in the early-evening light, looks like the *National Geographic* border. The Portara is a gateway to a temple that was never built, but it feels like a window into the rich mythology of the Cyclades, and has stood through wave after wave of cultural influence, from Byzantine to Venetian and beyond. Theseus is said to have abandoned Ariadne here after slaying the Minotaur in Crete, while a young Zeus grew up nearby on his namesake mountain.

I mosey back down for dinner. Naxos has its cocktail bars and tatty restaurants, but somehow manages to absorb them. I see snatches of sea through the passages, and get distracted picking my way along Old Market Street, a spaghetti-like lane twisting past restaurants, cafes, jewellers and souvenir shops tailor-made for summer-evening strolls. Pink bougainvillea pops. A yellow bicycle is mounted on a blue shutter. Eventually, I wind my way to Eleni's dinner tip: Irini's Restaurant, where a gregarious waiter suggests the lamb stew, served in tomato sauce with those yellow, herby, addictive Naxian potatoes.

"It's not actually lamb," he adds, almost as an afterthought, while laying down bread and gathering up menus. "It's kid. Young goat."

I wait no longer than five minutes for the stew. The 'lamb' is so ridiculously tender, an ant could push it off the bone.

I pick up my pen. Damn it, time to write about Naxos.



WHERE ELSE?

IOS: Ios's friendly port (Gaios), blissful beaches and party reputation make it one of the most popular Cyclades islands, but you can easily slip away from the partying crowds — exploring hills, beaches and sugar-cube villages. It's also said to be the birthplace of Homer.

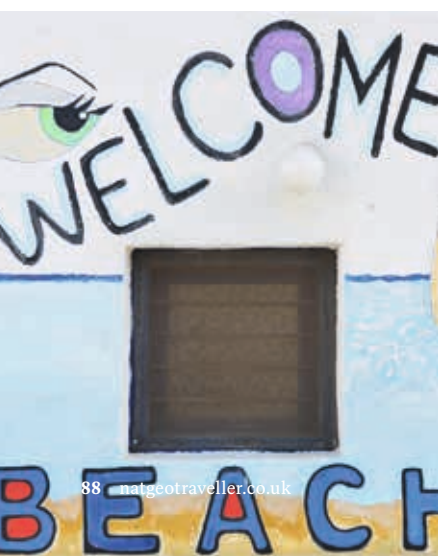
FOLEGANDROS: Around an hour by ferry from Santorini, it's an island few will recognise, but that's just perfect if you're looking to go a little off-radar in the Western Cyclades. Vertiginous cliffs are its most famous feature (the white-washed Hora is perched atop of one).

DELOS: A short trip from Mykonos, Delos is said to be the birthplace of twins Apollo and Artemis. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, it has a wealth of ancient monuments and mosaics and is famous as an ancient Greek religious and commercial centre.

AMORGOS: You want off-the-beaten-track? Head to the Small Cyclades, 'behind' Naxos. Beyond those, at the chain's most southeasterly point, lies Amorgos. Beautiful walking, vibrant village life and few visitors (outside of July and August) await. Take a ferry from Naxos.

PAROS: A short spin from Naxos in the Eastern Cyclades, Paros is a great hub for summer ferry-hopping. Windsurfing and a range of quiet beaches are reasons to linger. Antiparos and its cave, with graffiti from the 1700s, is a 10-minute ferry ride away.

IMAGES: PÓL Ó CONGHAILE



THE PLAYBOY MYKONOS

Hedonism and star power dominate its flash summer months, but off-season reveals an island with sometimes surprising heart

As the EasyJet flight circles the scorched-earth landscape of Greece's party island, a Fleet Foxes lyric is stuck in my brain.

*'And you will go to Mykonos
With a vision of a gentle coast
And a sun to maybe dissipate
Shadows of the mess you made'*

I'm playing over the possible meanings, and what this island will mean for me. The Cyclades takes its name from the Greek 'kiklos' because its islands 'circle' the sacred island of Delos, the ancient religious centre and mythical birthplace of Apollo. Delos is just a few miles from Mykonos, but there's little doubt which island is most central to life in the archipelago these days.

"Mykonos is a strange place," says my driver, poring over an island map whose most notable feature is a Starbucks logo. Just 10,000 or so people call it home, but in summer that bulges beyond belief. Charters jet in. Beaches and roads and restaurants overflow. Music throbs and cocktails kick. "It's crazy, you have to push people to get through the town," he sighs. "You can't walk."

I've come in autumn, however. I want to see Mykonos when the hedonism is in hibernation, when the sting is gone from the sun. When I drive to the party hub of Paradise Beach, I find thousands of empty Champagne bottles stacked up against a fence, 10-litre cocktail buckets for €120, and a "Twerk it, bitch!" special kicking off at 4pm. But a cool breeze blows over empty loungers too, as if Mykonos itself is breathing a sigh of relief. It feels like its guard is down.

In October, locals seem to come out of the woodwork. They're here all year of course, just hard to spot in the melee. Now, I sit for coffee on a backstreet by the harbour in Hora, the main town, watching people come and go to mass — an old woman in a black headscarf, a mother playing with her daughters on the sand, gnarly-fisted men hobnobbing beneath fluorescent cafe lights.

At Vienioula's Garden Hotel, where I'm staying, I ask the owner for a local restaurant recommendation, and get a little mark on the map above a northwestern beach

called Agios Sostis. An hour or so later, I lean my dusty rental bike against a wall and follow the smoky bouquet of a barbecue down towards an emerald cove with a tiny, whitewashed church. There's a queue outside Kiki's Tavern, and a waiter directs me to 'Mr Vasilis' in the kitchen.

I find a huge man in a Hawaiian shirt, holding court at a salad bar. There's a 30-minute wait, he explains. But it's worth it. Not long afterwards, my lunch is plucked from a grill sizzling with calamari, fish and pork chops big enough to club a man to death with.

"What's best?" I ask.

"The best thing is the queue outside," Mr Vasilis grins.

In many ways, Mykonos is a mirage. Made famous as a luxe escape by Jackie and Aristotle Onassis, it's both one of the Med's hottest party scenes and a celeb crossroads, visited by everyone from Leo to Mariah and Versace (it's got a Nobu, and private cabanas with their own butlers, whirlpool baths and Ligne St Barth skin products at Nammos restaurant on Psarou Beach). But you don't have to twerk it or spend a small fortune to get to the heart of the island either. It's a place you can explore easily in the shoulder season, spotting little churches and dovecotes, pulling into swimming coves, taking the boat to Delos, or just following your nose.

*'And a sun to maybe dissipate
Shadows of the mess you made'*

By early evening, the tight lanes' and toothpaste-white buildings of the Old Town twinkle with jewellery and souvenirs. Handfuls of tourists head out for sundowners, leaving trails of aftershave and perfume in the air.

"The girls want to get sunset," I overhear one man saying. "Aw, we've seen about 20 f**king sunsets already!" his friend moans.

Mykonos is indeed a strange place. But waves lick against the teetering buildings of Little Venice, and everybody looks beautiful.

LEFT FROM TOP: Clothes shop in Old Town, Hora; pork chop at Kiki's Tavern, Old Town; early autumn bougainvillea in Hora; Paradise Beach

RIGHT: Little Venice, Mykonos

IMAGES: PÓL Ó CONGHAILE

Mykonos is both one of the Med's hottest party scenes and a celeb crossroads, visited by everyone from Leo to Mariah and Versace





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THE ROCKSTAR

MILOS

Milos is the rock star of the
Cyclades, a geological wonderland
whose birth scars are literally etched
into the earth



IMAGE: PÓL Ó CONGHAILE

Backing butt-first down a cliff path towards a hidden cove, my footing gives way. Sand billows up into my eyes. I grasp the thick rope tied to a stake at the top of the descent, steady myself and get my bearings.

Through a narrow gap in the rocks below, I can see the shimmering sea. A swimmer is doing a neat front crawl a few hundred yards out, and it looks like he has the

ocean to himself. I'm determined to spoil his solitude. Inching on down, I reach a wooden ladder, the final steps to Tsigrado Beach. But just as I'm about to climb onto it, a blonde girl in a black bikini appears from nowhere, glides by and asks if I mind taking her picture. I oblige, and she scoots on ahead.

Milos, in the Western Cyclades, is a rock star, and Tsigrado is just the beginning.

Similar in shape to Santorini, only larger, the island encircles a blown-out volcanic crater. Its geology blows my mind. Imagine a volcano erupting through a sweet shop, leaving the results frozen in time. There are jagged stacks, smooth pumice tufts, random rocks that look like they've been dusted with turmeric and saffron. Miners have scoured the earth here for millennia, digging for obsidian, perlite and myriad other minerals. Take a boat trip



IMAGES: PÓL Ó CONGHAILE

around the coast, and you'll see psychedelic stratification and basalt columns.

It makes for sensational beaches too. At Fyriplaka, to the south, I pass two kayakers about to paddle around a chunky sea stack beneath cliffs threaded with tendrils of white, yellow and red. Sarakiniko, to the north, is a meringue-like moonscape, with curving pumice formations smooth and chalky to the touch, and a little inlet leading to blue, choppy waves. At Paleochori, I swim along the coast to warm sulphur springs where you can see tiny bubbles shooting into jade-green water — popping up from holes in the sand, between rocks, with little fish whizzing about between them. There's a distinctive pong above the surface.

Several people make a point of telling me there are more beaches on Milos than any other Cycladic island. The numbers vary. Is it 75? 90?

"When I first came to Milos, it was so white I couldn't open my eyes for the brightness," says Gladwin Kiritsi. Originally from Belfast, and still speaking with a

Northern Irish accent, Gladwin first visited in the 1980s with her partner, who hails from Milos. She remembers him taking her out on a boat and leaping into the water with a cigarette still in his mouth.

"At first I thought I married a Greek god," she jokes affectionately. "But it turns out I married a goddamned Greek!"

There's more to Milos than geological goodies, as Gladwin shows me. Together, we walk through a stunning set of Roman ruins — including a theatre — near Trypiti, and pass by a suite of catacombs said to be the most important early Christian monument in Greece. Then she points out an olive tree in a grove of hundreds.

"That's where a farmer discovered the Venus de Milo," she says. As in, the actual Venus de Milo. The marble masterpiece, with its twisting torso and mysterious missing arms, was discovered here in 1820, before being whisked away to Louis XVIII and the Louvre. It's still a touchy subject.

We drive down corkscrew roads to the fishing village of Klima, where Gladwin

Gladwin recalls her partner, who hails from Milos, taking her out on a boat and leaping into the water with a cigarette still in his mouth

PREVIOUS PAGE: The sun sets on a fishing harbour, Milos
CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Tsigrado Beach; syrmata, Milos; Gladwin Kiritsi at her house in Klima
NEXT PAGE: Sarakiniko Beach



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and her husband have a pretty *syrmata* (traditional fisherman's house), just inches from the water. With boat sheds on the ground floor and living areas above, plus brightly painted balconies and gates, these properties have become a hit on Airbnb. *Syrmata* began life as caves, Gladwin tells me. As we talk, the sea rakes the pebbles back and forth, and older passers-by tell us to mind our step on the slippery piers.

I'm trying to think of a way to take a piece of Milos home. Back on the main drag, after sitting in the cobbled town of Plaka to eat a pizza topped with taste-bombs of tomato, and a sweet, nutty baklava, we hit on an idea. Gladwin calls a jewellery store owner, and she opens up for me to sift through the cases, eventually picking out a butterfly necklace made of black lava for my daughter.

Its rocks set Milos apart. But as with all of the Cyclades, the longer I stay, and the more people I speak to, the more difficult it becomes to describe.

"Milos is multifaceted," says Leonidas Fotinos, relishing the syllables of the word. "Mul-ti-fa-ce-ted. It's off the beaten track. It doesn't obey the mass tourism rules."

Leonidas runs the aptly named Small Islands travel company out of Adamantas. He's the man who introduced me to Gladwin, and he also takes me on a jeep safari through the island's wild, western half — a nature reserve. Visitors are coming in growing numbers to Milos, he tells me, but he sees no danger of the place becoming a package holiday hotspot.

Leonidas invites me to dinner at To Petrino, a family-run restaurant a short drive outside Adamantas. He's a big man, resting a forearm on his wine glass as he talks, enthusing about the island's geology while we pick our way through an equally rich spread of salad, *pitarakia* (cheese tartlets), *lachanodolmades* (stuffed cabbage rolls) and roulades made to the owner's mother's recipes. The rosé flows, and we get talking about life, philosophy, the future. After the age of 50 "you realise you are a product with an expiration date," he muses. "You realise you don't have countless moments left; the moments are limited. So you value them. You make sweet compromises."

I can't think of better advice for touring this remote part of the Cyclades. □

Miners have scoured Milos for millennia, digging for obsidian, perlite and myriad other minerals. Take a boat trip, and you'll see psychedelic stratification and basalt columns

ESSENTIALS

Getting there & around

There are direct flights from Gatwick, Heathrow and Manchester to Santorini and Mykonos. Alternatively, you can fly from London, Edinburgh and Manchester to Athens and connect by domestic flights or ferry from the Port of Piraeus.

Seajets, among others, provide ferry transfers from Piraeus (Athens) and connections between 22 Cycladic islands, as well as Crete. Summer sees the most connections, with routes thinning out from October. [seajets.gr](#)

When to go

Late spring and early autumn are the best times to visit the Cyclades, with warm temperatures, fewer crowds and lower rates. September finds the Aegean Sea at its warmest and mosquitos are less of a problem.

More info

[visitgreece.gr](#)
[greektravel.com](#)

How to do it

Sunvil offers bespoke itineraries for Greece and the Cyclades. A week in May, including flights from London Gatwick, ferry/plane transfers, four nights on Milos and three nights on Sifnos starts from £844 per person (based on two sharing). An 11-day trip in May with several nights on Santorini, Naxos and Paros costs from £984 per person. [sunvil.co.uk](#)

IMAGE: GETTY



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