

THE BIG SIX

Put down the weighty guidebook; our experts have gathered together everything you need to know (fast) about the Med's most popular islands

CORFU

The timeless one

Stays: Home in on the rugged, unspoilt northeastern coast (aka Durrell country) for secluded villas overlooking idyllic, pocket-sized coves, with Albanian mountains in the distance. Seafront Villa Periyali, a short stroll from beach-lined Yialiskari, sleeps four and starts at £1,088 per week (cvvillas.com).

Bays: Swathes of golden sand trim the west coast — but tend to get busy. Head south to the serene, shelving strands of Marathia and Agia Varvara, by the Korission lagoon, or the even more pristine Gardenos. Suckers for romantic sunsets should head to cliff-embraced Peroulades, in the far northwest.

Sights: Unesco-listed Corfu Town combines wonky Venetian charm with French and British classicism, and hosts cricket matches on its seaside esplanade. South of the town, the Neo-Classical Achilleion Palace, built by the Austrian Empress known as 'Sisi' (www.achillion-corfu.gr/default_en.html; £5), is so splendidly over-the-top that it would make an excellent location for a Bond movie.

Bites: Venetian influences mark out this island's cuisine: seek out *sofrito* (veal cooked with garlic and vinegar), *pastitsada* (pasta in a rich, meaty sauce) and the fish stews — such as peppery *bourdeto* and garlicky *bianco*. For a modern Italian-Greek epiphany, try Etrusco, in Kato Korakiana — one of the country's top restaurants (etrusco.gr; mains about £20).

Must-do: Make the tortuous drive up the emerald slopes of Mount Pantokrator to bucolic Old Perithia, Corfu's most ancient village (now half-abandoned), for a late lunch in one of its four tiny tavernas. Afterwards, wander through

the flowery meadows, soundtracked only by humming bees and goats' bells.

CYPRUS

The family-friendly one

Stays: Classic seaside hotels and apartments rule Cyprus's roost — and are pleasantly affordable as part of a package. Columbia Beach, near Limassol, is a chic-boutique rarity (columbiaresort.com; doubles from £106, B&B), and villas with pools are good value for money, too (try thomson.co.uk).

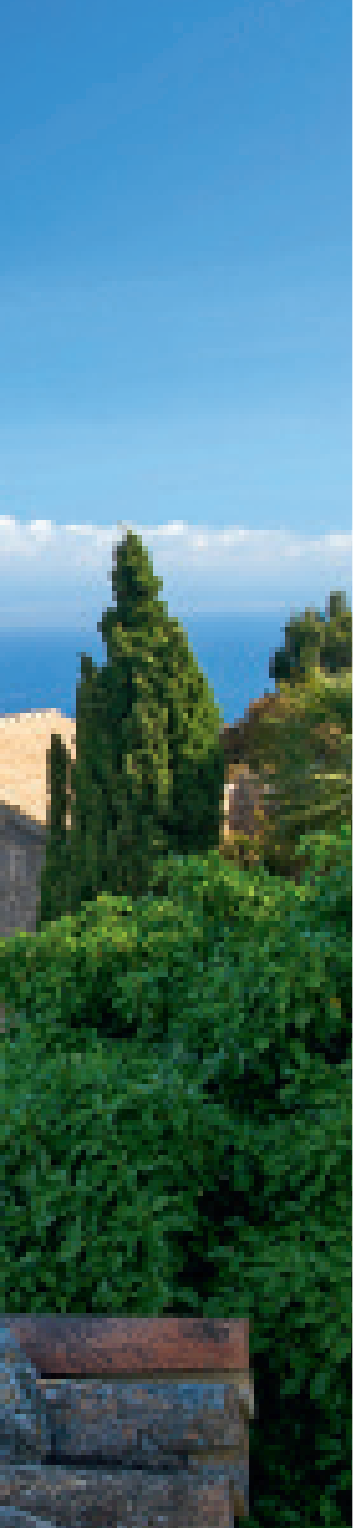
Bays: Head east for glamourpuss beaches: kid-safe Fig Tree Bay at Protaras; the trio of sandy coves outside Ayia Napa; the turquoise

waters at Nissi; sheltered Konnos; or golden Makronissos. To the west, the best beaches for families are just north of Paphos.

Sights: Antiquities abound — start with ancient city Kourion, near Limassol, and the intricate Roman mosaics in Paphos. In Nicosia, the must-sees are Cyprus Museum's vivacious prehistoric art (mcw.gov.cy; £3) and the historic travellers' paintings in the Centre for Visual Arts (cvar.severis.org; £3.60).

Bites: For gourmet restaurants and boutique Cypriot wines, go to the cities and upscale hotels. With little ones in tow, stick to simpler cooking — we like convivial Archontiko Papadopoulou, near Larnaca (archontiko.papadopoulou.com.cy; *meze* £15).





Blue-sky thinking: clockwise from left, a hillside chapel near Valldemossa, Mallorca; cliffs near Ayia Napa, Cyprus; Mirtiotissa Beach, Corfu; cobbled streets in Sardinia

MY FAVOURITE MED BEACH

Palombaggia, Corsica
 'Maldives-clear water, but framed by frothy French pine trees to remind you that you're in the lovely Med.'
 Katie Bowman, Travel's features editor



Must-do: For youngsters, Paphos and Limassol both have Medieval castles and water parks — while older kids will love exploring Paphos's underground Tombs of the Kings (visitpafos.org.cy; £2).

MALLORCA

The secretly chic one

Stays: Forget Magaluf's high-rise horrors; this underrated isle specialises in gorgeous *fincas* — rural estates that mix country-house charm with a chic, Balearic vibe. Two of the best are antiques-filled farmhouse Mirabó de Valldemossa (mirabo.es; doubles from £160, B&B) and minimalist, clifftop Can Simoneta (cansimoneta.com; doubles from £151, B&B).

Bays: The sandy sweeps at Alcúdia, Pollensa and the south-coast resorts offer watersports, lifeguards and places to eat — but they do fill up. Lovely quiet coves can be found near the main hubs: try Cala Varques, 20 minutes' drive from Porto Cristo, or Cala Torta, near Capdepera.

Sights: The wonderful Fundació Pilar i Joan Miró (miro.palmademallorca.es; £4.50) features Miró's studio, left exactly as it was when he died. In the heart of the island, the Jardines de Alfabia is an atmospheric, shady spot for a picnic among Moorish designs.

Bites: Tapas is king, from stylish bodegas in the capital, Palma, to simple village cafes. Try *pa amb oli* — home-baked bread rubbed with fresh tomatoes, olive oil and garlic — and

tombet, a rich vegetable stew. Ca N'Antuna in Fornalutx (Arbona Colom 6; mains about £10) is the traditional choice.

Must-do: Saturday morning in Sóller — a chic little town ringed by the Tramuntana mountains — offers a glimpse of authentic island life. Shop for citrus fruit, *sobrassada* sausage and Manchego cheese in the weekly market.

SARDINIA

The bountiful-beaches one

Stays: Boutique hotels disguised as crumbling stone cottages, such as Petra Segreta on the celeb-filled Costa Smeralda, typify Sardinia's quiet luxury (petrasegretaresort.com; doubles ➤



Still waters: Cala Salada Beach, Ibiza; right, Mount Etna seen from the castle in Agira, Sicily



peachy horizon — is unique. Café Mambo is a classic viewing spot (cafemamboibiza.com).

from £132, B&B). And hints of Sardinian crafts decorate Su Gologone, in the Supramonte hills (sugologone.it; doubles from £137, B&B).

Bays: Visitors gather in the south (near Pula, Villasimius and their neighbours), but paradise-perfect La Celia is the Costa Smeralda's secret weapon. And the fantasy sands at Bidderosa National Park are so sacred that authorities limit the number of daily visitors.

Sights: Get the best views of the capital, Cagliari, from the hike-able Devil's Saddle or the walled Castello district. For more ancient, mystical vibes, day-trip to Su Nuraxi to see its labyrinthine village of Iron Age stone huts.

Bites: It's Italian grub — but more robust: think spicy fish soups, lamb and dumplings. Pighetti (pighetti.it; mains about £7), in Oliena, roasts suckling pig to an ancient recipe, and Da Lillicu (00 39 070 652970; mains about £12), in Cagliari's port, is the one for super-fresh, unusual seafood (catfish, sea urchin).

Must-do: Sardinia's beaches are the island's best asset, so set off in search of the finest: hire a motorised dinghy at Cala Gonone (calagononecharter.com; £90 for a day) to visit crowd-free, cliff-sheltered scoops of white sand such as Calas Mariolu, Sisine and Luna.

IBIZA

The hedonistic one

Stays: Remote rural retreats can be found away from the

high-rise party hotels. Homey *agroturismo* Can Gall floats in a bubble of tranquillity (agrocangall.com; doubles from £160, B&B); down south, eschew the Playa d'en Bossa behemoths in favour of boutique Es Vivé, a party base for grown-ups (www.hotelesvive.com; doubles from £130, B&B).

Bays: You're never far from a pretty cove on Ibiza (ask your host for their favourite), but cross-island drives are short (just 20–40 minutes), so you should seek out some of the iconic beaches, too. Las Salinas' powdery sands and crystal tides live up to the hype, while north-coast Benirrás has a hippie vibe.

Sights: There are no hard-and-fast 'must-sees' on this pleasure-driven isle. If you have a hangover-free morning, rise early to climb the cobbled streets to the cathedral — and its killer view — at the top of Eivissa's walled fortress of an Old Town, or visit the hippie markets at Sant Carles (Saturdays) and Es Caná (Wednesdays).

Bites: Tapas and seafood dominate, but exceptional sushi and stone-baked pizza also star on this cosmopolitan isle. Amante (amanteibiza.com; mains about £18) is the most scenic lunch spot, overlooking a dazzling teal bay trimmed by ochre cliffs.

Must-do: Watch the sun go down from San Antonio's 'sunset strip', even if this is the only time you set foot in this club-hub. The atmosphere — as hundreds of bronzed drinkers watch the rosy orb sink below the

MY FAVOURITE MED BEACH
Lalaria, Skiathos
'Skiathos may be famous for sandy shores, but at Lalaria, silver pebbles cascade voluptuously into the sea, and a rock arch adds a grace note.'
Alex Allen,
Travel writer

SICILY

The all-rounder

Stays: Sicily is a villa sort of place — you get far more space for your money than in flashier Sardinia. Orizzonte Blu is a rustic-chic home in farmland near Noto, while Villa Rita in Cefalù overlooks the coast (both massimovillas.com, sleeping eight; from £1,655 and £1,839 per week respectively, self-catering; flights extra).

Bays: San Vito Lo Capo, a palm-fringed, talc-sand number in the northwest, looks like a Moorish Maldives and scoops awards, but the best beaches overall are around Punta Secca (southeast), Sciacca (west), and Cefalù (north).

Sights: Mount Etna is a no-brainer, and easy to see without strapping on hiking boots: fly into Catania and snap it from a left-hand plane window, or see it from your sunbathing spot on the beach at Giardini-Naxos. Baroque Noto and Ragusa make archaeology buffs quiver, while Taormina town is a postcard come to life.

Bites: Seasons rule the stomach here — be it eating in a lauded-yet-low-key family joint, such as Palazzaccio in historic Castelbuono (ristorantepalazzaccio.it; mains about £12), or squeezing veg in a market for tonight's villa dinner (Ortigia's and Palermo's are the liveliest).

Must-do: Syracuse is the guidebook superstar, with its Greek and Roman theatres, caves and catacombs — but Ortigia is the one to seek out. An island attached to the mainland by small bridges (and, essentially, Syracuse's *Centro Storico*), it's a manageable but magical twist of cobbled alleys and fabulous fish restaurants.

MY CORNER OF THE MED

Es Grau, Menorca

Annie Bennett reveals a perfect slice of fishing-village life in the Balearics

There is something very soothing about wading slowly, knee-deep, through crystalline water, edging along a curved bay framed by dunes. It's an activity – though not a very active one – best savoured in Es Grau, Menorca. This tiny pocket on the east coast of the chilled-out island of Menorca is a weekend bolthole for families escaping the capital, Mahón, 10km to the south. (And now for me, escaping emails, deadlines and the oppressive heat of summer in my hometown, Madrid.)

A village rather than a resort, Es Grau has white houses scattered along the hillside at one end of the beach, a smattering of laidback bars, cafes and restaurants, and half a dozen small shops. I don't know about you, but that's enough to keep me

amused. Throw in ice-cold beer and a novel in the shade of a tamarind tree at Bar Es Grau (Plaça Mestre Jaume 13; 00 34 626 476727), and that's me sorted for the day – or even the summer.

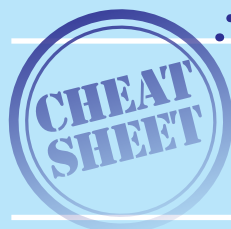
After spending the morning snorkelling in the fan-shaped bay, I like to dry out with a lazy lunch on my roof terrace (there are no hotels in Es Grau, so go native with an apartment or villa from airbnb.co.uk or homeaway.co.uk; from £66 a night). Unless, that is, they've already thrown a few sardines on the grill down at seaside Bar Es Moll (Lugar Moll des Magatzems 17; 00 34 971 359167; mains about £12) – in that case, the smell of crackling, oily fish wafting down the quayside tempts me every time. Friends often materialise, dragging up chairs and clamouring for beers, and for

prawns, clams and whatever else the fishermen have landed that day.

At dusk, a stroll around S'Albufera des Grau, the nature reserve behind the beach, is balm for the soul. The twisting routes along the lake and wetlands form part of the Camí de Cavalls, an old bridle path around the island that begs to be walked or cycled. As you pass hikers in full trekking kit, you'll feel sheepish wandering in your flip-flops – but rest assured, you are the one most in sync with Menorca's languid pace.

The next day, pick up a loaf, a hunk of the salty local Mahón cheese and a bottle of floral, full-bodied Sa Cudia white wine (the grapes are grown in S'Albufera: vinya.sacudia.com), and set off in search of my secret picnic spot. From the beach, follow the path shaded by wild olive trees that leads north along the crinkly coastline to a string of coves, including Tamarells, Sa Torreta and others so small they don't have names. Stop for a swim in the cobalt water, open the wine, and let your worries wash into the sea.





Island-hopping Croatia's Adriatic isles

Trip time: five days

Day one

5pm Catch the catamaran from Split (see Factfile for flights, page 78) to Korčula (jadrolinija.hr; £6.50 one way), with views of rugged Brač and idyllic Hvar on the way. Locals claim Korčula Town was Marco Polo's birthplace — it does look historic enough.

8pm Check into Korčula Waterfront Accommodation (00 385 98 937 0463, korcula-waterfront-accomodation.com; doubles from £36, self-catering), for scenic, low-key apartments a short stroll from town. Owners Antonio and Paulina have the best tips for the island.

Day two

10am Ignore Korčula Town's stony beaches, and catch the bus (korculainfo.com; £2.50 return) to Lumbarda, one of Croatia's few sandy coves.

1pm Stay for lunch overlooking the Adriatic at family-run Restaurant Feral (00 385 20712090; mains about £8). Don't miss the crisp homemade Grk white wine (only found in this corner of Korčula).

7pm Sip sundowners at Massimo, a cocktail bar in a turret of the 15th-century fortress that overlooks Korčula Town (Setalište Petra Kanavelića).

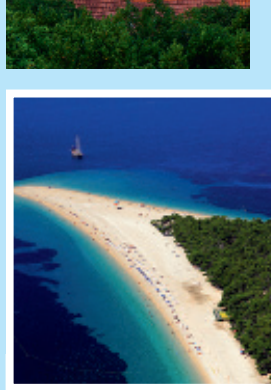
Day three

6am Catch the day's one catamaran to Hvar (jadrolinija.hr; £3.80 one way), Croatia's sunniest and most glamorous island, looking out for dolphins en route.

9am Drop your bags at waterfront boutique bolthole Riva, in hip Hvar Town (00 385 2175 0555, suncaniharvar.com; doubles from £122, B&B).

10am Slip on your shades and stroll past the super-yachts, before joining their owners for brunch at Carpe Diem (00 385 2174 2369, carpe-diem-hvar.com; mains about £12).

3pm Grab a picnic for dinner and head out on a wee boat (signposted on the waterfront, about £5pp) to the Pakleni Islands and Hvar's best beaches.



Shining spire: clockwise from top, Korčula; Zlatni Rat beach in Brač; view from the peak of Vidova Gora, on Brač; Hvar Town

Day four

6am Catch a bus (buscroatia.com; £3) to Jelsa for a catamaran to Bol, on Brač (jadrolinija.hr; £2.50). Check into stylish Hotel Bol (00 385 2163 5660, hotel-bol.com; doubles from £50, B&B), before a walk to the striking sandspit, Zlatni Rat.

Noon Eat at Mali Raj (00 385 21 635282; mains about £12). Try grilled skampi — not deep-fried pub grub, but plump local langoustines.

Day five

10am Hike up the 778m Vidova Gora, Croatia's highest island peak.

1pm Catch a bus (autotrans.hr; £3.30) from Bol to Supetar for a ferry to Split (jadrolinija.hr; £3.60). The last ferry is at 10.45pm — time to visit the Baroque church and take in the sea views.



You want: The Caribbean clone

You'll find it on: Crete

You're an hour and a half's drive from busy Chania, and a pastel-aqua sea, rippled with sunlight, shores tinted a cartoon pink. As you look out to sea, you can't believe you're in Crete and you flew only four hours to get here. Part lagoon, part bay, Elafonisi (best in June or September) has just this effect. Bellyflop into the shallows and, once you've acclimatised, wade over to the small islet over the bay, to mosey around the chapel and lighthouse.

Dip in: Base yourself in Chania; Olympic Holidays (0844 576 2386, olympic-holidays.com) has seven nights at five-star Porto Platanias Beach Resort from £569pp, half board, with Manchester flights and transfers.



You want: The sublime snorkel

You'll find it on: Port-Cros

One of the Îles d'Hyères, Port-Cros, is a national park, blanketed in maquis shrub. But it's the surrounding waters that make it worth the hour-long ferry ride from the mainland. At Palud, buoys mark an 'underwater trail', where sea anemones, corals and neon fish, including peacock wrasse, flicker below the surface.

Dive in: Open Jun-Sep (provenceweb.fr; free). CityJet (cityjet.com) flies from London City to Toulon-Hyères in summer, from £225 return. Catch a ferry from Hyères' Saint-Pierre Marina (£20 return).

MY FAVOURITE MED BEACH
Cala Torta, Mallorca
'Snorkelling in turquoise sea, flopping on white sand and scoffing grilled fish at a beach bar: Torta has everything you want from a Mediterranean cove.'
Annie Bennett, Spain expert and resident

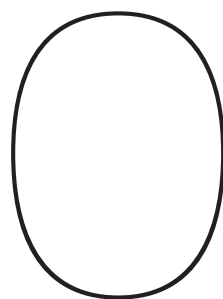
**You want: The cute cave hotel****You'll find it on: Santorini**

You've seen it on postcards and in brochures, and you know exactly what you want from this Greek island: frosty-white cave hotels jutting from steep volcanic cliffs, with terraces overlooking nothing but still blue waters. Does this cure-all Cycladic getaway still exist? It does indeed: check out Iconic Santorini, a humble but sneakily luxurious cave hotel in Imerovigli. Not only do you get your whitewashed shell of a cave apartment, but also interiors artfully draped by Athenian designers A&T Kontodimas (blue-fringed throws, rustic bowls, driftwood coffee tables — you'll want to take it all home). Hibernate, undisturbed, in your suite with sea-view terrace, or wander along the narrow hotel pathways to chef Avgoulis's tiny restaurant, to work your way through the specials on his freshly chalked board. The best bit? You'll only ever have to share the premises with 20 other faces, max — occupancy is kept low to ensure a peaceful mood.

Check in: Iconic Santorini (00 30 228 602 8950, iconicsantorini.com) has doubles from £355, B&B.

It's always the quiet ones

The Med's multitude of islands means it still has its lesser-known secrets. Enter Bozcaada, whispers **Kevin Gould**, a wine-tinged Turkish isle with a pace that'll make you sigh with pleasure

n a map, it looks like a Greek island. After all, it's in among Limnos, Lesbos, Samothraki and other well-known summer-holiday outcrops that canoodle with the west coast of Turkey. But while Bozcaada is rich in Greek history – 5,000 years of it, including an alternative, ancient-Greek name (Tenedos) – it's been resolutely Turkish since the '20s.

At the mouth of the Dardanelles Strait, a ferry voyage away from Geyikli, the place has one main attraction to travellers from Istanbul, six hours by road to the north: Bozcaada makes wine, and grapes have been squeezed here for three millennia. This breezy island is on the map now thanks to the work of prize-winning vintner Reşit Soley, who has revived a once-moribund industry.

Soley, who has a gift for comedy and a pate like Telly Savalas, greets me as I disembark from the Geyikli ferry. When he first arrived in 2002, Bozcaada's wines were in the grip of the Tekel state monopoly; he's since rebuilt the winery, and Corvus (corvus.com.tr) has made him, some say, Turkey's most celebrated winemaker. It's named after the mythological crow that angered Apollo in the *Iliad*, and Soley tells me that so much

Ripple effect: clockwise from above, taking a dip; the harbour in Bozcaada Town; typical architecture; alfresco dining; grape times – the island's viticulture has been revitalised

mythology is set here 'because the gods liked the climate!' But as we stroll the huddle of cobbled streets and alleys of the only settlement (also called Bozcaada), he fulminates that the place is being buffeted by the winds of change. 'We now have three – three! – ATMs.'

Still, there is only one general store, and hardly any of the handsome boutique hotels has more than 15 rooms. I fall in love with Kaikias (00 90 532 363 2697, kaikias.com; rooms from £60, B&B), which oozes unpretentious chic. It's filled with reclaimed local antiques, hosts an annual Day of the Poet – with readings from the *Iliad*, in which the island is mentioned – and has its own pebbly beach with views across to Bozcaada's bluff, squat fort.

As the island's only 'attraction', the fort is occasionally open for visits, but I never make it there. Instead, I spend hours each morning lingering over Kaikias' heroic breakfasts of sheep's cheeses, squashy tomatoes, red-poppy jam (produced only here), and warm, pillowy breads, before sallying slowly forth to discover my cove for the day. Sea winds have always played a role in Bozcaada's story, and you choose which shore to bask on according to its direction.

I find freedom on a scooter (from Akyüz: 00 90 545 541 9515; from £7 per day, cash only). Each day, I meander through vineyards over red-earth tracks to the east side of the island. My picnic of wine, cheese and olives is taken on the rocks, my eyes filled with lapis-lazuli seascapes. If I fancy

MY FAVOURITE MED BEACH

Porto Katsiki, Lefkada
'This southwest stunner has spectacularly soft, golden sands and mesmerising teal waters, embraced by sheer limestone cliffs.'
Dana Facaros, Greece guidebook writer



company, there are cafes and sunloungers on the sandy beaches at Ayazma, Habbele and Akvaryum.

I start planning dinner immediately after lunch. I adore the taverna atmosphere of ramshackle Salkım, in town, (00 90 535 232 0747; mains about £15), and the classical Aegean dishes at simple, stylish Maya (00 90 286 697 8050, mayabozcaada.com; mains about £18, book ahead). The latter is just a quartet of tables in a garden in the heart of the island, a five-minute drive from town.

Another day I might – and you must – visit the splendid stainless steel-and-oak cellars of Corvus, where Soley plays Coltrane and Count Basie to encourage the maturing wines. Other entrepreneurs have followed him, and more than half of Bozcaada's 38sq km are now under vine. There's even a Vineyards Route you can walk, with six stops, along which I happen upon Talay Bağlari (talaybaglari.com; rooms from £65, B&B), whose four rustic rooms sit in a chunky, low-built winery. If the pulsing pace and fleshspots of Bozcaada town (population 2,750) get too much, I can always retreat here...

With the treadmill of daily life far behind, I never tire of watching breezes turn Bozcaada's waters to chain mail, or the play of light on carnival-coloured fishing boats in the harbour. I spend one glorious afternoon glued to a chair in a cobbled, bougainvillea-bowered alley, draining a bottle of chilled white wine. Bozcaada may be on the verge of becoming trendy – but until then, its boozy, breezy, beautiful torpor will keep me coming back.



Bozcaada is six hours' drive from Istanbul, via Tekirdağ; cross the Hellespont at Eceabat. Regular car ferries (gestas denizulasim.com.tr) from Geyikli, and weekend passenger hydrofoils from Canakkale, make it easy to visit from Troy or Izmir. Turkish Airlines (turkishairlines.com) flies to Canakkale from Istanbul four times a week, from £29 one way.

Five quiet Med islands

Marrettimo

One of Sicily's Aegadi isles, Marrettimo has a single toy-town settlement, diving spots and trails edged by wildflowers. It's the farthest (and thus most expensive to reach) of the three islands, but its only hotel can turn your day trip into a weekend (www.marrettimoreidence.it; doubles from £58, B&B). Take the summertime hydrofoil from Trapani.

was cut off from the '50s to the '90s, used as a military base for the Yugoslavian army). Even so, its food-and-wine scene is up to date – try Roki's winery in Vis Town (rokis.hr) or marine-themed Jastozera restaurant in Komiza (00 385 21713859).

Kastellorizo

Look east of Rhodes on a map and you'll find this speck of a Greek island almost nudging Kaş in Turkey. Its main port is all about low-key tavernas, cobbled alleyways and bougainvillea-draped cottages. Take a boat trip to the Blue Cave at Meis (about £7), a fantastical 75m-long grotto where you can swim in luminous cobalt water.

Folegandros

Next door to Santorini but with a fraction of its tourist numbers, this Greek island (below) is a place for adventure. Find secluded beaches and caves only accessible by boat, and stroll round whitewashed villages or the Venetian castle. The lack of major roads should keep things quiet, but hurry – there are rumours its party scene will make it 'the new Mykonos'.

Procida

Often just an afterthought for visitors to Ischia and Capri, Italy's petite Procida actually has some superb beaches (try Chiaia). It also has a touch of stardust (*The Talented Mr Ripley* was filmed here), and Marina Grande's candy-coloured buildings make it a showstopper. Take the hydrofoil from Naples and seek out spa retreats such as La Suite (lasuiteresort.com; doubles from £122, B&B).

Vis

The most remote among Croatia's scattering of islands, Vis is topped by cliffside villages, pine forests and boutique vineyards. Sightseeing is split between Vis Town and period-drama Komiza, but much of the island has a pleasantly frozen-in-time feel (it

