

THE GREEK ISLES**a Cultural Journey****13 days**

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Day 1 *Arrival in Athens*

Welcome to Greece!

Today we arrive in Athens, off-and-on the capital of Greece in its many incarnations over several thousand years. The city received a major facelift for the 2004 Olympics and is looking better than ever, with buildings and monuments cleaned and renovated, and newly created pedestrian areas near the Ancient Agora and Acropolis.

Overnight in Athens.

Meal Plan: Dinner, if required.

Day 2 *Athens: City Tour*

Today we enjoy a guided tour of Athens, the heart and soul of Greece.* A large part of the town's historic centre has been converted into a 3-kilometre pedestrian zone (the largest in Europe), leading to the major archaeological sites, reconstructing -- to a large degree -- the ancient landscape, this allowing us to avoid the city's horrendous traffic.

We start at the Acropolis (with hopes to beat the heat/crowds), near the site of the Dionysos Theatre. Constructed in the 6th century BC, it is one of the world's oldest theatres and the place where the great works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes were first performed. We will also see a more recent theatre, the Odeon of Herod Atticus from the second century AD, which is still used for concerts and performances.

Ascending to the top of the Acropolis, we will see magnificent buildings dating from the 5th century BC, the Golden Age of Athens. On the highest point on the Acropolis is the Parthenon, often considered the finest monument to Greek civilization. The temple was dedicated to Athena "Parthenos," the virgin and patron goddess of the city.

After our Acropolis tour, we'll descend and enter the Ancient Agora located adjacent to the Plaka, the old town of Athens. Among the numerous sights in this archaeological park are the well-preserved Temple of Hephaistos and the landmark Roman era Tower of the Winds.

Our guided tour ends at the Acropolis Museum, located at the foot of the Acropolis. The museum was built to house every artifact found on the rock, from the Greek Bronze Age to Roman and Byzantine Greece; nearly 4,000 objects are exhibited over an area of 14,000 square metres. From here you are free to wander and explore on your own or make your way back to the hotel with your Tour Leader's assistance.

* The exact order of our sightseeing in Athens may be altered by your Tour Leader depending on several variables and their judgement on how best to run today's tour.

Overnight in Athens.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 3 *Athens - Fly to Santorini*

Today we fly to the island of Santorini, also known as Thira.

Vast geological upheavals have given this island its unique form resulting in the nickname, "Pre-Historic Pompeii." The effect of

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terracing makes this unlike any other island, Greece's most visually stunning. Santorini is also the island of churches, wine, and donkeys! From as early as 3000 BC the island developed as an outpost of Minoan civilization until around 1500 BC when the volcano erupted. At this point the island's history became linked with the legend of Atlantis.

We generally aim for a morning flight, which will allow us time to drop our bags (check-in later this afternoon - so be prepared!) and take a little orientation stroll around the main town of Fira, enjoying the incredible views.

Fira is the capital of the island and the most important village. Early in the 19th century the capital of the island was moved from Pyrgos to Fira. After the earthquake of 1956 a part of the town was destroyed (only a small part of the 18th century buildings were saved). Fira is perched on the edge of an impressive cliff 260m high and offers a great panorama over the submerged volcano. Here the small streets are filled with all kinds of shops, cafes, and restaurants.

Time-permitting we can break for lunch (on your own account), after which your Tour Leader can recommend some additional sightseeing and/or a hike.

Overnight on Santorini (Fira).

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 *Santorini: Island Tour*

Visually, Santorini is the most spectacular of the Cycladic islands. With its brilliant flooded caldera, high cliffs and charming villages, it is the Greek Isle of everyone's dreams. Our coach tour today will take us to Santorini's highlights.

We begin with a visit to Fira, where we'll visit the small yet impressive Archaeological Museum. This museum features many pieces and exhibits specific to the Santorini site of Akrotiri, as well as artifacts dating back to the time of the Cycladic Civilization, which can be divided into three periods: Early (3000-2000 BC), Middle (2000-1500 BC), and Late (1500-1100 BC). The most impressive legacies of this civilization are the statuettes carved from Parian marble -- the famous Cycladic figurines.

The town of Oia, our next destination, is built along the rim of the caldera wall. We will walk through the village, admire the magnificent panoramic views, and perhaps enjoy a beverage at one of the many local cafes (we avoid sunset here as it is far too crowded and refreshment/food is not good value).

We then head south and up to the Prophet Elias Monastery built on the highest point of the island in 1711 AD. Though we will not visit inside the monastery, the view from here is breathtaking.

We then round out our days with a tour of Akrotiri, where excavations have revealed a complete prehistoric Minoan city with squares, streets and two-storey houses which contained marvelous frescoes. The buildings date to the late 16th century BC. No skeletons or treasures have been found in Akrotiri, so historians think that the inhabitants were forewarned of the eruption and were able to escape. The excavations have yielded evidence what has revolutionized our knowledge of the Late Bronze Age; indeed the town has been called a "bronze-age Pompeii."

Time and weather-permitting, we may be able to catch the sunset at a spectacular lighthouse before heading back to our hotel.

Overnight on Santorini.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 5 *Santorini: Free Day*

Today is a day at leisure in a truly spectacular place. You might explore some of the excellent shopping in Fira, or while away some time with a colourful beverage, enjoying the fantastic view. A popular thing to do is to walk down to the old port and then return to the rim via donkey or cable car (optional expense). Full or half-day volcano boat tours are also a popular option.

If you'd like to spend some time on the coast and stretch your legs on a self-guided, steep-but-short hike, you can hike from Kamari Beach to the site of Ancient Thira, located 400m / 1,320 ft above the beach on the southeast coast of the island. Here you'll find the ruins of an 11th century BC Dorian settlement excavated by a German expedition in the 1860s. We can see remains from the Hellenistic, Roman, and Byzantine periods. The ruins are limited, but you can see evidence of temples, houses with mosaic floors, an agora, gymnasium, and a theatre with stunning and sheer views to the sea. You can also enjoy one of Santorini's finest black sand beaches.

Your Tour Leader can help you plan your day with all, some, or none of the above -- have a great day!

Overnight on Santorini.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 *Santorini - Ferry to Amorgos*

Today we travel by ferry to the isle of Amorgos. The ferry likely stops at several lesser islands along the way and drops us at either Katapola, the main port of Amorgos, or Aegiali, the island's secondary port. If we must disembark at Katapola, we will travel by road to Aegiali where our hotel is located. We will likely arrive in time for dinner.

Amorgos's timeless monastery, scattered churches, and pleasant beaches offer both respite from tourists on the other islands and a taste of traditional Greece. For many, Amorgos has become the highlight of the tour, accurately described as "the soul of Greece." The locals are extremely friendly, the mountains surrounding the port majestic, and the sunsets stunning. It has been the location of several movies and is a super place for walks through idyllic olive groves. After bustling Santorini, this will be an abrupt shift of gears from touristic Greece to a much mellower and more authentic version.

Overnight on Amorgos.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 *Amorgos: Chora & Chozoviotissa Monastery*

This morning we travel by road to Chora, the capital of the island. We will pause here to stroll about the village, set high above the sea protected from pirates of bygone days. We leave the village and follow a magnificent staircase to the Monastery of Chozoviotissa. The dazzling white building, founded in the year AD 1099, clings precariously to a cliff face. We will enter the monastery and climb into its snug interior. Hopefully the docent will be available to show us around and provide access to the tiny but fascinating museum.

We proceed down to the other port on the island, Katapola. Here you can stroll the small promenade, have lunch (and/or an ice cream/beer) before heading back to our hotel.

This evening we'll enjoy a fun and informative Greek cooking class, with emphasis on traditional, family-style island dishes. Opa!

Overnight on Amorgos.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 *Amorgos: At Leisure*

Today is free on Amorgos.

You may join your Tour Leader on a moderate hike through the olive groves to the village of Langada, a great place for lunch -- for the truly energetic, there's an excellent, though very steep hike to the ridge directly above Langada. Here you can discover a row of ruined windmills dating back to the time of the Venetians -- of course the views are incredible! From here (or Langada) you can walk

down to the small port village and or proceed to the adjacent beach; from here it's easy to catch the local bus back up to our hotel.

Overnight on Amorgos.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 9 *Amorgos - Ferry to Mykonos*

This morning we travel by ferry the short distance to the island of Mykonos and transfer to our hotel.

Later this afternoon have a walking orientation tour of Chora (Mykonos Town) before dinner. We wander the pirate-proof streets of town and see the Paraportiani Church near the quay, an architectural masterpiece of five chapels in one. From the harbour waterfront, you can watch the local fishing boats, or venture into the labyrinth of dazzling, white-washed streets to the many churches, tavernas, or shops selling artisan crafts, jewelry and the latest fashions. In the distance stand a string of windmills that once harnessed the breezes of days gone by. As one of the most cosmopolitan Greek islands, Mykonos is legendary for its shopping and nightlife.

After our walk we will have dinner at one of the many restaurants in town before sampling some of the gay nightlife for which the island is famous (or infamous). Walk/taxi back to our hotel on your own.

Overnight on Mykonos.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 *Mykonos: Free Day*

There are many beaches on Mykonos and today we can enjoy them to their fullest. You can also head back into town for more independent exploration and/or shopping. Your Tour Leader can help you plan your day. Enjoy!

Overnight on Mykonos.

Meal Plan: Breakfast

Day 11 *Mykonos: Boat trip to Delos*

This morning (not tooo early) we meet the boat and guide who will take us to the tiny sacred island of Delos (30 minutes away).

Delos gives the whole group of islands surrounding it their name, the Cyclades -- so named because they form a circle (kyklos) around Delos. We will see the Agora of the Competialists, Roman merchants or freed slaves who worshipped the guardian spirits of crossroads; the Sanctuary of Apollo, the three temples of Apollo and the Sanctuary of Dionysus. In the House of the Masks we are able to see a mosaic portraying Dionysus riding on a panthers back. The theatre here could seat 5,500 people. From the top of Delos Mountain we have a spectacular view of the entire island.

We return to Mykonos with the balance of the day at leisure (you may also return to Mykonos at your leisure spending as much time as you like on Delos). This evening we reconvene for our last island dinner. Hopefully during one of our evenings on the island, we'll be able to enjoy some of the island's nightlife, such as a cabaret or drag show. As such things come and go without warning, however, it's hard to promise well in advance. Your Tour Leader will have his/her ear to the ground as our visit approaches.

Overnight on Mykonos.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 *Mykonos - Ferry to Athens*

Today we take the fast ferry back to Athens.

Time-permitting back in Athens, we recommend a visit to the Museum of Cycladic Art, devoted to the study and promotion of ancient Greek art. The main exhibit, the Cycladic Collection, contains 350 objects representative of every phase or type of artifact that Cycladic islanders have left us, be that marble sculpture, pottery, or metal ware. You should also have some time for some last-minute shopping in the Plaka district before our farewell dinner.

* Some past travellers have elected to extend their stay on Mykonos and not return to Athens today. Please let us know well in advance if this option is of interest to you.

Overnight in Athens.

Meal Plan: Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 *Departure from Athens*

Departure from Athens.

KALO TAXIDI!!

Meal Plan: Breakfast