

SANTORINI FOR LOVERS

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COVER STORY, SUNDAY TELEGRAPH TRAVEL SECTION

The first time you step out of Fira's winding laneways and glimpse the Aegean Sea your heart skips a beat and you simply stop to stare out at the view. How many people before me have stood on that same patch of stone pavement and enjoyed a momentary absence of time?

I remember that day very clearly because it was the day I decided to propose to my girl.

Such a life-changing moment was probably inevitable, in hindsight, but Santorini is precipitous by nature. Her steep plunging caldera has embraced falling hearts and new love for centuries. And so I fell for her charms. Santorini that is - I had long ago fallen for my girl.

The history of the island reads like a tragic love story. Once a thriving seat of Greek culture, in ancient times Santorini is devastated by a volcano that destroys nearly half the island. Nature's fury leaves behind a remarkable caldera which later becomes an inspiration for beauty and love. Not all Greek tragedies end badly.

Many of the smaller islands in the Mediterranean will offer you rustic charm and old world traditions, but Santorini is flavoured by a sensual expression and prosperity that differentiates her from all others. Postcard views of exclusive villas rise up from the caldera's edge like bubbles in a glass of champagne.

Courtyard gardens stretch along the ridge as far as the eye can see. They are secluded yet open. Most of them are visible only from a distance, their enjoyment limited to the pampered guests and residents.

Choosing a place to stay is made difficult only by the abundance of options. Stepping up the budget to avoid the hostels will get you some genuine luxury in a small villa. Few places offer more than a handful of rooms and many have their own pool, perfect for those of us who prefer views of the Aegean Sea to walking down the hill and jumping in it. It's a simple luxury but a luxury doubled when you and your companion have some privacy.

A world of colour awaits you just outside the villa, just a few white-washed steps away.

Blue domed chapels mirror the water far below, with their white crosses floating in the sky above. I tried counting them one day but I kept losing my number whenever a new view of the caldera popped out beyond someone's garden.

I was invited into one courtyard by a friendly old man. His cats lay sleeping among the potted flowers and cactus. The steps leading from the street to his balcony provided a home for every imaginable shade of red and orange flowers. A little wooden gate, painted in blue, broke the lines of low white walls and led away to the rocky slopes. Splashes of purple and pink bougainvillea lit up the open yard like strokes of paint.

You can't take a villa home but you can happily treasure a reflection of your time in Santorini represented in silver and stone. Jewellery, for many, is the language of love.

The shop windows of Santorini literally shimmer with colour and charm. Glazed enamel is the hot trend in accessories this year. I spent an afternoon shopping for just the perfect shiny something to give my loved one. I could have spent all week but my head hurt from the endless array of bedazzling colours.

On this, my advice is simple. If you find something you like just buy it. Trying to backtrack to the shop you found earlier that day is a bit like online dating - you may think you're headed in the right direction but most of the time you're totally lost.

The lanes are white, the villa walls are white and the rooftops and residences are white. Don't leave home without a good pair of sunglasses.

Dining out will possibly test your relationship, as the sheer breadth of choice will demand compromise on the part of one or the other. If for this reason alone a Santorini escape should be given the entire week before moving on to another Greek island.

The finest restaurants offer international flavours and cosmopolitan menus. The very best of Greek cuisine is also available, but sometimes the view surpasses the food. If your preference is for a quick bite and sneaking back to the villa then do as the locals do - get a takeaway gyros wrap with chips. Simple, savoury and saucy.

My favourite eating in Santorini is in fact drinking. As the sun starts to dip a little, and the afternoon heat is tempered by a sea breeze, there is no finer way to pass time than 'people watching' on ice. Iced mint tea with a shot of Pimms No.1 goes nicely with the moment.

As you sip and mellow with the sea view be aware that, from another cafe nearby, you are part of the view too. Good thing you can't stop smiling, you never know whose photo album will unwittingly include your better side in the corner of an irresistible sunset.

Between 4:30 and 6pm all the buses heading west from Fira are packed silly with tourists. They are headed for the town of Ioa to watch the sun go below the horizon. It may be one of the most photographed settings on earth.

Spectators crowd the narrow lanes and spill over every vantage point and cafe. Further down the hill a lookout gives another view of the sunset, and the sunset seekers. After the sun has ebbed away, and the crowd along with it, the sky becomes rich with gentle colours and an overwhelming peacefulness.

Many popular destinations lose their character by virtue of that very popularity. Not Santorini, for her brand of fame has led to greater things.

The influx of travellers has encouraged a celebration of all things Hellenic; a distillation of that elegance and refinement which is unique to classical Greek style. Friendly locals, superior lifestyle, and breathtaking natural beauty.

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