

AEGEAN BLUE

AUGUST 04, 2006

COVER STORY, HERALD-SUN TRAVEL SECTION

On the Greek island of Milos the yellow haze of a late afternoon sun brings a warm glow to your cheeks and a touch of gold to the otherwise blue waters of the Aegean. A few fishing boats motor past the village of Klima as they head for a mooring, while others bob gently in the wake like old friends saying goodbye. After travelling for three weeks from one end of the Aegean Sea to the other, the need to head back to port and catch my ferry to Athens was something I wanted to postpone for just a little longer.

It was a statue that attempted to capture the beauty of the Greek Goddess of Love which made Milos famous – the Venus de Milos – yet the island itself is far more seductive than any piece of carved marble, its rugged coastline dotted with secluded little fishing villages and their blue domed chapels. Klima doesn't see many tourists and the locals enjoy the sunset with open doors and family gatherings. Homes are arranged along the waters edge in double story fashion, upstairs for living quarters and downstairs for a boat shed. Minimal effort is needed to get out onto the water.

Milos is part of the Cyclades group of islands, which are close enough to Athens to be easily reached by ferry yet far enough away to retain their charms and secrets. Even the most well known islands reserve themselves a quiet side.

The postcard scenes of Santorini draws wave after wave of couples seeking romance and indulgence, but privacy and escape are still possible. If you cannot afford to rent your own villa with private courtyard and pool, there is always the option to stay on the beach at Kamari and just take the bus across the island when you want to partake of the caldera views and shopping that makes Santorini so unforgettable.

With over 200 islands in the Cyclades, and another 160 islands in the Dodecanese, the opportunity to island hop the Aegean Sea is compelling. Ferries come in all shapes and sizes but the most travelled routes are operated by the same few companies. Really big slow boats are cheap, while more efficient high-speed cats cost a little more. It is possible to travel from Athens to Turkey by ferries for as little as \$100 but if you're doing lots of short trips, and the islands are too numerous and varied to simply sail them by, then plan to average about \$25 for each short hop.

Ferry schedules are tricky to work out. The abundance of ferry timetables makes the task somewhat overwhelming, but the port on every island will feature a handful of ferry agencies that specialise in getting traveller between the islands, and they can usually give you the best option that takes into account your available time and budget.

Not everything goes according to plan of course, and even a seasoned traveller such as me can make mistakes. I got off a ferry on the wrong island and had to wait two days before the next one came along. Sikinos was one of the less well travelled islands in fact, but the experience gave me a chance to get familiar with goat herds, play Greek Rummy with the locals and enjoy a wonderful holiday-unit to myself for just \$50 a night.

The high season in the Greek islands is regrettably popular. From mid-July to the end of August the only way to beat the rush is by chartering your own yacht and exercising the option to pull into harbours that are

less readily accessible by land. The months of May, June, September and October are the best months, with enough activity to make sure that all tourist options are available but enough peace and quiet to allow you to enjoy the islands for what they are. Goats and all.

The difference between a good holiday and a great one is when you really enjoy the food, and Greek island cuisine is truly memorable. Seafood dining is usually a sensation of flavours with simplicity and freshness the key elements to preparation. Even a tuna salad done Greek style becomes a delicacy. My favourite eats are the tavernas found in small villages and quiet harbours. The experience is more like visiting an old friend for dinner than buying a meal, the menu on any given day usually determined by what Yannis and his mother have prepared the day before.

On the island of Paros the balance between white-washed villages and tourist amenities has been perfected. At one end of the island sits the ancient city of Paroikia with its endlessly fascinating laneways filled with white and blue churches, old Greek women offering rooms by the night and elegant shops and courtyards to suit every budget. At the other end of Paros is the town of Naoussa, which has retained its fleet of little fishing boats and in more recent years has also gained a collection of exclusive resorts and villa style accommodation. Because of this the harbour in Naoussa has been overwhelmed with very small seafood restaurants where you can sit and watch the fishermen come and go while enjoying a seafood feast that rivals any other in the world. Reaching Naoussa from Paroikia takes just 30 minutes by bus through the rustic hillsides of farms and vineyards.

There are many shade of blue in the Greek islands; painted on the domes of churches, unbroken across the horizon of the sky and lapping onto the shores of hundreds of islands. My favourite is that partly weathered blue of a painted boat shed; the kind of colour that suggests the owners care enough to make their sheds look pretty, but patient enough to be in no hurry to repaint it.

