

Some Still Unspoiled Islands in the Greek Sun

On most maps of Greece some sixty islands are delineated and identified. Sailing charts improve on this number, and if one were to count each isolated chunk of land throughout the Ionian and Aegean seas the figure would escalate toward three hundred. But who's counting? One of the minor pleasures of sailing among the Greek islands is to be aware, vaguely, that they are just about uncountable. It is also to know why Apollo, to whom there are more temples than to any other ancient Greek god, represented light. It is the pure, unsparing, radiant light of Greece that overwhelms one, first and most abidingly. The landscape, especially that of the Cyclades and of Delos, where Apollo was born, is barren, and the rocks are no particular color except for what the luminous light bestows on them from season to season; or in a single day, from dawn to dusk, when the colors run the gamut of the spectrum from black to violet to copper to rose.

Delos is the apotheosis of all dream islands and the illusion is preserved to the extent that although thousands of people have wandered over its lovely and desolate ruins, nobody is allowed to live there. Who is to dispute the legend, explainable in human terms, of Leto, the mother of Apollo and Artemis, who was exiled to this most infertile spot to give birth to her children and to escape Hera's jealousy? Matron of the gods and wife of Zeus, Hera had turned a blind eye to her husband's visitation of other women—in a shower of gold with Danae, as a bull with Europa, and as a swan with the lovely Leda. But Leto he had visited in human form, and Hera would not forget or forgive. Today's visitor can still see, on Delos, the fragments of indisputable historic fact: the superb mosaic floors decorated with playful dolphins and with Dionysus riding a magnificent spotted panther; the theater, whose floor was also constructed as a water catchment to feed a neighboring cistern; and the temples, shrines and treasures all of which marked its later civilization, in the 3rd Century B.C., when the island was partly a center of religious pilgrimage, and partly a trading center—the ancient Greeks seldom separated the sacred from the secular—its influence stretching east, south and west. Then, as the traveler will still find today in the more remote islands, hospitality to the stranger was a sacred ritual. It may be symbolized by no more than an upright cane chair beside an open doorway, and a bunch of basil growing in a whitewashed gasoline drum. In Amorgos, an island known to few mainland Greeks and fewer foreigners, I wandered into a walled garden full of pomegranate trees and roses and hibiscus, a dream world of its own. Suddenly, and apparently from nowhere, a village woman, veiled like most of her island compatriots, appeared and began to gather flowers, adding a rose here, a sprig of basil there, and presented the bunch to me. Asked into anyone's house—and you will be—you are offered a glass of cold water and a spoonful of jam that tastes of roses.

Paradoxically, the most acceptable form of re-

payment is—of all things—a photograph, preferably in color. This I first discovered while wandering through some of the remote hill towns in Corfu. Whatever one tried to photograph, except a graveyard, children planted themselves in a grinning row in front of it. Old women, too, stood like instinctive models, a basket poised on top of their heads, as they shrieked to their friends to come and get in the picture. Mechanism is magic, and they have a childlike love for it. It was in such a village that I saw, one evening, a trail of men, women and children, each carrying upright chairs, move toward the main piazza where a large van was parked. It was the fortnightly traveling cinema.

Corfu is a relatively sophisticated island. It was colonized for four hundred years by the Venetians who left, in the capital, elegant colonnades and tall, pale stone houses with beautifully fretted windows. There are four luxury hotels, dotted around the capital and the coast, and a grandiloquent casino, housed in the palace originally built by the Empress Elizabeth of Austria. Yet, within its forty miles from top to toe, the gentry possess two houses, one for country and one for town. The peasant girls in the north dress quite differently from those of the south, where, when they marry, twenty olive trees are the usual dowry.

One evening last summer, I came upon the little west-coast fishing village of Benitses, *en fête* with the festival of its local saint, Marina, and saw something that epitomized the gaiety and simplicity that is Greek island life. Village girls, linked by hand-held kerchiefs, were dancing in a circle around an energetic three-piece band; lambs, impaled on long poles, roasted—and oh, the smell!—over charcoal braziers, the red cinders dropping into the sand. An old man with a glass in his hand and a sprig of jasmine clenched between his teeth was dancing a step or two of his own, oblivious but happy. The priest, who had been handing out pieces of blessed bread, wandered out of his church to observe a conjuror, his mouth stuffed with cotton wool, who was swallowing razor blades. There was a tent, specially set up for the occasion, inside which a belly dancer with a beaded bosom and vast expanses of plump white flesh nonchalantly clicked her castanets. A girl walked by, cradling what I hoped was a pet lamb, not immediately intended for the spit, and everyone who was not otherwise occupied crowded round to stroke the flat black silk of its nose.

It seems extraordinary that this island of olive groves and honeysuckle and yolk-yellow daisies, with fireflies flashing through the summer night, should possess anything so prosaic or contemporary as an air-strip (and a jet one at that) but, like several of the islands, it does. Yet the waterfront at Piraeus, with its menu of delights in the shape of steamer sailings, usually chalked on a blackboard, is a vastly more romantic prospect than Athens' domestic airport. Few forms of transport yield quite the same pleasure of anticipation, nor such adventure of human contact. *Continued on Page 77*

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language regardless, as a plain Greek island steamer.

For various reasons, punctuality and creature comfort among them, it is as well that the Aegean casts the spell it does. Sit on the deck and watch the prisms of sapphire light through the waters below; the puffy blue islands harden to bronze as you approach the port, there to exchange passengers and take aboard the island exports: sweet nougat from Syros, marble from Naxos, piglets from Paros and tomatoes from everywhere. With a rattle of the anchor chain, the port begins to dissolve once more into the horizon and you settle back to watch the seagulls' wings, translucent against that dazzling sky, feeling al-

ready the first symptoms of a near-fatal disease called islomania.

Those who are afflicted by it eschew the main classical sights (Delos, that most ravishingly beautiful of all islands and all ruins, being the great exception), together with *Guides Bleu*, *Baedeker* and even human. They willingly pass up comfortable hotels and ice in their drinks for a clean-scrubbed room to sleep in, and a share of the shower down the corridor. Of caiques to sail in, and tavernas to eat in—the sort with scrapy chairs, a stone floor, and mullets, moussaka and kebabs to choose from in a semi-refrigerated glass case; of little white churches and mule tracks to walk or ride along, they can never find enough. The prospect of every new harbor on an unfamiliar island is a challenge and a delight.

Most people who go to Greece for the first time see Mykonos, since it is

on the itineraries of every cruise ship and most private yachts. The Athenians, who adore it and have created from it a kind of Aegean Capri of esoteric little bars and boutiques, all housed in minuscule whitewashed cottages, can never understand why anyone should want to go further. Equally, most foreigners who fall in love with Greece devote their time to discovering a virgin facsimile of Mykonos.

The island most likely to succeed Mykonos is Ios. The harbor is too small for the cruise ships which could wreck it in a season, but island steamers put in there (the journey is thirteen hours from Piraeus, and worth it), as also do many yachtsmen, for the anchorage is small, deep and sheltered. The port is an animated stage set of low white houses, cafés and tavernas. Georgiou, who runs the most popular of them, took us in his

fishing boat to Mylopota beach to find a mile of deserted blond sand to walk along, water fathoms deep to swim in, and a hospitable little taverna which provided the traditional lunch of olives, white *feta* goats' cheese and fish.

Ios recently acquired street lighting, but to my knowledge still has no wheeled transport. Mules with TAXI stenciled on their bridles wait to carry luggage from the jetty, and I have even seen them in a house-moving operation, loaded with bedstead, chairs, rugs and all. In the evening, we rode by mule up the flight of shallow stone steps to the upper town, an Orthodox priest in full regalia jogging ahead, to find a picturesque agglomeration of steep, whitewashed alleyways decorated with pots of geranium and sweet basil; minuscule churches and even tinier houses, with a view from the hilltop over the whole

tantializing archipelago, the smooth enamel of the sea broken only by the wake of passing ships. In the main square, the size of a modest ballroom, the old men sat on upright cane chairs and a woman hunched on her doorstep, teasing sheep's wool around a spindle. Odd little shops sell soap, candles and an assortment of coins, some of them Byzantine and even Roman. The barbers, visible to all through open doorways, were in full operation with soap and blade, the shoe-shine men were busy with an aroma of beeswax and a paraphernalia of brushes (the simpler the island, I have often thought, the more elaborate the toilet that goes on).

Each island has pleasures of its own, though they are not always apparent from the immediate vicinity of the port. Kamares, where the steamers put in on the island of Sifnos, looks distinctly unpromising at first, since it is surrounded by obliterating hills and there is little waterside life, but it is no exception to the rule that Greek islands must be approached with a spirit of ready gamble and romantic faith.

All five of the island taxis come to the jetty to meet the boats, and one of these—an elderly De Soto with no windows in the back but a record player in front, took me across to Kastro, a fortress village and erstwhile capital, which is one of the most exquisite in the whole of the Aegean. Sifnos was once rich in silver and the broad, creamy flagstones with which its trafficless streets are paved are still flecked with a silvery sheen which catches amazing tricks of light.

Kastro is a place of cats and churches. The cats, which are universally slender with disproportionately large, pointed ears, match the color of the flagstones as though they had been specially camouflaged. They court one another around tubs of geraniums, and stretch indolently in the sunshine along wrought-iron balconies. The churches, of which there are at least a dozen, are doll-sized, redolent with incense, glittering with candles, gleaming with ikons and magnificently painted altar screens. Among the most precious in Greece, the ikons were given by families fleeing from the Cretan rising and later from Russia, to the Sifniot sailors who helped them escape.

The nucleus of the Sifnos beach resort life is the Xenia hotel, more or less isolated on a south coast beach. The hotel is pleasant, but the beach nothing great, which is what caused me and some accidental friends I made—Greece is like that—to charter a fishing boat and explore the rest of the coast. After half an hour's putting through the water, we rounded into another bay and there, enthroned on a tawny headland, were the dazzling white cubes and domes of Chrysopigis Monastery, with a flight of steps leading down to the landing stage, such as it was. The paved forecourt of the monastery was milling with people. We, the strangers, clad

in bikinis and sweaters, were offered thimble glasses of *ouzo* and sweet white bread. Unknowingly, we had arrived on the name day of the island's patron saint, Saint John (June 24th, for future reference). The local priest invited us to lunch at a long trestle table, and we sat down with some hundred villagers to platefuls of *fava* (a kind of thick bean soup), fresh basil, tomatoes, anchovies, *feta* cheese and pitchers of *retsina*. A deafening rattle, as everyone beat the sides of their plates with a fork, signified thanks to the host.

Whereas the Venetian civilization was a strong influence on the architecture and the way of life on Corfu and its neighboring islands to the west, that of Turkey and the Ottoman Empire has colored Rhodes, Samos and the Dodecanese islands which hug the Turkish coast, and both groups are completely different from the dry, white, windy Cyclades.

The Dodecanese or 'dozen' islands lie between Rhodes and Samos and include Kos (birthplace of Hippocrates and his oath as well as the lettuce), Kalymnos, Leros and Patmos, all of them seemingly moored within the steep indentations of the Turkish coast. It is the constant interplay of land and water—the islands from each other, the islands from the coast, with the clouds tossing over the mountain peaks like balloons which have lost their moorings, that makes sailing in these waters, whether by yacht, cruise ship or local steamer, the most visually beautiful and exciting in the Aegean, the Mediterranean, or, quite possibly, the world.

Patmos, one of the loveliest, is velvety green and gentle, though not noticeably forested. Its hilly masses—nothing so violent as a mountain—are joined together in a series of seemingly landlocked bays with white sugar-cube houses scattered across them. The waterfront of Patmos harbor is shaded by casuarina trees, and the stones and bollards along it are draped with saffron-colored nets. Brightly striped fishing boats bob at anchor outside a row of tavernas and cafés, and the men wear baggy Turkish trousers whose quaint origin was that Mohammed would one day be born of man. The whole feeling after four hundred years of Ottoman rule, which ended early in this century, is more Levantine than Hellenic, and the food—*humus* and kebabs, cheese-pastry, *tyropitas* and honey-sweet *baklava*—owes much more to Turkish civilization than the Greeks care to admit. As throughout Greece and especially in the islands, you walk into the kitchen to choose whatever you fancy from the pots on the stove or from the fish that lie, scaly bright, in a glass showcase.

But I digress from what, for most people, is the chief objective of Patmos: the Monastery of Saint John the Divine, overlooking the Vale of the Apocalypse where Saint John received his vision of the Revelations. The first time I went to Patmos, be-

fore any road was built, one had to ride by mule up the side of the mountain, the vale and the harbor falling away behind, and so dramatic a sight deserves that approach, that pace. The almost thousand-year-old monastery stands on the site of a Roman labor camp, in which Saint John was most likely a prisoner—for not all Christians ended their days in the jaws of a lion. Apart from a particularly beautiful chapel, studded with ikons, the great treasure is the library, full of illuminated manuscripts, now very beautifully displayed, that includes part of the pre-6th Century gospel of Saint Mark, inscribed in silver on purple vellum. Yet even this man-made devotion is eclipsed by the view from the whitewashed bell tower, soaring above the monastery, towards Cape Mykale on the Turkish mainland, the islands of Icarus and Leros and, due north, the cloud-dappled peaks of Samos, which change shape with every passing shift of light.

The journey to Samos takes about three hours of wordless, gaping wonder at so much beauty. Long, long beaches stretch ahead, white slits against the greens and purples, bronzes and blues that surround them. On the starboard side, the Turkish coast, only half a mile away, is another continent, another civilization—the edge of Asia.

Of all Greek islands, Samos, with its massive, steep-shouldered mountains, is one of the most majestic to behold: the word means high or huge, and it is aptly named. As Hippocrates of Kos gave to medicine a binding oath which is still in practice today, as Saint John of Patmos saw his Revelations, so Samos produced some of the earliest scientists: Aristarchus, the first man to suggest that the earth revolved around the sun and not the other way around; Pythagoras, a mathematician and astronomer who epitomized the Greek ideal of cultivating, in equal proportion, the body and the intellect, is best remembered as the author of a geometric theorem which still causes intellectual agonies to school-children two thousand, five hundred years later.

Samos was important at a time when Athens was an insignificant city-state. Of all the Greek islands it was, and is, one of the richest. Within the last two centuries, its inhabitants, so close to the shores of Turkey, developed an ambivalence towards the generally hated Turks, but also earned their respect to the extent of being granted self-government within the Ottoman Empire. It has largely been Samians, too, who among expatriate Greek communities have operated the commerce of whole cities such as Alexandria, Smyrna and Constantinople.

In ancient times Samos was known as the Isle of the Blessed because of its climate and fertility. Its olives and vines, its walnuts, pomegranates, figs and timber were capitalized by a shrewd and hardy breed of shipowners and traders who conserved its

riches. These are apparent enough even superficially, in the good roads, the paved-over mule tracks, and the well-built houses. Of an evening, the cafés in the main port of Vathy are milling with locals, the tables five deep on the pavement. Starlings chatter by the thousand in the date palms overhead, the men play backgammon, and for the sake of sentiment if nothing else you have to drink a libation to Homer—"Come fill the cup with Samian wine!" Tastes change, even since Byron's time. To be frank, this traditional, golden wine can taste horribly like sweet vermouth but the dry white, not so easy to come by, is very, very superior.

Vathy is a big commercial port built only a hundred years ago by the Turks. Its very liveliness and prosperity are an attraction, but the more poetic town is the ancient port of Tigani, often known as Pythagorion (such double naming abounds in Greece). Cypresses and olives punctuate the road and the view, surrounded by that truly wine-dark sea, of the little harbor, jutting out into the waters so that each building doubles its reflection. Little remains of the ancient temple to Hera, the patron goddess of the island, but odd pediments and capitals from the fields of ruins lie about the harbor and some of the broken drums are used as bollards. Yet apart from this heedless scattering of ancient splendors (there are in fact also two museums, more often closed than not), there is also a sense of neat, civic pride: the pomegranate trees are precisely planted in whitewashed stone, their trunks painted with broad blue stripes like Venetian gondola poles. A good deal of small-boat traffic uses Tigani rather than Vathy, which maybe accounts for the vast number of cafés, each of them, on a Sunday evening in September, in a thriving way of business.

The appeal of many Greek islands is one of entirely primitive, virgin simplicity. Of the other kind, even Rhodes and Heraklion, in Crete, are empty museum cities by comparison with those of Samos, whose people take their ancient splendors for granted and live with, and not for, them. And the visitor can enjoy the best of both worlds for from Vathy one can make day or overnight excursions to Kusadasi, the nearest port on the Turkish mainland, to explore the ancient Hellenic cities of Ephesus, (splendidly restored) Didyma and Priene with whose history, alternately in conflict and alliance, that of Samos was so closely bound.

As I said earlier, the Greek islands are inexhaustible. To the southwest of Samos, a tantalizing dolphin on the horizon, grape blue against the sunset, lies Icarus, the island which was born of the legendary youth who, flying too close to the sun itself, burned his wings and dropped into the ocean. Possibly there is a moral in this somewhere. But Islamians know no cure, and nor do they often desire one. Icarus is for next time. THE END

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