



gettingaway

MY BIG FAT GREEK VACATION

by Janna Marlies Santoro

“There are two kinds of people –
Greeks, and everyone else who
wish they was Greek.”
— Michael Constantine as
Gus Portokalos in *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*

For anyone who writes off the Grecian stereotype with the same skepticism that clouds this ancient land's mythological past, here's a tidbit that may just prevent the cynic from incurring the wrath of Zeus: everything you've ever heard about this glorious country is true.

Mykonos



Santorini



Parthenon



Corfu

Those distinct white buildings with brilliant blue doors and shutters? They really do exist. Crystal clear water? Yes. Days of endless warm sunshine? That, too. Ouzo? Plenty for all. Fascinating culture? Inevitably. History around every corner? It goes without saying. Greek god? I now know the true origin of the term – and I’m not talking about mythology.

With its scenery, culture and history, Greece is one of the most exotic vacation destinations in the world. The eager traveler can combine history and mythology with an abundance of unique shopping, superb beaches and veritable feasts for the eyes. Even for avid travelers, this country is unrivaled.

But because Greece offers so much, narrowing down an itinerary to specific destinations is as daunting as a voyage from Troy across the Aegean Sea. Fear not – globetrotting to Greece need not be the traveler’s Achilles Heel; simply consider the following suggestions. *(Author disclaimer: location labels are meant to be useful, not to limit choices. Visitors will find plenty of history, curios, shore-*

lines, photo ops and cultural delights everywhere.)

Athens – Best History

As the country’s hub, Athens is the obvious, but logical (and nearly unavoidable) heart of the itinerary. The thing to remember is that Athens is a metropolis, and as such, offers the “big city” usual suspects: traffic, crowds, souvenir shops, city shopping, and so forth. Translation: there’s not a lot of tranquil Mediterranean island culture happening here. There are, however, several historical points of interest that should not be missed.

Situated on the country’s most traveled hilltop, the “High City” Acropolis is the center of ancient Athens. This site houses the ruins of the Parthenon, the main temple dedicated to Athena, Goddess of Wisdom; the Temple of Athena Nike, Goddess of Victory; the Erechtheion, temple of Athena and Poseidon, God of the Sea; and the Acropolis Museum, which contains a collection of sculptures and artifacts from the Acropolis.

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For additional doses of Greek history, don't miss the National Archaeological Museum or the Temple of Olympian Zeus, built in the sixth century B.C. Athens' Olympic Stadium brought the country's history full circle when the last summer Olympic Games returned to its roots once again in 2004.

Corfu – Best Shopping and Eating

This is the place to find a plethora of signature Greek wares – virtually anything your wreath-crowned head can imagine that is made from olive wood: picture frames, kitchen utensils, chess sets, coasters, hair clips, jewelry and more – not to mention olive products galore, from the standard cooking oil to olive-based soaps, lotions and other various items.

Non-shoppers will find the one-hour drive from Corfu to Paleokastrisa worthwhile for the island's gorgeous views. The beaches here also are inviting, although they quickly attract crowds.

When a shopping respite is in order, Corfu's quaint sidewalk cafés and restaurants provide just enough shade to entice passersby. Such establishments are the perfect environment to sample traditional Greek cuisine such as tzatziki (a yogurt, cucumber and garlic appetizer), pastitsio (baked macaroni and lamb), moussaka (minced meat and vegetables served in a creamy cheese sauce), gemista (cooked tomatoes or peppers stuffed with ground lamb) and, of course, baklava. It was in Corfu that my traveling companions and I enjoyed the best food of our trip.

Rhodes – Best Beaches

By far, the most incredible beach on which to catch rays is in the town of Lindos on the island of Rhodes. Perhaps it was simply the Grecian sun, combined with a sip or two of Ouzo, but whatever it was, the place was magical. Our particular beach was in a cove, surrounded by large rock formations like

something out of a fairytale or a dream, putting us in a blissful state. Because Lindos is on the south side of the island, a swim through the cove's warm turquoise water through an opening in the rocks had us floating serenely in the Mediterranean Sea, where we simply swayed with the sea's gentle ripples.

Here again, the beach is not the sole attraction – history buffs will be intrigued by the island's archaeological museum, the Palace of the Grand Masters (a 14th century castle) and the Palace of Castellania (a 16th century building for knights), all in the old town of Rhodes.

Katakolon – Best Culture

From Katakolon Village on Greece's Peloponnese, a visit to the ruins of Olympia takes travelers about an hour by taxi, where you can visit ancient culture at the Temple of Zeus – one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World – the House of Nero and the Olympic Stadium. The village itself, however, reveals modern Grecian culture to be as warm and welcoming as one would expect.

Boutique shops line the single main street as well as waterfront restaurants and cafés that face Katakolon Bay. Proprietors of the city's shops and cafés will chat eagerly and excitedly (gestures and all) with equally intrigued foreigners. For instance, take Panos at Azeri Carpets, a shop specializing in handmade carpets and rugs that also happens to sell jewelry. His persuasive banter made us want to buy out the shop.

Around the corner from Panos and his charming ways, we met Carolyn at Carolyn's Candies – an American transplant originally from New Jersey, who met her Greek husband while in Cuba. She also introduced us to traditional Greek sweets: mandolato, a taffy-like candy made with honey and roasted almonds, and pasteli, made with sesame and honey.

Heading out of the village, we were enticed – er, mainly I was – by a handsome man

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Olympia Ruins



Mykonos



Rhodes

named Theodore to sit for a minute at one of the waterfront cafés. We agreed, on the condition that he pour us some Ouzo, a request that he heartily granted. He served the licorice-flavored liqueur in the two ways that it's typically offered: mixed with carbonated water for a more tart taste and with lemon-lime soda for a sweeter flavor. We toasted (Opa!) and sipped our drinks while a group of men sang, danced and played accordions on the café steps.

Mykonos – Best View

Mykonos embodies the quintessential Greece. Images of rows upon rows of stark white buildings and their bright blue accents come from this tiny island. Through a maze of winding alley-like corridors, the Aegean Sea is often just on the other side of the buildings – turn one corner, and you'll come face to face with waves crashing on the rocks. It's said that the winding streets were built to confuse invaders, but they also serve as a protection from the strong sea winds.

While sitting at yet another waterfront café, sipping exotic cocktails and gazing at the waves and the view of what's called Little Venice (the island was under Venetian control for much of its history, and still exhibits some of that influence), we realized that there is just no contesting the glory of this country.

Santorini – Best Photos

Though Mykonos is a sight to behold, the distinct Grecian architecture and landscape is best captured on camera from the famous island of Santorini, where buildings cling to volcano cliffs and the beaches have black sand from the island's lava rock. When strolling the streets of Santorini's villages Fira and Oia, you'll be rewarded with views from above the buildings and surrounding sea, giving you a great position for wielding your camera.

Aside from the scenic photo ops, one of the most unique traveling experiences occurs on this island. Arriving by boat at the coast near Fira means a steep upward trek to the towns perched atop the island. For the adventurous (and shutter-happy), one way to the top is via donkey, an experience like none other.

For anyone who wishes that they were Greek, all it takes is a big fat Greek vacation. ●

TO CRUISE OR NOT TO CRUISE?

When considering a trip to Greece, accommodations can be a tricky component. My trip happened to be via a Mediterranean cruise. Here are both pros and cons for a trip of this nature:

PROS

- **Transportation** – Cruising offers the simplest solution to travel between islands, which would otherwise typically require routes back through the hub of Athens.

- **Ports of Call** – In addition to the six Greek ports featured here, this particular cruise also included the ports of Venice, Naples and Rome, Italy; Dubrovnik, Croatia and Kusadasi, Turkey – twelve days in all, and perhaps the most convenient way to visit so many places in one trip.

- **Home Base** – Admittedly, having multiple itinerary locales isn't the most convenient thing, considering the hassle of re-packing every other day. On a ship, however, your cabin becomes your mobile hotel, which also saves you the headache of booking a different room for each night.

CONS

- **Timetable** – When cruising, travelers are confined to the ship's schedule, which means a limited number of hours at each port and, often, a rushed day.

- **Culture Squelcher** – It seems to me that the purpose of traveling abroad is to actually experience the culture of the countries visited, which is a tad difficult when dining, sleeping and traveling on a ship full of Americans.

- **Lean Cuisine** – As in, not very much of it. True, the all-you-can-eat buffet is supposedly one of the pros of cruising. But what ever happened to enjoying the local culinary delights as part of the foreign experience?