

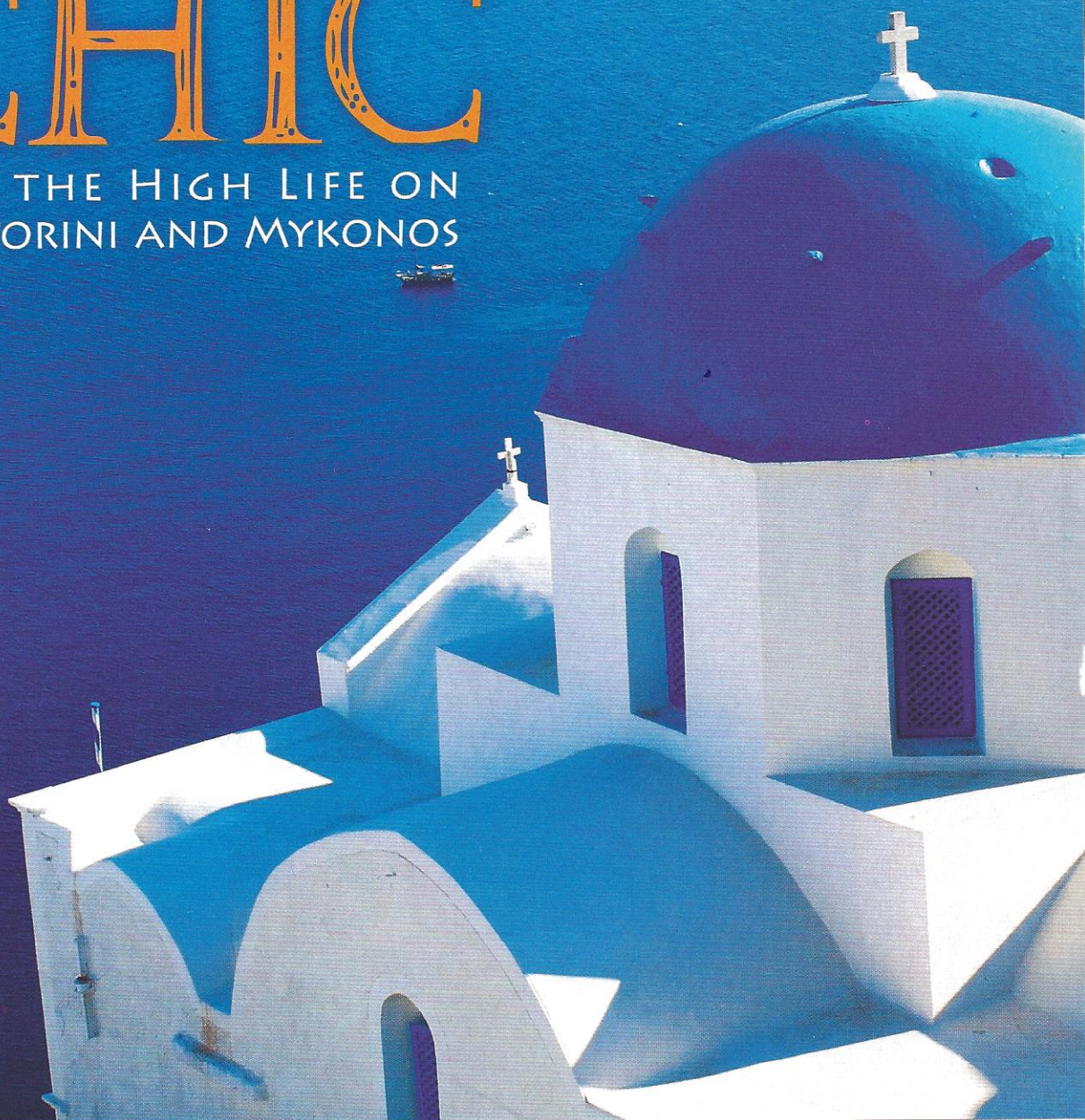


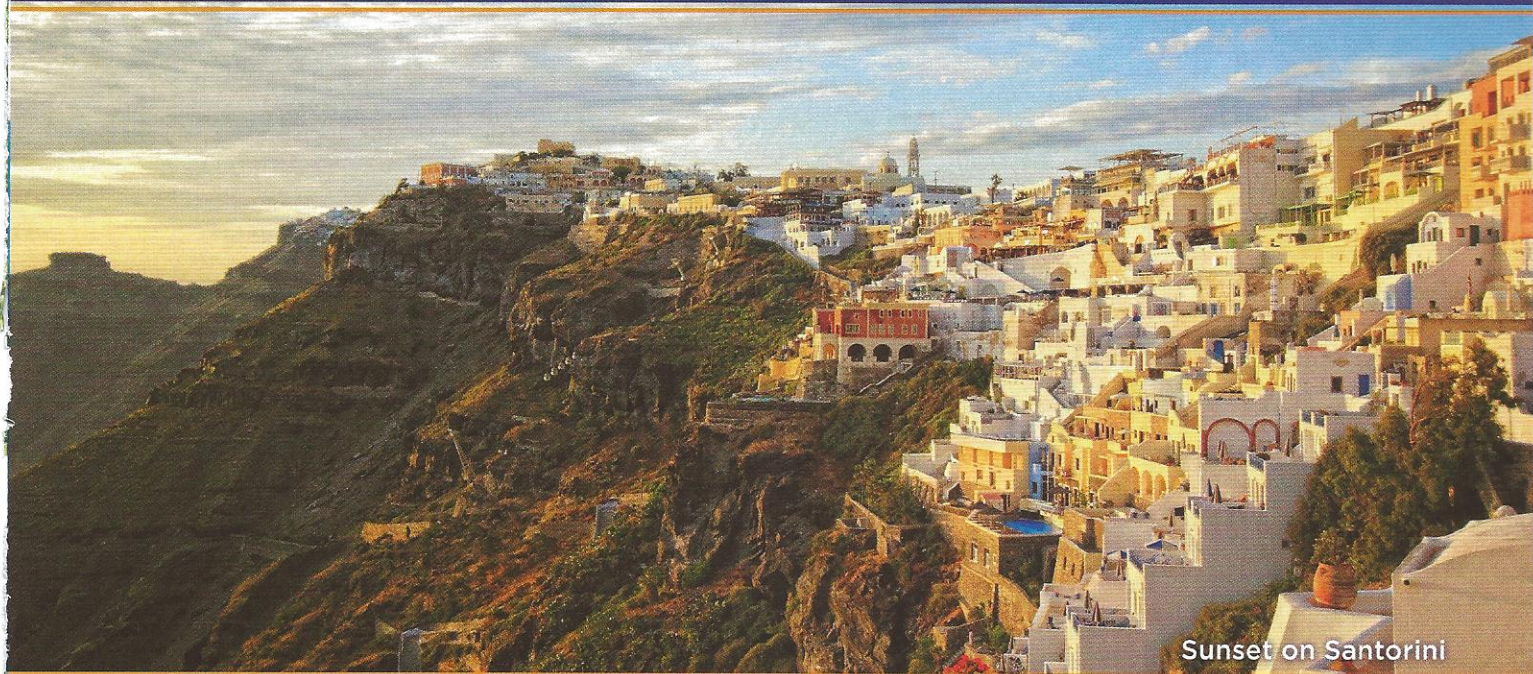
GREEK

By Janice Mucalov

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SEEK THE HIGH LIFE ON
SANTORINI AND MYKONOS





Sunset on Santorini

The ancient donkey trail, now a narrow cobblestone path, snaked along the edge of soaring black volcanic walls. My husband and I strolled past blue-domed churches and small apartments, where neon-pink bougainvillea burst through wrought-iron balcony railings. On the other side of the path — a dizzying 1,200 feet below — the azure Aegean Sea sparkled in bright sunlight. In the distance, shops and sugar-cube houses clung to jagged cliffsides like frosting atop a half-eaten cupcake.

We were on Santorini, the sickle-shaped Greek island whose middle was blown out by a massive volcanic eruption in about 1600 B.C. Santorini is stunningly scenic and a favorite Greek destination for North American visitors. Another is Mykonos, a jetsetter's escape blessed with sybaritic sandy beaches and exciting nightlife.

Santorini and Mykonos are within the Cyclades island chain close to Athens. Each is easy to reach and fantastic to visit — as a cruise stop, a day trip or the sole destination for a long, luxurious Greek getaway.

SANTORINI

After arriving at Santorini by ferry or cruise ship, you'll want to see Fira, the island's capital. Unless you've asked your Travel Leaders agent to reserve private transportation, you'll have a choice to make: Walk up 588 worn, marble-edged steps; take a cable car; or ride a donkey. We say nix the donkey (too smelly!) and hop on the cable car. You'll need your energy later, after reaching the island plateau. Exploring on foot is one of the most satisfying ways to take in heart-stopping views of Santorini's vertical cliffs rising from its sea-filled volcanic crater.

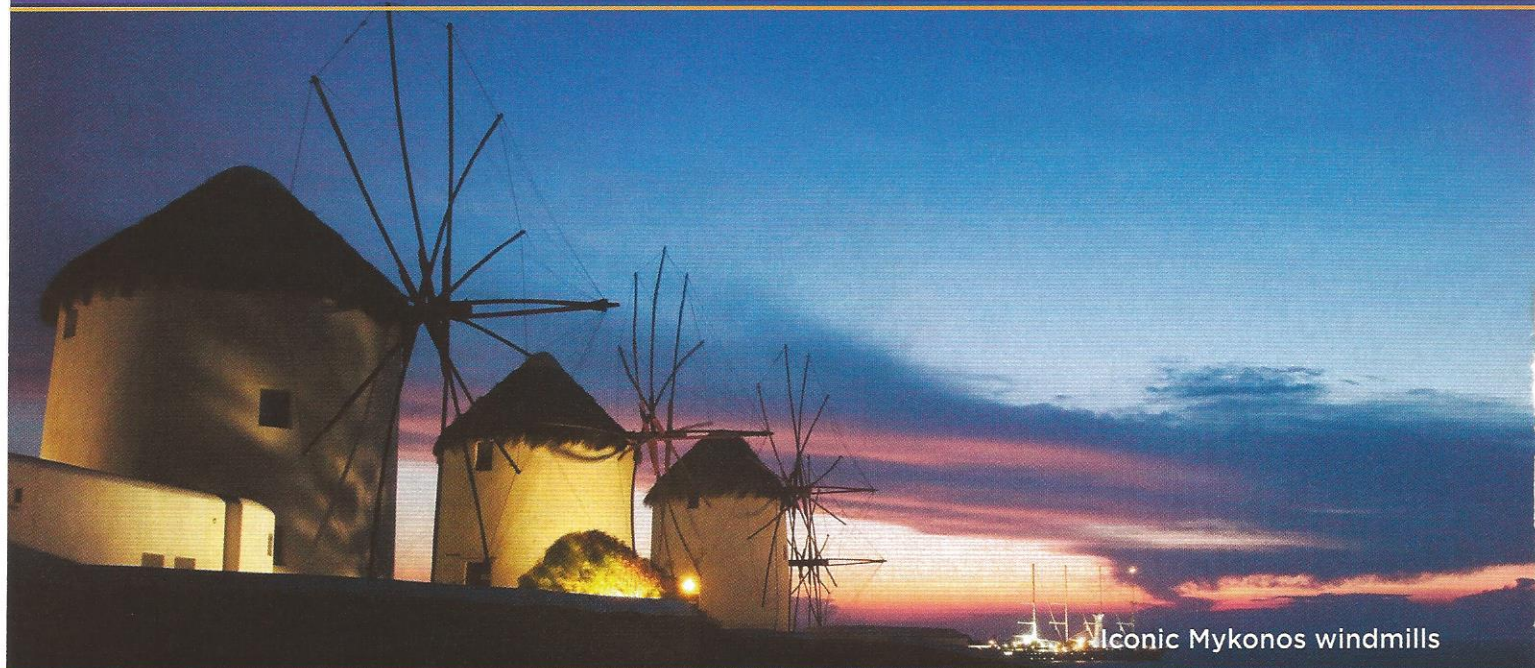
One popular trail runs seven miles from Fira to the white fairytale village of Oia. Honeymooners love to stay in small, upscale Oia, where porters toss suitcases on their shoulders before lugging the bags up long, vertical staircases from pedestrian-only streets. Several Oia hotels are tunneled into cliffs like traditional cave dwellings built centuries ago by Santorini fishermen and villagers. (Of course, those ancient residents didn't have terraces and infinity pools overlooking the sea, as today's modern accommodations do!)

If you time a walk to Oia just right, you can join the crowds that gather nightly near the island's edge to celebrate as the sun sinks past the horizon. The sight of the golden orb turning blood red is billed as one of the most photographed sunsets in the world. Sure enough: When the moment arrives, cameras click away, couples kiss and everyone claps as daylight softly turns to darkness.

For another view of Santorini's spectacular landscape, try sailing. We opted for a first-class experience aboard a multimillion-dollar catamaran. From the sea, we ogled the island's craggy brown and white cliffs. For lunch, our crew served barbecued shrimp and mussels, Greek salad featuring Santorini's sweet cherry tomatoes, and goblets of wine.

We ended the day jumping off the boat to swim in underwater hot springs gushing up by the lava islet of Palea Kameni. The yellow-green water was lukewarm, not steaming. We had fun slathering our bodies with sulfuric mud, said to be good for the skin.

You don't need a car to toodle around Santorini. The island covers less than 30 square miles. But consider renting a scooter and visiting dramatic Perissa Beach. The long stretch of black sand goes on for miles, lapped by crystal clear waters. Beach clubs there rent sun beds and umbrellas. When hunger hits, you'll find fresh grilled fish at many seaside tavernas.



Iconic Mykonos windmills

MYKONOS

Unlike Santorini, Mykonos boasts a wealth of gold-sand beaches. From the resort areas of Ornos Bay and Platis Gialos, colorful wooden taxi boats ferry tourists to the island's south coast. For a few dollars apiece, my husband and I puttered along in one of the vessels for a delightful hour, viewing rocky cliffs and idyllic coves on our way to Super Paradise Beach.

What a scene! Bronzed, beautiful people spilled out from the main restaurant bar, drinking champagne and nibbling on lobster as music throbbed loudly and women in string bikinis danced on tables. At the other end of the beach, nude sun worshippers swam in crystalline waters. Beach and club parties in Mykonos are legendary, often extending into the wee hours of the morning. That's why many area hotels offer breakfast until noon.

Back at Platis Gialos, a family-friendly beach, we plunked ourselves down on comfy loungers and watched children play at the water's edge. We sipped cappuccino and sparkling water, served by waiters from one of many restaurants lining the long, curved beachfront.

During our stay, we frequently went into Chora, the island's principal town. Inevitably, we'd get lost. Close to the cruise ship port, Chora is an enchanting labyrinth of narrow cobblestone streets winding among blue-shuttered houses, jewelry shops, chic clothing boutiques and alfresco cafés. By the water, we'd keep an eye out for Petros, a longtime Mykonos mascot. The white pelican (his current incarnation, anyway) is often seen snoozing in front of a doorway or waddling about underfoot, startling unsuspecting tourists.

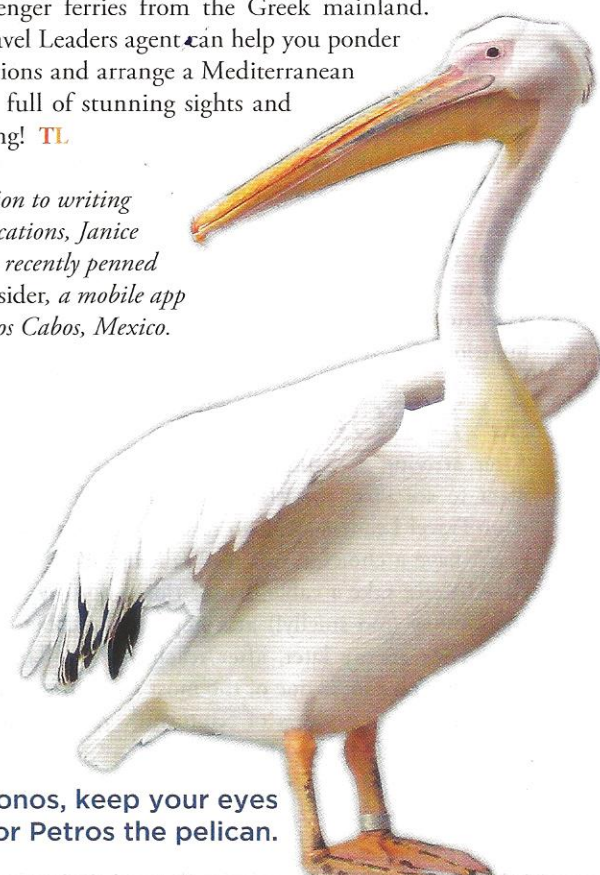
In Chora's Little Venice neighborhood, balconies of bars and alfresco restaurants jut out above the splashing sea. Snag a table on one of those perches, and you can look out at

landmark windmills proudly presiding over the town. From the 16th through 19th centuries, the tall, white structures with conical wooden roofs ground grain. Today, they spring to life whenever the wind blows (which it does 200 to 300 days a year), but their chief function is to serve as iconic symbols of the island — and great subjects for vacation snapshots.

GETTING TO THE GREEK ISLANDS

Santorini and Mykonos are on many cruise itineraries. If you prefer an extended stay, both islands are accessible via passenger ferries from the Greek mainland. Your Travel Leaders agent can help you ponder your options and arrange a Mediterranean vacation full of stunning sights and luxe living! **TL**

In addition to writing for publications, Janice Mucalov recently penned Cabo Insider, a mobile app about Los Cabos, Mexico.



On Mykonos, keep your eyes peeled for Petros the pelican.