

AEGEAN *elegance*



Santorini

Scenic Santorini, where houses like gleaming white sugar cubes cling to the cliff edges, and sophisticated Mykonos, whose narrow streets are packed with restaurants, cafes and bars, offer the best in Greek island hedonism. They are easy to reach, too. But beware - these delightful scraps of land, and the four hotels featured here, are addictive. Their secret – that special caress of Greek seductiveness. **JANICE MUCALOV**

BLESSED WITH SYBARITIC BEACHES, ancient ruins and the dark blue Aegean Sea, the Greek Islands have enticed travellers ever since Homer penned Ulysses' epic odyssey. Two upscale favourites are Mykonos and Santorini. And for good reason. Sophisticated Mykonos is the jetsetter's escape, with superb sandy beaches and exciting nightlife. Santorini, shaped like a sickle moon, is strikingly scenic, with white fairytale villages hugging the rim of an extinct volcanic crater like frosting atop a half-eaten chocolate cupcake.

Close to Athens, the two islands are easy to visit. From the mainland port of Rafina, high-speed ferries depart daily for Mykonos; ferries also connect Mykonos and Santorini. From Santorini, there are cheap flights back to Athens. The deluxe hotels (including the four featured in this article) provide complimentary transportation to and from the ferry dock or airport.

You're bound to stroll about Mykonos town – and inevitably get lost. It's an enchanting maze of narrow cobblestone streets winding between blue-shuttered houses, jewellery shops, chic clothing boutiques and cute cafés. In the Little Venice area, the balconies of the bars and alfresco restaurants hang out over the sea. Snag a balcony table, and you look out at the landmark windmills standing watch over the harbour. Take one of the colourful old wooden taxi boats to the island's south coast beaches. From Ornos Bay, you can putter along for an hour, past rocky cliffs and idyllic coves, to Super Paradise beach. Crowding the outside restaurant bar, the bronzed and beautiful drink champagne and nibble on lobster, as music throbs loudly and Paris Hilton lookalikes in string bikinis dance on tables. At the other end of the beach, nude and gay sun worshippers swim in crystalline waters. (You can't go to Mykonos and not check out its famous party beaches, right?)

Down by the harbour, excursion boats leave for half-day guided tours of nearby Delos. A UNESCO World Heritage Site, the uninhabited island – all five square kilometres – is covered with archaeological ruins dating from 300 BC. The island was once the most prosperous commercial centre in the ancient world, and you

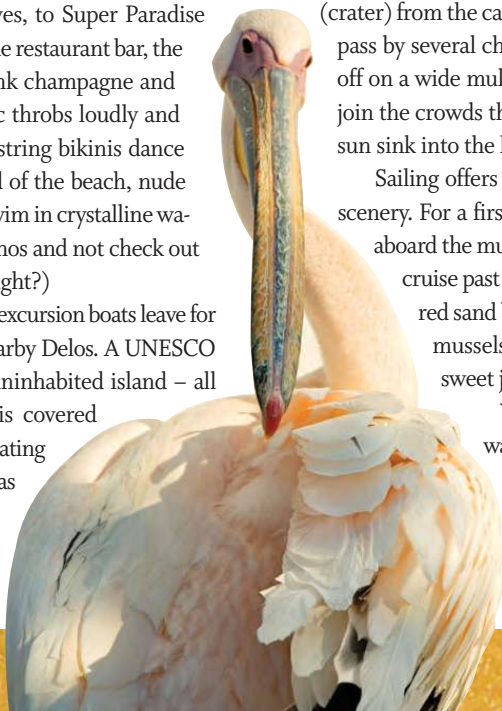


can still see the mosaic floors of formerly grand villas and even remains of their toilet rooms (canals under the whole city took waste water out to sea).

Santorini is the island whose middle was blown out by a massive volcanic eruption in 1600 BC, and walking is one of the most pleasurable ways to take in the heart-stopping views of the vertical cliffs soaring 300 metres above the sea-filled crater. A popular trail runs 12 kilometres along the edge of the caldera (crater) from the capital of Fira to the white sugar-cube village of Oia. You pass by several churches and through two tiny villages before finishing off on a wide mule path. Time your walk to end at sunset, and you can join the crowds that gather in Oia for the nightly ritual of watching the sun sink into the horizon.

Sailing offers a different viewpoint from which to enjoy Santorini's scenery. For a first-class experience, join no more than five other couples aboard the multi-million dollar catamaran Sunset Oia. From Oia, you cruise past the island's craggy brown and white rocks to swim at a red sand beach. For lunch, the crew barbecues huge shrimp and mussels, serving that with Greek salad featuring Santorini's sweet juicy cherry tomatoes and unlimited goblets of wine.

You end the day jumping off the boat to swim to underwater hot springs gushing up by an uninhabited lava islet. The water is actually only luke-warm, but it's fun to slather on the red-brown sulphuric mud, said to be good for the skin. And if the mud doesn't rejuvenate you, at least time away in the Greek sun works wonders.



Santa Marina Resort & Villas

Travelling with children? Santa Marina Resort & Villas is one of the few places on Mykonos that is family-friendly. In addition to 87 rooms and suites, there are eight 2- to 4-bedroom villas, each with a kitchen and private pool. A free supervised all-day kids programme is offered in July and August for ages three to 12.

Part of the Starwood Luxury Collection, the resort itself is laid out like a Greek village with cubic white washed buildings. Rooms come with contemporary furnishings, super comfy king-size beds (most Mykonos hotels have queen beds only) and lovely sea views. A complimentary shuttle departs for nearby Mykonos town three times a day.

But perhaps the best feature is the 150-metre stretch of private golden sand beach. Tucked away in a sheltered cove, it provides an unrivalled spot for swimming and lounging underneath a thatched palapa. When hunger strikes, wander over to the resort's sophisticated new Beach Bar & Restaurant, where the specialty is fresh grilled fish (the chef buys seafood from fishing boats that come to the resort's dock each day). Go Greek with a fashionably late lunch – and you can watch the setting sun melt like liquid gold into the sea.

www.santa-marina.gr

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Kivotos Club Hotel

What started out as a Mykonos holiday home for a Greek architect/designer and his family is now an exquisite boutique hotel. Perched serenely over Ornos Bay, Kivotos Club Hotel (a member of the Leading Small Hotels of the World) is unique. Housed within white plaster and stone villas, each of the 40 rooms and suites is an individually decorated work of art. Our delightfully eclectic suite had exposed beam ceilings, Venetian glass chandeliers, a mosaic tiled bathroom with a bevelled glass door, and a large stone balcony framed by gauzy curtains.

Outside, marble steps wind past garden courtyards, fountains and two swimming pools, where kittens nap on a couch in the sun and budgies chirp in hanging cages, eventually leading to a private rocky beach with cushioned teak sunbeds.

The buffet breakfast, included in the rate, is to be savoured. There's champagne and fresh squeezed juices, eggs and bacon, lox and cheeses, a sweet selection of chocolate banana tart, baklava and sugar cookies, silver baskets of raisin cream pastries and croissants, and even a hot chocolate sauce fountain for dipping pineapple chunks. Settle yourself on a Louis XV chair at a marble table with sweeping views of the sapphire blue sea, and you have the perfect start to a five-star fabulous day in Mykonos.

www.kivotosclubhotel.com





Santorini Grace

Opened in 2008 a year after the award-winning Mykonos Grace debuted, the Santorini Grace is the newest hotel owned by the Mediterranean boutique hotel group Grace Hotels. Seventeen stylish rooms and suites boast king beds with luxury linens, Korres toiletries and all-white 60s mod furnishings; some have plunge pools for two. Our barrel shaped room, tunnelled into the rock face like the traditional cave dwellings built by Santorini fishermen and villagers hundreds of years ago, offered an outdoor hot tub with staggering views of monolithic Skaros Rock, cruise ships and the sea below.

From the hotel's setting in the quiet little village of Imerovigli, you can walk along a three-kilometre cobblestone path on the caldera rim, past charming little restaurants and houses with flower-filled balconies, to Fira. For more exercise, swim laps in the zigzag-shaped infinity pool, one of the largest on the island. Poolside caves with loungers and potted palms are cool havens for hiding from the sun.

With its fresh youthful vibe – spoons of sliced fruit are left at nightly turndown instead of chocolates – the Santorini Grace is popular with honeymooners. But any couple seeking a romantic retreat will fall in love with this hotel.

www.santorinigrace.com

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Vedema Resort

At Vedema Resort, pastel-painted townhouses with 45 suites are built around a 15th century volcanic rock winery in the traditional Greek village of Megalohiri. You won't get caldera views, but suites have stone balconies offering equally stunning panoramas. The rooftop terrace of our Theta 7 suite was a magical place at dusk to sip a welcome bottle of chilled Santorini wine, as we gazed out over vineyards and the town's cupola roofs and listened to ringing church bells and birds singing in the bougainvillea vines.

Renovated in 2008, the apartment suites are extremely comfortable with separate living rooms, huge marble bathrooms and colourful modern art. Wine tastings are held nightly in the candlelit wine cellar; breakfast is served under a pergola around the swimming pool. Several excellent tavernas are just a short walk away in the village.

Space, privacy and service reign supreme (scores of celebrities from Angelina Jolie to Heidi Klum have stayed here) and you may be tempted to happily stay put at this Starwood Luxury Collection property. But it's worth exploring the island's charms – a complimentary shuttle takes you to Fira and the resort's beach club on the magnificent black sand beach of Perivolos. To enjoy Oia, stay too at sister resort Mystique, where 18 deluxe cave-house suites and villas built into Oia's cliffs are perfectly poised to take in Santorini's glorious sunsets.

www.vedema.gr and www.mystique.gr



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Sunset in Oia