

ruise of the Gods

Story by Tom Etsue
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Escaping the many horrors that often surround modern cruise holidays to explore the Greek islands at a more leisurely and independent pace is an option offered by schooner operator Viking Cruises.

Ignoring the trend to shuttle visitors at a rushed speed through well-trodden sights, Viking Cruises, aboard their two wooden schooners, operate very much at the local pace, allowing guests to sample the unique characteristics of the Cyclades archipelago either by themselves or aided by resident guides. It's a highly preferable way to travel, with the intimacy of a small crew and a maximum of 40 guests providing ideal conditions to get to know new people as well as new places.

Located equidistant from Africa, Turkey and the Middle East, Greece is the cultural heart of Western Civilisation; a country steeped in ancient history and legend, once ruled by gods and heroes, where volcanoes and earthquakes erased civilisations, where democracy first flourished and successive empires and religions rose and crumbled into the dust. It's also a modern European country still riding high on the success of last year's Olympics, an event that not only culturally enriched the country but also blessed it with brand new infrastructure and facilities to rival most in Europe.

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Above: The acropolis is still Athens' main attraction.

A group of nuns sitting in a lush flower-filled quadrangle with the harsh beauty of rocky mountains behind provided an unforgettable image of the island's beauty.

Vikings' seven-day cruise of the Cyclades has been designed to celebrate both the ancient and the modern. Of the around 100 settled Greek islands, speckled like sparkling pearls across the Aegean, the Cyclades are the closest to Athens. Forming a circle south of the capital, they include popular destinations like Santorini, Mykonos and Ios, and are perfect for a comprehensive introduction to the country's many wonders.

By luck, on our trip, only one third of the schooner's cabins were occupied; filled with a healthy blend of characters from all walks of life, brought together by a love of the sea and an abhorrence of the strict routines of larger cruise ship holidays. The boat was blessed with a few charming idiosyncrasies that more modern ships have corrected, such as a lack of hot water during particular times of the day, some eccentrically-shaped cabins, and the squeaks and creaks of a wooden vessel. However, like in the old house of a favourite aunt, all amenities worked, but in their own way and in their own time. With a crew of 10, the service rivalled that of far more expensive cruises, allowing for informality, intimacy and friendship impossible on a larger ship. The chef cooked for what would be a traditional Greek family, rather than the faceless hundreds onboard a towering liner.

*Below: A shady ménage à trois.
Following page: With a stiff cycladic wind in her sails.*

Departing from Athens on a sun-drenched evening, we sailed overnight to Santorini from where we would return to Athens in a zigzag pattern over the following week, stopping at Ios, Naxos, Paros, Mykonos, Syros and Kythnos.

Santorini's towns have startlingly unique architecture, with white and blue painted buildings fitted together along narrow alleys perched precariously on hilltop cliffs. Docking on the western side of the island, we faced a towering 270-metre cliff on which Fira, the largest city clings. To reach the town, you can hop on a donkey for the climb, use the cable car, or get some exercise by trudging the 580 steps to the top.

Fira is an attractive commercial town crammed with souvenir shops, galleries and boutiques. After a quick stroll around town, we jumped on a bus for a short tour of island, including trips to the excavation site of a 3,500-year old city buried under one of the island's many volcanic explosions, and the beautiful town of Oia on the north coast. Much smaller and less commercial than Fira, Oia provides endless opportunities for the classic Greek island shot of cliff-side whitewashed churches overlooking the sparkling ocean. The best way of getting around the narrow streets of Greek towns is on foot, but those wanting to explore the countryside are well catered for, with rental cars and motorbikes available on most islands.

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*Previous page: The popular beach at Psarou on Mykonos
Above, left: Donkeys await arrivals on Santorini. Right: Church bells in Santorini.*

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Road signage is often arbitrary, but given the size of the towns and islands, getting lost for long isn't a problem. Nearly all businesses on the islands are family run, and it's common for transactions to proceed in a roundabout and leisurely fashion.

Later that day, we sailed to Ios, a smaller, less developed island with equally impressive architecture. On Ios it was easier to observe traditional Greek life, and I walked through streets filled with playing children, old women whitewashing the sides of homes and the sounds of family life emanating from picturesque doorways, decorated with a thousand blossoms. The island is a popular stop-off for young travellers from around Europe who gravitate towards the tiny square at the centre of town at night, where bars like the Red Bull serve up cocktails and pitchers of ouzo until it's time to hit the clubs.

With the boat in port until the following morning, this proved to be a popular chance to sample the legendary Greek nightlife and there were quite a few absentees at breakfast the following day when we set sail to Naxos. A benefit of cruising is the ability to travel to the next destination while engaging in other activities, such as sleeping and eating, with our week's itinerary obviously the result of well-planned research.

On Naxos, we decided to explore the island with a couple of our fellow passengers, while the rest recovered in their cabins. There was only one car available to rent, a tiny two-door vehicle of uncertain pedigree to transport two six foot-plus males with spouses up and down the island's mountainous terrain. Luckily, the sunroof allowed the tallest to stick their heads out of the top. Like the majority of the landscape throughout the Cyclades, Paros is a dry rocky island fringed with sheltering coves and a turquoise ocean. Due to the lack of rain and high winds, the barren hills are useless for most forms of agriculture but some pockets of green are used to grow vines, lemon trees and the huge tomatoes essential for the ubiquitous Greek salad.

A two-hour sail in the afternoon took us to Paros, where we docked at Paroikia. This is a great island to explore on motorbike. There's hardly any traffic, the roads are good and Psarou on the southern tip. The day ended with dinner at a traditional taverna, a very jolly affair involving stupendous amounts of food, free-flowing local wine and ritual humiliation on the dance floor as a few members of the crew attempted to teach the essentials of Greek dance.



Left: Young girls feed the birds in the village square in Ermoupoli, Syros.



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Next port of call was Mykonos, renowned for its glamorous local inhabitants and happening club scene. The narrow lanes of the main town form a maze, within which it's quite easy to get lost. Mykonos is the centre of the Cyclades' marine transportation system and traffic management is perhaps the town's major challenge given the large number of visitors and limited facilities. The best strategy is to rent a car or scooter and head to one of the many beaches, especially Psarou on the south coast, where the packed sand is complimented by a very fashionable stretch of chilled-out bars and lounges.



Above: The colourful Syros downtown.

For those not interested in shopping or beaching, the village of Ano Meri in the middle of Mykonos, the home of a 6th century monastery, is well recommended. The villagers have a fierce pride in their village, indicative of the effort and dedication essential to survive inland among the rocky and harsh terrain. Near Ano Meri is the beautiful Paleokastrou convent and associated churches and ruins, where a group of nuns sitting in a lush flower-filled quadrangle with the harsh beauty of rocky mountains behind provided an unforgettable image of the island's beauty.

We left early the following day for Syros in slightly jumpy seas, causing the ship to moan and creak as it slapped the waves - sounds familiar to sailors throughout the ages. Ermoupoli, the capital city, has homes painted in light beige, rather than the traditional white, which extend up two hills, each crowned with large churches, one Catholic, the other Orthodox. Parts of the city have a distinctive Italian flavour, a remnant of the French and Italians who held sway here in the past. Climbing either hill, while stopping at the numerous churches on the way, is highly recommended, affording the fit with glorious views of the coastline.

The following day, we anchored at an isolated inlet on Kythnos, our last stop. Several hardy passengers swam around the boat while a sailor managed to catch an octopus from the ship, much to the delight of the crew and our fellow travellers. Docking at the main city around noon, we rented a car to look around the island, which was surprisingly undeveloped given its proximity to Athens. Kythnos is small but exploring the various beaches, small villages and rugged mountainous landscape can easily fill an afternoon. Later that evening, all on board celebrated a hearty captain's dinner where the groaning table of Greek delicacies included the tender octopus caught earlier. It was fitting end to a relaxing and seductive Greek experience of visiting new places while enjoying new friendships with a random group of fellow travellers. 🌐



For more information on cruising the Cyclades, visit **Viking Cruises'** website at www.viking.gr.

Justin Eeles flew THAI to Athens from Bangkok direct. There are thrice-weekly flights. Visit www.thairways.com.