

# Condé Nast Traveller



MAY 2016

## *The Great* **EUROPEAN ESCAPE**

**HOT HIDEAWAYS IN ITALY**

**SMART LONG WEEKENDS**  
**MADRID • AMSTERDAM • BERLIN**

**GREEK ISLANDS**  
THE MOST DELICIOUS ONE OF ALL

A LIFE-CHANGING RETREAT IN  
**THE SOUTH OF FRANCE**

**PLUS**

GEORGE CLOONEY  
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**PITCH PERFECT**  
THE BEST FAMILY  
GLAMPING IN BRITAIN

*Step out of the shade*





Panagia Poulati monastery on the east coast of Sifnos. Opposite, octopus with sweet-wine reduction at Omega 3

# BAKE OFF



MYKONOS IS THE QUEEN OF THE DANCE FLOOR, SANTORINI IS A SCENE STEALER. BUT THE SEARING FOODIE BUZZ ON SIFNOS MAKES IT THE MOST DELICIOUS GREEK ISLAND OF ALL. BY RACHEL HOWARD. PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID LOFTUS





Outdoor terrace at Sifnos 4K villa in Exambela. Opposite, from left: a bedroom at Verina Suites; homely décor at Theodorou's Sweet Shop; handmade pottery at Atsonios Ceramics in Vathi

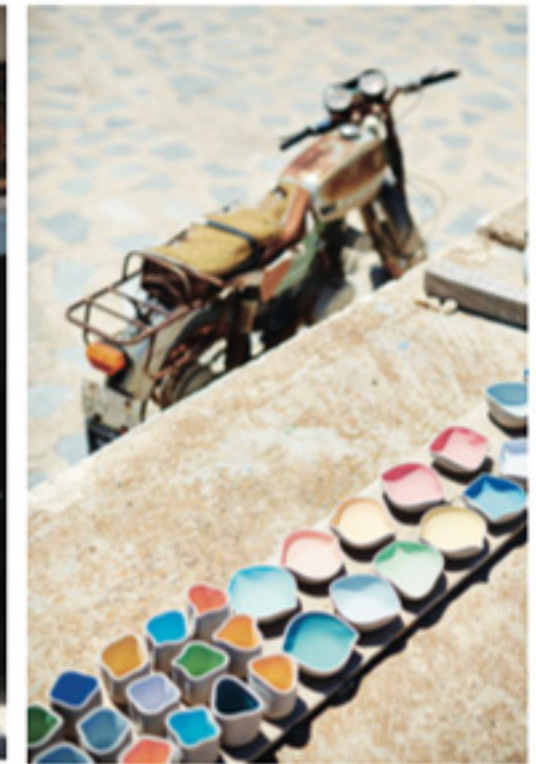
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N MOST GREEK ISLANDS, what hits you first is the light, bouncing off burnished rocks or painting the horizon a fuzzy peach. On wildly beautiful Sifnos in the Cyclades, it's the aroma of orange-and-anise biscuits drifting down whitewashed lanes; pockets of sage and oregano in wind-chiselled valleys; blasts of brine as sea urchins are prised open, orange roe scooped up with salty fingers.

In summer, stepping off the ferry at Kamares, the island's unassuming little port, there is also the unmistakable perfume of sizzling calamari and suntan oil. If it is early afternoon, I stroll along the hot boardwalk to the sandy

rum-and-cokes until dawn and feast on dandelion-and-feta pies from the bakery before stumbling into bed.

Although the bakery has gone, Kavos Sunrise is still open and – save for a couple of ugly cafeterias at its entrance – the village looks pretty much the same as it did back then. The rest of Sifnos hasn't changed much either. It still has that raw elemental appeal and an intense tranquillity, even though there are more cars and foreigners, a few more villas tucked in among the terraced hills and a handful of smart restaurants and hotels. These days I stay at the elegant Verina Astra,



## OLD MEN FORAGE FOR CAPERS, THE FLOWERS BURSTING OUT OF CRACKS IN THE WALLS

beach of Agia Marina and dive straight into the sea. The octopus bruschetta and aubergine chips at the Isalos beach bar taste even better when I have sand between my toes. As a lilac haze settles over the bay, I toast my return to the island with a cucumber Margarita.

The first time I saw Sifnos was 20 years ago on a whirlwind trip with five girlfriends from five different countries. We rented a couple of rooms in the cliff-top village of Kastro from a lascivious old codger who munched on raw garlic cloves. Our digs may have been spartan, but we had the most sensational sunrises over the Church of Seven Martyrs, a chapel floating on an outcrop of rock, hundreds of feet below. The local bar, suitably named Kavos Sunrise, was run by a dude in denim hot pants and a bandana, who was known as Che because of his obsession with Cuba. Here we would drink

where there are just seven deeply calming suites that have views of blue sky and sea, a brilliant-white village cascading over a distant hilltop and, at the bottom of the valley, the blue dome of a monastery dangling above an emerald cove. The hotel is managed by Miltos Salemis and Isidora Chandeli, a handsome young couple who know and love every inch of Sifnos, and we have become good friends.

Up here with those views, I can't help but slip into the slow rhythm of island life, lulled by the buzz of cicadas. Everything feels deliciously remote, yet the hotel is just a five-minute drive from Artemonas, the prettiest village on Sifnos. I have found that the best time to visit is at dusk, when giggling children race through the tangle of alleys, grandmothers gossip on steps lined with geraniums and old men forage for capers, their purple flowers bursting



Church of the Seven Martyrs in Kastro.  
Opposite, lunch at Tsapis taverna near  
Apokofto beach in Chrysopigi





From left: breakfast area at Verina Astra; view of Cheronissos Fish taverna; spiced-chicken wraps at Rambagas café-bar; a bedroom at Sifnos 4K



## SOFT CHICKPEAS BOBBED IN THE CREAMY BROTH AND, WITH JUST A SQUEEZE OF LEMON, IT

out of cracks in the stone walls. My evenings here inevitably start with a carafe of *tsipouro* (a brandy made with grapes) and a meze platter at Mosaico, a family-run *ouzeri* where occasionally musicians strike up a tune. After devouring saucers of pork-and-leek stew and pickled anchovies, I follow the aroma of lamb chops to a hidden-away taverna in Chrysopigi, where the cognoscenti go for grilled meat – and lots of it. I order a heap of those chops, a Greek salad topped with a blob of creamy *mizithra* cheese, and *kaparosalata*, a local dish of capers and onions stewed into a sweet-and-sour umami bomb, and eat under a sliver of moon, the domes of far-off churches glowing like beacons in the darkness.

Even after all this deliciousness, I can never quite resist stopping at the family-run Theodorou's Sweet Shop on the way home. Its nougat wafers, bergamot sugar paste and *amigdalia* (addictive almond cookies shaped like Roman

noses) have seduced the sweet-toothed since 1933 and everything is still cooked in copper pots over a wood fire. My treats are weighed on antique scales by Vasilodimos Theodorou and behind the baby-blue counter his spindly father crimps dozens of *bourekia* – ground almonds, cloves, cinnamon and honey wrapped in pastry then drenched in icing sugar – in a sequence of precise movements perfected over a lifetime.

SIFNOS OWES ITS REPUTATION as a foodie island to Nicholas Tselementes, a local chef who wrote the first Greek book of recipes in 1910 (his surname has been synonymous with 'cookbook' in Greece ever since). Ironically, Tselementes shunned the simple, seasonal food of his childhood in favour of the fancy dishes he learned to cook at grand hotels in Vienna and New York. He dismissed garlic, olive oil and spices as Ottoman

## WAS THE TASTIEST SOUP I HAD EVER EATEN. THE TRICK IS TO COOK THEM IN RAINWATER

interlopers in the Greek culinary canon. Jellyed ham, Mont Blanc and béchamel-with-everything may have appealed to aspirational middle-class Athenians, but they were – and, thankfully, still are – anathema to his fellow islanders.

Traditional Sifniot cooking is baked in the same terracotta casserole dishes that have been produced on the island for centuries. Dozens of potteries once lined the coastline; the ceramics were stacked onto fishing boats and exported all over the Mediterranean. One of the oldest manufacturers is Atsonios, set on its own little cove overlooking the bay of Vathi. 'When I was a kid, the whole island worked in the ceramics business, not just potters, but mule drivers and boat captains,' recalls owner Antonis Atsonios as he and his son work on bowls decorated with distinctive white loops in their dusty workshop. Until 1995, when a tarmac road and electricity came to Vathi, the pots were fired in a wood-burning kiln built in 1870 (it still works

perfectly). Atsonios' earthenware dishes have survived decades of roasting in the bulbous outdoor oven that's in use daily at Manolis, the best of about half a dozen tavernas on the sandy beach at Vathi. All the ingredients come from the owner's kitchen-garden, local fishermen and neighbouring farms. On a terrace shaded by tamarisk trees, the twinkly-eyed proprietors, Stelios Neroutsos and his wife Margarita, have taught me how to make *mastello* – lamb soaked in red wine then slow-roasted on a bed of vine branches – and *revithokeftedes* – chickpea fritters spiked with marjoram and mint.

Chickpeas are a staple of Sifniot meals, especially Sunday lunch, which is traditionally cooked overnight. One Saturday evening, Miltos took me to his neighbour Angeliki's house, just up the hill from Verina Astra. Plump and smiling, she welcomed me as every Sifniot does – with unaffected warmth and great generosity.



Kavos Sunrise façade. Opposite, from left: bread board at café-bar Rambagas in Apollonia; the terrace; a traditional house



I watched as villagers brought *skepastaria* – pot-bellied casseroles full of chickpeas, onions, and olive oil – to the covered wood oven in her garden. The next morning, I returned as Angeliki's neighbours trickled in after church to retrieve their blackened pots (decorated with their initials for ease of identification) from the embers. At last they were all gone and Angeliki cracked open the pastry seal on her own dish: soft chickpeas bobbed in the creamy broth and, with just a squeeze of lemon, it was the tastiest soup I had ever eaten. The trick, she told me, is to cook them in rainwater. For centuries, the entire island was planted with chickpeas

the pebbles, perfectly positioned for the sunset. On a rickety chair at the far end of the beach, someone had scrawled *cosmote edo* (mobile-phone signal here).

The best meal I have ever eaten on Sifnos was on a sun-dappled terrace in Exambela, the drowsy village where Nicholas Tselementes grew up. Here Alberto Bourdeth, a local artist, and his luminous wife Zoe cooked up an array of dishes almost too pretty to eat: magenta beetroot cream, pillowy taramasalata with pink peppercorns, slow-roast goat speckled with dill, and yogurt with apricots and pistachio praline garnished with freshly picked thyme flowers. There is also excellent



## THE AROMA OF ORANGE-AND-ANISE BISCUITS DRIFTS DOWN THE WHITEWASHED LANES

and other crops, so the craggy interior is threaded with terraced walls and stone paths laid by farmers and shepherds. More than 100 kilometres of these trails have been waymarked and I have followed the red-and-white markers to crumbling dovecotes, monasteries in the clouds and glistening coves.

One day a flock of goats came jangling down for a drink while I was having a dip at Glyfo. After a rocky scramble down to Heronissos, a tiny fishing port on the island's barren northern tip, I stopped at Cheronissos Fish taverna to reward myself with grilled lobster snapped up straight from the startlingly green sea. Another time, I recovered from the hair-raising descent to Vroulidia bay with an ice-cold beer and some of the sun-dried mackerel strung like bunting outside Giannis Depastas' waterfront joint. A few sun loungers were wedged among

people-watching to be had at Platis Gialos, a long, shallow strip of sand lined with beach bars and restaurants. You might even spot Tom Hanks at Omega 3, a tiny fish bar where it's worth wrestling the competition for a stool. Chef Giorgos Samoilis was a molecular biologist before he took over the kitchen, and it shows: seafood is cured, caramelised, smoked *à la minute* and cooked sous-vide. 'It's still like working in a lab – experimenting with temperatures and techniques, seeing how proteins and molecules react. Only now I get to taste the results,' said Samoilis, smiling as he produced a succession of knockout dishes: smoked-herring and goat's-cheese crostini; baby-squid tempura; an unctuous octopus tentacle dotted with a reduction of sweet Mavrodaphne wine.

On Saturday evening, everyone hits Apollonia, the lively hill-top capital, for a night out. Here, stylish French





Display at Theodorou's Sweet Shop.  
Left, dining area at Verina Suites.  
Opposite, Artemonas village

couples buy beaded sandals and designer kaftans on Steno, the narrow lane that snakes through town. Trendy bars have sprung up on rooftops and terraces all over the place, but O Drakakis is still the heart of the action – an old-time café where locals have been chewing the fat and knocking back *rakomelo* (warm grappa with honey, cinnamon and cloves) since 1887.

I soak up my *rakomelo* shots with slivers of fried *manouri* – crumbly goat's cheese cured in red wine – before moving on to the capital's latest hotspot, Rabagas: three white-on-white terraces where glossy Athenians catch up over cocktails and nouvelle Cycladic dishes conjured by Greek celebrity chef Yiannis Loukakos. It feels like an entirely different island and it's always fun, but for me, nothing can beat Botzi, a little bar that only really gets going after midnight. The warren of smoky rooms, lethal Mojitos and Afro-Cuban tunes take me back 20 years, and I am young again, and completely carefree. **T**

## SIFNOS: ZONING IN

### WHERE TO STAY

Verina Hotels ([verinahotelsifnos.com](http://verinahotelsifnos.com)) has three stylish boltholes: with its cliff-side setting, Verina Astra (doubles from about £90) is effortlessly sexy; at Verina Suites (doubles from about £120), minimalist maisonettes are set around peaceful gardens and a family-friendly pool; sprawling Verina Villa (sleeps 16; from about £13,450 per week) has a gym, hammam and five staff. If privacy is a priority, go for Sifnos 4K ([fivestargreece.com](http://fivestargreece.com); sleeps 12; from about £7,700 per week). This manor house in Exambela village has shady nooks for alfresco feasts and a pool with ravishing views. Hidden in an olive grove, Kamaroti ([kamaroti.com](http://kamaroti.com); doubles from about £90) excels at mid-century-modern style in rural surroundings. The only fully-fledged beach retreat here is Elies ([eliesresorts.com](http://eliesresorts.com); doubles from about £270), which feels like a miniature Cycladic village.

### GETTING HERE

From Athens, Sifnos is two hours by catamaran or seven hours by ferry. For boat schedules, check [openseas.gr](http://openseas.gr). For maps and hiking trails, visit Sifnos Trails ([sifnostrails.com](http://sifnostrails.com)).

### GET INSPIRED

Read *The Greek House*, Christian Brechneff's lyrical memoir of his 30-year love affair with the island.

