

GREECE'S DODECANESE ISLANDS

Volcanic Landscapes, Medieval Harbours & Island Traditions

14 days

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Day 1 Arrival on Rhodes

Rhodes announces itself as a medieval fortress city – not with beaches or resort hotels, but with walls. The Knights Hospitaller wrapped this island in massive stone ramparts in the 14th century and built them to last. They did.

Although Rhodes is the Dodecanese capital today, it wasn't one of the original twelve islands that gave the archipelago its name. The Dodecanese – literally twelve islands – scatter across the southeastern Aegean, closer to Turkey than to mainland Greece.

We transfer to our hotel; tomorrow we begin our touring in the heart of Rhodes' medieval old city – the labyrinth of narrow streets, arched gateways, and limestone walls that have held human life for seven centuries.

Overnight in Rhodos.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Rhodes Touring

The Palace of the Grand Masters rises above the old town -- gothic towers, crenellations, the architecture of serious medieval defence. The Knights built it not to impress but to repel. In 1856 an accidental explosion in a nearby church destroyed the palace. Italian occupiers later rebuilt it, and Mussolini used it as a summer retreat. History keeps arriving in Rhodes and leaving its layers behind.

The Knights of St. John began as a religious order in 11th-century Amalfi, shifted toward military action, and eventually became something closer to a maritime mercenary outfit. By the time they arrived in Rhodes they were warrior-monks with money and intent. They held the island for two centuries before the Ottomans took it – a long, expensive commitment to a piece of stone in a difficult sea.

Our walking tour traces the old town – UNESCO World Heritage site, the largest preserved medieval city in Europe. The streets are intentionally narrow and confusing. Defence strategy. The walls are thick enough to withstand cannonfire. Every spatial decision reflects the assumption that enemies would arrive by water without notice.

Overnight in Rhodes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Rhodes: Acropolis of Lindos

Lindos sits on the eastern coast, the Acropolis of Athena Lindia crowning a hilltop 116 metres above the village below. Bronze Age sanctuary, 4th-century temple, St. Paul arriving in the bay in 58 AD – one empire replacing another in slow geological time.

The village itself reveals what happens when trade produces prosperity but geography enforces constraint. The streets are narrow, steep, paved in stone. Whitewashed houses, blue doors – not a design choice but a response to heat, wind, and what local stone could provide. Traditional island architecture develops because of limits, not despite them.

Our return journey crosses Rhodes from east to west, the landscape shifting from coastal resort development to interior villages to moorland. Filerimos Mountain gives us the view that explains Rhodes politically: three ancient city-states – Lindos, Ialysos, Kamiros – each controlling their own territory because the island's scale and terrain made unified rule impractical. They competed, cooperated, and eventually faded into the larger Roman structure.

We return to Rhodes town mid to late afternoon.

Overnight in Rhodes.

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Rhodes - Ferry to Nisyros

This morning we ferry to Nisyros — a volcano rising from the sea, still steaming. The crossing takes roughly two and a half hours, arriving with the afternoon ahead.

Nisyros sits atop an active volcano. Greece's youngest volcano. Population approximately 1,000. The island features one of the world's largest hydrothermal craters, natural hot springs with waters ranging from 30 to 60 degrees Celsius. The oldest rock formations date 160,000 years back; the youngest are approximately 15,000 years old. The island is, geologically speaking, a teenager.

In Homer's Iliad, Nisyros contributed ships to the Greek force sailing against Troy. Later it joined the Athenian alliance. Today the economy runs on fishing, agriculture, tourism, and mineral extraction — pumice and perlite quarried from volcanic deposits and shipped worldwide. The island is literally being mined, slowly disassembled, a resource base rather than an agricultural one.

Our hotel sits near Mandraki, the island's small port and capital. Narrow lanes wind through a medieval castle district. Whitewashed houses, traditional architecture — the island has resisted major development, partly because it's less accessible, partly because tourism never arrived at scale.

Mandraki's Archaeological Museum displays artifacts revealing the island's long history. The Folklore Museum preserves photographs and objects from recent centuries. Local specialties include pythia — a chickpea-based dish — and koukouzina, a traditional spirit distilled from grapes and figs.

NOTE: Ferry schedules are subject to change based on weather, vessel availability, and seasonal variations. The sequence of islands visited and specific sightseeing activities may vary for your chosen departure date.

Overnight on Nisyros.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Nisyros Touring

We begin at the Volcanological Museum in Nikia village, which provides essential context for understanding what we'll encounter today. Nikia sits 400 metres above sea level, close enough to the volcano to command panoramic views across the island and the surrounding Aegean.

The island's primary attraction is the crater Stefanos — 260 to 330 metres in diameter, 27 metres deep. Pyroclastic deposits and volcanic mud cover the surrounding rocks. Steam vents perforate the crater floor. The landscape is genuinely otherworldly: grey mud, sulphurous vents, mineral deposits in shades of ochre and rust, geometry that suggests the moon more than the Mediterranean.

We also visit Paleokastro, the island's ancient acropolis — 4th century BC, constructed from volcanic stone, the defensive walls still standing above Mandraki. Ancient builders working with the difficult, brittle material the island provided. It held enemies for centuries until enemies didn't matter anymore.

Our touring includes Emporios, a village perched 400 metres above sea level. The Greek government designated it as architecture of high cultural importance because it retained its traditional character despite modern pressure.

Overnight on Nisyros.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Nisyros - Ferry to Symi

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We depart very early this morning for Symi – a crossing that tests the commitment but rewards it. The ferry takes three hours across open water. We arrive mid-morning with the afternoon ahead.

Yialos – Symi's main harbour – presents itself as something genuinely unusual. Neoclassical merchant mansions cascade down a hillside in pastel hues, amphitheatre-style, each one facing the water where everyone could see it. We walk the waterfront, orienting ourselves to the town's geometry and energy. This is architecture as economic statement – the moment when maritime wealth knew exactly what to build.

The afternoon is deliberately unstructured. This is rest and settling-in time. Swimming in the harbour if the mood strikes. A taverna lunch at your own pace. Exploring the steep lanes at leisure without a schedule. The island's fishing heritage remains visible: boats depart daily, nets are hauled, the rhythm of the place reveals itself when you're not rushing through it.

Local tavernas serve garides – small sweet prawns caught in surrounding waters, traditionally eaten whole because the shells are delicate enough to be edible. The island hasn't fully pivoted to tourism, so you still eat what the sea provides.

Overnight on Symi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Symi Touring

We visit Chorio, the upper village perched 200+ metres above Yialos harbour. Rather than climbing the 500 stone steps of Kali Strata, we travel by coach through the upper town – passing neoclassical houses in various states of preservation, some lovingly restored, others standing as ruins, which is their own kind of honesty about what happened when the merchant economy shifted elsewhere.

The elevated position provides views across the harbour and surrounding sea. An ancient acropolis occupied this ridge in antiquity. The Knights of Saint John constructed a castle here in the 15th century, designed to protect against pirate raids. The Ottomans conquered it in 1522. Today there's not much left – the stone was repurposed, the strategic value evaporated – but the elevated position still says what it always said: control the high ground, command the harbour, manage the sea approaches.

We visit the 18th-century Panormitis Monastery, the Archangel Michael. Church, bell tower, two small museums displaying ecclesiastical artifacts and folk traditions. For those with energy after the monastery, your Tour Leader can lead you on one of Symi's most satisfying walks: a gentle descent from the Chorio neighbourhood down to the small seaside village of Pedi, about an hour each way on a well-marked path. The route trades the famous harbour bustle for quiet lanes, lizards on stone walls, and a fishing village that hasn't reconfigured itself for visitors.

Those who'd rather linger over a coffee in Yialos are equally well-placed. Along the waterfront, merchants sell Symi sponges – natural sea sponges, silica and calcium formations, harvested from surrounding waters, cleaned and dried. The sponge trade shaped the eastern Mediterranean economy for centuries.

Overnight on Symi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Symi - Ferry to Kalymnos

This morning we ferry to Kalymnos – roughly two hours across open water to an island that had to completely reinvent itself. We arrive mid-morning.

Kalymnos built its entire civilization around sponge diving. Nearly all the island's men worked the sponge waters. The industry generated wealth, shaped culture, defined identity. In 1986, a viral disease killed most of the sponge beds. The economic foundation vanished in a season. Rather than fade, Kalymnos adapted. Rock climbing arrived. Tourism developed. New livelihoods emerged. The old identity became heritage, memory.

We transfer to our hotel and settle in. The remainder of the afternoon is yours to explore at your own pace – walk the winding streets of Pothia, sit in a waterfront taverna, absorb the rhythms of a place rebuilding itself.

Kalymnian cuisine reflects both Greek and broader Mediterranean influences. Fila is the local interpretation of stuffed grape leaves.

Avgolemono combines chicken broth, egg yolks, and lemon. Seasonal specialties include Kalymnian salad featuring watermelon during summer months.

Overnight on Kalymnos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Kalymnos Touring

The Archaeological Museum houses artifacts documenting the island's ancient past: prehistoric settlements, classical and Byzantine periods. The collection reveals Kalymnos's steady presence throughout different eras – not famous, not dominant, but consistently inhabited and consistently part of the broader Aegean network.

We visit Agios Savvas, a church perched on the mountainside with expansive views over the town and harbour. The elevated position provides perspective on the island's dramatic topography and its relationship to the surrounding sea.

To understand the sponge industry that defined Kalymnos for generations, we visit one of the island's sponge processing facilities. These operations demonstrate how raw sponges are cleaned, treated, and prepared for market – a process refined over centuries. Some facilities continue serving niche markets; others are closed or converted to other uses. The visible record of economic transition.

For those who'd like to stretch their legs before dinner, the coastal path to Cape Trachilas and the chapel of Agios Fotios makes an ideal afternoon walk – roughly 6.5 km from the village of Kantouni, following the southwestern coastline to the island's edge and a small whitewashed chapel above the sea. Easy going with rewarding views, and no transport required. Your Tour Leader can point you in the right direction or join the group depending on interest.

Those preferring a slower afternoon will find a waterfront taverna and a glass of local wine an equally sound choice.

Overnight on Kalymnos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Kalymnos - Ferry to Leros

Today we ferry to Leros – a short crossing arriving at Agia Marina. According to mythology, the goddess Artemis came to Leros seeking solitude. The island maintains this character – hidden beaches and bays scattered along its coastline, traditional and neoclassical houses in settlements, a rhythm of life that remains deliberately unhurried.

Leros is different from the islands we've visited. Founded as Porto Lagos in the 1930s during Italian occupation, the island's main port – Lakki – represents a distinctive moment in European urban planning: rationalist architecture, wide streets lined with eucalyptus trees, art deco and Italo-Mediterranean buildings arranged with geometric precision. It's an open-air museum of 1930s idealism, preserved not by nostalgia but by geography. Tourism never arrived at scale, so the architecture never needed updating.

We transfer to our hotel and settle in. Depending on our arrival time, your Tour Leader may suggest/lead an informal orientation walk in the port area to observe the distinctive architecture and get a sense of the island's unhurried pace.

Overnight on Leros.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Leros: Pantelio Castle & Leisure Time

This morning your Tour Leader leads an optional walk to Pantelio Castle and the island's famous windmills – a gentle climb from Platanos along a well-marked trail, rising through the ridge to six large stone windmills standing in a row above the town. The path continues to the Byzantine Castle of Pantelio, 11th century, occupying a rocky outcrop at the hill's summit with sweeping views over the bays of Agia Marina

and Panteli and the surrounding sea. The walk takes roughly an hour and a half at a comfortable pace. Those who prefer a slower morning are equally welcome to find a café table and let Leros come to them.

The afternoon is yours entirely. Your Tour Leader can help arrange a boat trip from Agia Marina harbour to the neighbouring island of Lipsi – a small, almost car-free island of about 700 people, white chapels, clear water, and a pace of life that makes Leros feel metropolitan.

Closer to home, the Military Museum occupies Italian-built tunnels from the Second World War, focused on the 1943 Battle of Leros – a fierce, largely forgotten engagement in which British and German forces fought for control of the island's deep-water harbour.

The Historical and Folklore Museum in Bellenis Tower displays wartime photographs, traditional instruments, and manuscripts. If the afternoon calls for nothing more ambitious than a waterfront taverna and a plate of whatever came off the boat this morning, that's also Leros doing its job.

Overnight on Leros.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Lakki Bay & Castle Sightseeing

No visit to Leros is complete without the island's castle – the Castle of the Virgin, located atop Pityki Hill 200 metres above sea level. Byzantine construction on the site of an ancient fort. It houses the Monastery of the Virgin Mary, whose icon, according to legend, appeared from the sea and is believed to possess healing powers. Rather than climbing the 500 steps from Platanos, we drive through the village, arriving at the elevated position with sweeping views of the bays of Agia Marina and Panteli.

The coastal town of Agia Marina has grown to merge with Platanos, creating Leros's largest settlement. We walk its cobblestone streets past neoclassical mansions – some showing Egyptian influences, reflecting the island's connections to broader Mediterranean trade networks – traditional houses, and bougainvillea-filled courtyards. The architecture demonstrates the prosperity certain families achieved through maritime commerce – a pattern repeated across the Dodecanese.

We visit the Archaeological Museum, displaying artifacts documenting Leros's long history from ancient through medieval periods.

The Lakki Bay area contains remarkable examples of period architecture: a church, school, hospital, theatre, navy barracks, hotel, and circular agora with clocktower – all designed in the distinctive Italo-Mediterranean rationalist style. Mussolini envisioned Leros as Nea Polis (New City) – a planned settlement on former marshland, positioned to serve as the main port of Fascist Italy's Mediterranean navy. The harbour is the largest natural deep-water anchorage in the Mediterranean, protected from winds by surrounding mountains. The occupation ended. The architecture remains.

Our tour continues to a local winery where we learn about wine production on the island. The visit includes tasting and lunch featuring local ingredients and traditional preparations. This evening we gather for our final dinner in the Dodecanese.

Overnight on Leros.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

Day 13 Leros - Fly to Athens

Today we fly to Athens, the capital of Greece and the historical capital of Europe. Upon arrival we transfer to our central hotel.

Athens has a long history dating from the first settlement in the Neolithic age; in the 5th Century BC, the city's values and civilization acquired a universal significance. In 1834, it became the capital of the modern Greek state and an attractive modern metropolis with unrivalled charm.

Flight schedule permitting, we may be able to achieve some informal sightseeing upon arrival. If you would like to add an optional two-day guided extension in Athens, please refer to tour GD2.

Overnight in Athens.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure

Departure from Athens.

KALO TAXIDI/BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast