

GREECE'S DODECANESE ISLANDS with Athens Extension

Rhodes, Symi, Nisyros, Kalymnos & Leros

16 days

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Day 1 Arrival on Rhodes

Today we arrive on the island of Rhodes.

Although it's the capital of the Dodecanese island group today, Rhodes is not one of the original 12 islands that willingly submitted to Ottoman rule and thus is not historically part of the Dodecanese. That said, it still makes ample sense to start our Dodecanese explorations here.

The Dodecanese, in addition to the larger 12, also consist over 150 smaller islands and islets in the southeastern Aegean, close to Turkey's Western Anatolian coast. Many of the islands can therefore be considered to belong geographically to Asia, though ethnically and culturally all are very decidedly Greek.

These days it is relatively easy to visit many of the islands by plane or ferry, but historically they were quite remote from the mainland and from each other. This remoteness, as well as the dry climate, mountainous terrain and poor soil on many of the islands, forced the inhabitants to become seafarers, merchants, fishermen, and sponge divers.

Upon arrival transfer to our hotel located in the heart of the old city of Rhodes.

Overnight in Rhodos.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Rhodes Touring

Rhodes has architecture that looks like nowhere else in Greece, stemming from Medieval times when the Knights Hospitaller wrapped the capital in impenetrable walls to repel attacks by the Ottomans.

Today's on-foot exploration will include visit the Castle (aka Palace of Grand Masters), which features turreted towers as perfect as they were back in the 14th century. This rare example of Gothic architecture in Greece was possibly built using stones taken from one of the wonders of the ancient world, the Colossus of Rhodes. Destroyed when an arms store in the nearby Church of St. John exploded in 1856, it was rebuilt by the Italians and was the summer retreat of King Victor Emmanuel and Mussolini.

The Knights of St John was a religious order of the church of Rome founded in Amalfi in the 11th century. They went to Jerusalem initially to minister to the needs of the pilgrims who arrived there and soon extended their duties to tending the poor and sick of the Holy Land. Over the years they became increasingly militant, joining forces with the Knights Templars and the Teutonic Knights of St Mary in battles against infidels.

We'll also have a walking exploration of the old town of Rhodos, a UNESCO World Heritage site and the largest and best preserved fortified city in Europe.

Overnight in Rhodos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Rhodes: Acropolis of Lindos

This morning we head out of town by bus, stopping at Lindos to visit the Acropolis and to have a wander about this lively village, a unique monument of preservation. The beauty of the castle, the Acropolis of Athena Lindia on the top, with St. Paul's Bay (where the Apostle arrived in 58 AD) and the paved streets of the village captivate visitors. A walk through its narrow paved streets reveals the beauty of the traditional island architecture.

On the way back to Rhodes we drive across the island from east to west coast, passing through villages and densely wooded areas. We reach the top of Filerimos Mountain, with its marvellous panoramic view. We then come to the ruins of the acropolis of the ancient Lalussos where we have one of the best panoramic views of Ixia, one of the biggest tourist resorts in Rhodes.

We return to Rhodes town mid-late afternoon.

Overnight in Rhodes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Rhodes - Ferry to Symi

Today we aim for a morning ferry crossing from Rhodes to the nearby island of Symi in order to maximize our time on this splendid little island (journey time +/- one hour*).

Often considered to be the most beautiful of all Greek islands, Symi is dotted with beaches and monasteries. But Yialos (Gialos), the main harbour area, is the primary draw for most visitors. With its ever-present neoclassical architecture and myriad pastel hues, the harbour has been touted as one of Greece's most beautiful, a bold claim that's hard to refute once you've seen it in person.

Arriving late morning will give us the balance of the day to settle in and explore the main harbour of Yialos after a break for lunch (we may have to store our luggage at the hotel until check-in later in the day).

Speaking of lunch, if you're fond of seafood, one of the things you must do while on Symi island is to try the deliciously fresh Symi shrimp that are served up in almost every restaurant around town. These little 'garadaki symiako' are the taste of the island and a favourite appetizer among locals and visitors alike. The plate of sweet fresh shrimp is served simply with a squeeze of lemon and is eaten whole thanks to their delicately soft shells.

This afternoon we'll explore the main harbour town of Yialos, a stunning scene with a sea of colours rippling down the hillside. Symi's ever-present hills and stairs will make you feel better about indulging in a nice lunch; you'll be getting a workout just exploring town. The island of Symi is actually amongst the top 5 places in the world in terms of longevity, with residents well into their 90s still scaling staircases with their daily catch and freshly baked bread from the waterfront.

Overnight on Symi.

* All ferry crossing durations listed in our program are approximate and subject to change depending on ferry company, vessel type, and scheduling which is subject to change. It is also possible that the final order of the islands visited may vary from this version of the itinerary.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Symi Touring

This morning, above the main town on the top of the hill, we'll find the small village of Chorio. Although it's geographically close to the port, it feels like a world away. To reach Chorio on foot, you'd have to walk up 500 (!) stone steps, known as "Kali Strata." To save some time (and your feet) we'll cover the distance by small touring bus instead.

On your right and left you will see plenty of fantastic neoclassical houses. Some of them have been restored, while others are in ruins. On the way up, you will be rewarded with fantastic views of the beautiful bay. Like most of the Greek islands, Symi has a long and rich history and has been inhabited for thousands of years. Since the ancient times, this Acropolis has loomed above the town below. In the 15th century, the Knights of Saint John built a castle over the ruins of the ancient acropolis, designed to protect the island against pirate raids – and it did its job well before finally falling to the Ottomans in 1522. There's not much of the castle grounds left, but you can still enjoy the lovely views over the harbour.

We also visit the 18th-century Monastery of Archangel Michael, also known as Panormitis Monastery, is one of the most popular attractions on Symi island. The church and bell tower are very impressive – take your time to observe the interior of the church. Within the monastery grounds there are also two small museums, an Ecclesiastical Museum and a Folklore Museum.

These islands are (as are most in Greece) known for their lively tavernas serving fresh fish and seafood dishes, like kalamari or grilled octopus.

At some point during (or after) our day's sightseeing you'll have the opportunity to sample some of the local specialties and perhaps do some shopping. All along the port, you'll find merchants selling Symian sponges, natural loofahs formed in the sea from silica, calcium, or calcium carbonate materials.

Overnight on Symi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Symi - Ferry to Nisyros

Today we ferry to the quirky island of Nisyros,* one of the only Greek islands with its own volcano, and a population of only about 1,000.

A small, quiet island, Nisyros is most well-known for its active volcano that has one of the world's largest hydrothermal craters, as well as its hot springs. The volcano is the youngest one in Greece; it is an active volcano like the ones at Methana, on Milos Island, and on Santorini. The oldest rock formations found around the entire island date back 160,000 years, while the youngest ones, about 15,000 years. It also has one of the biggest hydrothermal craters in the world, with thermal springs having warm waters ranging from 30 to 60 degrees Celsius.

Historically, Nisyros is mentioned in Homer's Iliad as part of the army that descended on the Trojans. They were also part of the Athenian alliance after the Persian Wars for a brief period of time. The island's economy is based on fishing, agriculture, and tourism; however, the biggest source of income for the island is the production and trade of pumice and perlite.

Our hotel will likely be in the vicinity of Mandraki, the port town of Nisyros and the island's capital -- small but charming, with a few shops, traditional restaurants and cafes with a view to the sea. It's a fantastic little town to explore on foot, walking up and down the narrow alleys of the medieval castle, and discovering the traditional architecture and pretty little details.

Mandraki also has a couple of museums. There's an Archaeological Museum, where we will learn more about the history of the island, and a small Folklore Museum, where you will see some very interesting old photos and other exhibits.

While on Nisyros, we may be able to sample pythia, savory specialty based on chickpeas. It may be compared to the Middle Eastern falafel, which is prepared with similar ingredients. The adventurous may want to sample koukouzina, a traditional spirit distilled from grapes and figs, and similar to raki. This alcoholic beverage is typically produced at old local distilleries with a preparation process that follows age-old traditional methods handed down for generations.

Overnight on Nisyros.

* PLEASE NOTE that this journey will likely involve a stop at the island of Kos, which will involve us being picked up for a road transfer to a different port on Kos from which ferries to Nisyros depart. And in case you're wondering, we don't include Kos on our itinerary as it was not one of the original 12 islands of the Dodecanese. That said, ever-changing ferry schedules may necessitate an overnight here at some point.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Nisyros Touring

Because exploring the volcano is best enjoyed after visiting the Volcanological Museum, it'll be our first stop this morning in Nikia village. It features exhibits and information about many volcanoes in Greece and abroad. Nikia itself is said to have the best square in the entire Aegean, so it's also a must-see! At 400 m above sea level and quite close to the volcano, it has breathtaking views of the entire island and the Aegean.

Onto the biggest attraction on the island and the main reason why most people visit Nisyros -- the volcano located right in the middle of the island and one of the most impressive landscapes to be seen in Greece. We'll visit the crater called Stefanos, whose diameter is between 260m to 330m and 27m deep. The rocks all around are covered in pyroclastic deposits and volcanic mud.

And of course we'd be remiss not to visit the local acropolis, the Paleokastro, a little-visited but incredibly impressive ancient site dating from the 4th century BC. The tall, thick walls are constructed out of volcanic stone; reigning over Mandraki, its walls are still standing and still impressive.

While on Nisyros, we'll also visit the remarkable village of Emporios, sprinkled over the top of a hill 400 m above sea level. The government

has cited Emporios as having architecture of "high cultural importance"; indeed the village has retained its authenticity with a traditional feel and charm.

Overnight on Nisyros.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Nisyros - Ferry to Kalymnos

Today we'll travel by (a hopefully direct) ferry to the island of Kalymnos.

Kalymnos is famous for its sponge fishing industry in which almost all the men of the island were, at one time, diving for sponges. The industry was severely impacted in 1986 when a viral disease killed most of the sponges, along with the economic basis of the island.

On arrival we'll visit the town of Pothia, a great place to explore on foot and home to many of the island's most important historical landmarks. The winding streets of the town are filled with shops, cafes, and restaurants, and there is always something new to discover. In your free time, you might choose to visit Kalymnos Sponge Museum dedicated to the history and culture of sponge diving in Kalymnos. The museum contains a collection of artifacts and exhibits that provide insight into the island's history.

Kalymnos has a rich and delicious cuisine that is influenced by both Greek and pan-Mediterranean flavours. Some of the dishes you may be able to try while on the island include fila, a Kalymnian take on stuffed grape leaves; and avgolemono, a classic sauce of chicken broth, egg yolks, and lemon juice. Another plate we might try (seasonally) is the Kalymnian salad, which includes watermelon.

Overnight on Kalymnos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Kalymnos Touring

Today explore the most rugged and third largest of the Dodecanese islands.

The Archaeological Museum of Kalymnos is a good place to start (if not already visited yesterday), dedicated to the archaeology and history of the island. The museum contains a collection of artifacts and exhibits that provide insight into the island's ancient past.

Of course it's always important to visit at least one church and/or monastery, and Agios Savvas is an excellent choice. The church is known for its stunning views and peaceful atmosphere, and it is a great place to escape the busy-ness of town. It offers an incredible mountaintop view of the city and the port.

It's also important on these islands to learn more about the sponge industry specific to Kalymnos, with a visit to one of the sponge-processing factories/museums.

Balance of the day at leisure.

Overnight on Kalymnos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Kalymnos - Ferry to Leros

Our next, and sadly our last island, is Leros, with a ferry crossing of about an hour.

Picture the scene: the ferry has just docked and you immediately realize that you've arrived at a harbour like no other in Greece. The main port, Lakki, was founded under the name Porto Lagos during the 1930s by the Italians (who had occupied the Dodecanese islands), and to this day still amazes with its Italo-Mediterranean features. Lakki is an open-air museum of wide streets with eucalyptus trees and eye-catching

art deco buildings of tremendous artistic value, as they represent the only example of authentic "rationalistic" architecture outside Italy.

Leros is – according to mythology – where the goddess Artemis came to get away from it all. These days it offers visitors the same sense of escape. It's a heavenly refuge made up of hidden beaches and bays with an assortment of traditional and neoclassical houses, as well as a deep history and culinary culture.

Ferry schedules permitting, we'll hopefully be able to begin our sightseeing program upon arrival (otherwise we'll defer till tomorrow morning). While on Leros, we'll explore the area of Lakki Bay -- look out for the church, school, hospital, theatre, navy barracks, hotel and circular agora with its clocktower – all in Italo-Mediterranean style. They are revolutionary in concept and reveal the vision behind what was once referred to as the 'Nea Polis'. Indeed, Mussolini envisaged Leros as a 'New Rome' and went about constructing a new city on what was once marshland, making it the main port of Fascists Italy's navy with the biggest natural deep water harbour in the Mediterranean, protected from winds by the nearby mountains.

Overnight on Leros.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Leros: At Leisure

A well-deserved free day to rest up and soak in as much Dodecanese atmosphere and ambiance before our journey sadly comes to a close.

Of course your Tour Leader is available to make suggestions and provide advice on how to accomplish your activities of interest. And, of course, you're not obliged to do anything apart from joining us for our last evening meal in the Dodecanese (and even that is negotiable ;)

A few ideas:

War buffs may consider the military museum, Deposito Di Guerra, a true gem allowing you to travel back to the past and unravel the island's fascinating history, focusing on WW2 and the Battle of Leros in 1943. In the same vein, the War Museum is housed in a tunnel built by the Italians during the Second World War.

The Historical and Folklore Museum is housed in Bellenis Tower on the way to Alinda. It includes photos from the Second World War, traditional instruments, old maps, and manuscripts.

Hikers may be drawn to a jaunt to the Pantelio Castle & Windmills, a 2.6-km loop trail near Leros town. Generally considered a moderately challenging route, it takes about an hour on average to complete (full details available on the free "AllTrails" app).

Explore fishing villages -- seafood tavernas along the shoreline, fishing boats bobbing in the sea, happy faces enjoying local delicacies, as well as freshly-caught fish, traditional cafes, and a beach with clear blue water (ideal for a swim followed by a Greek coffee).

Farther afield, one can book a boat trip on a wooden boat from Agia Marina harbour that takes you on an adventure to the neighbouring island of Lipsi and other wonderful islets.

Another highlight of your time on Leros will be discovering the island's rich culinary heritage. Don't miss out on the local mizithra cheese and honey, as well as pies, almond sweets, traditional soumada and gavafes – a fruit believed to be a relative of the guava that is only found on Leros.

This evening we reconvene for our last dinner in these magical islands – Yamas!

Overnight on Leros.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Leros: Lakki Bay Sightseeing

No time spent in Leros is complete without a visit to the island's castle (also known as the Castle of the Virgin). It is located at the top of Pityki Hill, 200m above sea level, and was built by the Byzantines on the site of an ancient fort. It houses the miraculous icon of the Monastery of the Virgin Mary which, according to legend, appeared out of the sea and is believed to have healing powers.

One can walk the 500-odd steps up to the castle from Platanos (the capital and oldest settlement of Leros), but we'll drive up through the village of Panteli. However one chooses to get there, we'll enjoy the same sweeping views of the bays of Agia Marina and Panteli amidst a background of low mountaintops, fields, and valleys.

The coastal town of Agia Marina has, over the years, become one with Platanos, effectively becoming the largest settlement on Leros. We'll walk its cobblestone streets and admire the neoclassical mansions with Egyptian influences, traditional houses, bougainvillea-filled courtyards, earth tones and the show-stopping white windows that serve to underline Leros's architectural wealth. As we stroll the streets, we'll visit the Archaeological Museum, where we can learn about Leros's history.

We continue to Hatzidakis Winery, founded in 1997 and located at the village of Pyrgos Kallistis. The new owners spotted a cave at the end of the property in which they created a "kanavaki," a small underground winery, which slowly took shape with patience, persistence, enthusiasm, passion, and with "meraki" as they say in Greek, a term that describes a scenario in which a person has really put a part of themselves into something. As part of our visit, we'll enjoy a tour and wine tasting followed by a leisurely lunch.

And since we're nearby, we visit one more monastery, that of "Profiti Ilias-Santorini" before making our way back to the hotel.

This evening we reconvene for our last dinner in these magical islands – Yamas!

Overnight in 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.

Overnight in Athens.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Athens: City Touring

Today we enjoy a guided tour of Athens, the heart and soul of Greece.* A large part of the town's historic centre has been converted into a 3-kilometre pedestrian zone (one of the largest in Europe), leading to the major archaeological sites, reconstructing -- to a large degree -- the ancient landscape, thus allowing us to avoid the city's horrendous traffic. As such, much/most of our tour today will be conducted ON FOOT at a leisurely pace.

We start at the Acropolis (with hopes to beat the heat/crowds), near the site of the Dionysos Theatre. Constructed in the 6th century BC, it is one of the world's oldest theatres and the place where the great works of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and Aristophanes were first performed. We will also see a more recent theatre, the Odeon of Herod Atticus from the second century AD, which is still used for concerts and performances.

Ascending to the top of the Acropolis, we will see magnificent buildings dating from the 5th century BC, the Golden Age of Athens. On the highest point on the Acropolis is the Parthenon, often considered the finest monument to Greek civilization. The temple was dedicated to Athena "Parthenos," the virgin and patron goddess of the city.

After our Acropolis tour, we'll descend by foot and enter the Ancient Agora located adjacent to the Plaka, the old town of Athens. Among the numerous sights in this archaeological park are the well-preserved Temple of Hephaistos and the landmark Roman era Tower of the Winds.

Our guided tour ends with a guided visit of the Acropolis Museum, located at the foot of the Acropolis. The museum was built to house every artifact found on the rock, from the Greek Bronze Age to Roman and Byzantine Greece; nearly 4,000 objects are exhibited over an area of 14,000 square metres. After our tour you are free to wander and explore on your own or make your way back to the hotel with your Tour Leader's assistance.

* The exact order of our sightseeing in Athens may be altered by your Tour Leader depending on several variables and their judgement on how best to run today's tour. Please note that our time in Athens may be managed by a local guide (not an AA Tour Leader) for groups of 6 or less.

Overnight in Athens.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Athens: Archaeological Museum & Exarhia

This morning we'll be transferred (by bus) to the extraordinary Archaeological Museum of Athens, a mandatory visit for any tour of Greece! We'll enjoy a guided tour through the museum and then check out some lesser-visited corners of the city on foot and experience the vibe and energy of modern Athens.

While our morning thus has focused on the distant past -- the birth of democracy in ancient Greece and the institutions that came from this -- the balance of our day (on FOOT) reveals what is happening in modern Athens. Our walk will take us first to the Athens Central Market -- one of the liveliest places in the city, this is where many Athenians come to buy fresh vegetables and fruit, sea food, meat and poultry, nuts, grains, herbs and spices. It is also a good place to stop and have a drink, no matter the hour.

Our walking tour through the city also takes us to a district of the city known as Exarhia. Although no one would ever call it beautiful, and it certainly is not included on most tourist itineraries, Exarhia is steeped in recent history. In 1973, the student uprising which was crushed by the ruling junta of the time, eventually led to the fall of the much-hated military dictatorship. In the last couple of years, it was this Bohemian university district that often played a leading role in the uprisings against the police and the state. Anarchy and democracy -- both words of Greek origin, and both playing a role in the making of tomorrow's Greece.

We return to the hotel for a bit of a break before our farewell dinner.

Overnight in Athens.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Departure

Departure from Athens.

KALO TAXIDI/BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast