

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 Rhodes serves as capital of the Dodecanese island group today, it was not one of the original twelve islands that gave the archipelago its name. The Dodecanese (literally "twelve islands") consists of these historic twelve plus over 150 smaller islands and islets scattered across the southeastern Aegean, close to Turkey's western Anatolian coast. While geographically closer to Asia, the islands remain decidedly Greek in culture and character.

Historically isolated from the mainland and from each other, the Dodecanese developed distinctive traditions. The dry climate, mountainous terrain, and poor soil on many islands forced inhabitants to become seafarers, merchants, fishermen, and sponge divers rather than farmers.

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

Overnight in Rhodos.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Rhodes Touring

Rhodes preserves architecture unlike anywhere else in Greece, a legacy of the medieval period when the Knights Hospitaller wrapped the capital in massive walls to repel Ottoman attacks.

Our walking tour includes the Palace of the Grand Masters, a rare example of Gothic architecture in Greece featuring turreted towers that appear as perfect as they were in the 14th century. The fortress was possibly constructed using stones from the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. When an arms store in the nearby Church of St. John exploded in 1856, the palace was destroyed, then later rebuilt by Italian occupiers as a summer retreat for King Victor Emmanuel and Mussolini.

The Knights of St John originated as a religious order founded in 11th century Amalfi. Initially ministering to pilgrims in Jerusalem, they extended their mission to tending the poor and sick of the Holy Land. Over time they became increasingly militant, joining forces with the Knights Templars and Teutonic Knights in battles against perceived threats to Christendom.

We explore the old town of Rhodes, a UNESCO World Heritage site and the largest and best preserved fortified medieval city in Europe. The massive defensive walls and labyrinthine streets reveal the strategic importance this island held for centuries.

Overnight in Rhodes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Rhodes: Acropolis of Lindos

This morning we travel by coach to Lindos to visit the Acropolis and explore this well-preserved village. The Acropolis of Athena Lindia crowns the hilltop above the settlement, overlooking St. Paul's Bay where the Apostle is said to have arrived in 58 AD. Below, narrow paved streets wind through the village, lined with traditional island architecture characteristic of the Dodecanese.

On our return journey to Rhodes, we drive across the island from the east to west coast, passing through villages and wooded areas. We ascend Filerimos Mountain for panoramic views, then visit the ruins of the ancient acropolis of Ialyssos, one of three major city-states that once controlled Rhodes. From this elevated position, the coastal resort area of Ixia stretches below, demonstrating how modern development has transformed the island's accessible coastlines.

We return to Rhodes town mid to late afternoon.

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Overnight in Rhodes.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Rhodes - Ferry to Symi

This morning we take the ferry from Rhodes to nearby Symi, approximately one hour across the water.

Symi's main harbour, Yialos, presents a striking scene of neoclassical architecture cascading down the hillside in a palette of pastel hues. The amphitheatre-like setting has earned recognition as one of Greece's most beautiful harbours, a claim that holds merit upon arrival.

We arrive late morning with the balance of the day to settle in and explore the waterfront after lunch. The island's steep terrain means exploring involves considerable climbing, though the exertion proves worthwhile for the views and atmosphere of this remarkably preserved town.

Symi developed its distinctive architecture during a prosperous period when the island's shipbuilding industry and sponge diving brought wealth to local families. The neoclassical mansions reflect this maritime heritage, their tall windows and elegant proportions speaking to an era when Symi's sailors and merchants traded across the Mediterranean.

Local tavernas serve fresh Symi shrimp, small sweet prawns caught in surrounding waters and traditionally eaten whole due to their delicate shells. The island's fishing heritage remains visible in the harbour, where boats depart daily and return with catches destined for evening tables.

Overnight on Symi.

NOTE: All ferry crossing durations are approximate and subject to change depending on vessel type and scheduling.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Symi Touring

This morning we visit Chorio, the small village perched on the hilltop above Symi's main port. Rather than climbing the 500 stone steps of Kali Strata on foot, we travel by small coach, passing neoclassical houses in various states of preservation, some restored and others standing as ruins.

Like most Greek islands, Symi has been inhabited for thousands of years. An ancient acropolis has occupied this strategic hilltop since antiquity. In the 15th century, the Knights of Saint John constructed a castle over the ancient ruins, designed to protect the island against pirate raids. The fortification served its purpose until the Ottoman conquest in 1522. Though little remains of the castle today, the elevated position provides sweeping views over the harbour below.

We also visit the 18th century Monastery of Archangel Michael, known as Panormitis Monastery, one of Symi's most significant religious sites. The church and bell tower demonstrate traditional island ecclesiastical architecture, while two small museums within the monastery grounds display ecclesiastical artifacts and folk traditions.

Along the waterfront, merchants sell Symi sponges, natural sea sponges formed from silica and calcium materials harvested from surrounding waters, continuing the island's long association with the sea.

Overnight on Symi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Symi - Ferry to Nisyros

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Today we ferry to Nisyros, one of the few Greek islands with an active volcano and a population of approximately 1,000.

The volcano, Greece's youngest, features one of the world's largest hydrothermal craters alongside natural hot springs with waters ranging from 30 to 60 degrees Celsius. The oldest rock formations around the island date back 160,000 years, while the youngest are approximately 15,000 years old.

In Homer's Iliad, Nisyros contributed ships to the Greek army that sailed against Troy. Later the island joined the Athenian alliance following the Persian Wars. Today the economy relies on fishing, agriculture, tourism, and the production of pumice and perlite extracted from volcanic deposits.

Our hotel will be near Mandraki, the island's small port and capital, characterized by narrow lanes winding through a medieval castle district. The town's traditional architecture and whitewashed houses create an atmosphere distinct from more developed islands.

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

Overnight on Nisyros.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Nisyros Touring

We begin at the Volcanological Museum in Nikia village, which provides context for understanding the volcanic landscape we'll encounter today. The museum features exhibits about volcanoes in Greece and internationally. Nikia itself sits 400 metres above sea level, close enough to the volcano to offer panoramic views across the island and the Aegean.

The island's primary attraction is the volcano located at its centre, creating one of Greece's most distinctive landscapes. We visit the crater called Stefanos, measuring between 260 and 330 metres in diameter and 27 metres deep. Pyroclastic deposits and volcanic mud cover the surrounding rocks, while steam vents perforate the crater floor.

We also visit Paleokastro, the island's ancient acropolis dating from the 4th century BC. Constructed from volcanic stone, the thick defensive walls still stand above Mandraki, testament to the skill of ancient builders who worked this challenging material.

Our touring includes the village of Emporios, perched 400 metres above sea level. The Greek government has designated Emporios as having architecture of high cultural importance, the village having retained its traditional character and layout despite the pressures of modern development.

Overnight on Nisyros.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Nisyros - Ferry to Kalymnos

Today we travel by ferry to the island of Kalymnos.

Kalymnos developed around a sponge fishing industry that once employed nearly all the island's men. The economic foundation collapsed in 1986 when a viral disease killed most of the sponge beds, forcing the island to adapt to alternative livelihoods including tourism and rock climbing, for which Kalymnos has become internationally known.

On arrival we visit Pothia, the island's capital and main port. The town's winding streets contain shops, cafes, and restaurants, along with several historically significant buildings. The Kalymnos Sponge Museum documents the history and culture of sponge diving through artifacts and exhibits that illuminate this dangerous profession and its central role in island life.

Kalymnian cuisine reflects both Greek and broader Mediterranean influences. Traditional dishes include fila, the local interpretation of stuffed grape leaves, and avgolemono, the classic sauce combining chicken broth, egg yolks, and lemon juice. Seasonal specialties may include Kalymnian salad featuring watermelon during summer months.

Overnight on Kalymnos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Kalymnos Touring

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

The Archaeological Museum of Kalymnos houses artifacts and exhibits documenting the island's ancient past, from prehistoric settlements through classical and Byzantine periods. The collection reveals Kalymnos's strategic importance in the Aegean throughout different eras.

We visit Agios Savvas, a church perched on the mountainside offering expansive views over the town and harbour below. 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 of maritime tradition. The industry's decline forced dramatic economic adjustments, though some operations continue serving niche markets.

The balance of the day is yours to explore independently or relax at the hotel.

Overnight on Kalymnos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Kalymnos - Ferry to Leros

Our ferry crossing to Leros takes approximately one hour, arriving at the distinctive harbour of Lakki.

Lakki presents architecture unlike any other Greek port. Founded as Porto Lagos in the 1930s during Italian occupation of the Dodecanese, the town represents authentic rationalistic architecture rarely found outside Italy. Wide streets lined with eucalyptus trees connect art deco and Italo-Mediterranean buildings of significant artistic value, creating an open-air museum of 1930s urban planning.

According to mythology, the goddess Artemis came to Leros seeking solitude. The island maintains this sense of retreat, with hidden beaches and bays scattered along its coastline, traditional and neoclassical houses in its settlements, and a pace of life that remains unhurried.

Ferry schedules permitting, we begin our exploration upon arrival. The Lakki Bay area contains remarkable examples of period architecture including a church, school, hospital, theatre, navy barracks, hotel, and circular agora with clocktower, all designed in the distinctive Italo-Mediterranean style. Mussolini envisioned Leros as a New Rome, constructing what locals called Nea Polis (New City) on former marshland. The site became the main port of Fascist Italy's navy, utilizing the largest natural deep water harbour in the Mediterranean, protected from winds by surrounding 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:

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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 an 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.

Overnight on Leros.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Leros: Lakki Bay Sightseeing

No visit to Leros is complete without exploring the island's castle, also known as the Castle of the Virgin. Located atop Pityki Hill 200 metres above sea level, the fortification was built by Byzantines on the site of an ancient fort. It houses the Monastery of the Virgin Mary, whose miraculous icon, according to legend, appeared from the sea and is believed to possess healing powers.

Rather than walking the 500 steps from Platanos, the island's capital and oldest settlement, we drive up through the village of Panteli. The elevated position provides sweeping views of the bays of Agia Marina and Panteli against a backdrop of low mountaintops, fields, and valleys.

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 showing Egyptian influences, traditional houses, and bougainvillea-filled courtyards. The architecture demonstrates the island's connections to broader Mediterranean trade networks and the prosperity certain families achieved through maritime commerce.

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

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

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.

Flight schedule permitting, we may be able to achieve some informal introductory sightseeing upon arrival.

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