

GREEK ISLAND HOPPING

Santorini, Mykonos, Delos & Crete

14 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Athens

Today we arrive in Athens, the capital of Greece and the historic capital of Europe. Modern Athens is a vibrant and bustling city, a fascinating blend of ancient grandeur and contemporary life. While steeped in the remnants of its glorious past, evident in its numerous archaeological sites, it pulses with the energy of a modern European capital, offering a rich tapestry of culture, commerce, and everyday life.

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): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 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 3 Athens - Ferry to Mykonos

Early this morning we travel by local ferry from Athens' port, Pireaus, to the island of Mykonos.*

From the harbour waterfront, you can watch the local fishing boats, or venture into the labyrinth of dazzling, white-washed streets to the

many churches, tavernas, or shops selling artisan crafts. In the distance stand a string of windmills that once harnessed the breezes of days gone by. The sugar cube buildings are stacked around a cluster of seafront fishermen's dwellings. The labyrinth design was intended to confuse the pirates who plagued Mykonos in the eighteenth and 19th centuries. The whitewashed houses concealing dozens of little churches, shrines and chapels.

* PORTERS ARE GENERALLY NOT AVAILABLE ON THE GREEK ISLES, OR ON FERRIES BETWEEN THEM. You MUST be able to carry / wheel your baggage on and off ferries.

Overnight on Mykonos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Mykonos: Walking Tour & Boat Trip to Delos

This morning we'll take you on an orientation walking tour of Mykonos Chora. We wander the pirate-proof streets of town and see the Paraportiani Church near the quay, an architectural masterpiece of five chapels in one.

We then meet the boat that will take us to the tiny sacred island of Delos (40 minutes away). Delos gives the whole group of islands surrounding it their name, the Cyclades -- so named because they form a circle (kyklos) around Delos. For nearly 1,000 years this sanctuary was the political and religious centre of the Aegean. Leto, pregnant by Zeus, gave birth to the twins Apollo and Artemis on Delos. In the 18th century BC, the annual Delia Festival was established on the island to celebrate the birth of Apollo. Delos was populated during its height in Hellenistic times with wealthy merchants, mariners and bankers from as far away as Egypt and Syria.

During our guided walking tour of Delos, we will see the Agora of the Competialists, Roman merchants or freed slaves who worshipped the guardian spirits of crossroads; the Sanctuary of Apollo, the three temples of Apollo and the Sanctuary of Dionysus. In the House of the Masks we are able to see a mosaic portraying Dionysus riding on a panthers back. The theatre here could seat 5,500 people.

We return to Mykonos where you will have free time to explore Mykonos town on your own.

Overnight on Mykonos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Mykonos - Ferry to Santorini

Today we take a ferry or hydrofoil (depending on scheduling) to the island of Santorini.

Vast geological upheavals have given this island its unique form resulting in the nickname, "Pre-Historic Pompeii." The effect of terracing makes this unlike any other island, Greece's most visually stunning. Santorini is the island of churches, wine, and donkeys! From as early as 3000 BC the island developed as an outpost of Minoan civilization until around 1650 BC when the volcano erupted. At this point the island's history became linked with the legend of Atlantis.

At some point in our visit, we'll stop in at the The Museum of Prehistoric Thera. It was built on the site of the old Ypapanti Church, destroyed in the 1956 earthquake. The museum houses a very large number of ancient artifacts from various excavations on Santorini, such as at Akrotiri and at the nearby Potamos site.

Overnight on Santorini.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Santorini: Akrotiri & Island Tour

Visually, Santorini is the most spectacular of the Cycladic islands. With its brilliant flooded caldera, high cliffs and charming villages, it is the Greek Isle of everyone's dreams. Our coach tour today will take us to Santorini's many highlights.

We begin with a visit to Akrotiri for a thorough guided tour. Excavations have revealed a complete prehistoric Minoan city with squares, streets, and two-storey houses, which contained marvelous frescoes. The buildings date to the late 16th century BC. No skeletons or treasures have been found in Akrotiri, so historians think that the inhabitants were forewarned of the eruption and were able to escape. The excavations have yielded evidence that has revolutionized our knowledge of the Late Bronze Age; indeed the town has been called a "Bronze-age Pompeii."

We will also visit the hilltop village of Pyrgos, once the capital of the island and home to more than 30 churches. The village is composed of traditional houses built around the Venetian Castle and the small streets follow the shape of the hill. Climbing from the square up to the castle of Pyrgos, the stone houses crowd more densely together within the labyrinth of narrow vaulted lanes.

Our drive around the island will also take us up to the Prophet Elias Monastery built on the highest point of the island in 1711 AD. Though we will not visit inside the monastery, the view from here is breathtaking.

Fira is the capital of the island and the most important village. Perched on the edge of an impressive cliff 260m high, the town offers great panoramic views over the submerged volcano. Here the small streets are filled with all kind of shops, cafes, and restaurants. After an orientation walk through the town, you might choose to visit the impressive Archaeological Museum in your spare time (optional). This museum features many artifacts dating back to the time of the Cycladic Civilization. The most impressive legacies of this civilization are the statuettes carved from Parian marble -- the famous Cycladic figurines. Like statuettes of Neolithic times they depicted images of the Great Mother. Other remains include bronze and obsidian tools and weapons, gold jewelry, and stone and clay vases and pots.

Return to Kamari Beach (those who wish to extend their time in Fira can return to Kamari using the public bus system).

Overnight on Santorini.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Santorini: Fira - Imerovigli - Oia / Free Afternoon

This morning (to beat the crowds) we will head to the small town of Oia (pronounced "EE-ah"), situated at the northern tip of the island.*

Built on a steep slope of the caldera, many of Oia's dwellings nestle in the niches hewn in the volcanic rock. This was once a major fishing port but is principally known these days as perhaps the most dramatically-situated towns in the whole of Greece. The peak of prosperity for this small port town was reached in the late 19th and early 20th centuries; at that time the locally based merchant fleet plied its trade in the Eastern Mediterranean, especially from Alexandria to Russia. The two-story captains' houses built on the highest part of the village are a reminder of the village's former affluence. Oia is a place where many artists have found their inspiration... and here we will wander the narrow streets and old ruins, and enjoy the stunning views of the caldera with panoramic views of the rest of Santorini and the Aegean Sea.

After our visit we will double back by road toward Fira, hopping off at a caldera-side district called Imerovigli from where we will walk (downhill) along the rim enjoying the stunning caldera views and dramatic setting. Our route leads through the suburb of Firostefani, with ever-changing views as the perspective of the island changes minute by minute. En route we will look out to Skaros, the remains of a Venetian Castle built in 1207 by Marco Sanudo, the ruler of all Cyclades at that time.

Once we arrive in central Fira, the balance of the day is free to explore on your own. Your Tour Leader is available to assist with options -- perhaps extend your time in Fira, shopping, strolling, soaking it all in, or head down to one of Santorini's famous black beaches or hike up to the ruins of Ancient Thira.

* PLEASE NOTE that the sequence events described above may vary at the Tour Leader's discretion depending on a number of variables, including cruise ship arrivals, weather etc. One constant - to avoid crowding in Oia - will remain a priority. Your Tour Leader will keep you apprised ahead of time.

Overnight on Santorini.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Santorini - Ferry to Iraklion, Crete

Today we travel by ferry or hydrofoil (depending on scheduling) to Crete.

Crete is the largest and most southerly of the Greek Islands, blessed with a magnificent setting of rugged coastal scenery and warm waters. On arrival we will have an easy walking tour of central Iraklion,* including the impressive St Titus Church, Morosini Fountain and other Venetian legacies. The massive walls that surround the town of Iraklion were built by the Venetians in the mid-15th century.

*NOTE: Ferry schedules may require that we have our walking tour tomorrow.

Overnight in Iraklion.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Iraklion: Knossos, Archaeological Museum & Lassithi Plateau

Early this morning we travel the short distance to Knossos where our local guide will show us the ancient palace of King Minos, first built around 1900 BC. In 1700 BC it was destroyed by an earthquake and rebuilt to a grander and more sophisticated design. The city of Knossos consisted of an immense palace, residences of officials and priests, the homes of ordinary people, and burial grounds. The Palace, which covered an area of 22000 sq m (236,682 sq feet), consisted of royal domestic quarters, public reception rooms, shrines, workshops, treasures and storerooms around a central court. Knossos was excavated by Arthur Evans between 1900 and 1930.

We also visit the Archaeological Museum in Iraklion, one of the best museums in Greece. The exhibits, collected from excavations carried out in all parts of Crete, come mainly from the prehistoric era and form a valuable record of the artistic, social and economic life of the island during the ancient period.

This afternoon we will proceed to the Lassithi Plateau, one of the highpoints of Crete, both in altitude and atmosphere, for it is unique: a green carpet hemmed in on all sides by the Diktean Mountains, snowcapped into April and irrigated in summer by windmills. As the excavations carried out on various sites have shown, this inaccessible area has been inhabited since Neolithic times. The plateau was also farmed by the Minoans and later by the Dorians. In 1293, however, it was such a nest of resistance that the Venetians forced everyone out and demolished the villages.

Overnight in Iraklion.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Iraklion - Rethymnon - Chania

We leave Iraklion today and travel to Chania via Rethymnon. The old town here still retains its original aristocratic appearance, with buildings dating back to the 16th century as well as Byzantine and Hellenistic-Roman remains and a small Venetian Harbour. We will have some time here to wander and explore and soak up the charming atmosphere.

We then continue to Chania via the Akrotiri Peninsula, which rises just north of the bay of Suda, one of the biggest natural harbours in Greece. This peninsula east of Chania was once called Kiamon, and today is associated with the liberation struggles of Crete. While on the peninsula we will visit the monastery of Agia Triada, originally built in the 17th century. Today it is one of the few monasteries in Crete where monastic life is practiced.

Chania is a former capital of the island and the site of the ancient Minoan city of Kydonia. In the 13th century, Venice was becoming the maritime master of the eastern Mediterranean. At Chania they built large fortifications against pirates and the Ottoman Turks. Eventually, though, the Ottomans took Chania in the mid-17th century. Today many regard Chania as Crete's most beautiful city.

Overnight in Chania.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Chania: Walking Tour

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This morning we'll delve into the rich history of Crete with a visit to the spectacular Archaeological Museum of Chania. The museum is home to an impressive collection of artifacts that showcase the island's fascinating past, from the Minoan civilization to the Roman era. As we explore the museum's exhibits, we'll gain a deeper understanding of the cultural and historical significance of Crete.

Following our visit to the museum, we'll embark on a guided walking tour of Chania's enchanting old town. We wander the narrow, winding streets of the historic quarter, and visit the Folklore Museum, which offers a glimpse into the traditional way of life in Crete with exhibits featuring local costumes, textiles, and handicrafts.

As we wander through the old town, we'll discover a treasure trove of architectural and historical landmarks. We'll see remnants of the city's Ottoman past, including beautifully preserved Turkish fountains and bathhouses. We'll explore quaint medieval backstreets and alleyways, lined with charming Venetian and Turkish houses, some of which date back to the 16th century. We'll also visit historic mosques and churches, and see impressive fortifications that attest to the city's strategic importance throughout history.

Our walking tour will also take us through the old tradesmen's shops and markets, where we can see artisans at work and sample local delicacies. As we navigate the labyrinthine streets, we'll uncover a host of other secrets and surprises that make Chania one of the most captivating cities in Greece.

The afternoon is yours to enjoy Chania at your own pace. You might choose to visit the famous Chania Market, where you can sample local specialties and shop for souvenirs. Alternatively, you could stroll along the picturesque harbour, admire the stunning views of the sea, or simply sit back and enjoy a coffee or meal at one of the many charming cafes and tavernas. Whatever you choose, you're sure to fall under the spell of this enchanting Greek city.

Overnight in Chania.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Chania - Overnight Ferry to Athens

Today you may choose to continue your explorations of this charming town, visit the beach, or rent a car (international driving permit NOT required; bring your home driver's license) and further explore the hinterland of western Crete on your own. As you drive around the island, you can turn off the main road almost anywhere and find people in agricultural villages going about their daily routine. Your Tour Leader can help you plan your day.

Later this evening we transfer to the port for our overnight ferry to Pireaus, the port of Athens. The ferry is very comfortable with each cabin having two side-by-side beds and private facilities.

Overnight ferry to Athens.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Arrival in Athens: National Archaeological Museum

Early this morning we arrive in Athens.

As our Athens hotel rooms will not be ready for us upon arrival, we will store our luggage at the hotel, enjoy breakfast, and then head out for some morning touring.

We will take the metro to the National Archaeological Museum, the largest museum in Greece, situated outside the main tourist neighborhood of Plaka. With some of the greatest collections of antiquities in the world, this museum was established in 1829 to house and protect antiquities from all over Greece. The museum is housed in an imposing neoclassical building dating from the end of the 19th century. The best way to appreciate this museum is at your own pace, allowing you to focus on the exhibits you find most interesting; we especially recommend the Cycladic Room, an excellent way to end your visit to the islands.

Your tour leader will then accompany you back to the hotel via metro, and your afternoon is free to enjoy this lively city.

Overnight in Athens.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Departure

Departure from Athens.

KALO TAXIDI/BON VOYAGE!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast