

GREECE'S IONIAN ISLANDS

Corfu, Paxos, Lefkada, Ithaki, Kefalonia & Zakynthos

16 days

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Day 1 Arrival in Corfu

Welcome to the Ionian Islands and the island of Corfu, the starting point of our odyssey.

Scattered off the western coastline of Central Greece, and to the south of Peloponnese, the Ionian Islands have been strongly connected to Italy in terms of history and culture since the Venetian occupation period. Many fortresses, churches, mansions, and historic buildings were constructed during this time throughout the Ionian Islands. Corfu Town is, hands down, the most prominent example of Venetian architecture, while Kefalonia offers some of the most impressive monasteries. And apart from their unique architecture, the Ionian Islands are also known for their lush green nature and wonderful beaches, with emerald waters and exotic landscapes.

Corfu (Kerkyra in Greek), unlike the rest of Greece, never fell under the Ottoman oppression. Due to the successive domination by the Venetians, the French, and the British over the centuries, the island has primarily become part of the Western rather the Levantine world. Corfu is also one of Greece's most lush and green islands; its reputation as a distant paradise began with Homer, and in Shakespeare's "The Tempest," Corfu was the 'magical isle'.

Overnight on Corfu.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

Day 2 Corfu: Town Tour

This morning we have a walking tour of the Old Town of Corfu (aka Kerkyra), a certified UNESCO World Heritage Site and one of the most charming and romantic places in all of Greece.

The town is a maze of narrow streets dominated by the 16th century fortress; around every corner can you can find a chapel, old mansion, or secret garden square. Facing the Liston Esplanade is the Old Fort, built between the 6th & 19th centuries on a man-made island, features some stunning architecture. The Palace of St. Michael and St. George to the left of the Liston, was built by the British and used as the official residence of the Governor. It is also the place where the late Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh, was born.

But it was under the Venetians, who stayed for some 400 years (from 1386-1797), that Corfu Town really prospered. The Venetians brought not only their great commercial know-how but also their architectural prowess. Soon Corfu Town became a thriving economic centre with northern-Adriatic flair and impregnable defences.

The afternoon is yours for some independent exploration. The Campiello, the medieval heart of Corfu Town, is a great place to just wander, get lost, and stop occasionally for delicious local refreshments (maybe take it easy on the local kumquat liqueur). The narrow streets feature small shops of every commercial nature -- among the bustle, look out for stalls selling local items like wild honey, fig cakes, and handmade lace. For the history buff, both the Archaeological Museum and the Byzantine Museum are worth a visit.

Overnight on Corfu.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Corfu Island Tour

Today we leave Corfu Town and explore a little farther afield with a tour of some of the island's most interesting and scenic highlights.

We head to Kanoni Peninsula where the ancient naval city of Corfu flourished in the 7th century BC. From here we enjoy the famous and panoramic views over Mouse Island, referred to as Pontikonisi by the locals, and the Vlacherena convent. This tiny island is said to be the remains of Odysseus's ship after Poseidon turned it to stone.

After our visit we continue our tour with to Achileion Palace and gardens, built in 1890 for Empress Elisabeth of Austria, known by her

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nickname “Sisi.” Its architectural style was intended to suggest an ancient palace from mythical Phaeacia. The palace’s decorative motifs centre on the hero Achilles from Greek mythology, from which it also derives its name. Corfu was Empress Elisabeth’s favourite vacation destination and she wanted a palace which would exemplify her admiration for Greece, its language, and its ancient culture (please note that ongoing restorations may limit which parts we are able to view).

From here we travel inland toward Paleokastritsa, the most popular and picturesque area of the island. A short walk uphill takes us to Paleokastritsa Monastery, located on a little peninsula wedged between two beaches. From the top, you can explore the quaint monastery and see a few small exhibitions and a little church. It’s a relatively peaceful place with lots of blooming flowers in the courtyard. Here we’ll break with an opportunity for lunch and a stroll to soak in the seaside atmosphere.

Our next stop is Lakones, a gorgeous village 180m above Paleokastritsa, which we’ll reach on a very windy road famous for its switchbacks and views. We’ll pause here at “Bella Vista,” described by Lawrence Durrel as having the most beautiful view in the whole Mediterranean. Indeed the views over several bays will reveal why locals call it the ‘Balcony of the Gods.’ According to myth, the Bay of Paleopkastrista is where Odysseus first encountered Nausicaa, the beautiful young princess of the island. The beautiful, heart-shaped bay is certainly an appropriate meeting-place for the pair, and many scholars believe the couple represents one of the earliest depictions of unrequited love in literature.

Coming to the end of our island tour we travel through the Trombeta Pass, enjoying spectacular views of the north and central parts of the island.

Overnight in Corfu.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Corfu - Ferry to Paxi

Today we travel by local ferry to the island of Paxi (aka Paxoi or Paxos).

In doing so we experience a major shift of gears, exchanging the largest, most-developed and visited of the Ionian islands, with a destination that couldn’t be any more of a contrast: the island of Paxi, the smallest and one of the least-developed (excluding those islets within the group that are uninhabited). According to Greek myth, Paxi was created when Poseidon slammed down his trident on Corfu, chipping off this eight-mile-long chunk of chalky, olive-grove-covered rock. Though Paxi is located only 15 km south of Corfu, it might as well be 1,000 -- it’s quaint and cozy, with picturesque fishing villages and extensive ancient olive groves divided by stone walls. This is about as laid-back as it gets.

We will aim, of course, for a direct link; however, please note that we may sail first to the nearby mainland port of Igoumenitsa and connect onward from there. Accordingly, some may wonder why we include this tiny island on our program, and it essentially comes down to two things: 1) culturally and visually, it’s for a taste of Greek island life from days-gone-by, and 2) if you look at a map, it makes logistical sense. The distance between Corfu and the larger islands to the south is considerable, and Paxi conveniently allows us to break up an otherwise 7-8 hour ferry crossing to Lefkada.

In the spirit of the local custom, our time and activities here are somewhat free-form, with an intent to showcase this pretty place in a way that sets the stage for other islands yet to come. One of the greatest joys and rewards from island hopping in this part of the world is that each place is unique in its own special way, which forms the basis of one of the more compelling themes that tie this itinerary together.

Today upon arrival, we should be able to visit the main town of Gaios and possibly (perhaps tomorrow) accomplish a leisurely (and optional) one-hour point-to-point walk of about 3km (with vehicle support). From the small coastal settlement of Loggos the route ascends (+/- 120m) to the small village of Mastoratika -- the view to the and the green surroundings is amazing. From here the route descends to the sea, reaching Monodendri Beach with stunningly clear blue waters.

More info at <https://www.alltrails.com/greece/paxos> - “Loggos - Monodendri Beach”

This evening we enjoy a group dinner on an island with an abundance of fresh and tasty Mediterranean vegetables, herbs, fruits, seafood, and meats all kissed by the Ionian sun and blessed by the local micro-climate. The food alone is a reason to visit this place.

Overnight on Paxi.

Day 5 Paxi Boat Trip & Leisure Time

This morning we take a private half-day boat trip along the coast of the island, with its steep cliffs and caves. A Venetian fort appears to rest in tranquillity on an islet lying off the principal port of Gaios, and Anti-Paxoi, a tiny island off the southern tip of Paxi, is famous for its blue caves, lonely beaches, and red wine.

While beach-going is a hugely popular activity here and throughout Greece, because we find that our travellers are generally inclined to enjoy beaches for maybe an hour or two at most, provision will be made for a dip in these gorgeous waters, likely in combination with time to enjoy a leisurely lunch at a seaside taverna, before we end our tour back on Paxi with the balance of the day at leisure.

Overnight on Paxi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Paxi - Ferry to Lefkada

Today we take the ferry south to the island of Lefkada (+/- 3 hours).*

Today we take the ferry south to the island of Lefkada (+/- 3 hours). This is one of the most popular Ionian destinations, full of amazing beaches with turquoise waters, monasteries, museums, and seafront or mountainous villages with a unique charm. It is also popular due to the fact that it can also be reached via a causeway from the mainland. Lefkada town (Chora) is the island's main gateway and capital.

If ferry timing permits, we may have a look at some of the principal sites of interest in and around Chora. Just where the causeway from the mainland joins the island, is a medieval castle built by the Franks who occupied Lefkada in 1294 and it protected the whole region from enemies. The Castle of Agia Mavra is an excellent example of fortress architecture. At the time of inception, in the medieval period, the entire neighbourhood was named "Castle of Agia Mavra" and historians believe that for quite some time the name was used to indicate the whole of Lefkada island.

The town also has a small but informative Archaeological Museum of Lefkada. Its four rooms cover a large chronological period, from the Paleolithic times till the late Roman years.

We will likely be staying in the vicinity of Vasiliki, located at the southern end of the island. While our ferry from Paxi arrives at the port at the northern end, a southern positioning is advantageous as this is the location of the main ferry port servicing our next island, Ithaki.

At some point during our stay, we hope to visit the Olive Museum Fabbrica in nearby Syvro village for an opportunity to uncover the secrets of both traditional and modern olive oil making in Greece. We see the old machinery that was used in the past, and visit an old warehouse to taste carefully selected extra virgin olive oil.

Overnight on Lefkada.

* Please note that the sailing times indicated in this itinerary are estimates based on historical norms and scheduling. Some adjustments may be necessary.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Lefkada Island Touring

Today we have a leisurely tour around the island, accomplishing any sightseeing we were unable to get to yesterday.

We stop at Karya, the largest village in the mountains of Lefkada. We will visit the Folklore Museum here, where we will learn about the history of the village and encounter the unique handcrafted embroideries made by local women. We'll explore the small footpaths of Karya and admire the remarkable views.

Next is Exanthia, a traditional mountain village with a great view of the Ionian sea. We hope to be able to do some local wine tasting while here.

Continuing to Englouvi, located 700m above sea level, which is why it also represents a populated place at the highest point of Lefkada. The

village is famous for the production of lentils, so every August they hold a festival celebrating this unique and venerable crop. The scenery is amazing: old houses, traditional atmosphere, and a small picturesque square right in the middle where we can relax with a beverage.

Next we visit an abandoned US Air Force camp with huge antennas -- the view from here is magnificent! You will have a chance to see the stunning white and blue Church of Prophet Ilias close-by, with an amazing view to the southeast part of the island.

We finish our day back in Vasiliki.

Overnight on Lefkada.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Lefkada - Ferry to Ithaki

Today we take a ferry (1.5-2 hours) south to the island of Ithaki (also Ithaka or Ithaca).

This island is a relatively unknown destination for most visitors, though the name is probably familiar to people interested in Greek mythology. This was the homeland of Odysseus, the Greek legendary king who took ten years to return home after the end of the Trojan War. His journey is described in one of ancient Greece's epic poems, Homer's *Odyssey*. It is symbolic of human struggles, temptations and goals, with the return to Ithaki marking the end of the adventure. Ithaki is definitely a place where myth meets rugged beauty – a Greek island that embodies the symbolic.

Ithaki has been inhabited since the Neolithic Ages (4000-3000 BC). Throughout its long history it has been conquered by many different peoples, including the Romans, the Venetians, the Ottomans, the French, and the British. Today, Ithaki is an ideal place for relaxation. Lacking the long, sandy beaches of Lefkada and the party life of other Ionian islands, it attracts a different type of visitor -- the kind who just wants a laid-back experience in beautiful surroundings.

While on this island we will visit one of the island's must-sees, a large monastery up on the island's highest mountain, Moni Katharon. The Monastery of Panagia Kathariotissa, built in the late 1600's, is located at a height of around 600 above sea level at the peak of a mountain that Homer referred to as Nirito. From here we'll have an amazing view of Vathi and the rest of the south part of the island and, if clear, all the way to Kefalonia.

We also hope to include the Ancient Acropolis, one of the largest and most important archaeological sites of the island, located on the top of the cliff Aetos. According to tradition, the ruins belong to the palace of Odysseus and a sample of the magnificent ancient culture that once thrived on the island.

The picturesque town of Vathi (Vathy), where we base our stay, sits right in one of the prettiest and safest ports in Greece. It is a completely protected natural bay, where hundreds of sailing boats and private yachts dock every summer. The houses in Vathi are built in the traditional Ionian way, and most of them are colourful and have tiled roofs. If time permits, you can visit the archaeological and ethnographic museum, as well as the main cathedral. It is said that one of the first works of El Greco, the famous painter, can be found here.

Overnight in Ithaki.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Ferry to Kefalonia - Ferry to Kefalonia

Today we ferry to Kefalonia (+/- 2.5 hours), the largest of the Ionian islands and a charming and popular place to visit. Mountainous villages surrounded by lush greenery, Byzantine monasteries, breathtaking landscapes, and amazing beaches complete the picture of this ruggedly attractive place.

Ferry time-permitting, we may begin our sightseeing program upon arrival (we'll likely be based in the principal town, Argostoli). As usual, the exact timing and order of our sightseeing may vary depending on ultimate ferry scheduling, but here we have the luxury of a well-deserved three-night stay and a bit of flexibility (and down-time). Your Tour Leader will fill you in on our exact program for the coming days.

Gastronomically, Kefalonia, a large well-watered and verdant island, boasts a cuisine based on many treats of the land – greens, meats, vegetables, as well as those from the sea. While on the island, you might like to sample a typical pie comprised of greens, or meat (dominated

by goat), or seafood, which characterize the traditional cuisine of Kefalonia.

Overnight on Kefalonia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Kefalonia Island Touring

Today we discover the natural charm and diversity of this friendly and handsome island.

Our first stop is at the Robola Winery Cooperative, one of the most famous wineries in Kefalonia. Robola is a white wine grape variety that is grown primarily on Kefalonia; historically the vine was thought to have been brought to northeast Italy by Venetian merchants in the 13th century. The winery produced its first vintage 1983 and produces a variety of wines, with the chance to taste their current offerings.

Our next stop is Drogarati Cave to observe the amazing stalactites and stalagmites that give this place the feel of a cathedral. The cave is more than 150 million years old and is well known for its impressive acoustics. Next we will explore the cave of the nymphs the famous Melisani Lake. We enjoy a relaxing boat ride on the turquoise waters as the sun shines into the cave. Visitors enter the cave through an underground path and then step into a boat to tour the cave. Archaeological excavations have found artifacts from the 4th and the 3rd century BC.

Our next stop is Assos village, which gives the impression of being an island of its own. Pretty colourful houses nestle into the craggy hillside, an attractive contrast with the dominant greens and blues. The Castle of Assos stands on a peninsula right above the village, once one of the strongest castles of Kefalonia. We enjoy jaw-dropping views of Assos and the Ionian Sea from here.

Lastly we will visit the cosmopolitan village of Fiscardo which, despite the great earthquake of 1953, retains the architecture and ambiance of a time when the Venetians ruled Kefalonia.

Overnight on Kefalonia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Kefalonia: Food Tour & Time at Leisure

Around mid-morning we reconvene for a walking “food tour” conducted by a family-owned business with a passion for introducing guests to the tastes, culture, and history of the island. Their mission is to bring a unique and personal experience in which we can learn about the local flavours and culture of Kefalonia while also discovering more about the island’s history. Kefalonia has taken Greek food to another level, and the famously spirited locals are known for nurturing the very best out of their rugged soil with love and passion – ‘meraki’ as it’s called in Greek. Their wines, cheeses, honey, extra-virgin olive oil, and other local products are highly prized.

Our hosts, highly knowledgeable locals who really understand traditional Kefalonian food, will take us on a journey through the island's capital, highlighting its unique flavours and giving attention to the local tastes while sharing the stories behind each dish. We can hope to taste a variety of local cheeses, a local cod dish, local nuts and wines and, of course, traditional Kefalonian meat pie. The balance of the day is yours to enjoy as you please.

Some suggestions:

People Watch in Platia Valianou: The town’s bustling square is a great place to take a break. Stop for a coffee, juice, ice cream, whatever you fancy. There is a really nice, relaxed vibe in this part of town.

Hike to the Cyclopean Walls: Did you know Argostoli is home to walls built by giants? Well, sort of... take a hike up to the ancient ruins of the city of Krane and walk amongst the enormous boulders making up the city’s defensive walls.

Walk Across De Bosset Bridge: Built in 1813, this bridge is the longest stone bridge over the sea in the world. A walk along the bridge will provide gorgeous views of the town and the mountains opposite -- make sure you check out the obelisk half-way.

Archaeological Museum: This museum houses various findings from the prehistoric, the Hellenistic, and the Roman period. The best part of the collection is from the Mycenaean period and consists of coins, swords, sculptures, ceramics, and tools.

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Overnight on Kefalonia (dinner on your own this evening).

Included Meal(s): Breakfast

Day 12 Kefalonia - Ferry to Zakynthos

Today we take our last ferry (1-2 hours) to the island of Zakynthos. Upon arrival we transfer by road to the town of Zakynthos, where we will base our island explorations.

Aiming for a morning ferry, we'll plan to have a walking tour through the capital of the island once settled. Zákynthos, also known as Zante, is a city on the island of the same name. A ruined castle above the city attests to centuries of Venetian rule when the city was called Fior di Levante. Many of the buildings reflect a classic Venetian style, though many of them were built after the destructive earthquake of 1953. It's a pleasant and walkable place, and today's touring will be on foot at a leisurely pace.

Our tour includes the Byzantine Museum, with its arcade of arches, located on central Solomos Square. Its displays of religious art include frescoes and icons. The belfry of the 16th-century Agios Markos Church was modelled on that of St. Mark's Basilica in Venice.

Solomos Square was named after Dionysios Solomos, Greece's national poet who wrote the 'Hymn to Liberty,' the national anthem. The church of St. Nicolas of the Molos, located in Solomos square, is the only building in Venetian style (17th Century) that survived the earthquake, which makes it a unique example of original architecture.

We will also visit the Museum of D Solomos and Eminent People of Zakynthos, which presents carved pottery, sculptures, ancient musical instruments, clothes and weapons of noble families, an important cultural repository. The Tomb Of Andreas Kalvos on the ground floor of the museum hosts the remains of the poet, Dionysios Solomos mentioned above, as well as the bones of poet Andreas Kalvos and his wife.

Our next stop is the oldest 'mandolato' (nougat) workshop in the city. Mandolato and pasteli are an integral culinary part of the life of locals; honey, eggs, sugar, almonds are turned into the traditional confectionery offered for all occasions.

We will walk along the busy pedestrian street, Alexandrou Roma, full of shops and small cafes where locals enjoy moments of everyday life. This street preserved the characteristic arcades that existed pre-earthquake, and were imposed by the rainy climate and by the hot summer sun. A precious architectural part of Zakynthos.

At the end of the port, the church of St. Dionysios, the patron saint of the island, imposes its presence. The bell tower is a landmark of the city as it stands out among the different buildings recognizable as soon as you enter the port. The interior of the church is meticulously detailed with frescoes, lamp holders, and colours.

This evening we'll reconvene for our evening meal. Typical of the Ionian Islands with their Italian influences, the dishes and food here are all fresh, rich in flavours, and comforting. The quality of the olive oil here is some of the best in the world.

Overnight in Zakynthos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Zakynthos Island Touring

Our activities today take us farther afield and includes some of the most notable sites and sights of the island.*

A highlight of our day is Porto Schiza, where the view is simply breathtaking! We then continue to the western mountainous part of the island and drive through the small traditional villages Kiliomeno, Agios Leontas, Maries, Exo Chora where we will see the oldest olive tree on the island.

Our next stop will be Anafonitria's 15th century monastery, which is of great importance for the island. The patron saint, St Dionisios, was the Abbot of this monastery in the 16th century. After the visit to the monastery you can enjoy coffee or choose some local products only found in those villages: famous Zakynthian raisins, handmade souvenirs, honey, local wine, and, of course, olive oil.

Later we visit picturesque St. Nicholas port with a break for lunch.

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Our last stop Callinico Winery in the village Kalipado, which is one of the oldest wineries in Zakynthos. We will learn there about the process of wine making in this challenging location and get the chance to try many different wines such as Veradea, the traditional wine of Zakynthos, a dry white blend of many local varieties. After this soul-nourishing stop, we continue driving along the beautiful eastern coasts of Zakynthos back to our hotel.

* Zakynthos's famed Shipwreck Beach and the views thereof, which have become iconic thanks largely to social media, presents a challenge to our day's planning. The Navagio Viewpoint high above the beach has become problematic both in terms of its popularity and for the dangerous instability of the cliff-top from which most photos (and selfies) are taken. Local authorities have restricted access with fencing and barricades that prevent one from reaching the best views. Long lines also tend to frustrate one's itinerary, with extended waits (in the sun) to get one's turn. The beach itself, which has always been accessible only by boat, has recently been closed to visitors due to dangerous landslides from above. The situation is ever-evolving, but please be prepared for this element to be excluded from our day's program.

Overnight on Zakynthos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Zakynthos - Fly to Athens

Today we fly to Athens, the capital of Greece and the historical capital of Europe. We'll spend two nights here to allow for some sightseeing and to place us conveniently for our onward journeys.

The city 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 time-permitting, we may have a leisurely stroll through the city's old town of Plaka with some free time before dinner.

Overnight in Athens.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 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

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how best to run today's tour.

Overnight in Athens.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Departure from Athens

Departure from Athens.

KALO TAXIDI!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast