

## GREECE'S IONIAN ISLANDS

### Corfu, Paxos, Lefkada, Ithaki & Kefalonia

**13 days**

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#### **Day 1 Arrival in Corfu**

Welcome to the Ionian Islands, where Venetian bells still echo across harbour squares and olive groves shimmer silver in the Mediterranean light. Our odyssey begins on Corfu, the emerald jewel that Homer called a "distant paradise" and Shakespeare immortalized as his magical isle in *The Tempest*.

Unlike the rest of Greece, Corfu never fell under Ottoman rule. Instead, four centuries of Venetian governance, followed by French and British periods, created a unique cultural fusion that feels more Italian Riviera than Aegean Greece. The successive Western influences shaped everything from the architecture of its UNESCO-listed capital to the musical traditions that still fill its kafeneions.

As evening settles over the Ionian Sea, we gather for our welcome dinner, beginning a journey through islands where each destination tells a different chapter of Mediterranean history. Tomorrow, we'll discover why the Venetians called this place the key to the Adriatic.

Overnight on Corfu.

Included Meal(s): Dinner, if required.

#### **Day 2 Corfu Town & Fortress**

This morning we step into the living museum of Corfu's Old Town, where narrow kantounia (alleyways) wind between Venetian mansions and Byzantine churches. Our walking tour reveals why UNESCO recognized this remarkable place—it's the most complete example of Venetian urban architecture in the Eastern Mediterranean.

We explore the imposing Old Fortress, built on a strategic promontory that has defended this harbour for over a millennium. Originally a Byzantine stronghold, the Venetians transformed it into an impregnable bastion with ingenious engineering that includes a man-made moat carved from solid rock. From its ramparts, we understand why Corfu controlled the entrance to the Adriatic for centuries.

The maze-like Campiello district unfolds before us—secret garden squares appear around every corner, chapels hide in shadowed alcoves, and the famous Liston arcade echoes with the conversations of locals enjoying their afternoon coffee. This elegant promenade, modeled after Paris's Rue de Rivoli, was once reserved exclusively for Corfu's nobility.

The balance of the afternoon is yours to wander these enchanting streets, perhaps sampling the local kumquat liqueur or discovering hidden shops selling wild honey and handmade lace.

Overnight Corfu

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### **Day 3 Corfu Island Discovery**

We venture beyond the capital to discover the island's most dramatic landscapes and ancient mysteries. Our first stop at Kanoni Peninsula reveals the panoramic view that has graced countless postcards—tiny Mouse Island (Pontikonisi) sitting in the turquoise lagoon like a green jewel. According to Homer's *Odyssey*, this islet is actually Odysseus's ship, turned to stone by the vengeful Poseidon.

At the Corfu Archaeological Museum, we uncover the island's pre-Venetian past through remarkable artifacts spanning three millennia. The star attraction, the Gorgon Pediment from the Temple of Artemis, represents one of the finest examples of Archaic Greek sculpture.

We then journey to Paleokastritsa, where dramatic limestone cliffs plunge into waters so clear they seem like liquid sapphire. The 13th-century monastery perched on its rocky peninsula has watched over fishing boats and Byzantine galleys alike. Local legend claims this bay is where Odysseus first encountered the beautiful princess Nausicaa—a meeting that represents literature's earliest tale of unrequited love.

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Our final ascent to Lakones village, 180 metres above the sea, delivers what Lawrence Durrell called "the most beautiful view in the Mediterranean"—a panorama so breathtaking that locals named it the "Balcony of the Gods."

Overnight 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.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

#### Day 5 Paxi Boat Trip & Leisure Time

This morning we take to the sea aboard a private boat, exploring Paxi from the perspective that reveals its true character. The island's coastline tells a geological story written in dramatic white cliffs and hidden caves carved by millennia of Ionian storms.

We cruise to Anti-Paxos, the even tinier satellite island famous for its otherworldly blue caves and beaches with sand like crushed pearls. The contrast of turquoise water against white limestone creates an almost tropical paradise that feels impossibly remote. Local fishermen still harvest the tiny island's grapes to produce a distinctive red wine found nowhere else.

A Venetian fort watches over Gaios harbour from its rocky islet, a reminder of when these waters required constant vigilance against Ottoman raids. As we anchor in secluded coves accessible only by sea, we understand why Paxi became a refuge for those seeking escape from the tumultuous history of larger islands.

Back on Paxi, we enjoy lunch at a waterfront taverna where the catch of the day comes from boats we can see bobbing in the harbour. The

afternoon unfolds at Paxi pace—perhaps a swim in crystalline waters, a stroll through olive groves divided by ancient stone walls, or simply the pleasure of watching island life flow around a harbour café.

Overnight on Paxi.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 6 Paxi - Ferry to Lefkada

We sail south across deeper Ionian waters toward Lefkada, one of Greece's most dramatically beautiful islands. The three-hour journey\* allows us to appreciate the geographic logic of our island-hopping route—each destination represents a different chapter in the complex story of Ionian history and culture.

Lefkada stands apart among Greek islands as the only one connected to the mainland by a causeway, a feature that has shaped its unique character. Where other Ionian islands developed in splendid isolation, Lefkada maintained constant connection with mainland Greece, creating a fascinating blend of island mystique and continental accessibility.

As we approach the island's mountainous silhouette, we can already see why this destination attracts a different type of traveller. Lefkada promises some of the most spectacular beaches in the Mediterranean, hidden in coves where turquoise water meets limestone cliffs, alongside traditional mountain villages where island life continues much as it has for centuries.

We'll likely base ourselves near Vasiliki in the island's south, perfectly positioned for tomorrow's explorations and conveniently located near the ferry port that will carry us onward to our next island adventure. The evening settles gently over an island that promises to reveal yet another facet of Ionian character.

Overnight 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

Our exploration begins in Lefkada town (Chora), where the medieval Castle of Agia Mavra guards the narrow causeway that links island to mainland. Built by Frankish crusaders in 1294, this fortress protected not just Lefkada but the entire region from seaborne invasions. The massive walls remind us that these peaceful waters once required constant vigilance.

The town's Archaeological Museum reveals Lefkada's deeper past through artifacts spanning from Paleolithic settlements to Roman villas. In four compact rooms, we trace human habitation across millennia, understanding how this strategic location attracted settlers from the earliest times.

We then venture inland to discover the Nydri waterfalls, where mountain streams cascade through lush forests—a refreshing contrast to the sun-baked coastal landscapes. The hike through verdant gorges reveals Lefkada's surprising ecological diversity, where Mediterranean scrubland gives way to almost alpine environments.

Our mountain journey continues to Exanthia village, perched high above the Ionian Sea with panoramic views that stretch to distant islands. Here we sample local wines produced from grapes that benefit from both mountain cool and sea breezes. We conclude in Englouvi, at 700 metres elevation the highest inhabited village on Lefkada, famous throughout Greece for producing the finest lentils in the Mediterranean—celebrated each August with a festival that draws visitors from across the islands.

Overnight Lefkada

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 8 Lefkada - Ferry to Ithaki

A relatively short ferry crossing brings us to Ithaki, the legendary homeland of Odysseus and perhaps the most symbolically significant island in our journey. While the name resonates with anyone familiar with Homer's epic, the modern island reveals itself as one of the Ionian's best-kept secrets—largely undiscovered by mass tourism yet rich in both mythological significance and rugged natural beauty.

Ithaki embodies the symbolic meaning of journey's end, representing homecoming after long adventure. For Odysseus, reaching Ithaki marked the completion of his ten-year odyssey; for us, it offers the chance to explore an island where myth and landscape intertwine in extraordinary ways.

We ascend to Moni Katharon, the Monastery of Panagia Kathariotissa, built in the late 1600s at 600 metres elevation on the peak Homer called Mount Nirito. From this dramatic perch, we survey not just the southern reaches of Ithaki but distant Kefalonia across the straits—views that help us understand the strategic importance of these waters in ancient times.

The monastery's peaceful courtyards and Byzantine frescoes provide a contemplative introduction to an island that invites slower exploration. As evening falls over the picturesque port of Vathi, nestled in one of the Mediterranean's most perfectly protected natural harbours, we prepare for tomorrow's deeper dive into the landscape of legend.

Overnight Ithaki

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 9 Ithaki - Following Odysseus

Today we walk in the footsteps of literature's most famous traveller, exploring archaeological sites that may indeed be the locations described in Homer's epic. The Ancient Acropolis of Aetos, dramatically positioned atop a cliff-top peninsula, represents one of the most significant archaeological sites in the Ionian Islands.

Tradition identifies these impressive ruins as the remains of Odysseus's palace, and recent excavations have revealed substantial Bronze Age foundations that align remarkably well with Homer's descriptions. Standing among these ancient stones, with commanding views across the channel to Kefalonia, we can almost envision the moment when the disguised hero finally revealed himself to his faithful wife Penelope.

The island's network of ancient paths offers some of the finest walking in the Ionian Islands, threading through landscapes that have changed little since Homer's time. Olive groves cascade down hillsides toward hidden coves, while traditional stone walls trace boundaries established centuries ago. These aren't tourist trails but working paths still used by locals, offering authentic glimpses of island life.

Our afternoon remains flexible—perhaps exploring Vathi's charming Archaeological and Ethnographic Museum, housed in traditional buildings around the port, or simply enjoying the profound peace of an island where the modern world feels refreshingly distant. The evening light over Ithaki's rugged coastline creates moments of pure magic that explain why this place has inspired poets for three millennia.

Overnight Ithaki

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 10 Ithaki - Ferry to Kefalonia

We ferry across the narrow straits to Kefalonia, the largest and most diverse of the Ionian Islands. The 2.5-hour crossing allows us to appreciate how these islands, despite their proximity, each developed distinct characters shaped by geography, history, and the particular mix of civilizations that touched their shores.

Kefalonia immediately announces its different scale and ambition. Where Ithaki whispers its stories, Kefalonia speaks boldly through dramatic landscapes, substantial towns, and a wine-making tradition that dates to ancient times. The island's size—nearly ten times larger than Paxos—supported a more complex society that survived historical upheavals to maintain traditions lost elsewhere.

Our introduction begins at the Robola Winery Cooperative, where we discover one of Greece's most distinctive wines. Robola grapes, grown exclusively on Kefalonia's limestone slopes, produce wines that Venetian merchants prized highly enough to export throughout their

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Mediterranean empire. The cooperative, established in 1983, continues traditions that stretch back over seven centuries.

The afternoon allows us to settle into Argostoli, Kefalonia's bustling capital, rebuilt after the devastating 1953 earthquake that leveled most traditional architecture. Despite this tragedy, the town maintains its essential character as a working Greek port, where fishing boats share the harbour with ferries connecting to Athens and Italy. The evening brings our first taste of Kefalonian cuisine, renowned throughout Greece for its hearty mountain dishes and exceptional local ingredients.

Overnight Kefalonia

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 11 Kefalonia's Geological Wonders

Kefalonia's limestone landscape has been sculpted by underground rivers into some of the Mediterranean's most spectacular geological formations. We begin at Drogarati Cave, descending into chambers more than 150 million years old where stalactites and stalagmites create natural cathedral architecture. The cave's remarkable acoustics have been tested by concerts—Maria Callas herself performed here, her voice resonating through chambers that amplify sound with perfect clarity.

Our next wonder, Melisani Lake, represents one of the world's most extraordinary underground lakes. We glide across turquoise waters in small boats, entering chambers where sunlight streams through a collapsed roof to illuminate depths that reach 39 metres. Archaeological excavations around the lake have revealed artifacts from the 4th and 3rd centuries BC, suggesting this was once a sacred site dedicated to the god Pan and the water nymphs.

The afternoon brings us to Assos, a village that appears almost to float on its own private peninsula. Pretty pastel houses nestle against a dramatic headland crowned by a massive Venetian castle—one of the largest and most imposing fortifications in the Ionian Islands. The castle's massive walls, built to withstand Ottoman sieges, now frame breathtaking views across waters that shift from deep blue to brilliant turquoise.

From Assos's elevated position, we understand how Kefalonia's strategic location made it a crucial link in Venetian trade routes, requiring the massive investment in fortifications that still dominates the landscape today.

Overnight Kefalonia

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

### Day 12 Kefalonian Flavours & Farewell

This morning we embark on a culinary journey that reveals why Kefalonia has earned recognition as one of Greece's premier gastronomic destinations. Our food tour, led by passionate locals, introduces us to flavors that reflect the island's unique position at the crossroads of Mediterranean cultures.

We sample Kefalonia's famous cheeses, aged in caves that maintain perfect temperature and humidity year-round. The local cod preparation, influenced by centuries of Venetian rule, demonstrates how Italian techniques merged with Greek ingredients to create distinctive island specialties. Local wines complement every tasting, from the crisp Robola whites to rich reds produced from indigenous varieties found nowhere else.

The island's olive oil, pressed from trees that survived the 1953 earthquake, carries flavors intensified by limestone soil and constant sea breezes. We taste honey harvested from wildflower meadows and nuts from mountain groves, understanding how Kefalonia's diverse microclimates support exceptional local products.

Our afternoon offers final opportunities to explore Kefalonia at leisure—perhaps walking across De Bosset Bridge, the world's longest stone bridge over the sea, or visiting the Archaeological Museum to see Mycenaean treasures that illuminate Bronze Age civilization. As evening approaches, we gather for our farewell dinner, celebrating a journey that has taken us through five distinct island worlds, each revealing different facets of Ionian culture and history.

Overnight Kefalonia

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Included Meal(s): Breakfast, Lunch and Dinner

### **Day 13 Departure from Kefalonia**

Our Ionian odyssey concludes as we transfer to Kefalonia Airport for onward flights. From here, connections are available to Athens for international departures, or direct international flights depending on the season.

As we depart, the view from the aircraft window provides a final perspective on our island-hopping route—the emerald dots scattered across brilliant blue waters that have sheltered civilizations, inspired poets, and created some of Europe's most distinctive cultures. The Ionian Islands have shared their secrets generously, from ancient archaeological sites to family farms, from dramatic geological wonders to quiet harbour moments that define the authentic Greek island experience.

KALO TAXIDI! (Good Journey!)

Included Meal(s): Breakfast