

THE LESSER-KNOWN CYCLADES ISLANDS**Tinos, Folegandros, Sifnos & Milos****15 days**

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Day 1 Arrival in Athens

Today we arrive in Athens, the capital of Greece and the historical capital of Europe. 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.

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.

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 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.

Overnight in Athens.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Athens - Ferry to Tinos

Today we take a ferry (+/- 3-4 hours) from the port of Piraeus (Athens) to the Cycladic island of Tinos -- welcome to the Cyclades!* Tinos is famous for its large pilgrimage church, its many villages, hundreds of dovecotes and, of course, excellent food and wine.

The island group's name derives from the Greek for "encircling islands," so named because they form a rough circle around the sacred island of Delos, which was the legendary birthplace of Artemis and her brother Apollo. Many of the Cyclades are famous for their jetset holiday lifestyles, attendant high prices, and inevitable crowds; our intention on this special tour is to avoid all of those things and immerse ourselves in the "other side" of these beautiful islands and enjoy a glimpse into something closer to traditional island life.

Immediately upon arrival in the Cyclades, visitors are invariably struck by the quality of the light, the impossibly blue water, and the charming

white "sugarcube" architecture with its ubiquitous bright blue trim. Sifnos is typical of our overall goal of this tour -- to experience the beauty, charm, friendliness, and unique cultures of islands unspoiled by mass tourism.

On arrival, we can have a leisurely stroll about Tinos town, taking in the Panagia Church, Greece's most important pilgrimage centre for Orthodox pilgrims. Note the carpeted strip along the main road leading to the church, put in place for pilgrims who demonstrate their piety by crawling the distance from the main waterfront square, up the hill to the church.

According to mythology, Tinos was the home of Aeolus, God of the Winds. The Ionians came to Tinos around 1000 BC; in the 6th century BC Tinos was ruled by Eretria, while in 490 BC the island was seized by the Persians, regaining its freedom after the battle of Marathon. In 1207 Tinos was conquered by the Venetians. Venetian rule in Tinos island lasted longer than on any other island of the Cyclades. In 1715, Tinos was taken by the Turks, to be liberated by the Greeks in the War of Independence of 1821. The year 1822 was an important one for Tinos, for it was then that the famous icon of the Blessed Virgin was discovered, after a nun in the Kechrovouni convent saw it in a dream.

Today, most people who travel to Greece bypass Tinos. And what better reason for us to visit! With glitzy Mykonos just a short ferry away, Tinos is another world in attitude and appearance.

Overnight on Tinos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Tinos: Island Touring

Today we tour Tinos, another Cycladic island unique unto itself, with soaring mountains, dramatic cliffs and gorges and charming traditional villages. We distance ourselves from Chora, which, unlike most other Greek island choras, lacks island charm, possessing a decidedly more urban and chaotic feel. As such, the island's powers of seduction are not immediately apparent, but as we venture beyond you will soon fall under its spell.

We first head uphill to the ruined fortress of Exombourgo to admire a stunning view of the Aegean. Mt Exombourgo is a steep-sided granite cone 553m (1,814 ft) high that features a ruined Venetian castle and the remains of three churches and a fountain-house. This was the medieval capital of the island of Tinos until the town was devastated by the Turks.

We continue to the village of Koumaros where we can enjoy a traditional Greek coffee before continuing to the village of Volax, almost hidden in the middle of rounded, granite boulders -- once believed to have been flung from the heavens by the gods -- that litter the countryside. Volax is also noted for its traditional handmade woven baskets. A footpath winds down the valley to Agapi; look for examples of the island's famous "dovecotes," built long ago for pigeons but today considered works of art. In the old times pigeons were sold to seafarers who came to the island to stock up with supplies.

We continue into the interior of the island through jaw droppingly beautiful scenery. Unlike our tour's next islands, the mountains here are steep, the distances between villages on the tortuous roads are vast, and nature has largely been left to its own devices. All this gives the island a wild, untamed, uninhabited feel.

Descending to the coast on the far side of the island, we break for lunch (included today) at the port of Panormos, a unique natural harbour that played a catalytic role in shipping and trade until the early 60s. It was a transfer station for exported products (mostly marble from Exo Meria) and imported goods (mainly wheat, which supplied the windmills).

This afternoon we stop in Pyrgos to visit the Museum of Marble Crafts, a unique institution presenting the technology of marble, a material that holds a particular place in the architecture and art of Greece from antiquity through to the present.

En route back to our hotel, as in other Cyclades islands we'll visit, you will notice the stone terracing, which is pretty much everywhere keeping the topsoil in place and turning steep hillsides that might otherwise be barren into farms and orchards that can last a thousand years. As far as vegetation goes, Tinos is one of the more green islands with fertile valleys with ample water able to sustain the whole island were it necessary. But more than anything Tinos has stone: marble, granite and slate, and just about everything is built out of these rocks, from walls to streets to monuments and art. No wonder Tinos is known for its sculpture artists, and the father of Phideas, acknowledged as the greatest sculptor of all time whose most well known work was the Parthenon, came from Tinos.

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

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 5 Tinos: Island Touring

After a bit of a leisurely morning, we'll head off for a half-day tour highlighting the island's food and wine and, of course, stunning scenery and friendly residents. Long known a place of Orthodox pilgrimage, Tinos is now becoming a destination for those seeking to experience unique locally-produced foods, wines, arts, and crafts.

Tinos's unique geological history and untouched wild habitat make for distinctive flavours and a unique cuisine that will impress you. In 1842, French travel writer Alexis de Valon noted: "The whole island is cultivated with great determination, almost in defiance of nature; in the absence of soil, the inhabitants even plough the rocks." Indeed vineyards snuggle among granite boulders as smooth as giant cannonballs, and this windswept landscape is emerging as Greece's new wine frontier.

Tinos was a major wine producer for centuries, but when farmers switched to livestock in the 1970s, the vines were ravaged by grazing goats, but today there is an increasing number of producers. The vineyards, most of which are located in the centre of the island, often spread in terraces and the vines are trained low. An interesting blend of varieties are found here, including Assyrtiko, Malagousia, Mavrotragano, Mandilaria, Avgoustiatis, and the local Potamissi, Rozaki, and Koumari.

Our day is somewhat relaxed and free-form, but our intention is to visit a couple of local wineries (some of which don't usually accept groups), which often also double as workshops for other local products, such as herbs, soaps, oils, marble items and other works of art. As food and wine are inexorably intertwined with culture and history, and our touring today will also reveal this aspect of the Cyclades throughout the ages and how the islands (and islanders) have evolved into what/who they are today.

Overnight on Tinos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Tinos - Ferry to Folegandros

Late this morning we ferry across to our next stop, the laid-back island of Folegandros (this is likely a full transit day with a connection on Naxos).

Folegandros, named after the son of King Minos, was once thought of as so isolated that political prisoners were exiled here until the last century. However, its beauty and charm are such that many of those sent there chose to settle permanently. But beyond its 700 or so inhabitants, you are more likely to find holidaying Athenians or writers and artists seeking inspiration.

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Overnight on Folegandros.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Folegandros: Ano Meria & Chora

Today we'll head north to visit the farm settlement of Ano Meria, the island's second-largest settlement, with lush green fields and sprawling orchards and said to be one of the most authentic villages in the Cyclades. We'll visit the small Ecological and Folklore Museum located here, offering an insight into the island's past; you can view the remains of an olive press alongside tools and utensils previously used in Folegandros.

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□ Doubling back, we'll stop in Chora, one of the oldest traditional medieval towns in the Cyclades; the buildings stand close to one another creating the external wall of the kastro. It is no exaggeration to describe Chora as one of the most aesthetically picturesque, traditional villages of its kind. The view is said to be second only to that of Santorini, though fans of Plaka on the island of Milos might argue -- you can be the judge!

□

□ While in Chora, your Tour Leader will likely suggest a walk up a zig-zag path winding gently up the mountain to the church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary. Allegedly built on the site of an ancient temple, the church hosts significant ancient immured inscriptions and statues' pedestals in its yard and interior. Tradition has it that the silver-plated icon of the Virgin Mary is miraculous. Linked to pirate stories, the icon is carried around the town in a procession held every year on Easter Sunday. Open every evening (from 6pm-9pm), the church features stunning sculptures and statues as well as breathtaking views over the sea from the courtyard.

□

"We return to our hotel with the rest of the day yours to enjoy the charms of this special place, which has been called "an untouched piece of true Greece." Your Tour Leader can help you plan your afternoon (or not!).

If in supply/season, we may be able to sample some of the island's specialities this evening, including: Kalassouína (cheese pie made with cheese and onions); handmade pasta served with rabbit, goat or chicken in a tomato sauce; baked chickpeas; Karpouzénia -- a local sweet made of fried watermelon, sourotó (white goat cheese), and the famous aperitif of the island, raki with honey.

Overnight on Folegandros.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Folegandros - Ferry to Sifnos

Today we ferry across to our next stop, the laid-back island of Sifnos (possibly with a connection in Mykonos).

Sifnos is known for a few things, but most notably as the center of high quality ceramics going back to days of antiquity. Indeed, traditional Sifniot cooking is baked in the same terracotta casserole dishes that have been produced on the island for centuries. Recently, such dishes have helped propel the island to notoriety as one of the Mediterranean's most exciting emerging culinary scenes.

Depending on our arrival time, your Tour Leader may suggest doing some informal sightseeing this afternoon once we're settled in.

Overnight in Sifnos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Sifnos: Pottery & Home Cooking

This morning we begin with a visit to some local potteries to learn how locals make the island's ancient and most famous product.

It is not known when pottery began on the island though it is mentioned by Theophrastus in the third century BC. The oldest pottery found dates back to the eighth century BC, and Pliny makes mention of Sifnos ceramics in the first century BC. By the eighteenth century potters from Sifnos were travelling all over Greece, some relocating to other islands. There is even a colony of Sifnos potters in Amaroussi, a suburb of Athens. Today there are still many who practice the art of ceramics, just as their fathers and grandfathers did.

After a break for lunch, we'll have a fun and informative experience during which we'll learn much of the island's other famous products: its food. This afternoon we'll witness first-hand authentic local food production at a local farm and cooking school. Sifnian cuisine, renowned for its mouth-watering recipes throughout Greece, is based mainly on vegetables and local aromatic herbs. Here, you will have the opportunity to find out all about the efforts of the local farmer in growing and harvesting vegetables, in this 'unfriendly' natural environment. You'll have a chance to collect the fresh ingredients that will be used for our meal, which we enjoy together, just like the locals, around our wooden table next to the wood burning oven. Local white wine or a medium sweet red, which has matured in the sun, accompany the meal (non-alcoholic drinks available), and we'll finish the meal with fruits of the season, many of which are old and rare varieties.

Overnight on Sifnos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Sifnos: Kastro & Artemonas

Today our tour takes us to the village of Kastro, where we will visit the archeological museum. Its collections include exhibits dating from the early Bronze Age to the late Byzantine period and most are local finds. Among the most important exhibits is the marble head of Kouros that dates back to 6th century BC, a headstone, architectural parts, Hellenistic sculptures, sanctuaries, and a fine collection of ceramics from the Geometric to Hellenistic period.

Kastro is one of the most fascinating and mysterious places on Sifnos. The town has been inhabited for over 3,000 years and was at one time

the capital of the island. The town – a unique specimen of Venetian architecture – is tightly-built, accommodating only a few open public areas, protected in its entity by the ancient fortifications and the additional enclosure formed by the outer walls of the buildings at the bottom of the hill. The name – Kastro – leaves little to the imagination: this has been a veritable castle-city, built to resist pirates or any other attack.

Kastro was inhabited since the prehistoric times; however, the town reached its peak during the Archaic era, when the exploitation of Sifnos's gold and silver mines turned the island into one of the wealthiest in the Cyclades. The town is rich in antiquities and, besides having an archaeological museum, there are artifacts scattered throughout the village. The white-washed village sits upon a domed rock that towers above the sea; to protect the town from pirates there were only five entrances in the massive walls which enclosed it. When you enter the town you go through tunnels and passageways into a labyrinth of tiny streets wide enough for only two or three people to walk abreast.

There are cafes, restaurants and several interesting old churches. We'll follow the main street to eventually come out at the sea with a stunning view of the coast. As we continue to walk around the village with the Aegean below, the ancient walls and the ruins of the Venetian fortress are above you.

After a break for lunch, we continue to nearby Artemonas, a quiet village and the gem of Sifnos. It owes its name to the worship of the goddess Artemis. The beautiful small settlement displays some of the most elegant traditional old mansions of Sifnos with verdant gardens. A stroll around the village is fascinating, with its unique Venetian and neoclassical architecture. Apart from typical mansions, we'll also see remarkable churches and monasteries. If you're craving a coffee break, the village also boast several excellent pastry shops and traditional bakeries.

We make our way back to our hotel.

Overnight on Sifnos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Sifnos - Ferry to Milos

Today we ferry to our next island, the volcanic island of Milos, perhaps best-known for being the original home of the most famous statue ever created in Classical Greece -- the Venus de Milo. Thanks to its volcanic origin, Milos boasts a magnificently colourful landscape and a coastline that counts more than 40 beaches! The strong volcanic eruption that happened in Milos millions of years ago formatted its present landscape with reddish cliffs, soft sandy beaches, and underwater sea caves. Standing out for its majestic ambiance, rich history, picturesque fishing villages, amazing food, and indigo bays, Milos island is a timeless Cycladic gem with a personality all its own.

Depending on our ferry schedule, we may be able to accomplish some of the sightseeing listed on tomorrow's program.

Overnight on Milos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Milos: Full-day Island Touring

Today we spend our day exploring this interesting island. As Milos remains still somewhat untouched by chain hotels and pre-packaged tourism, you can truly discover Milos as the island has been for thousands of years. Created by the same volcano that created Milos, the neighbouring islands of Kimolos and Polyaigos are often overshadowed by their larger neighbour, though the beauty of these islands is remarkable with clear waters, caves, and rock formations. The best part is that these are unspoilt by large crowds.

While on Milos, we'll pay a visit to the Archaeological Museum of Milos in Plaka. The museum is housed in a Neoclassical building of the 1870s; at the entrance of this building, there is a replica of the famous Venus de Milo, originally found in Milos by a farmer in 1870 (the original is in the Louvre Museum in Paris). The museum also features figurines, statues, anaglyphs, and coins, along with findings that date back to the Neolithic Age (finds from Milos make up about 70% of the National Archaeological Museum of Athens' Cycladic wing). Near this museum, we can see the History and Folk Museum of Milos, a 200 year-old house which traces Miloan life from the 17th century to date. Walking through the village of Plaka, we will discover a traditional place of Cycladic architecture, stunning views to the Aegean Sea, and pastries with delicious homemade sweets.

Then we'll drive along the northern side of Milos and arrive in Sarakiniko. This is probably the most photographed spot of Milos, a fantastic

place with pure white stone sculpted by volcanic eruptions. Beneath the white rocks are impressive sea caves.

□ We then head to the early Christian Catacombs and the ancient city of Klima; an ancient marble theatre is found close to the Catacombs that can be seen only from above due to ongoing restoration work. On the way to this ancient theatre, we'll see the spot where the famous statue Venus de Milo was discovered in 1820.

□ Our visit in the Catacombs reveals an important complex of labyrinths that date from the 1st century AD, as old as the famous Catacombs of Rome. These graves are mostly decorated with natural jewels and pictures, but were not just places to bury the dead, but also as Christian churches during the time when Romans were persecuting Christians.

□ Our tour continues to the fishing village of Klima, which was the port of the ancient city of Milos. This lovely port is lined up with houses that have boat garages on the ground floor. These houses are called "syrmata" and their doors and window shutters are painted in different colours.

□ We return to our hotel in time to head to a local restaurant for dinner. Milos, like Sifnos, is enjoying growing recognition for its traditional cooking using locally-sourced ingredients. The local table wines are particularly balanced, fruity and fresh.

Overnight on Milos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Milos: Kimolos & Polyaigos Islands

Created by the same volcano that created Milos, the neighbouring islands of Kimolos and Polyaigos are often overshadowed by their larger neighbour, though the beauty of these islands is remarkable with clear waters, caves, and rock formations. The best part is that these are unspoilt by large crowds.

□ We head to the port of Adamas where we board our private scenic cruise vessel, which will show us the best of Kimolos and Polyaigos, the latter being the largest uninhabited island in Greece. The name Polyaigos means "many goats," which today are the only inhabitants of the island. The island is mostly owned by Greek Orthodox church, which rents land to shepherds in Milos and Kimolos.

□ Our first stop is Kimolos and a small cove with crystalline waters called Goupa. Around the small beach, we see typical houses of the region, constructed as boat garages into the soft rock with colourful doors.

□ We then head for Polyaigos passing 'Diamantospilia', a very tall and impressive cave on the north of the island, big enough to fit a whole sailing boat if the weather allows a slow approach! Next stop is Faros, a sheltered bay to the east, with magnificent turquoise waters and colourful rocks. Sailing close to the island we reach Galazia Nera ("blue waters"). The transparency and fluorescent colour of the sea are beyond words; here we have a chance to swim, enjoy lunch, and relax.

□ Our day is somewhat free-form to take advantage of prevailing weather conditions and group interest. We return to Milos (due to our included lunch and the length of our day, dinner will be on your own this evening).

□ Overnight on Milos.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Lunch

Day 14 Milos - Ferry to Athens

After a morning at leisure we ferry back to Athens (+/- 3.25 hours). After transferring our hotel we'll convene for our farewell dinner at a nearby local restaurant.

Overnight in Athens.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Departure

Departure from Athens.

KALO TAXIDI!!

Included Meal(s): Breakfast