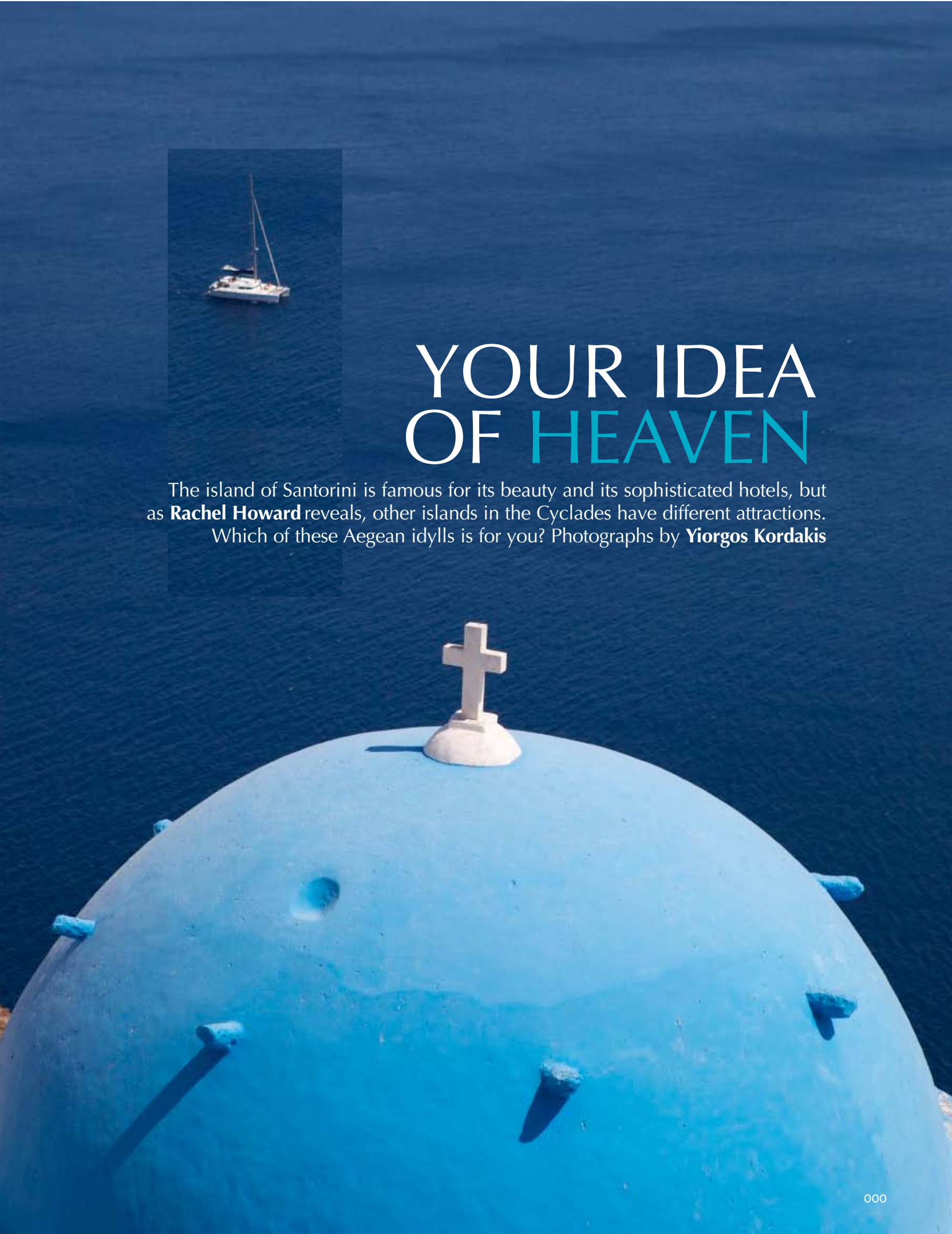


Steps winding down through the grounds of the Perivolos hotel in Oia, on Santorini. Opposite, the dome of Tktkt Tktktkt church in Oia, overlooking the caldera



YOUR IDEA OF HEAVEN

The island of Santorini is famous for its beauty and its sophisticated hotels, but as **Rachel Howard** reveals, other islands in the Cyclades have different attractions. Which of these Aegean idylls is for you? Photographs by **Yiorgos Kordakis**



JAMES THEODORE BENT, the intrepid British scholar who toured the Cyclades in the 1880s, pronounced Santorini ‘a hideous island, fascinating in its hideousness’. Today, the most famous of all Greek islands is renowned for its ravishing beauty. However, if you fly into Santorini, your first impressions might lean towards Bent’s school of thought. Unsightly buildings pockmark the landscape. It is only when you catch sight of the caldera – the flooded crater created by a volcanic eruption 3,500 years ago – that you will appreciate why this is one of the world’s top honeymoon destinations.

‘It’s what the Americans call the million-dollar view,’ says Joseph Gaoutsis, co-manager of the Santorini Grace hotel. This isn’t just a turn of phrase. An acre of land on the caldera costs more than a million euros. Ironically, land on this part of the island was traditionally given to the black sheep of the family because the sheer, windswept cliffs couldn’t be cultivated with vines or cherry tomatoes (the cornerstones of the local economy before tourism). Now these rogues are millionaires. Thankfully, building regulations along the caldera are tight, so there’s nothing to mar the mindblowing view.

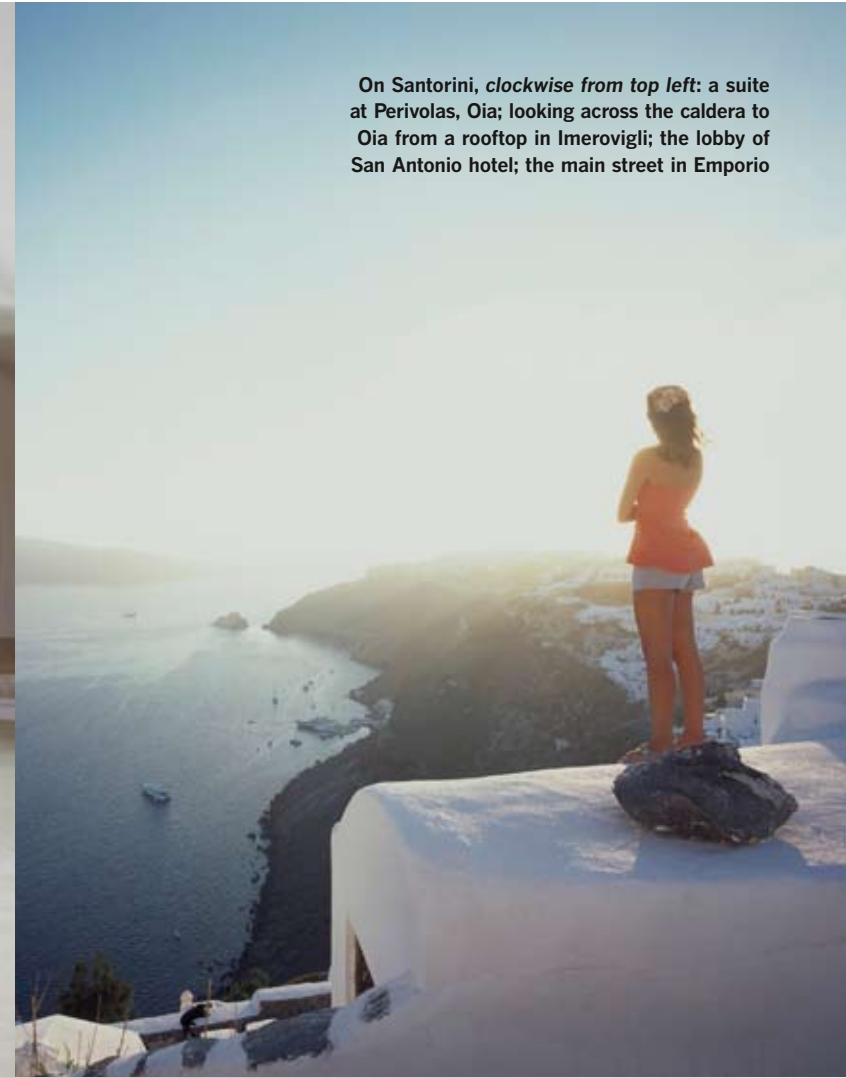
Some of Greece’s finest (and priciest) hotels are lined up along the caldera, mainly in the pretty village of Oia, marooned on the island’s northern tip, and the black sand beaches are no match for the infinity pools spilling over the edge of the abyss. It’s not the grand captains’ houses but their crews’ humble cave dwellings, burrowed into the cliff, that have been converted into five-star lodgings. The lowliest sailors were relegated to the lower rungs of the rock face – still something to watch out for when booking your hotel room. Santorini is not for the unfit or those protective of their personal space. Rooms are tightly stacked, so you can check out who has the biggest plunge pool or bikini collection. Serious voyeurs even bring binoculars.

Joseph leads us down the vertiginous path to Santorini Grace. The hotel and surrounding village of Imerovigli teeter on the brink of the cliff. Here, cooing couples are smearing each other in suncream by the pool so, feeling self-conscious, I set off to climb Skaros, a rocky outcrop that was once the island’s capital. It’s like stepping inside a View-Master: a widescreen panorama of streaky black and red cliffs, crested by whitewashed houses which look like seagulls poised for flight. The charred islets of Palea Kameni and Nea Kameni – ominous remains of the volcano – sizzle in the glassy sea. There were once 200 houses on Skaros. An enormous bell rang out whenever a

A CHOICE OF CYCLADES ISLANDS

SANTORINI WHERE TO STAY

- **1864 The Sea Captain’s House & Spa** From the original vaulted ceilings to the weathered wooden floors, everything at this three-suite hideaway and spa is just so; you’ll feel like a pampered house guest. Debonair owners Tony Mosiman and Antonio Totev also run a restaurant in Oia, Ambrosia & Nectar (see ‘Where to eat & drink’). *Oia* (00 30 22860 71983; www.sea-captains-house.com). Doubles from €201
- **Perivolos** While newer hotels in Oia vie to out-do each other in the bling stakes, Perivolos sticks with a formula that’s kept guests returning since the 1980s: flawless, pared-down interiors, show-stopping views and the infinity pool that launched countless imitators. *Oia* (00 30 22860 71308; www.perivolos.gr). Doubles from €420
- **San Antonio** In a crook in the caldera between Imerovigli and Oia, this new hotel has nothing around it for miles. The tunnelled lobby opens onto a dramatic terrace dangling over the cliff. The best rooms are the four Master Suites with private gardens. *Oia/Imerovigli* (00 30 22860 24388; www.sanantonio-santorini.com). Doubles from €250
- **Santorini Grace** Behind the typical Cycladic exterior lies a contemporary, white-on-white ➤



On Santorini, clockwise from top left: a suite at Perivolos, Oia; looking across the caldera to Oia from a rooftop in Imerovigli; the lobby of San Antonio hotel; the main street in Emporio



The pool at Perivolos, Oia. *Opposite, top:* the pool at Santorini Grace. *Below:* one of the three suites at hotel 1864 The Sea Captain's House; the chef at Santorini Grace



► interior. The first nine rooms (which opened in 2008) proved so popular that eight more were added last summer, shielded by volcanic black stone walls. The gigantic new Grace Suite has its own spa. *Imerovigli* (00 30 22860 21040; www.santorinigrace.com). Doubles from €275

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

- **Aktaion** This 80-year-old taverna is a quaint spot to try traditional, reasonably priced dishes such as fava with capers, mackerel fritters and white-aubergine pie. *Firostefani* (00 30 22860 22336). About €40 for two without wine
- **1800** Like its 200-year-old premises, this restaurant has stood the test of time: after two decades, it's still the top spot in town for dinner. *Oia* (00 30 22860 71485; www.oia-1800.com). About €100 for two without wine
- **Ambrosia & Nectar** Modern Mediterranean food and warm service is a winning combination at Tony and Antonio's place. Try baked feta in black sesame and honey crust. *Oia* (00 30 22860 71504; www.ambrosia-nectar.com). About €60 for two
- **Dimitris** Of the half-dozen fish tavernas packed along the waterfront at Ammoudi, this has the freshest fish and friendliest service. *Ammoudi* (00 30 22860 71606). About €70 for two without wine
- **Franco's Café** Franco Colombo has forsaken his legendary bar in Fira for a refined setting beside the fortress of Pyrgos. Top-notch cappuccinos and Bellinis. *Pyrgos* (00 30 22860 33957)
- **Hasapiko** Housed in a former butcher's shop, this lively bar (better known as Mary-Kay, after the owner) is an institution. *Oia* (00 30 22860 71244)
- **Domaine Sigalas** Taste Santorini's finest vintages with delicious nibbles. *Baxedes, Oia* (00 30 22860 71644; www.sigalas-wine.com)

WHAT TO SEE

Immortalised by 20th-century poet Odysseus Elytis as 'the daughter of supreme wrath', Santorini is a crust of solidified lava. The settlement of Akrotiri, a Bronze Age Pompeii, was discovered just 30 years ago, though the site is now closed. But you don't go to Santorini for sightseeing. You go to laze on your terrace and gaze at the view.

FOLEGANDROS

WHERE TO STAY

- **Anemomilos** Teetering on the abyss on the edge of Chora, these bright and airy studios aren't fancy, but their location is unbeatable. It's worth paying the premium for the Blue Studios: they have the best views and biggest terraces. Relax with apricot daiquiris by the pool. *Chora* (00 30 22860 41309; www.anemomilosapartments.com). Doubles from €110
- **Anemi** Big quirky photographs of Folegandros inject a dash of local colour into the interiors of these whitewashed bungalows. Chef Themis Papadopoulos serves contemporary Cycladic cuisine at the poolside restaurant. The only drawback to this swish 44-room resort is the location: a barren hillside overlooking the port. *Karavostasis* (00 30 22860 41610; www.anemihotels.com). Doubles from €220
- **Fata Morgana** An effusive welcome and spectacular sea views compensate for the slightly kitsch interiors. Exuberant owner Fani Anastasiadi also rents rooms in her grandmother's house ►



pirate ship appeared on the horizon. Now the cruise ships drifting into the caldera send ripples of anticipation rather than alarm through the entrepreneurs waiting on shore.

As dusk falls, coachloads of excitable tourists jostle for space along the ruins of Oia's Venetian castle to watch the sun slip into the sea. A firing squad of zoom lenses take aim. A bride in improbably high heels appears on a donkey. I slink off to savour the sunset with a glass of Assyrtiko at the Sigalas winery.

Not so long ago, Paris Sigalas was the local maths teacher. Now he's an award-winning vintner who, over the past decade, has helped put Santorini back on the map as a world-class wine destination. The island's volcanic terroir has been cultivated with vines for thousands of years, and in the 19th century, ship-owners made fortunes exporting sweet Vin Santo to the Black Sea and beyond. But the schooners that set sail for Odessa are long gone. In their place are a handful of fishing boats that provide the catch of the day to the waterfront tavernas at Ammoudi, the harbour that lies 200-odd zigzagging steps below Oia. A haul of bream arrives just in time for my supper.

AT FIRST LIGHT, I catch the ferry to Folegandros, an island 'where the steamer does not touch, and where sometimes in winter they are weeks without a post', James Theodore Bent observed in 1885. Surprisingly little has changed. Folegandros is on the 'agoni grammi', the unprofitable line; one of several remote islands serviced infrequently by state-subsidised ferry routes. Recent allegations of officials demanding bribes in return for licences to run these routes has not shamed the government into

'FOLLOW THE DONKEY TRACKS OVER SAGE- AND THYME-SCENTED HILLS

TO FAR-FLUNG COVES SUCH AS KATERGO, AMBELI AND LIVADAKI'





improving the service. The only ferry from Santorini in May when I am there is the *Aeolos Kenteris*, unfortunately named both after the God of Wind and Greek sprinter Kostas Kenteris, disqualified from the Athens Olympics on dope charges. There's no question of performance-enhancing drugs today: the 25-mile journey takes four hours (there are more frequent, but still erratic services in July and August).

'Of all the islands of the Aegean Sea, Pholygandros can boast of the most majestic coastline... I doubt if it can be equalled anywhere,' Bent declared. I'm inclined to agree. The main village, Chora, is huddled atop a jagged cliff. It's a 200-metre plunge to the sea, but the emerald water is so translucent that you can count the fish swimming by. The same pale-green stones that give the sea its limpidity pave Chora's tangle of lanes, which all lead eventually to three interlocked squares lined with trees, tavernas and bite-sized bars. Locals knock back shots of *rakomelo*, warm raki with honey that glazes the world in a fuzzy glow. In the Kastro – the fortified, medieval castle – children scamper among billows of crimson geraniums.

Folegandros has around 650 inhabitants. There's no bank and only one ATM. The north of the island still has no electricity. When the first hotel, Fani Vevis, opened in the early 1970s there was only one bathroom for all 12 rooms. 'Water was so scarce that the shower cost 70 drachmas, although rooms were only 10 drachmas,' recalls Fani Anastasiadi, who still runs the hotel, which was set up by her grandparents. 'Tourists would line up outside the bathroom in their towels and wait their turn. My grandmother would yell at them to turn off the taps,' she says.

➤ across the street, complete with family heirlooms. *Chora* (00 30 22860 41237; www.fatamorgana.com.gr). Studios from €95

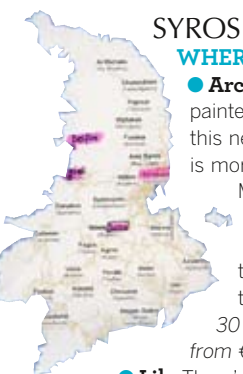
- **Anatoli Hotel** Six well-priced rooms on a hillside in Ano Meria with stunning views of Chora and the sea. *Ano Meria* (00 30 22860 41069; www.hotelanatoli.gr). Doubles from €40
- **Themonies** A cluster of 19th-century stone houses on a hillside overlooking Chora, this is a secluded hideaway close to the action. Quietly stylish interiors in earthy tones, with exposed stone walls and beamed ceilings, have made Themonies a hit since it opened last summer. *Chora* (00 30 22860 41517; www.themonies.gr). Doubles from €150

WHERE TO EAT AND DRINK

- **Pounda** In a walled garden, Takis dishes up healthy breakfasts and delicious lunches – fried goat's cheese, octopus with black-eyed beans, courgette croquettes with tzatziki – served on his wife Lisbet's handmade ceramics. *Chora* (00 30 22860 41063). About €30 for two without wine
- **Mimis** Run by a delightfully eccentric family, this taverna serves the island's best *matsata* (tagliatelle with rabbit, goat or cockerel) and addictive cheese pies. *Ano Meria* (00 30 22860 41377). About €30 for two without wine
- **Irini's** A throwback to the 1950s, when every grocer doubled as a taverna. Tuck into Greek salad and meatballs among the tinned tomatoes and cans of olive oil. *Ano Meria* (00 30 22860 41436). About €40 for two without wine
- **Mikro** Locals crowd into this tiny bar to drink *rakomelo*, play games and eat cake. *Chora* (00 30 22860 41550)

WHAT TO SEE

Folegandros is made for rambling. Stone-paved donkey tracks still criss-cross the island, the most well-trodden from Chora's cemetery to the hilltop church of Panagia at Paleokastro – spectacular at sunset and sunrise. A less strenuous way to circumnavigate Folegandros is on a boat tour, which is the only way to get to Chrysoispilia, a huge cave lined with ancient Greek inscriptions.



SYROS

WHERE TO STAY

- **Archontiko Vourlis** With its painted ceilings and antiques, this neoclassical guesthouse is more like a period film set. Manager Yiannis Printezis, the consummate host, puts guests at ease over the communal breakfast table. *Ermoupolis* (00 30 22810 88440). Doubles from €135
- **Lila** There's not much of a view at this guesthouse, but the colourful, split-level suites are cosy and the staff couldn't be kinder. *Ermoupolis* (00 30 22810 82738; www.guesthouse.gr). Doubles from €60
- **Xenon Apollonos** This waterfront mansion has just three bedrooms – fabulously and artfully decorated with antique armoires, linen drapes and patterned wallpaper – surrounding a shared living room. *Ermoupolis* (00 30 69777 46300; www.xenonapollonos.gr). Doubles from €160 ➤



On Folegandros, clockwise from left: one of the bedrooms, and the pool at Anemi hotel; the hilltop church of Panagia. Opposite, a lane within the Kastro of Chora, Folegandros



Ermoupolis, the chief town of Syros and of all the Cyclades. Opposite, in Ermoupolis, clockwise from top left: Oneiro restaurant terrace; inside Fox restaurant; Allou-Yialou restaurant; a seat at the bar in Fox



► WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

- **Allou-Yialou** Extraordinarily good food in a magical seaside setting. Owners Yiannis and Lina love what they do, and it shows in the giant portions of battered cod with beetroot purée, sea-urchin spaghetti with ouzo, garlic and ginger, and trio of complimentary desserts. *Kini* (00 30 22810 71196). About €40 for two without wine
- **Fox** A buzzing bar/restaurant in the former fish market. Go for cocktails at the curved concrete bar or juicy steak under softly lit stone arches in the garden. *Ermoupolis* (00 30 22860 81888). About €50 for two without wine
- **Oneiro** The team behind this new gourmet restaurant ran some of the best places to eat in Santorini before moving here. Ingenious dishes and immaculate service more than make up for the cheesy decor. Try the octopus carpaccio and modern Greek salad with shaved fennel and marinated feta, followed by Turkish-delight ice cream in filo. *Vaporía, Ermoupolis* (00 30 69365 26298). About €80 for two without wine
- **Plakostroto** Everything at this rustic, hilltop taverna is local, from the home-grown vegetables to the hand-picked herbs. Try the goat *en papillote* or rabbit with rosemary. There's live Greek music on Saturday afternoons, and sweeping views of the sea and the sunset. *San Michalis* (00 30 69739 80248). About €30 for two without wine

WHAT TO SEE

Ermoupolis's grand town hall on Miaouli Square contains a Cycladic art and archaeology museum, a fascinating historical archive and an old-time coffee shop in the atrium. Italian opera companies travel here to perform at the Apollo Theatre, a miniature model of La Scala, with an intriguing little museum on the top floor. The industrial museum near the dockyard recaptures the bygone trades that bankrolled Syros's rich cultural history. For edible souvenirs, the food market on Chios Street stocks local sausages, dried figs and delicious San Michalis cheese, similar to pecorino.

GETTING TO THE CYCLADES

- You can fly direct to Santorini, or fly to Athens and take a ferry from Piraeus port to the Cyclades. **EasyJet** (0905 821 0905; www.easyjet.com) flies to Santorini. **Aegean Airlines** (00 30 210 626 1000; en.aegeanair.com) flies to Santorini via Athens.
- Ferries from Athens to Santorini take from five hours (high-speed) to seven or eight (regular service); ferries to Syros take three to five hours. Ferries sail directly between Santorini, Syros and Folegandros. From Santorini to Folegandros is one to four hours, from Syros to Folegandros, three to four hours (depending on which line you take, and the whim of the captain who might stop anywhere en route). Connections are variable, however, especially outside high season (July–August). **Hellenic Seaways** (www.hellenicseaways.gr) and **Blue Star** (www.bluestarferries.com) both serve the Cyclades. For more information, visit www.ferries.gr or www.greekferries.gr.

WHEN TO GO

The best time to visit the Cyclades is from Easter to mid-September, but avoid peak season (July and August), when it can be busy and expensive. May and June are lovely. Out of season, ferries are less frequent and many hotels and restaurants close.



The ancient Greeks called the island Folegandros, or 'iron hard', because of its unforgiving terrain. Perhaps that's why political exiles were dispatched here for centuries. Stoical locals tamed the valleys with slate terraces, coaxing crops from the scorched, sun-baked earth. Most farmsteads are scattered around Ano Meria in the north. Donkeys work hard here – they're not just a photo opportunity. Lemon trees are protected from fierce winds by circular stone *dendrospita* ('tree-houses'). The village bakery is fired with brushwood, which gives the *kouloures* (rusks flavoured with aniseed) and *kalasouna* (goat's cheese and onion pie) a wonderful smoky aroma.

There is a bus service from Chora to Ano Meria, but when I check the chalkboard timetable it's blank. Folegandros runs on GMT: Greek Maybe Time. But step onto the road and within moments someone will offer you a lift. Or you can follow donkey tracks over sage- and thyme-scented hills to far-flung coves such as Katergo, Ambeli and Livadaki. These beaches are also accessible by boat in high season, but then of course you have to share them with other people. I have inquisitive lizards, humming bees and the occasional obstreperous goat for company on the one-hour hike to Livadaki, a dazzling, white-pebble beach that is blissfully deserted. A love heart is etched into the black cliff. There's a perfectly smooth stone where you can sit and dangle your feet into the water. While I sunbathe, teeny fish nibble my toes.

The return hike is energetic and uplifting. An octopus drying in the sun lures me into Mimis taverna in Ano Meria. A sign says: 'The restaurant is open year-round, because

Continued on page XXX

YOUR IDEA OF HEAVEN

Continued from page XXX

history is written every day.' The paper tablecloth is printed with a map of Folegandros: it's covered with churches, and very little else. Patrick Leigh Fermor ascribed the profusion of chapels to a longing for saintly protection in this 'haunted' landscape. There's a more prosaic explanation: if you built a chapel, you were exempt from property taxes under the Ottoman Empire.

Mimis has a crumpled boozier's face, but his eyes haven't lost their sparkle. He brings me juicy tomatoes cut into flowers and budding with olives, tender octopus, a few fish his friend caught earlier. I feel utterly content and at peace with the world. Mimis' son-in-law – also called Mimis – nods sagely. 'On Folegandros, you realise you don't need a lot to be happy.'

When I finally stumble out into the honeyed twilight, the two Mimis bid me farewell like old friends. They insist on giving me a whole head of *melichloro*: salty, sea-washed goat's cheese. 'When you finish it, you must come back for more,' they tell me.

MY LAST PORT of call is Syros, the administrative, commercial and cultural capital of the Cyclades. Bent predicted: 'Future ages will quote this little spot as the brightest specimen of activity produced by the revival of the long dormant spirit of independence in Greece.' Ermoupolis, the crumbling 19th-century capital, was founded a year after Greece won its hard-fought independence in 1821. It was Greece's

busiest port and ship-building centre for 50 years (trade shifted to Piraeus after the Corinth Canal opened). The Neorion Shipyard still looms over the harbour.

Hawkers weave among the coffee-drinkers in the waterfront cafés, selling nougat and *loukoumi*, Turkish delight flavoured with rosewater. Queen Victoria used to order boxes of the stuff. According to local lore, once your chops have been dusted with *loukoumoskoni*, the sweet's thick coating of icing sugar, you'll get stuck on Syros.

'People who imagine little white houses will be disappointed,' says Andonis Krinos, a local historian. One of the smallest islands in the Cyclades, Syros is the most densely populated. A lively city of 12,000 inhabitants, Ermoupolis is built on twin peaks: Catholic Ano Syra on the right, Orthodox Vrontado on the left. About half the population are Catholic, a legacy of many years of Venetian occupation. A handful of neoclassical

mansions have been converted into charming guesthouses. Old-fashioned groceries and alfresco restaurants fan out from Miaouli Square, a huge marble piazza dominated by the handsome town hall. Chain-smoking mums gossip in the cafés, while kids kick footballs around the square, scattering pigeons.

In its 19th-century heyday, the city thronged with finishing schools and literary salons. Ermoupolis still has a sizeable student population and thriving cultural scene. That night, I settle into a balcony box at the Apollo Municipal Theatre, a miniature replica of La Scala in Milan which was built in 1864. Aeschylus, Homer and Euripides gaze down at me from the painted

ceiling, alongside Verdi, Rossini and Bellini.

As if to celebrate this multicultural mishmash, the Dutch jazz band launches into David Bowie's *Space Oddity*.

In its prime, Syros had its own currency, which was more valuable than the Greek drachma. The local economy is not dependent on tourism, even today. Most visitors are Greeks. Admittedly, the southern coastline has suffered from over-development and the beaches are rather disappointing. But in the rugged, untouched north, dirt tracks link secluded hamlets and footpaths lead to sheltered bays. Children pootle around on Kini beach, while their parents swig ouzo at the pair of tavernas beneath the tamarisk trees. It's the kind of place where you could

stay all day, waiting for the sun to set at the mouth of the bay.

Instead, I climb aboard *Perla* for a whistlestop tour of the northern beaches with Captain Lakis. He is in infectiously high spirits, swaying his hips to Cuban music as we cruise past a succession of idyllic bays: Delfini, Varvaroussa, Aetos, Lia, Dyosmos, Marmari, Grammata. Pressed to pick my favourite, I settle for Marmari, where Lakis has planted a few palm-frond umbrellas. I dive off the boat into the water and drift towards the shore, melting into the landscape. It seems that life couldn't get any better, when Lakis whips out his *pièce de résistance*: an ingenious floating bar, with round holes for wedging plastic cups of ouzo and ice. He has even rustled up some *mezze*: cheese, tomatoes, and cherries. We stand in the waist-deep water and toast our good fortune.

Rachel Howard is the co-author of 'Secret London: An Unusual Guide' (Jonglez Guides, £10.99), out now