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An escape to Atlantis

By Danielle Demetriou, Daily Mail, 6th ????????? 2007



Carved out by a volcanic eruption, Santorini offers stunning views galore



Lava cliffs, black sandy shores and a jagged coastline: a volcano once so explosive it may have given rise to the Atlantis myth may not be the most obvious setting for a late summer beach holiday.

But the island of Santorini is as stylish as its landscape is dramatic. Famous for the most beautiful sunsets in the Greek Islands, Santorini is the perfect destination for those who like a touch of style with their sunlounger. Forget simple food, drab decor and questionable plumbing: Santorini is home to some of the best boutique hotels in Greece.

The distinctive horseshoe shape of the island was created in an apocalyptic burst when an earthshattering volcano erupted more than 3,000 years ago.

Today, the island juts out of a perfect blue Aegean Sea in the southern Cyclades. Whitewashed villages cling to the cusp of the crater and towering lava cliffs surround the focal point of the island: the still waters of the submerged caldera of the volcano.

Minimalist hotels, fashionable bars and stylish designer boutiques line the pretty cobbled streets and attract crowds of beautiful people.

And despite constant reminders that the island is volcanic, visitors will be relieved to note that there has not been an eruption for more than half a century.

So, sit back and enjoy a classic Santorini sunset.

BEST HOTELS

Expect a view. Or ten. Perfect panoramas take centre stage at almost every stylish boutique hotel that overlooks the caldera waters. And a chilled glass of white Santorini wine is the perfect companion.

Cosmopolitan Suites

Housed in a traditional white Cycladic home, this resort is set high on the sea cliffs, overlooking the caldera. A stone's throw from the bustle of the island's main village, Fira, the hotel offers a calming escape from the outside world.

Pale blue walls, large mirrors and antique furnishings set a stylish maritime tone throughout the ten individually designed suites. Softly curved white arches between rooms frame perfect sea views.

A deep blue infinity pool, massage services and a classy poolside bar and restaurant complete the package.

Cosmopolitan Suites (00 30 22860 25632; www.cosmopolitan-santorini.com) has doubles from £176 between May and September, including breakfast.

Chromata

The volcanic drama of the island matches the opulent interior of Chromata, a retreat in the traditional village of Imerovigli. Colourful modern design fills the 22 suites cut into the cliffside: warm pink walls are mixed with turquoise drapes, leopard-print furnishings, chandeliers and private plunge pools.

But centre stage is the cliff-hugging infinity pool, which stretches into a blue grotto where the bar is housed. The indulgent can be pampered by the in-house bath butler, while the romantic can enjoy a candlelit dinner on the glass deck above the pool.

Chromata (00 30 22860 24850; www.chromata-santorini.com) has doubles from £162 from May to October, including breakfast.

Katikies

One of the best hotels in Greece, Katikies is a stylish enclave in the postcard-perfect village of Oia, on the northern tip of the island. Hewn into the volcanic rock 100 metres above the caldera basin, a string of stairs and bridges link 23 rooms and 16 suites throughout the whitewashed hotel.

All the rooms are light and airy, with vaulted ceilings, antique furnishings - and, of course, private balconies.

Katikies (00 30 22860 71401; www.katikies.com) has doubles between May and mid October from £281, including a champagne breakfast and free beach transfers.



On The Rocks

Hanging 200 metres above the caldera basin, this boutique hotel is - literally - on the rocks. A small complex of minimalist apartments, the 17 rooms are painted serenely in blue and white to blend in with the sea and sky.

Blue cushions and white deckchairs are scattered prettily around the sea-facing terraces. Massages take place in a peaceful spa suite, which is fitted with a steam room and Jacuzzi and promises to banish any lingering stress. At night, white candles line the pool, and dinner is served beneath the stars.

Luxury lovers should pick the honeymoon suite to enjoy its private outdoor pool overlooking the caldera.

On The Rocks, Imerovigli (00 30 22860 23889; www.onrocks.net) has doubles from £196 from June to September, including breakfast.

BEST RESTAURANTS

Simple, fresh and tasty: Santorini is home to some of the best restaurants in the Cyclades.

Selene

Al fresco dining is elevated to new heights on the hillside terraces of Selene - its seafaring views and romantic ambience guarantee that it is frequented by newlyweds.

The food mixes the experimental with the classic - think sea urchin and artichoke salad, fava balls with caper sauce and zucchini with smoked eel. Simple Greek yoghurt and honey is the perfect pudding.

Those who really enjoy their meal can pick up a few tips to take home with them - at the on-site cookery school.

Selene, Fira (00 30 228 602 2249; www.selene.gr), Dinner for two including wine costs around £75.

1800

Wander down a quiet backstreet in the village of Oia and you might stumble across 1800. Housed in an 18th-century sea captain's mansion, the setting is as elegant as the food - from antique sofas to wooden travel chests. But it is worth stepping outside on to the stylish roof terrace for the stunning sea views.

The restaurant excels at slowcooked traditional Greek dishes with a modern twist.

1800, Nikolaou Nomikou, Oia (00 30 228 607 1485; www.oia-1800.com), Dinner for two including wine costs around £88.

Seaside Lounge

For a modern restaurant experience Santorinistyle, head to the Seaside Lounge at the black sand beach Agios Georgios in Perivolos.

With its white decor and chilled ambience, the restaurant is stylish and contemporary. Wicker chairs and white tables sit beneath an airy canopy with open sides looking out to sea. DJs playing chill-out music create a relaxed backdrop.

From simple paella to fresh lobster, the cuisine is modern Mediterranean.

Seaside Lounge, San Georgios-Perivolos (00 30 228 608 2801; www.seaside-restaurant.gr). Dinner for two costs around £54.

Archipelagos

This is housed in one of the oldest captains' houses on the island, dating back to 1860. But visitors could do worse than to bypass the original stone walls, striking artworks and sculptures that dot the interior - and head straight outdoors to eat.

Clinging to the caldera cliffs, the restaurant offers the ultimate dinner with a view. As the sun dips behind the Aegean Sea and volcanic crater, tuck into the Mediterranean cuisine.

Archipelagos, Ypapantis, Fira (00 30 228 602 4509; www.archipelagos-santorini.com). Dinner for two with wine costs around £68.

WHAT TO DO

From diving in the caldera to sampling the fruits of the island's famous vineyards, there is a raft of activities to keep holidaymakers busy. And those who prefer to take it easy? Grab a towel and head for one of the black sandy beaches that line the east of the island.

Sail away

The sight of Santorini from the sea is stunning. Hop on a boat trip across the caldera to take in the awe-inspiring volcanic island.

A clutch of nearby islands are also worth exploring. There is Thirassia island with the whitewashed village of Horio perched at the top of 250 stairs. And don't miss the volcanically active Palea Kameni and Nea Kameni with their smouldering sulphur craters, natural hot springs and bubbling mud pools.

Sail in style with Captain Ted on board one of his gleaming white catamarans. Trips include daytime or sunset tours with seafood and steak barbecue in a private bay, from £88 per person (00 30 694 424 1162; www.santorinisailing.com).

And wine not?

Home to some of the oldest vineyards in Europe, a visit to Santorini is incomplete without a tour of a winery. One particularly stylish venture is Art Space in Exo Gonia.

The 1830 winery is one of the oldest in the country and produces the famous dry white Nychteri and sweet desert Vinsanto wines. And it not only offers visitors tours of the original winery, its current production site and its museum, but also hanging on the rough stone walls of the wine cellars are exhibitions by acclaimed Greek and international artists.

Art Space, Antonis Argiros, Exo Gonia (00 30 228 603 2774; www.artspace-santorini.com).

Shop 'til you drop

It may be a tiny Greek island but don't let that cramp the style of retail therapy lovers.

Santorini is home to a swooninducing quantity of designer boutique stores. Take a stroll along the cobbled maze of streets in Fira and drink in the glamour - from Christian Dior to Versace. The jewellery shops that line the streets are also worth pursuing.

Take a look at the original modern designs in the Iosif Collection at Kyklos in Fira. In Oia, pick up a moody black and white photograph of the island at the art gallery, Nikos Rigopoulos.

Or settle for some thyme honey and a bottle of fine Santorini wine from Cava Sigales Argyris, in Firostephani.

Beneath the surface

Santorini has long been hailed the setting for the mythical city of Atlantis. Those keen to probe beneath the surface of the sea should not miss the chance to go on a diving trip.

From beginners to experienced divers, Santorini Dive Centre offers a string of tours exploring the underwater volcano crater and surrounding beaches.

Santorini Dive Centre (00 30 228 608 3190; www.divecenter.gr). Dives from £37.

HOW TO GET THERE

Direct flights from Gatwick, Manchester and Newcastle to Santorini are available between May and October, from around £149 return. Airlines include First Choice (0871 200 7799; www.firstchoice.co.uk), Excel Airways (0870 320 7777; www.xl.com), Thomas Cook Airlines (0870 750 5711; www.thomascook.com) and Thomson Fly (0870 1900 737; www.thomsonfly.com).

For more information, contact the Greek National Tourism Office (020 7495 9300; www.gnto.co.uk).

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