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Art of the Aegean

By **DES HANNIGAN** Lonely Planet
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Diana Mayfield Lonely Planet Images

Fabled Santorini and the Greek islands offer rich local arts and crafts along with sun-dappled beaches and exquisite views.

The first time I walked into L'Olivier (www.fish-olive-creations.com), a ceramics gallery and shop on the Greek island of Naxos, I felt an edge of excitement that is all too rare for a hardened travel writer. It was some years ago, late evening, early summer. I was in the little village of Halki at the center of mountainous Naxos, the biggest island in the Cyclades, that great loop of islands that boasts such world-famous destinations as Santorini, Mykonos and sacred Delos in the heart of the Aegean Sea.

The velvety dusk had settled like a veil on Halki's little village square. Young Scopes owls hooted from marble ledges on the facades of old Naxian mansions. The air was sweet with the scent of nearby olive groves and meadows. Inside L'Olivier it was as if the sunset glow of an hour earlier had lingered. Everywhere I looked were pieces of stoneware ceramics and jewelry to take your breath away.

Every piece was different. Yet all reflected the timeless Mediterranean themes of fish and olive that are at the core of the work of the Naxian potter Katharina Bolesch and her partner, artist and craftsman Alexander Reichardt. Three-dimensional ceramic olives framed the edges of shining plates or tumbled down the side of elegant jugs and bowls. Grapes, too, hung in little ceramic bunches. Painted shoals of fish darted across platters and swam round bowls and dishes. Ceramic and silver "fish" jewelry extended the theme. It all evidenced the burgeoning renaissance of Cycladic arts and crafts.

I was first impressed by the rich thread of modern arts and crafts that links the Cyclades when I came across the Museum of Contemporary Art (www.moca-andros.gr) on Andros, the most northerly island of the group. The shipping magnate and native Andriot Basil Goulandris and his wife Elise founded the gallery in 1979 in the island's lovely old capital, Hora.

Not only does the gallery exhibit the work of prominent Greek painters and sculptors, but each year it stages an exhibition featuring original works of one of the world's great artists. To date, works by Picasso, Matisse, Braque and Miro have been featured, a remarkable achievement for a Greek island that is somewhat out of the mainstream. This year's exhibition, running through Sept. 30, is Andre Masson and Ancient Greece. The setting of Hora, all marble flagstones and beautiful old buildings above the sea, adds even more magic.

This theme of modern Cycladic culture extends southward to the island of fabled Santorini, the ancient caldera of a massive volcanic eruption in 1650 B.C. Today Fira, the glittering cliff-edge town of Santorini, is awash with fashion jewelers and galleries that are often more kitsch than cultured. But tucked away on the southern edge of the island is the wonderful Art Space (www.artspace-santorini.com) of Antonios Argyros, a gallery housed in the Argyros family's traditional wine caves, or kanavas, which are tunneled out of the volcanic earth of this remarkable island.

The kanavas of Art Space are hung with paintings, while dramatic sculptures transform lost corners and niches, all of it the work of accomplished Greek and international artists. What makes Art Space even more inspiring is that wine is still made here by Antonios; a tasting of his vinsanto or nychteri adds appetite to art.

Many other quality galleries and craftshops populate the Cyclades, colorful alternatives to all those sun-soaked beaches, traditional tavernas and bouncing nightspots. At times I may grow weary of the exhausting heat and hullabaloo of busy ports, but I'm inspired always

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Resources

IF YOU GO

Major international carriers serve Athens International Airport. Direct metro and bus connections run from the airport to Piraeus, the main ferry port for the Cyclades. For ferry information visit www.gtp.gr.

WHERE TO STAY

- In Naxos' port town (20 minutes by car from Halki), the immaculate **Hotel Grotta** (011-30-22850-22215; www.hotelgrotta.gr; rooms \$80-\$100) has great sea views from its front rooms.
- On Santorini, one of the smaller caldera-edge sunset-view options in Fira is **Aroma Suites** (011-30-22860-24112; www.aromasuites.gr; rooms \$130-\$200), a stylish boutique hotel with charming owners to match.

WHERE TO EAT

- Down at Nimborio Beach below the Hora of Andros is **Palinorio** (011-30-22820-22881; dishes \$10-\$20), a taverna that includes terrific fish dishes on its menu.
- In Halki's dreamlike little square, you won't get better traditional food and atmosphere than at **Yianni's Taverna** (011-30-22850-31214; dishes \$8-\$12).

by the certainty that somewhere, soon, I may walk into another L'Olivier or Art Space, or a simple village workshop, where the Art of the Aegean thrives beneath the blue.

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