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# A sunny view on Santorini

By [Caitlin Liu](#)  
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There we stood, on the side of a highway on this Aegean island's wine country. We were stranded. Darkness was about to fall.

I glanced at Peggy, my buddy through thick and thin. Returning a worried look, she nodded. We turned to the traffic and struck the pose: right arm out, thumb up.

Cars whizzed by. Some were packed with no room for more, but solo drivers also ignored our gesticulations. Were we invisible? Surely our roadside posturing, no matter how shameless, conveyed the universal language that we needed a ride.

"What do the Greeks do when they hitchhike?" I asked, shouting above the whooshing din.

"How would I know?" asked Peggy, a former New Yorker who now lives in Taiwan.

As the sun edged toward the horizon, our hopes and egos plummeted. Maybe Peggy's beach shorts and my flowered mini-dress, in this part of the island at this waning hour, were hurting rather than helping our cause.

As befitting every good Greek tale, this one too had a *deus ex machina* – a seeming miracle that saved the day. Let's just say Zeus and Apollo came to our rescue.

And that was how I got to see one of the prettiest sunsets in the world.

Splendor in the sea

I had traveled to the Cyclades more than a decade ago before. It was the summer after college, when having a good time meant hauling a backpack to such islands as Mikonos, where British lads launched drunken bacchanalia at midday, French nudists paraded on beaches and drag queens ruled the dance floor.

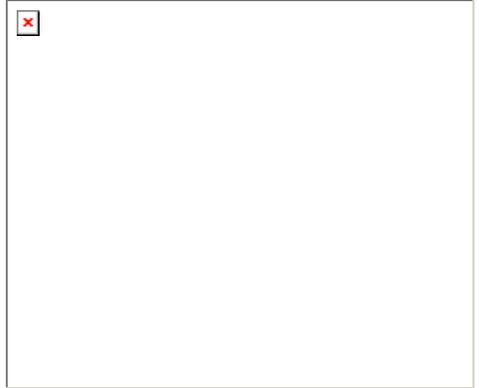
But what mesmerized me about these isles in the Aegean Sea was their splendor: glistening whitewashed buildings, meandering cobblestone streets and those times of the day when the sky and sea glowed the same velvety hue and the horizon ceased to be.

It was for such moments that I returned to Greece last August.

Out of dozens of Cycladic isles, Santorini is a geological drama queen that may be the most visually spectacular. Its turbulent past is said to have inspired the legend of Atlantis. Its crescent-shaped coastline of jagged cliffs formed 3,500 years ago, after a volcano on the formerly round island exploded so cataclysmically that its center collapsed into the sea.

Santorini continues to blow its top every so often, most recently in 1950. The 30-square-mile island also is prone to earthquakes. A 1956 temblor of magnitude 7.8 flattened villages, killed scores of people and caused thousands to flee for other islands.

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Despite the ever-present specter of another colossal disaster, Santorini and its 10,000 inhabitants are a beacon of unabashed optimism.

Few could be more hopeful than the island's grape farmers, tilling and sowing year after year, despite the lack of rain.

Few could be sunnier than the restaurateurs and hoteliers erecting building after building at the edge of the volcanic crater right above where the land once plunged into the sea.

And few could have more faith in humanity than Santorini's sun-baked tourists, dropping heaps of euros at a time for baubles supposedly of diamonds and gold at the island's jewelry stores – which operate alongside shops selling Burberry and Gucci knockoffs.

In similarly ebullient spirits, Peggy and I decided to visit the island's wineries. (Memo to snobs who pooh-pooh fermented grapes of Grecian vintage: Some Santorini wines are delicious.)

On Santorini, guided trips go virtually everywhere on the island; there are bus tours of ancient ruins, boat rides to muddy hot springs. So we were surprised we could find no tour or shuttle from Thira, also called Fira, that would allow us to vineyard-hop.

We were not deterred. Wielding a crude map delineating highways and dots marking wineries, we plotted our own itinerary.

Our first destination had an address like a clue for a scavenger hunt: "On the road to Kamari," a town on the eastern shore. Another winery had a cryptic single-word location of "Pyrgos," a village near the center of the island.

We were not fazed. If we couldn't find our way, we would ask for directions.

We thought it would be fun to travel as the locals did and ride the public bus. To places where transit might not go, we figured on hailing a taxi. A couple of wineries appeared to be next to each other on the map, so we could hoof it as well.

And so we set out – I in platform sandals, Peggy in rubber flip-flops with plastic daisies between her toes – as effervescent as the day was young.

Our journey began at the transit hub of Thira, the island's largest city with a population of 2,500, where we stayed during our four days on Santorini. A 90-cent ride in a rumbling public bus took us into the scenic countryside.

August is Santorini's grape harvest season, and we passed farmers with their donkeys in fields dotted with clumps of vines tightly coiled like baskets, a traditional practice to shield the delicate fruit from the island's brutal winds. After the tendrils are untethered and plucked clean, they are left sprawling on the dirt.

Our bus driver spoke no English but understood enough to suddenly lurch to a stop and motion us out when he arrived at our destination. We wallowed through a bitter cloud of diesel exhaust toward the private pathway of Volcan Winery, also known as Koutsogiannopoulos Winery to locals who call it by the owner's family name.

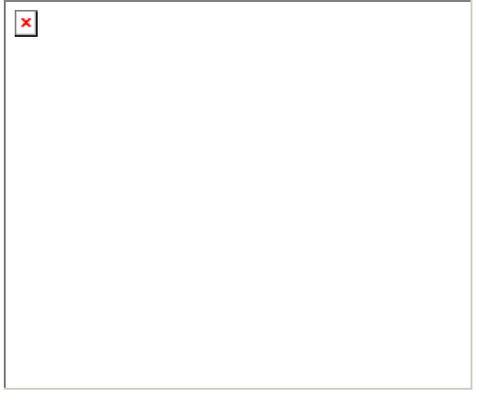
We kicked off our tour at Volcan because it has a museum. Winemaking is among the oldest trades in Santorini, dating back thousands of years. We wandered through Volcan's cavernous chambers, past mannequins posed in reenactments of bucolic scenes. Here, a peasant stomped on grapes with bare feet. There, a winemaker cranked a press. We learned that because of Santorini's arid climate, its fields are not very productive: Every 11,000 square feet yields only about 882 pounds of grapes, compared with amounts 10 times greater in wetter regions.

Our museum entry price of about \$5 included three tastings. We sampled a dry and mild young white wine made from Assyrtiko grapes; a slightly acidic red wine; and a vinsanto, Santorini's musky and syrup-sweet dessert wine made from grapes ripened for two weeks after harvest.

Ready to move on, we asked our server whether we should wait for a bus or walk. She seemed bewildered that we hadn't come by rental mopeds, ubiquitous among Santorini's younger set. She knew no one who had walked that route but after pondering said brightly it would take "15 minutes" to walk at most. It was all we needed to hear.

We soon realized why we were the only pedestrians out there.

The dusty, undivided roadway had no sidewalks. The pavement was barely wide enough for a car lane in each direction. We repeatedly crossed from one side to the other. To escape the intense sunshine, we dashed for tree shade. We scrambled the other way when a wider shoulder offered more distance from cars.



The noon sun grew so ferocious that I squinted through my sunglasses. Half an hour into our trudge, my straw-hatted head sweltered as though under a salon hair dryer.

Then we saw a small sign at the side of the road. A painted arrow directed oenophiles and art lovers alike to a place called Art Space. We hadn't planned on going there and, in fact, had not even heard of it.

A five-minute trot off the main highway, past modest backyards with garlands of dripping clothes, took us to Art Space, where modern paintings and sculptures are the main attraction and the wine is almost an afterthought. Though it had been a winery for more than 100 years, the buildings had been nearly emptied of winemaking equipment. Instead, colorful works by contemporary Greek artists lined its cave-like halls. All were for sale.

Owner and curator Antonis Argiros was so animated about art during our free guided tour that he nearly forgot our tastings afterward, which included a throat-burning raki followed by a soothing vinsanto.

Our spirits revived by the wine and gales of air conditioning, we resumed our hike. Fortunately, our next stop, Canava Roussos, was less than 10 minutes away.

Wine and good food

The winery, about 2,000 feet from the island's eastern coast, has a lovely outdoor dining area with trellises aflame with bougainvillea and ivy draped over picnic tables. We sat at a table with a view of the sea and ordered a platter of Santorini specialties and a seven-wine tasting.

The offerings turned out to be the most delicious we had in Santorini. I especially enjoyed a glacial, smooth red dessert wine called Mavrathiro.

Food from the winery's kitchen also turned out to be better than pricier meals we had in fancy restaurants. The tomato croquettes were tangy and delicately seasoned. The pureed fava beans, another local favorite, came with flavorful sun-dried tomatoes and capers.

Our next stop, Boutari, was on the western coast of the island, and this time we asked our server to call a taxi. The one that arrived was based out of Thira, on the island's west side. That meant our driver had to motor east to pick us up, putter west to drop us off and collect a hefty fare for the zigzag route.

The Boutari winery has a tranquil seaside location. A chief draw is its multimedia shows on Santorini's history. Inside the theater, we watched images of an erupting volcano and pastoral scenes of farming. The "multimedia" part of the show, we surmised, must have been the thundering musical accompaniment.

By then, it was getting late, and we were eager to leave for our final destination: Santo Wines, renowned on the island for its cliff-top location and to-die-for sunset views.

Back on the highway, we planted ourselves at a bus stop, where we were told we could catch a ride to Santo Wines a few miles up the road.

Soon a bus packed with riders barreled toward us. The driver held up a hand as if to say "no more" and zoomed past. We waited and waited, but had no idea when the next bus might come. Facing nightfall and the prospect of missing out on the Santo Wines sunset, we contemplated the passing cars and stuck out our thumbs.

Eventually, someone did stop. He was flaxen-haired and handsome, with a radiant smile. Then came his friend, a broad-shouldered, Olympian type. Each straddled a motorcycle.

And that was how Peggy and I found ourselves vrooming up a coastal road, hair trailing in the wind. Hat in hand, I clung to the brawny one – let's call him Zeus – while Peggy rode behind the luminous one, who could be no other than Apollo.

At one intersection, a near-miss with a silver Mercedes made its driver erupt with a Grecian equivalent of the finger. Our gentlemen took the vulgar gesture in stride and continued up the hill.

When Peggy and I disembarked, we thanked the guys profusely and scrambled toward the cliffs and Santo Wines.

The cooperative of small growers is at the tip of the caldera. Its gift shop has some seating, but the best spots are outside, with a panoramic view of curving coastline and the sea beyond.

I swooped into a cliff-side seat with a glass of vinsanto in hand, just in time to see the sun, trailing a resplendent mantle of amethyst, rubies and gold, seemingly hover for a moment before folding into a languid bow into the horizon.

I drew a deep breath as if it had been my first in a long time. Getting to the wineries had been a lot more trouble than we had expected (getting back was easier – we took a bus), but I was still glad to have done it. We saw gorgeous scenery, savored some great wines and now have a few interesting stories to tell.

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Greek island roundabout

GETTING THERE:

From LAX, Lufthansa, British, Swiss and Air France offer connecting service (change of planes) to Santorini. Restricted round-trip fares begin at \$1,178.

From Piraeus (the Port of Athens), boats and ships leave daily for Santorini. Catamarans are faster than ferry ships, but the ride isn't as fun because there is no outside deck and passengers are indoors the entire ride. Ferries are slower but offer a smoother ride, fantastic deck views and amenities such as Internet access. Fares and schedules are available at travel agencies.

TELEPHONES:

To call the numbers below from the U.S., dial 011 (the international dialing code), 30 (country code for Greece) and the local number.

WHERE TO STAY:

San Giorgio Villas, Thira; 22860-23516, [www.hostelworld.com/hosteldetails.php/sangiorgiovillas-santorini-6561](http://www.hostelworld.com/hosteldetails.php/sangiorgiovillas-santorini-6561) . Cute, no-frills lodge with no views but conveniently located in the center of town. Doubles \$57 with breakfast.

Hotel Keti, Thira; 22860-22324, [www.hotelketi.gr](http://www.hotelketi.gr), Built into the edge of the cliff, this small hotel has basic rooms but fantastic ocean views. Doubles \$88.

Porto Fira Suites, Thira; 22860-22849, [www.portofira.gr](http://www.portofira.gr). Luxury super-modern suites have Jacuzzis and private terraces with panoramic views of the caldera. Doubles \$352, including breakfast.

WHERE TO EAT:

Restaurant Panorama, on the cliff-top of Thirassia islet, just across from the main island. Family-run eatery can be reached only with a strenuous climb up a zigzag of stairs. Or for \$5, ride up on a donkey. The patio area offers a wonderful vista of Santorini's main island. Deliciously fresh seafood kebabs. Dinners for two \$25.

Taverna Naoussa, Thira, 22860-24869. Upstairs restaurant serves traditional cuisine, including fried sea bream and eggplant dip. Sit at a table toward the back of the covered patio for a view of city lights. Dinners for two \$32.

Canava Roussos, Mesa Gonia, 22860-31278. The winery has a pretty outdoor dining area. Delicious sampler platter features tomato croquettes, pureed fava beans, meatballs and stuffed grape leaves. Ask for the homemade grape pudding. Wine tastings \$9; entrees \$4-\$19.

WINERIES:

Volcan Winery and Wine Museum, also called Koutsogiannopoulos Winery, Vothonas; 22860 31322, [greekproducts.com/volcanwines](http://greekproducts.com/volcanwines). Tasting \$5.

Art Space, near Exo Gonia, 22860-32774. Free tastings.

Boutari Winery, near Megalohori, 22860-81011. Tasting \$5.

Santo Wines, near Pyrgos, 22860-22596, [greekproducts.com/santowines](http://greekproducts.com/santowines). Tasting 90 cents each glass.

TO LEARN MORE:

Greek National Tourist Organization, (212) 421-5777, [www.greektourism.com](http://www.greektourism.com).

– Caitlin Liu

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