The rocky, partly volcanic Argo-Saronic islands, most of them barely an olive’s throw from the mainland, differ to a surprising extent not just from the land they face but also from one another. The northernmost island of the Argo-Saronic group, Salamína, is effectively a suburb of Pireás, with its narrow strait, barely a kilometre across, crossed by a constant stream of ferries. There’s little to attract you on the other side, however, and the island is covered only briefly here. Égina, important in antiquity and more or less continually inhabited since then, is infinitely preferable: the most fertile of the group, it is famous for its pistachio nuts and home to one of the finest ancient temples in Greece. Tiny Angístri is often treated as little more than an adjunct of Égina, but it’s a lovely place in its own right, ideal for a few days’ complete relaxation. The three southerly islands – green Póros, tiny, car-free Ýdhra and upmarket Spétses – are comparatively infertile, and rely on water piped or transported in rusting freighters from the mainland. Continue reading to find out more about... Salamína Angístri Given their proximity to Athens and their beauty, the Argo-Saronics are hugely popular destinations, with Égina (Aegina) almost becoming a city suburb at weekends. Póros, Ýdhra (Hydra) and Spétses are similar in the summer, though their visitors include a higher proportion of foreign tourists. More than any other group, these islands are best out of season and midweek, when visitors (and prices) fall dramatically and the port towns return to a quieter, more provincial pace. You’ll also notice a significant difference between Ýdhra and Spétses, the furthest of the islands, and those closer to Athens – because of the distance, and because they’re accessible only by hydrofoil and catamaran rather than the cheaper conventional ferries, they’re markedly more expensive and exclusive, with significant expat populations. The islands were not extensively settled until medieval times, when refugees from the mainland established themselves here, adopting seagoing commerce (and piracy) as livelihoods. Today, foreigners and Athenians have replaced locals in the depopulated harbour towns; windsurfers, water-taxis and yachts are faint echoes of the massed warships, schooners and kaïkia once at anchor. **Salamína** SALAMÍNA is the quickest possible island-hop from Pireás, and indeed much of its population commutes to the city to work. The island itself, however, is highly developed, has few tourist facilities, and is close enough to the Athenian dockyards to make swimming unappealing. The island’s port is at Paloúkia, facing the mainland, just a short hop across a narrow, built-up isthmus to Salamína Town on the west coast. Five kilometres or so beyond Salamína Town, Eándio has the island’s cleanest and most attractive beaches. A similar distance from Salamína Town to the north, the monastery of Faneroméni (daily 8.30am–12.30pm & 4pm–sunset) is a working nunnery with impressive frescoes, beautifully sited amid pine woods overlooking the mainland. **The Battle of Salamis** Perhaps the main reason for heading to Salamína is for the boat trip itself, through an extraordinary industrial seascape of docks and shipworks. The waters you cross were the site of one of the most significant sea battles of ancient times; some would say of all time, given that this was a decisive blow in preventing a Persian invasion and allowing the development of Classical Athens, and with it modern Western culture. In 480 BC, the Greeks were in full retreat from the vast Persian army under Xerxes, following the defeat of the Spartans at Thermopylae. Many Greek cities, including Athens, had been sacked and burned by the invaders – indeed smoke from the ruins on the Acropolis probably formed a backdrop to the Battle of Salamis. The Greeks had roughly 370 triremes supplied by around twenty cities, the bulk from Athens, Corinth and Aegina; the Persian fleet was twice the size, with heavier ships, but even more diverse, with many from subject nations whose loyalty was questionable. Through false information and strategic retreats, the Greeks managed first to tire many of the Persian crews – who rowed all night to cut off a non-existent escape attempt – and then to lure them into the narrow strait off Salamína. Crowded in and unable to manoeuvre, and with the wind in the wrong direction, the Persians found themselves at the mercy of the more nimble Greek triremes, and the battle eventually became a rout. Some two hundred Persian ships were sunk, against forty-odd on the Greek side, and few of their heavily armoured crews or marines survived. **Angístri** ANGÍSTRI, fifteen minutes by fast boat from Égina, is a tiny island, obscure enough to be overlooked by most island-hoppers, though the visitors it does have are a diverse mix: Athenian weekenders, retirees who bought and restored property here years ago, plus a few British and Scandinavian package holidaymakers. There’s a small, not terribly attractive strip of development on the north coast facing Égina, but the rest of the island is pine-covered, timeless and beautiful – albeit with very few beaches. It’s also strangely schizophrenic: holiday weekends can see hordes of young Greeks camping out on otherwise empty beaches, while in Skála a few small, classy hotels are juxtaposed with cafés serving English breakfasts to the package-trippers.