

Visiting the paradise islands

Author's thoughts



Greece, the country of democracy, a place where great philosophers were born, culture and art was produced, but also a country that does not lack environmental beauty. This charm of Greece, in my belief, lies in the vast set of small islands which offer simplicity, relaxation, and endless moments of happiness. A pleasant feeling covers me upon landing on an island; the adventurous feeling is immediately born and a desire of discovering it feels me in every time. Before start pursuing my Doctorate degree, in Athens, I have never visited any Greek island before. However, after starting visiting them my jaws dropped every time. A feeling of enthusiasm covers my mind of each islands unique character, their different way of living, and the openness of their locals. Many times, I catch myself saying the same thing, "when I become pensioner I am going to buy a small house in a Greek island and living a chill, quiet, and easy going life..."

— Stefanos Georgiou

A visit in Haven

by STEFANOS GEORGIOU

In 2010, Greece was officially announced as a country of economic crisis, a fact that goes on over eight years, nowadays. However, a part that Greece is never on crisis is the unimaginable beauty and charm of its environment and more specifically its islands. The combination of sunny weather, almost all year along, with the exceptionally large and tasty portions of food, the great hospitality of its people, and the intense night live are the reasons making many tourists daydreaming when they talk about Greece all over the world.

According to Wikipedia, Greece has around 1,200 to 1,600 islands where 227 are inhabited. It also offers, beaches with various sandy colours such as brown, white, golden, pink, and volcanic black. In addition, it is a country with the most blue flagged beaches in Europe that indicates the clean waters. Tourists can enjoy their stay in islands through hotels, Airbnb apartments, or even camping sites which various of them do exist. However, my suggestion is not to stay for long time at hotel resorts, but, instead travel to different villages, talk with locals, go the places that also locals go in order to learn from this culture.

During my stay in Greece, I was

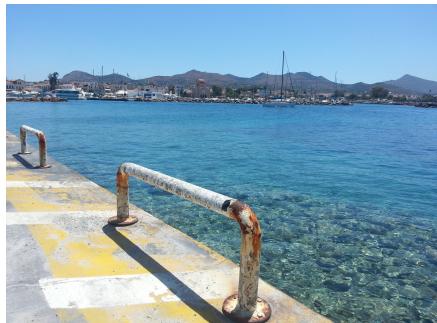
fortunate to visit at least ten different islands from various seas. Greece's islands can be found both in Aegean and Ionian seas. The distinguished characteristics of Aegean islands is the dry climate and environment, but, warm seas. On the contrast, Ionian islands are less dry with rich environment and many trees, but, with much colder waters, in general. The Greek islands are group in six clusters: the Argo-Saronic, Cyclades, North Aegean, Dodecanese, Sporades, Ionia islands also known as Eptanisa, and Crete that is a single large island. I have visited islands in both seas but mainly from the Aegean sea. Therefore the most of the discussion is going to be for the Aegean islands.

My aim with this article is to expose the hidden magic of the islands through some of my adventures, feelings, historical events, and thoughts in order to encourage people that paradise is not far away, it is much more closer than most of them think.

Aigina, my first island

By the end of April 2016, when the temperature usually is much higher than 30°, a friend of mine, that we used to serve in army for our mandatory duty, gave me an unexpected call. He was visiting Athens with his girlfriend for few days and he wanted to travel to Aigina and to catch up with me. A relatively big island that is located at Saronic bay and less than an hour distance away from Pireaus port by boat and famous mostly for the Aigina's peanuts; which is actually...a kind of pistachio.

Until that time, I have never been before to any island nor on a boat and since I am always up for trying new a different things I took the call. In general, in low season, there is no need to pre-book boat tickets since not many people are visiting the islands. After we bought our tickets, we entered the boat and took a place outside where to have better view and stare the seagulls. The seagulls were flying most of the time next to the boat to fish. Many people were trying to feed them in order to take pictures with them. It is necessary to be careful since the seagulls can bite also your hand while trying to get the food out of it. Therefore, we enjoy the view until we reached our destination, the port of Aigina.



Aigina's port and clean waters

The port of Aigina, where we disembarked, is located in the main city. Each island of Greece has its own main city and in most case a port can also be found there. In the old times, for some islands, the locals were building their main cities on mountains away from the port. This was done since to avoid quick attacks from pirates. However, it was not the case for Aigina.



Aigina's main city

Once we disembarked, we took a ride towards Marathonas beach since it is found outside of the city and the bus schedules are not in favour of the public. However, on my second tour to Aigina I was more prepared and I rented a bike which was much fun and a cheaper solution. The organised beaches in Greece offer umbrellas, beach beds, and bars from where you can enjoy ice-cold coffees such as frappe, cold beers, and different snacks. Even though it was May and the outside temperature more than 35° the water was quite cold for my Cypriot standards. Nevertheless, it was also refreshing and my first bath, so I tried to enjoy it as much as I could without showing that it was cold.

After our cold experience on Marathonas beach, we made our way back to the city where we enjoyed some local food and Aigina's peanuts. Also, we took our time to explore the city centre that provides different types of restaurants, mainly traditional Greek cuisine, and small narrow roads where decorated with many bougainvillea, white houses, and very clean streets. Just walking in those streets of Aigina you can get the feeling that some things in that island

remained unaffected by the past of time. But still, the beauty and their simplicity can rest the human soul. After our walk we took the boat to return to the noisy Athens once again.

Salamina

A place where one of the biggest naval battle between the Greeks and the Persian army took place. On that time, Greece was separated in different kingdoms. Therefore, they united their forces to take down their common enemy. Also, there is a large naval base at Salamina that is hosting multiple types of warships.

By the beginning of May 2016, one of our lab's PhD fellow, Maria Kechagia, invited the whole lab in her hometown, which is in Salamina for a day trip. Salamina, is an island that is almost 15 minutes away by ferry boat. Therefore, we took the opportunity and we loaded two cars in the ferry to make our way easier in Salamina. The difference between the ferry and the normal boat is that the ferry is much smaller and slower. That means strong waves and long distances are troublesome.



The island of Salamina

Our first stop in Salamina was at Maria's home where her parents were expecting us. Her mother, few months ago had to go through a surgery and blood was required for that. Upon request, I immediately went for blood donation, a fact that her mother remembers till today and every time we meet she is bringing me cookies and other kinds of sweets. In our company, we also had a PhD student from India who came with his wife and four years old kid. Greek

parents are going crazy when they see kids and they try to cheer them with every kind of sweet or toys they have, no matter from which country they are. However, they did not only treat the kid well but us also. Once we sit outside in their garden that was full of trees, plants and flowers, Maria's mother brought us coffee, cookies, and home made ice-cream. Afterwards, they also suggested us beaches to visit and places to eat lunch.



Beach in Salamina

After the beach we went to have lunch at a local restaurant where we order "kotsi". This food is part of the pork's leg, cooked in an oven with sauce and different species. Literally the meat was going off the bone by simple touching it. It was one of the most amazing "kotsi" we ever had. Even after two years, our PhD fellow Antonis Gkortzis is still mentioning that food.

Vacations in Milos

Summer in Athens is almost unbearable and an escape plan is go to a Greek island. Ana, a beautiful blond Slovenian girl with charming blue eyes and a crystal smile, came to visit me in order to go at Milos island. Milos is an island in Cyclades before Santorini, however, much more cheaper, with less tourists, and beautify sandy beaches. In addition, most of the Cyclades islands share the common characteristics as white houses, flat roofs, blue doors and window labels, in most of cases. Therefore, in mid of July 2016 we travelled there by boat that took us more than four hours to reach our destination.

Milos has many beaches that are inaccessible by cars or foot and to visit them a sailing boat is required. To this end, we booked a whole day sailing tour with Ana to explore and enjoy the hidden places of Milos. Again, for me, it was my first time travelling by sailing boat, an experience which came to be fascinating and enjoyable since I love snorkelling and sailing boats offer this opportunity in a large scale. Also, we went close to an island called Poliaignos. A rocky island next to Milos that is mostly inhabited but goats and the shepherds that are watching over them. Poliaigos had the most clear blue water I have ever seen in my life. Even tho the water's depth was more than 15 meters the bottom was quite visible, but, also cold.



The crystal blue waters of Poliaigos

From the sailing boat, we also saw some of the traditional fisher men houses. The fisher men were colouring their houses doors with different colours to recognise them during night. This was done to avoid anchoring their boat outside the wrong parking spot.



Fisher men houses in Milos

During the night, our sailing trip reached its end. Overall, the trip was

tiresome since the wavy sea forced us to try keep our balance, in the boat, most of the time and in combination with the strong sun we get exhausted. However, it was a great new adventurous experience for me and one that I definitely repeat. In addition, we have visited coast lines that we could never see by car and it made it worth our time and the energy we spend on the trip.

A rather daring act from us was to use the local buses for transportation which end up being a cumbersome and time costly action. Many times, we ended up at completely wrong places and far away from our destination. However, every time locals where stopping to give us drive and to talk to us. In addition, they were really interested in our own stories too and many times they were suggesting us places for meals with the best value for many deals. Also, an old guy took us with his car at one of the most beautiful beaches of Milos, the Firiplaka beach.



Me at Firiplaka beach

Firiplaka is an magnificent golden sandy beach with blue and clear waters as depicted in the above picture. The specific beach is partially organised while the biggest part of it is not. It offers a small number of umbrellas and sea beds free of use with the policy of first come first serve. Also, it has a small kiosk that offers a number of refreshments, snacks, tasty and

big bowls with Greek yoghurt with various seasonal fruits, walnuts, and honey for very reasonable prices.

A different type of beach is the Sarakiniko. Sarakiniko means piratear and it is a white rocky bay as illustrated in the picture below. Its schema offers warm and ease waters to its swimmers with a small beach surrounded by many fig trees. As it is among the famous places of Milos and most of the time is quite crowded. However, it offers many spots and people can also lay on the rocky parts too.



The Sarakiniko beach

After we left from the beach, we made our way towards Plaka of Milos to enjoy the sun set. Plaka is small city located on a hill in the centre of the island. It also offers a number of restaurants, bars, and cafeterias from where you can see the sun set. For dinner, we had a delicious shrimps with cheese from Milos and grilled vegetables at a local restaurant while we enjoyed cold Mythos beer. Moreover, we didn't waste our chance to enjoy the sun set while listening to Hans Zimmer's songs such as "The last of Mochicans", "Braveheart", and so on, a tradition that I acquired from my PhD fellow Antonis Gkortzis and I still follow.



Shrimps with cheese from Milos

My dream is to fly

After returning from Milos I received news that a dear friend of mine from Serbia, Vojkan Stoitsik (a cool University assistant professor at Greek literature), was going for vacations at Lefkada island. Lefkada is big island found at the Ionian sea with rich environmental beauty, a lot of trees, and cold waters. In order to visit my friend for two days, since I took most of my days off, I booked a bus tickets towards Lefkada. Well, next time I should be more careful with the time tables since it was eight hours of bus driving which depleted my energy until I reached my destination. Needless to say, I have spend around 16 hours just for driving while I stayed at Lefkada almost a day.

The island of Lefkada is connected with the main part of Greece through a bridge since it is very close, thus no boat is required to reach it. It also has a very beautiful and traditional city centre that offers many restaurants, cafeterias, and bar. In addition, next to port many bars and night clubs can be found with loud music and fancy lights.

My first and only visit at Lefkada's beached was at "Porto Katsiki". Since Lefkada is on the west side of Greece it offers the possibility of paragliding due to the strong "west winds"; and of course I am always up especially for extreme challenges. The particular team, of paragliding, offered two venues: i) seven minutes of flying from almost 700 meters, and ii) ten to twelve with fall from 1000 meters. In addition, I was equipped with a Go Pro camera so we can capture the moment.

As soon as we reached the top of the hill the instructor prepared the paragliding equipments and attached me on it. On that moment, before the jump, I was not sure if I was feeling scared from the unknown feeling (of flying) or excited from it. However, as soon as we jumped (me attached together with the instructor) the bizarre feeling went away. I was feeling relax and calm, I was enjoying the unique view from the top that

mother nature feely offered to us.



It is manoeuvre time!!!

Upon reaching the beach, the instructor informed my that we can have some manoeuvres with the paragliding, only if I wanted it, and of course I agreed on that. While doing manoeuvres you are losing height much faster, however, the whole concept was fast, immediate, and at some points I even felt that I was losing my breath. But I could say it was the most exciting part of the whole process and a one everybody should try.

After the day passed and I had to take the bus back to Athens. The whole trip was very short but full with excitement due to the paragliding experience.

Camping with survival?

August is a month where most of the Greeks are resting and replenishing their batteries for the new season. To this end, on August 2017, we decided to have a camping experience in an island to also chill out and to enjoy our time on the beach. Our choice was Kea, a rocky and mountainer island approximately an hour away from Lavrio's port.

Our team, see picture below, composed from my PhD fellow Antonis Gkortzis (a beard scout boy guy, capable barman, good cold but nice humour, rum and beer addict), Daniela Mikeli (the girl who always smiles, jokes around, and has unlimited energy, and looks super cute until she starts drinking beers and watching football games), Marios and Maria

Zacharia (the sugar couple who recently got a cute pair of twins and they are always up for good food and burgers). Antonis was our master and commander for the whole camping experience since he was following the tradition from his childhood.



Me, Daniela, Maria & Marios, Antonis

The camping side in Kea was organised, that means they had bathrooms, restaurants, and electricity. For myself, Antonis, and Daniela we had a single big tent and we had another one for Marios and Maria. Our daily schedule for the next three days included mainly activities such as hitting the beach, having beers and cocktails (from Antonis who is always equipped with the necessary barman package) and a trail walking in the wild.

During the first day, we were mainly chilling out on the beach since we arrived during the afternoon and I was also exhausted due to conference paper submission just a day before. Due to my lack of sleep I went to bed relatively early. However, I didn't realise that I haven't closed the tent's mosquito net all the way up. As an outcome, we all heard Antonis during the night cursing out loud while mosquitoes were feasting on him.



Our little adventure

As the next day's challenge, Antonis found a trail path that had as a destination an unorganised beach with some ancient ruins. According to his information the path was easy and short, around 15 minutes. Therefore, we started our small adventure at 10:00 o'clock in the morning. We arrived by cars and the old mine (that was the starting point) and we prepared our backpacks to start the trail. However, we only took three liters of water since we were expecting a short journey. Who would ever thought that the trail took us an hour to reach our destination that also included a rough downhill on the way? Upon reaching our destination we ran out of water and there was nothing around to refill our supplies. We were alone in the wild at an amazing beach as shown in the picture below. To this end, we took our time to at least enjoy the beach before we head back. Going back without water supplies was not only challenging but a survival task too since we started feeling dizzy due to dehydration. It took us almost an hour and a half to reach our cars where we didn't have any water apart from a fridge back with ice cold beers. That time it didn't matter us, we were drinking them like water! That was an experience that definitely none of us will forget.



Trail walking with beach destination

Can't say no to raki

Mid of August 2017, the whole Greece is on vacations, Athens looks like a ghost town since most of its inhabitants are on vacations. By that time, three friends of mine, from the masters, came to visit me. Our international team (a French, a Nigerian, an Indian, and a Cypriot) had aim of visiting Chania, one of the most tourist regions of Crete island.



Fisayo, Alex, Me, and Rohan

Such a trip during August requires plan from far ahead since it is high season and most of places are booked in advance. Therefore, we made all the necessary steps such as booking apartments, boat tickets, rent a car, and prepare a plan of possible places that we would like to visit during our stay there. Since none of the guys had the boat travelling experience before, we decided to have reserved seats. However, the eight hours boat trip was indeed an exhausting decision and one I would most probably avoid. I am not planning on reserving a cabin. Also, we had to choose a driver in our team, a once that could handle the hard and narrow streets of Crete without getting killed. To choose

among a Cypriot, a French, a Nigeria, and an India, for driving was a tough choice. As a rational choice seems to be me, however, in Cyprus we drive from the opposite side. Rohan didn't know how to drive and Fisayo haven't updated his driving license to a European one. Therefore, we ended up letting Alexandre the French/Italian guy to drive. Due to his French blood, as he said, he had to complain about every narrow and badly maintained street we engaged in our path. Despite his complain those facts he did an awesome job by giving a safe drive until the end of our stay in Crete.

Among our first choices to visit was Seitan Limani. Towards our way to Seitan Limani, we stopped and had a lunch at the "Three porks". A very simple restaurant, mostly for students since it is located outside of a University, with very delicious and cheap food. A fact that impressed us about Cretan cousin was the raki which was offered to us at every restaurant we have been, and not just a glass of it. Since Alexandre was our diver, Fisayo was not drinking, and Rohan had issues with his liver, I had to consume the raki most of the times alone. When we reached Seitan Limani during the afternoon it was way to crowded. In addition, there was not a clear path towards the beach apart from a very rough downhill way. One of those paths that could easily fall and break your neck if you do not have wild goat's climbing skills. However, it did not stop locals or tourists to go down there and enjoy its beautiful and refreshing blue water as depicted in the picture below. One of the visitors of the particular beach was a wild goat that was approaching people on the beach to get or snatch food from their belongings. Despite this, it offers an interesting sight for the tourists who also are trying to make selfies with goat.



Seitan Limani



Fisayo posing at Elafonisi beach

Behind the main city's ports of Chania, one could find many hidden places and restaurants that are less franchised and offer the traditional flavours of Crete. You may lose the amazing view of the port, however, I believe it is worth more to have a better food in a much more decent price. Before going to Chania, I consulted a friend of mine, Ilias Dolaptitis, to provide us with guidelines such as restaurants that we should visit and what kind of foods we must try. I could say I was pretty satisfied with everything we ate at Chania and especially with their raki that I was still consuming alone.



Hidden beauties of Chania



Parts of the old city

Driving in Crete is quite a challenge and tough task. It gets even more challenging when you are driving through the mountains where the streets are much more narrow and when the buses are coming by and forcing you to go off-road. We had to go through this experience while going towards Efalonisi beach. However, driving through the mountains and experiencing the beautiful environment of Crete paid us back for the whole struggle.

A small island: Agkistri

After coming back from Chania, with the international team, Rohan and Alexandre had to leave. Therefore, me and Fisayo, we decided to have one more little adventure by travelling to very small island just next to Aigina, the Agkistri. Agkistri's direct translation is the "fishing hook". To this end, we took a boat

from Pireaus early morning and after an hour we reached our destination.

As soon as we disembarked at Agkistri's port, we rented two bicycles. I really enjoy cycling in the islands when they're not mountaineer and the cars are limited or not allowed at all. Since it was my first time at Agkistri we asked local for information such as the best restaurants and beaches to visit.



Those amazing colours...

Chalkidia is a nude beach at the north west part of the island. It is only accessible by foot or boat. In addition, it is a spot for free camping.



The beach of Chalkida

Hydra no cars allowed

Some Greek islands have restrictions to cars and motor bikes, those

are the islands I call "no-noisy-irritating islands". After staying too long in Athens, where a majority of cars and motor bikes are modified just to be more noisy, the necessity of getting away from this mess is huge. Therefore, such islands as Hydra where the transportation is only done by feet and donkeys do exist.

By the September 2017 a friend of mine, Dorine Petit from France came for a conference meeting in Athens with her boyfriend Jeremy, and since they never been to an island before we decided to visit Hydra. Hydra is a large mountaineer islands just an hour and a half away from Pireaus port. It has one of the most beautiful city port that I ever seeing. However, its beaches, the ones that we visited, are mainly rocky.