

Visiting the paradise islands



Author's thoughts

Greece, the country of democracy, the birthplace of great philosophers and scientists, the country of culture and art, but also a country that does not lack environmental beauty. This charm of Greece's environmental beauty lies in the vast number of 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 my self thinking the same thing, "when I become pensioner I am going to by a small house in a Greek island and living a chill, quiet, and easy going live..."

— 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, Greece is never on crisis on the unimaginable beauty and charm of its environment and more specifically its islands. The combination of sunny weather, almost all year along, with the substantial and tasty portions of food, the great hospitality of its people, and the intense nightlife 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. Alongside, 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 a long time at hotel resorts, but, instead travel to different villages, talk with locals, go the places that also locals go to learn from this culture.

Through my stay in Greece, I was

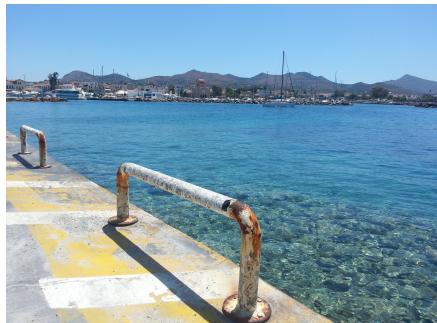
fortunate to visit at least ten different islands from various seas. Greece's islands can be found both in Aegean and Ionian seas. The distinguishing aspects of Aegean islands is the dry climate and environment, but, warm seas. On the contrast, Ionian islands are less dry with a rich environment and 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 toured islands in both seas but primarily from the Aegean sea. Therefore 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 to encourage people that paradise is not far away, it is much 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 the army for our mandatory duty, gave me an unexpected call. He was visiting Athens with his girlfriend for a 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 Piraeus 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 things, I answered his 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 place just outside to have a better view and stair the seagulls. The seagulls were flying most of the time next to the boat to fish. Many people were trying to feed them to take pictures with them. It is necessary to be careful since the seagulls can also bite 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 central city. Each island of Greece has its own central 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 tho 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 we Greek cuisine, and small narrow roads where decorated with many bougainvilleas, white house, and 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's soul. After our walk, we took the boat to return to the noisy Athens once again.

Salamina

A place where one of the most significant naval battles between Greece and the Persian army took place. At 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 on the ferry to make our way easier in Salamina. The difference between the ferry and the traditional 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, a 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 of 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 homemade 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 falling off the bone by merely 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 going to a Greek island. Ana, a beautiful blond Slovenian girl with charming blue eyes and a crystal smile, came to visit me to go to Milos island. Milos is an island in the Cyclades before Santorini, however, much more cheaper, with fewer tourists, and beautify sandy beaches. Moreover, most of the Cyclades islands share the common characteristics as white houses, flat roofs, blue doors and window labels, in most of the 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 on a large scale. Besides, we went close to an island called Poliaigos, a rocky peninsula next to Milos that is mostly inhabited but goats and the shepherds that are watching over them. Poliaigos had the clearest 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 fishermen houses. The fishermen were colouring their houses doors in different colours to recognise them during the 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 rough sea forced us to try to keep our balance, in the boat, most of the time and in combination with the intense sun, we get exhausted. However, it was a great new adventurous experience for me and one that I definitely repeat. Furthermore, we have visited coastlines that are not reachable 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 in entirely wrong places and far away from our destination. However, every time locals were stopping to give us directions 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 a magnificent golden sandy beach with blue and clear waters as depicted in the above picture. The particular beach is partially organised while the most significant part of it is not. It offers a small number of umbrellas and seabeds free of use with the policy of first come first serve. Also, it has a

small kiosk that offers many 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 eases 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 experience the sunset. Plaka is a tiny city established on a hill in the heart of the island. It further offers some restaurants, bars, and cafeterias where tourists can enjoy a meal or a drink alongside the sunset. For dinner, we had delicious shrimps with cheese form Milos and grilled vegetables at a local restaurant while we enjoyed cold Mythos beer. Moreover, we didn't misuse our chance to enjoy the sunset while listening to Hans Zimmer's songs such as "The last of Mochicans", "Braveheart", and so on, a tradition that I earned 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, Vojkan Stoitsik (a cool University assistant professor at Greek literature), was advancing for vacations at Lefkada island. Lefkada is a big island exposed at the Ionian sea with rich environmental beauty, many trees, and cold waters. Therefore, I booked a bus ticket towards Lefkada. Well, next time, I should be more cautious with the timetables considering it was an eight hours bus-trip which depleted my energy until I reached my destination. Needless to say, I have spent around 16 hours (round-trip) just to stay in Lefkada for almost a day.

The island of Lefkada is connected with the central part of Greece through a bridge since it is very close; thus no boat is required to reach it. It also has a charming and old city centre that allows numerous restaurants, cafeterias, and bar. Besides, close to port many bars and nightclubs are placed with loud music and fancy lights.



Kathisma beach at Lefkada

My first and only visit at Lefkada's beaches was at "Kathisma". Because Lefkada is on the west side of Greece

it advances the possibility of paragliding due to the powerful "west winds"; and of course I am continually up especially for extreme challenges. The particular team, or paragliding, offered two venues: i) seven minutes of flying from almost 300 meters, and ii) ten to twelve with fall from 600 meters. Nevertheless, I was equipped with a Go Pro camera to capture the moment.

As soon as we reached the top of the hill, the instructor prepared the paragliding equipment and attached me on it. At that moment, before the jump, I was not sure if I was feeling scared from the unknown feeling (of flying) or excited from it. Honestly, I was really thinking to back down; however, next to us it was located a cafeteria, and many customers came out to see the show. Well, after having there an audience it would be a disgrace to chicken out. Therefore, I found the courage to take the leap. As soon as we jumped (me attached together with the instructor) the bizarre feeling went away, and a pretty comfortable feeling filled me in. I was feeling relax and calm, I was enjoying the unique view from the top that mother nature freely offered to us.



It is manoeuvre time!!!

Upon reaching on the top of the beach, the instructor notified me that we can hold amazing manoeuvres with the paragliding, but only if I required it, and of course I allowed on that. While performing manoeuvres, we were losing height much faster; however, the whole concept was fast, immediate, and at some points, I even felt I was missing my breath. But I could say it was one of the most ex-

citing parts of the whole process, and one that everybody should strive.

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 and definitely one that I will not forget for some time.

Surviving at Kea?

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

Our team, see picture below, formed from my PhD fellow Antonis Gkortzis (a beard scout boy guy, capable barman, good but cold sense of 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 were most of the times she is cursing); 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. Needlessly to say, he is always branded as a team leader from all team members because he is planning most to the events by himself.



Me, Daniela, Maria & Marios, Antonis

The camping side in Kea was or-

ganised, 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 agenda for the next three days mainly covered activities such as hitting the beach, having beers and cocktails (from Antonis who is always equipped with the necessary barman package) and trail walks in the wild.

During the first day, we were mainly chilling out on the beach since we arrived in the afternoon and I was also exhausted from conference paper submission just a day ago. Due to the 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 had a feast party on him.



Our little adventure

As the next day's trial, Antonis found a trail path that had as a destination an unorganised beach with some ancient ruins. According to his information, the path was smooth and short, around 15 minutes. Therefore, we commenced our small adventure at 10:00 o'clock in the morning. We arrived by cars at the old mine (that was the starting point), and we prepared our backpacks to start the trail. However, we only took three litters of water as we were anticipating a short journey. Who would

ever think that the trail took us an hour to reach our destination that also included a rough downhill on the way? Upon reaching our goal, we immediately run out of the water, and there was nothing nearby to refill our supplies. We were alone in the wild at a fantastic 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 because we started feeling dizzy due to dehydration. We spent 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!

As we made our way back home in the next days, we were sure that the particular experience, of the camping and our survival in the wild, will not be forgotten that easy. As a matter of fact, we still discuss and make jokes on those events while drinking beers and enjoy a barbecue.



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 inhabitance are on holidays. 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 an aim of visiting Chania, one of the most tourist regions of Crete island.

Such a trip through August requires careful planning from far

ahead since it is high season and most of the places are booked in advance. Therefore, we made all the crucial step such booking apartments, boat tickets, rent a car, and fixed a plan of potential areas that we would like to attend during our stay there. Since none of the guys had the boat travelling experience before, we determined to have reserved seats and allow them to feel the moment. However, the eight hours boat trip was surely an exhausting decision and one I would most probably avoid in the future.



Fisayo, Alex, Me, and Rohan

One of the challenging issues that we had to solve while we arrived at Crete was who will be our driver. A guy that could handle any hard and testing obstacle that we could meet in the narrow streets and cumbersome streets of Crete without getting us 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 of the road. Rohan didn't know how to drive, and Fisayo hasn'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 poorly maintained street we engaged in our path. Even though he complained a lot, he did an excellent job by giving us a safe drive until the end of our stay in Crete.



Seitan Limani

Among our first options to visit was Seitan Limani. Towards our way to Seitan Limani, we stopped and had lunch at the "Three porks". A simple restaurant, regularly for students considering its location that was outside of a University, with delicious and inexpensive food. A fact that struck us about Cretan cousin was the raki which was served 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 all by my self, something that I did not mind at all. When we arrived Seitan Limani during the afternoon, it was way too crowded. Also, there was not a straightforward 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 locals 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 unusual sight for the tourists who were also are trying to take selfies with a goat.

Behind the central 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 fantastic view of the port; however, I believe it is worth more to have satisfying food at a much more decent price. Before going to Chania, I consulted a friend of mine, Il-

ias Dolaptsitis, to accommodate us with guidelines such as restaurants that we should visit and what kind of foods we must try. I could say I was pretty pleased with everything we ate at Chania and particularly with their raki that I was still consuming alone.



Hidden beauties of Chania

Driving in Crete is quite a difficulty and a tough task. It gets even more challenging when you are driving through the mountains where the streets much more narrow and when the buses are coming by and forcing you off-road. We had to go through this experience while going towards Elafonisi beach. However, driving through the mountains and experiencing the beautiful environment of Crete paid us back for the whole struggle.. Elafonisi beach is just imaginary, beautiful white sand and crystal clear water can be found all along the coast-line. Also, in some parts, pink and black sand exists which provides a spectacular view while combined with sea's blue colour.



Fisayo posing at Elafonisi beach

Also, Elafonisi is amongst the most famous tourist temptations for Chania as it is considered one of the most beautiful beaches of Crete. The

beach is partially organised allowing all the convenience for the tourists and locals. The road towards Elafonisi was tiresome and cumbersome, but the view of the beach at the end was charming and mesmerising us to stay for longer. However, driving during the night through the mountains was out of the question for our French driver!



Parts of the old city

Small but beautiful Agkistri

After coming back from Chania, with the international team, Rohan and Alexandre had to leave. Therefore, me and Fisayo, we elected to have one more little adventure by travelling to a tiny island just next to Aigina, the Agkistri. Agkistri's direct translation is the "fishing hook". To this end, we took a boat from Piraeus early morning and after an hour we approached our destination.

As soon as we disembarked at Agkistri's port, we rented two bicycles. I really enjoy cycling in the islands when they are not mountaineer since it releases childhood memory of freedom. Since it was my first time at Agkistri, we asked locals for information such as the best restaurants and beaches to attend. People mostly suggested us to visit the Chalikiada beach. Therefore, we made our way there while cycling next to the seaside and experiencing the beautiful view as illustrated below.



Those amazing colours...

Chalikiada is a beach for nudes too located at the north-west part of the island and "hidden" from the public (this is what we said after we passed the same road three times until we found the passage towards the beach). The beach is only accessible by foot alongside the sea through the camping area that is populated during summer since it is for free. Along the way to the beach, there are many apartments with a direct view of the sea and multiple small islands located around Agkistri, the perfect spot for romantic dates and lovebirds.



The beach of Chalikiada

Before the sunset, we started heading back. Next, to the port, a nice cafeteria exists where you can have a beautiful view towards, and you can, somehow, enjoy the sunset before taking the ship back to Piraeus.

Hydra, no cars allowed

Some Greek islands have restrictions to cars and motorbikes, those are the islands I call "no-noisy-irritating islands". After staying too long in Athens, where a majority of cars and motorbikes are modified just

to be noisier, the necessity of getting away from this mess is enormous. 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 island just an hour and a half away from Piraeus port. It has one of the most beautiful city port that I was ever seeing. However, its beaches, the ones that we visited, are mainly rocky.



The port and main city of Hydra

Since it was my first time and I haven't taken any information from friends regarding places to visit or restaurants to eat, we followed the rule of thumb "go where you see the most locals". Usually going to restaurants which are mostly populated by locals it indicates good quality of food and value for money. To this end, we end up at Vlychos beach.



Amazing mixed grill plate

To reach the Vlychos beach that locals informed us, we had to walk 20 minutes all along the coastline of the island and passing through small settlements of the locals. The beach was

mostly rocky with few brown grains of sand. Also, the water had a very lovely temperature because it was the end of September. Dorine and Jeremy really had a great time enjoying the water, the sun tanning, and the traditional Greek cold coffee, the frappe.



Beautiful streets of Hydra

Our boat was leaving at 20:00 o'clock, therefore, we took our time to enjoy the sunset from the top of cocktail bar named Hydronetta while having cocktails and discussing past moments and pleasant memories from our masters. At some point,

we had to go back and embark on the ship. That was the moment when Dorine said with a complaining tone in her voice "Why are we going back to Athens, let's stay here instead...". Oh my...this attractiveness and charm of the Greek islands it is imaginable.

and free! Also, I carry with me wireless speakers to enjoy music at every moment. In my case, I use the waterproof wireless speakers EU roll 2 (a birthday gift from my dear friends Daniela and Antonis) during hiking or laying on the beach.

What have I learned?

Proper preparation before every adventure is crucial, especially for places that I have never visited before. Getting temperature and wind's speed is vital to adjust your clothing, food and water supplies, and exploiting transportation options is essential, but, having great, bad-ass, and crazy companions are even more critical. When things are not proceeding as I planned that makes, at the same time, a new funny story to discuss and laugh about it with friends. By the end of the day, never forget to enjoy the sunset since it is one the wonders of the world, it is magical

Acknowledgments

Greek islands are magical places with many beauties blooming during the whole year, a place that one could easily describe as paradise. Staying here for almost three years it offered me so much regarding knowledge, life experience, travelling, and adventure. I would like to sincerely thank all my friends who contributed to making my journey and accommodation an unforgettable memory and carved rare moments of joy and happiness that I will always carry with me. Cheers guys, let's do it again soon!!!



Thank you all for the great company and the unforgettable moments (could not fit any more people in the frame, so please forgive me if I left someone outside)