

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 of environmental beauty. This charm of Greece, in my believe, 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 my self saying 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, 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 life 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 by stay in hotels, 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 accommodation in

Greece, I was fortune 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. **Here discuss on the different complexes of islands such Cuclades, ...** 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 we Greek cuisine, and small narrow roads where decorated with many bougainvillea, white house, 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 humans 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 Greece 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 kind 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 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

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, 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 mountaineer island approximately an hour away from Lavrio's port.

Our team composed from my PhD fellow Antonis Gkortzis (a beard scout boy, the man with a solution to every problem, good cold but 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.

Time is passing very fast while having fun, but how is it passing when you are not? We had to find out in a hard way while we decided to test our survival skills with trail walking under the heat of 30° plus.

Don't say no to raki