

- Home
- Hotels
- Destinations
- Cruise
- USA
- Family
- Rail
- Ski
- Luxury
- Deals

Greece's best luxury hotels and villas

Despite current woes, Greece retains the glamour and grandeur that has lured aristocrats and tycoons for decades. Robin Gauldie charts a realm of serene sea views, opulent mansions, quirky villas, privacy, good food and fine wine.



Greece continues to lure tycoons and aristocrats

By Robin Gauldie

11:03AM BST 14 May 2012

We may think of Greece as cheap, cheerful and, in recent months, broke, but it's easy to forget that, until mass tourism really took off in the early 1990s, it was as much a rich man's paradise as a hippie haven. In the 1960s, opulent enclaves such as Rhodes and Mykonos attracted visiting royalty, wealthy socialites and glitterati from the worlds of film, music, art and fashion, from Pablo Picasso, John Lennon and Henry Miller to Jackie Onassis and Brigitte Bardot.

There is still plenty of money around. The canny owners of the world's biggest merchant fleet aren't on the breadline yet – in fact, some have been quietly buying up tracts of Mayfair and Knightsbridge, and can still afford to send their offspring to English public schools. Some spend their summers in discreet comfort on Chios; at the other end of the scale, tiny Kastellorizo is a well-kept secret among wealthy Greeks, to whom luxury means simplicity.

Meanwhile, the new breed of post-Soviet plutocrat is drawn to the more upmarket Greek islands, with their staffed villas, crewed yachts and high-end hotels with pool suites, sybaritic spas, cigar bars and well-stocked wine cellars. Another option is the "hotel within a hotel", as exemplified by the Amathus Elite Suites on Rhodes, where guests can enjoy privacy combined with five-star-hotel services. Irrespective of recent Greek

troubles, boutique hotels continue to expand. Old mansions and village houses have been converted, creating a new generation of smaller, more colourful design hotels where luxury is still of the essence.

Food and drink have gone upmarket, too. In the best hotel restaurants, traditional cooking is given a lighter modern touch, and a brigade of internationally acclaimed chefs has found new ways to work with locally sourced ingredients. Visit Nobu, at the Hotel Belvedere on Mykonos, to see what happens when Japanese skills are applied to the fruits of the Aegean. Greek wines, too, are beginning to be taken seriously by connoisseurs.

Best of all, there is still an egalitarian friendliness that is hard to find elsewhere in Europe – though be prepared for your driver or waiter to unburden his (or her) resentment at the way Greece has been treated by its wealthier EU neighbours. This year, for reasons not unrelated, Greece is favourably priced. At Katikies, a whitewashed enclave on Santorini, a week in a junior suite costs £3,200, compared with £5,700 for a similar stay at the Capri Palace on the Italian isle of Capri.

Here is our hedonist's guide to the Greek islands, with hand-picked properties and advice on how to travel in style. Prices are for travel in June.

Kastellorizo

Way down south, the tiny island of Kastellorizo is as far off the beaten track as it is possible to get in Greece. In high summer (July and August) its fjord-like blue harbour, lined with old Ottoman-style houses in liquorice-allsorts colours, hosts a flotilla of rich folks' yachts. Silvio Berlusconi, Tom Hanks and Eric Clapton are (reportedly) on the summer guest list; ex-Pink Floyd axeman David Gilmour liked it so much that he recorded an album (*On an Island*, 2006) inspired by its charms.

The place to stay is the **Mediterraneo** (00 30 22 4604 9007, mediterraneo-megisti.com; ground-floor suite from around £140 per night), one of the most colourfully charming small hotels in Greece. The owner Marie Rivalant, a Parisienne, has converted an old waterfront mansion into a colourful haven, with bedrooms looking out over the harbour (though the ground-floor suite is the best) and a sunbathing terrace on the quayside. It doesn't have a pool, but a bathing ladder drops you into the aquarium-clear sea, where tiny, rainbow-coloured fish swim around your toes. There is no à la carte restaurant or bar, either, but breakfast is a lavish Levantine affair of yoghurt, island honey, nuts, home-made preserves, cheese and fresh-baked bread – and with a chain of tavernas and café-bars all around the waterfront, there is no need to eat at the same place twice.

The island's big "must-see" sight is its blue grotto, the equal of the much more famous one on Capri but blessedly free of singing gondoliers. If you feel like changing continents, you can charter a boat to putter across the bay to Kas, just a few miles away on the Turkish mainland. In short, Kastellorizo offers luxury of a different kind: it really is one of the world's great escapes.

Lesbos

Despite tales that Greece might sell off some of its thousands of uninhabited islands to plutocrats, to help meet its debts, renting one of them remains an impossible dream. A handful of islands, ripe for development as exclusive mini-resorts, languish on the books of the Canada-based company Private Islands Online, with asking prices starting at about €5 million (£4 million), but Greece is not about to become the Maldives any time soon.

The next best thing is **Villa Faros** (001 647 477 5581, privateislandsonline.com; from around £23,300 per week, sleeps 16), on a private peninsula near Sigri, on the big, calm island of Lesbos. This is more than just a villa. It offers the kind of yoga and spa treatments found in five-star hotels. There are three private beaches, a seawater infinity pool, a heated indoor wave pool and gardens that provide organic fruit and vegetables for guests at the villa. At the jetty, a 30ft speedboat awaits – and for those in a real hurry to get down to the serious business of relaxing, the property has a helipad.

Chios

Those who make it to Chios are pleasantly surprised to find themselves outnumbered by locals. There is a reason for this, say Chiot: this big island in the north-east Aegean is the ancestral home of several Greek multi-millionaire shipping dynasties, who still keep villas here. They prefer their holidays to be undisturbed by the antics of foreign hoi polloi, and have used their local clout to discourage large-scale development. So there are no big resort hotels – but there is at least one real boutique gem.

With its uncrowded beaches and quaint villages dotted around a rolling hinterland of fields and orchards, Chios feels thoroughly Greek. To Greeks, it is synonymous with the country's finest ouzo, a sweet and subtle tippie that is as different from the cheap liquorice firewater found in most tourist bars as a 20-year-old malt whisky is from a supermarket blend.

Like many Greek islands, Chios has produced more history than it has been able to consume. It is famous for its old-fashioned mastichochoria (mastic villages), which grew wealthy from the precious gum of the mastic bush, much prized as a breath-freshener by Ottoman sultans and their harems. Behind high walls, labyrinthine alleys lead to village squares where stonework is decorated in intricate harlequin patterns of black and white, embellished in summer with scarlet strings of drying peppers and tomatoes.

In medieval times, Chios fell into the hands of Genoese merchant-aristocrats who later became Ottoman vassals and whose grand mansions are still dotted around the Kampos district, inland from the island capital. Indeed, it is to a Genoese noble family that the island owes one of the most outstanding hotels in Greece.

The palatial estate that houses the **Argentikon Luxury Suites** (00 30 22710 33111, argentikon.gr; from around £400 per night for a double) was the home of the Genoese Argenti family from the 16th century until 1822, when the Argenti joined the Greek uprising against the Ottomans. Four of them were executed when the rebellion failed (marble busts in the hotel's lush grounds commemorate them) and the rest fled to Italy, France and England. The palazzo fell into disrepair and was finally destroyed by an earthquake in 1881. What you see now is a lavish reconstruction, begun by a descendant of the Argenti dynasty in 1900.

Philip Argenti spent millions on the project, and it shows. With its marble columns and mellow-hued stone walls, it is a slice of medieval Italy transplanted to a Greek island and surrounded by formal gardens scented and made colourful by thousands of citrus trees and rose bushes. But there is nothing antiquated about the facilities, which include a classy outdoor pool, an excellent restaurant, where the wine list includes bottles from the hotel's own vineyard, and a well-equipped fitness centre with sauna and whirlpool.

This is not a place for those who love minimalism. Its eight suites, housed in five separate villas, are unabashedly opulent, with period furniture, crystal chandeliers and frescoed ceilings. Each has a separate living room, a veranda, air conditioning for sultry summer nights and a fireplace for spring and autumn evenings. Service is ubiquitous without being intrusive, and includes twice-daily housekeeping. The only snag is that you may not want to step beyond the walls of this calm oasis, but if you do feel like exploring, the island's capital – with its museum, ruined castle and plenty of good restaurants – is just a few minutes away. Arrivals and departures are smoothed by private car transfers, and the airport is only two-and-a-half miles from the property.

For full-on luxury, Argentikon is hard to match, but if it is full – and booking well ahead is strongly recommended – try the smaller, even more intimate **Perleas Mansion** (00 30 22710 32217, perleas.gr; from around £100 per night for a double), set in four acres of grounds. With just three bedrooms, this 17th-century farmhouse (run by a husband-and-wife team) feels more like your own private holiday home. It has no pool, though there is a sunbathing terrace beside a pretty lily pond.

Corfu

Private villas with pools are the way to go on Corfu (especially for families). There are plenty to choose from, and at the high end they come complete with household staff, plus a boat with a skipper. The best properties are in the better-off areas of the north-east, set on semi-private bays and coves overlooked by the forested slopes of Mount Pantokrator, a million miles away in spirit from the fleshpot resorts of the south.

This is glorious isolation, which is why Corfu has been favoured by sundry oligarchs and millionaire political fixers. But when you feel the need to explore, the island has plenty to offer: the World Heritage old town, with its Venetian fortresses, Italianate churches and town houses, and faux-Parisian arcades, is about 30 minutes' drive away.

Heading in the other direction, there is a cluster of bars and restaurants around the harbour at Kassiopi. If you need activity, there is riding in the nearby valley of Avlaki, the highly commended Corfu Golf Club in the Ropa valley, a plethora of watersports from windsurfing to scuba diving, and phenomenal views of mainland Greece and Albania from the summit of Pantokrator, reached by four-wheel drive (with the final stretch on foot).

A boat is more than just a luxury in this part of Corfu – it's an essential if you are going to make the most of exploring secluded bays and beaches. You don't need a licence to pilot a boat with a motor up to 30 horsepower but for bigger-engined vessels you need a certificate of competence. The answer? Hire a boat complete with skipper.

The Bay Estate, near Agios Stefanos, has villas sleeping up to 10, and mooring space for vessels of up to 70ft – big enough for all but the showiest of oligarchs – and you can hire a skippered motor cruiser for eight to 10 people for €1,500-€2,000 (£1,250-£1,670) a day. Staying there is expensive, it's true – a villa costs almost £32,000 per week in July, but the price includes a housekeeper (five hours a day) and a chef and host serving breakfast, lunch and dinner six days a week. In June the same villa – with a 40ft infinity pool and access to a secluded beach in the villa grounds – costs £17,615, with a housekeeper but no meals. It's the perfect mix of high-end hotel service with villa privacy. Book through CV Travel's Private Collection (020 7401 1031, cvprivatecollection.com).

The next best thing is the **Barbati Beach House**, which sleeps six to 10, right on Barbati beach. It has a large pool and lush gardens, and a cook and boat hire are available. Prices start at £2,620 per week, again with CV Travel.

Santorini

Long before the Venetians seized and renamed Santa Irene (now Santorini) in the 13th century, it was and often still is called Thira. Long before that, the ancients knew it as Kallisti – "the most beautiful". Today, the island lives up to its old name, but its natural beauty is harsh, even apocalyptic. Arriving by sea, you enter a vast blue caldera, created when a volcanic explosion blew the island apart around 3,600 years ago and wrecked or blighted the Bronze Age civilisations of the eastern Mediterranean. Red and black cliffs loom above the sea, and whitewashed houses and blue-domed churches perch along the rim of the sea-flooded crater, hundreds of feet above the Aegean.

The same volcanism that destroyed the ancient civilisation has endowed Santorini with a surprisingly fertile soil. It is hard to believe that this Martian landscape, with its red and grey tufa hills and terraces of greyish clinker and ash-like soil, is one of the most productive in Greece. Every square foot has been painstakingly terraced, and shrubby vines – few of them more than 3ft high – crouch in their own little foxholes. The combination of hot sun, volcanic soil and the island's own Assyrtiko grapes produce wines unique to Santorini which increasingly win plaudits from connoisseurs.

In 1953, an earthquake rocked the island, all but destroying the village of Oia, on its northern tip. The village remained almost deserted for decades, only to rise from the ashes in the 1980s to become one of the most gorgeous holiday hot spots in Greece, with a plethora of superb boutique hotels.

Competition is fierce, but **Katikies** (00 30 22860 71401, katikies.com; from £380 per night for a double) stands out, having one of the world's great infinity pools and a collection of vivid white cottages carved out of the volcanic rock, 300ft above the sea. The hotel's open-air gourmet restaurant is one of the best on the island, and there are sunset wine tastings to introduce visitors to Greece's best vintages. The staff – immaculate in white uniforms – are multinational, multilingual, friendly and efficient.

You may not want to venture out, but do, if only to take a private boat trip out into the deep blue caldera to swim in the warm springs around Nea Kameni, or to eat the freshest fish at a rickety quayside table.

With a global reputation and only 29 rooms, Katikies fills up fast; an excellent alternative, by the sea in Vlihada at the other end of the island, is the **Notos Therme & Spa Hotel** (00 30 22860 81115, notosthermespa.com; from around £150 per night for a double), with a semi-private beach, and spa treatments based around Santorini's natural thermal springs and volcanic mud.

Mykonos

Mykonos is where jet-set travel began in Greece, and although it is no longer quite as exclusive as it was in the 1960s, its airport still sees a steady flow of private jets and helicopters as well as scheduled flights. In recent years, its cruise and ferry terminal has been relocated away from the excruciatingly pretty main village, leaving its harbour once again to fishing boats, private yachts and small excursion boats which ferry visitors to the serene temple ruins on Delos, the sacred island of the ancients.

Conspicuous consumption has always been one of the hallmarks of Mykonos, and there is no shortage of fine jewellers, designer boutiques and cigar bars in the narrow village streets. Equally, there is no shortage of great hotels, in the village itself and on the island's sandy beaches. They do get jam-packed in summer, so a hotel with a gorgeous pool is a better bet.

One such is the **Hotel Belvedere** (00 30 22890 25122, belvederehotel.com; from £313 per night for a double), set a little above the whitewashed labyrinth of the inner village: and a dream. Palm trees around the free-form pool? Check. Evening cocktails in the well-named Sunset Bar? Check. Matsuhisa Mykonos, the only Nobu restaurant in Greece? Check. Cellar with a list of 5,000 wines (particularly strong on Greek and New World varieties)? Check. All of this is built in and around an 18th-century mansion with west-facing verandas, perfect for watching the sun set over the bay.

If your taste inclines towards 1960s glamour with a 21st-century twist, the **Mykonos Theoxenia Hotel** (00 30 22890 22230, mykonostheoxenia.com; from £210 per night for a double) is a great alternative. Like the Belvedere, it is far enough from the village centre to avoid the throngs of cruise passengers, but close enough for effortless window-shopping and bar-hopping. The architecture echoes ancient temple precincts, while inside it is all pop-art colours. You half expect Jackie O to walk in at any moment.

Rhodes

Rhodes has one of the world's great medieval walled cities, a dazzlingly attractive white village that is the envy of many other isles, and – so its proponents claim – more sunshine than anywhere else in Greece. The hot tip here is the **Amathus Elite Suites** (00 30 22410 89900, amathus-hotels.com; pool suites from £400 per night), a hotel-within-a-hotel overlooking the beach at Ixia, 10 minutes from the medieval ramparts of the Old Town. The suites have sea views, some come with private pools and the attentive and friendly staff deliver trays of island goodies – sweets, cakes, liqueurs and other treats – every afternoon.

Breakfast is particularly lavish (take full advantage of the complimentary sparkling wine from the local winery). I'm not normally a fan of half-board deals, but à la carte dinner lives up to the rest of the services. There's a spa and health club, a tranquil, black-marble pool where scarlet and electric-blue dragonflies zoom overhead as you swim. A vast, lagoon-style pool is shared with the main wing of the hotel, and an underpass leads direct to the Amathus's own stretch of beach.

Tearing yourself away from all this takes an effort, but the hotel can lay on a private car to take you to the Old Town, with its 13th-century ramparts, the opulent Palace of the Grand Masters, and a handful of really outstanding restaurants. One of the best is **Alexis** (00 30 22410 29347) at Sokratous 18, which specialises in old favourites, from grilled lobster and red mullet to octopus carpaccio and clams in ouzo. Expect to pay €40-€50 (£33-£40) each, including wine.

Lindos – one of those iconic white villages, beloved of the glitterati since the 1960s – is the island's other nexus of boutique hotels. The gem here is **Melenos Lindos** (00 30 22440 32222, melenoslindos.com; from £220 per night), where the 12 suites are inspired by the unique vernacular architecture of the village, with monochrome pebble mosaics and canopied beds. Each has its own terrace, and black-and-white tiled patios overlook the beach. We may think of Greece as cheap, cheerful and, in recent months, broke, but it's easy to forget that, until mass tourism really

took off in the early 1990s, it was as much a rich man's paradise as a hippie haven. In the 1960s, opulent enclaves such as Rhodes and Mykonos attracted visiting royalty, wealthy socialites and glitterati from the worlds of film, music, art and fashion, from Pablo Picasso, John Lennon and Henry Miller to Jackie Onassis and Brigitte Bardot.

There is still plenty of money around. The canny owners of the world's biggest merchant fleet aren't on the breadline yet – in fact, some have been quietly buying up tracts of Mayfair and Knightsbridge, and can still afford to send their offspring to English public schools. Some spend their summers in discreet comfort on Chios; at the other end of the scale, tiny Kastellorizo is a well-kept secret among wealthy Greeks, to whom luxury means simplicity.

Meanwhile, the new breed of post-Soviet plutocrat is drawn to the more upmarket Greek islands, with their staffed villas, crewed yachts and high-end hotels with pool suites, sybaritic spas, cigar bars and well-stocked wine cellars. Another option is the "hotel within a hotel", as exemplified by the Amathus Elite Suites on Rhodes, where guests can enjoy privacy combined with five-star-hotel services. Irrespective of recent Greek

troubles, boutique hotels continue to expand. Old mansions and village houses have been converted, creating a new generation of smaller, more colourful design hotels where luxury is still of the essence.

Food and drink have gone upmarket, too. In the best hotel restaurants, traditional cooking is given a lighter modern touch, and a brigade of internationally acclaimed chefs has found new ways to work with locally sourced ingredients. Visit Nobu, at the Hotel Belvedere on Mykonos, to see what happens when Japanese skills are applied to the fruits of the Aegean. Greek wines, too, are beginning to be taken seriously by connoisseurs.

Best of all, there is still an egalitarian friendliness that is hard to find elsewhere in Europe – though be prepared for your driver or waiter to unburden his (or her) resentment at the way Greece has been treated by its wealthier EU neighbours. This year, for reasons not unrelated, Greece is favourably priced. At Katikies, a whitewashed enclave on Santorini, a week in a junior suite costs £3,200, compared with £5,700 for a similar stay at the Capri Palace on the Italian isle of Capri.

Here is our hedonist's guide to the Greek islands, with hand-picked properties and advice on how to travel in style. Prices are for travel in June.

The five-star island hop

Getting there

British Airways, Aegean Airlines, EasyJet and Olympic Air offer scheduled flights from London airports to Athens. Aegean and Olympic offer connecting flights from Athens to six of the islands featured here. For Kastellorizo, fly to Rhodes, then take a short hop with Olympic. EasyJet offers scheduled services to Athens, Corfu, Mykonos, Rhodes and Santorini.

In transit

Depending on your flight connections, you may opt to spend a night in Athens. At the Sofitel Athens Airport (sofitel.com), a couple of minutes from the terminal; prestige suites cost from £210. From there, take a 15-minute cab ride to Rafina, where a dozen open-air restaurants surround the fishing harbour. Though simple in appearance, these places aren't cheap, and are frequented by wealthy Athenians who drive there with their families to sample red mullet, lobster, octopus, sea urchins and other Mediterranean staples, displayed on trays of ice.

Transfers

Consider travelling from Athens to the islands by private plane or helicopter. For aircraft options and prices, see ellada.net/helicopter_services and privatejetscharter.net.

The Greek islands are, of course, prime yacht charter territory, too. The list of vessels available is comprehensive, ranging from steer-it-yourself luxury sailing boats to fully crewed motor yachts and cruisers complete with a chef and steward. For choices, see yachting-greece.com; the company can also arrange helicopter transfers and private plane charters.

Packages

Numerous tour operators offer tailor-made holidays to Greece, staying in boutique hotels and villas and benefiting from such services as chauffeured transfers and private tours. They include Sovereign Luxury (sovereign.com), CV Travel (cvtravel.co.uk), The Villa Collection (gicthevillacollection.com), Abercrombie & Kent (abercrombiekent.co.uk) and Cachet Travel (cachet-travel.com). Small Luxury Hotels of the World (slh.com) features more than 30 boutique properties in Greece.

More on Greece

[Athens city break guide](#)

[Corfu travel guide](#)

[Crete travel guide](#)

© Copyright of Telegraph Media Group Limited 2018