

Greece, By Choice c 1997, Aron Stevens

Anyone considering a trip to Greece is faced with several important choices to make. The three most difficult choices are: when, how, and where?

First, you need to choose WHEN to go to Greece. The most popular time to visit Greece is during the summer months, specifically July or August. That is when all of the beaches and restaurants will be open, the archeological sites and museums will have extended hours, the most ferries will be running, and the weather will be nearly perfect for lounging on the beach, Greek-style. Unfortunately, the height of summer will also mean long waits for good tables, packed ferries, and over crowded beaches. While you shouldn't pass up any opportunity to visit Greece, you may enjoy the trip more in the "shoulder" months of May and, especially, September.

Visiting in the shoulder months is not without risk. There will be fewer ferries, and the faster hydrofoils may often be canceled. There may be some cool and even windy weather, and you may miss some beach days. There may be shorter hours at some museums and sites, and some restaurants may even close for the season. But this will all be more than offset by the ability to sit in the best seats on a restaurant's patio, the likelihood that you will be able to negotiate successfully for everything from souvenirs to rental cars, and the simple increase in pleasure that comes from fewer crowds.

Don't push this theory too far, however. Past October 1 and for the balance of the off season, you really will find that the weather and the lack of facilities can be a problem.. Go in September, if you can.

The next choice to make is How? There are basically three ways to visit Greece....a cruise, an escorted tour, and on your own.

Cruising has its own attractions. You will sleep in the same place every night, there will be a minimum of luggage wrestling, you will probably never get lost and have to deal with language problems and you may see more islands (actually, more ports) than with any other type of travel.

On the other hand, cruise passengers usually spend only a short time in each port, and as a result, find themselves in the shops and restaurants which are geared up for them, usually with prices to match. With brief stops at several islands, cruise passengers rarely get a real feel for the island they are visiting. On the contrary, because of the similarity of the port and downtown areas throughout Greece, at some point all of the stops start to look the same---hardly a true Greek experience.

An escorted tour may be a solution. A prepackaged, or, preferably, a

custom-designed escorted tour, will allow you to spend some time at each stop on your own, with (if you choose carefully) plenty of time to absorb the flavor of each place. and, you won't have to worry about the logistics of traveling in Greece: ferry schedules, luggage, transfers to air terminals, and finding your way to the historical, cultural and archeological sites. There are many tour guides in Greece who will be happy to put together a trip for you with as much or as little structure as you want.

The last alternative is truly independent travel. Working with your travel agent, you will need to research hotels and book them, rent cars (and drive them!), find your way to and from ferry landings and airports, discover restaurants for yourself, and figure out where the best beaches are. You will get lost, you may find yourselves in situations where no one speaks English, you may sometimes (but not often) eat a bad meal, and you will have to deal with your luggage and street signs; you may (at least until you gain some confidence) spend lots of time with your nose in a map or a guidebook, and you will expend a lot of energy dealing with the logistics of travel, instead of just enjoying yourself. Independent travel is not for you if you are going to Greece only to relax, or if you are at all hesitant about asking total strangers for help and directions. It is the hardest type of travel.

On the other hand, traveling independently is by far the best way to really get to know your destination, to feel like you have discovered for yourself an out of the way restaurant, or a store where the local people shop, or an empty beach or a delightful hotel which is too small to accommodate groups. Independent travel is the only way to burn the memories of Greece into your brain as a special place, not just another trip.

That leaves you with the choice of WHERE to go in Greece. The best part of visiting Greece is that the country is so varied: While not particularly large in terms of land mass, Greece boasts of a large modern city, interesting mainland destinations north and east of Athens, fascinating sites and towns to the south, in the Peloponese, and, of course, the Greek Islands. Greece has cultural and historical sites from numerous eras and civilizations, great beaches and water sports, places of religious significance, hiking, climbing, even skiing, not to mention enough shopping to occupy even the most demanding bargain hunters and serious shoppers.

But, again, you have choices to make. Unless you are fond of airport waiting areas and ferry landings, you must be careful not to over schedule your trip. Although the Grecian land mass may be relatively small, it is certainly spread out over a large area, and the business of making connections can cut seriously into your vacation time. The goal is to visit enough places to make your trip interesting, but not so many that you are always on the move.

Over a three week period, you might spend two or three days in Athens, some time on the mainland, and the rest of the time visiting several islands. Like everything else about Greece, even this approach requires you to make choices: There are basically 5 groups of islands, with numerous islands within each group, so once again you have to be choosy.

Athens

Athens itself is a must. You will hear and read that Athens is a noisy, crowded, polluted and not especially pretty European city, and it is all of that. However, not too many places have a 2500 year old group of buildings on a hill in the middle of town, an even higher hill with a decent restaurant and a great view which you can access by tram, a tourist oriented area with surprisingly good restaurants (especially a bit away from the central area--ask directions to the O Repoe Toy Mopia Taverna) and shopping, fine museums and a general atmosphere of people who work hard but know how to have a good time. In fact, you will enjoy Athens more after you have visited all the sites in the guidebooks, when you can take your time strolling among the wonderful shops of the Kolonaki area, trying restaurants and pastry shops which catch your fancy, or people watching while enjoying a cup of Greek coffee at an outdoor cafe, where no one will rush you to finish up because they need your table. Go for the Acropolis, stay for the atmosphere!

Athens hotels

Most of the larger, tourist-oriented hotels in Athens are centered around Syntagma Square, which itself is well located near the Plaka, the Acropolis, and other important sights. The Plaka itself contains many smaller and less expensive hotels, some of which have local charm--although some of that "charm" consists of tiny lobbies, small rooms and noisy evenings. For a very pleasant alternative, try the Andromeda Hotel, about a 10 minute taxi ride from the Plaka area in a quiet residential area near the U.S. Embassy. The Andromeda's friendly staff, quiet and well appointed rooms and terrific breakfast will allow you to take the sights and sound of Athens well prepared.

The Mainland

Unless you have a great deal of time, or have just finished reading Thucididies and want to explore the Peloponese, you will probably want to spend most of your Greek vacation in the islands. However, one mainland sight you should see is Delphi, where you will be able to tour the archeological ruins of the Apollo and Athena temples, and the excellent nearby museum. Delphi itself is beautifully situated in the mountains, looking down to the sea (which is why it is a sacred site to begin with), and the town is comfortably touristy--several nice shops and restaurants (including the excellent Vak Dos)- but not too intense. A night and a day in Delphi and the nearby town of

Arachova (where you can sample the local cheese) is sufficient.

The best hotel in Delphi is the Amalia, although breakfast among the European tour groups can be a disconcerting experience!

On the drive back to Athens, you might choose to stop in a small town for lunch, where the tradition of visiting the kitchen to pick out your food still prevails.

The Islands

Choosing your island destinations will be the hardest choice of all. The books, magazines and travel brochures will tell you which islands are "the best"--but you can't visit all of them. And, although intra-island transportation is reasonably well organized, the fact is that every "change" will cost you both time and money. My advice is to limit your choices to islands that are reasonably close together, but to visit several different island groups, and to plan with a logical transportation scheme in mind.

Here's one possible plan for two weeks in the islands: Fly from Athens to Crete, then fly or take a (long) ferry to Mykonos, continuing somewhat clockwise through the Cyclades island group through Paros or perhaps Ios, winding up in Santorini. I realize that this itinerary misses Rhodes, and all of the Ionian Island, not to mention several other Island groups, but you have to save something for your next trip!

Crete

With it's size and variety, you could easily spend two weeks on Crete alone, but even with the goal of visiting Greece, not just one island, you can certainly enjoy three or four days on this wonderful, sunny island. The most developed part of Crete, for tourists, is the northwest coast, where the charter flights from northern and central Europe drop off planeloads of sun-starved guests for a week at a time. While the scenery and beaches are indeed wonderful, if you want to experience something a little more "Greek", head elsewhere.

The town of Chania, on the northwest coast, is much more appealing. The old town is a fascinating mixture of Venetian, Greek and Turkish architecture and cultures, with small, narrow, confusing streets, good restaurants, and some terrific small hotels. Good beaches are nearby, and the "new" part of the city is interesting to explore as well--be sure to visit the city market where the Greek habit of displaying the heads of the butchered animals in the butcher shops is something you won't see in your local supermarket at home!

Chania is a good spot from which to take a day trip to the Samaria Gorge--a six hour hike thorough and down a spectacular gorge leading to a town on the Libyan Sea with ferry access only. Your hotel can

arrange for a rather informally guided trip--the logistics are of doing it yourself are not worth the effort.

Unless you just have to see the Minoan ruins at Knossos--which are not particularly compelling--skip the capital city of Heraklion, a rather charmless commercial town

Perhaps the best small hotel in all of Crete is Casa Delfino, located in the old city of Chania. Be sure to ask for one of the 4 recently redone rooms. And ,in Chania,be sure to eat at the Anaphoic Restaurant, housed in the bombed out remains of three old houses in the Old Town, open to the sky.

Mykonos

Everyone has heard of Mykonos, and probably has seen photos and brochures showing the dramatic architecture, the narrow streets and the beaches, where partial or full nudity is not uncommon. What began as a jet-set destination is now a vacation spot for all types of people, and this island may have more jewelry stores per square foot than any other place on earth. So is it "overdone" to the point of losing its appeal? No way. Especially in September, the beaches are still great, the shopping fun and somehow Mykonos retains its charm in spite of the tourist development.

The best hotel location in Mykonos is slightly away from the central area of town, a short walk away from the primary tourist streets. You'll be close enough to walk back and forth to the harbor area, but away from the noise so you can relax and sleep in peace. (You might also chose to stay in a hotel away from the main town, out on the island, but,that will be an entirely different experience, since getting to town will be somewhat of a hassle, even if you rent a car, because of the parking problem). If you do need to rent a car, talk to Yiannis Bourgias at Road Runner car rental down by the harbor.

A good hotel choice in Mykonos would be the Belvedere Hotel, with very pleasant rooms, a pool, a great view, and its own excellent restaurant. You must get a room with a view toward the harbor. Restaurants are varied and plentiful, but don't leave without dining at Maria's, in the Venetian section of town.

Three or four days will suffice for Mykonos, although you should reserve at least a half day for the easy excursion to the ancient, sacred island of Delos. Delos has what may be the most extensive ruins from ancient Greece, and the visit is entirely

unstructured. You can take your own guidebook and walk around the extensive site slowly and almost aimlessly.

Paros

Paros has the advantage of being the transportation hub of the Cycladic island group, so it is relatively easy to get to and from. Most visitors stay in or near the main town, Parikia, which is somewhat reminiscent of Mykonos, but with fewer jewelry stores. The classic Greek Orthodox Church of 100 Doors near the central square is certainly worth a visit.

For a somewhat more typical Greek experience, in Paros stay in or near the small town of Naoussa--a small fishing village with enough tourist facilities and beaches to satisfy, several good restaurants (try the home made Greek-style pizza place near the fishing harbor) and a very casual approach to life. For dinner in Naoussa, try Lalula, which has excellent food-- don't be put off by the Australian accent of the co-owner.

Santorini

While Santorini has an airport, you must go there by ferry, for the entrance into the caldera by ferry is one of the world's great approaches. Unlike the other Cycladic Islands, Santorini is of volcanic origins; a blast and explosion about 2500 years ago essentially tore away half of the island. That leaves the island a perfect shape for visitors, with high sheer cliffs on one side (overlooking the caldera, or bowl, of the volcano, now filled with water) and the other side hosting great beaches. From the port, you will take a wild taxi ride up the cliff side to the high plateau where the main town, Thira, sits. Most definitely, you should stay in a cliffside hotel--often called "traditional houses"-- built on the side of (really, into) the cliff, either in Thira or the two small villages just north of Thira.

A good hotel choice close to Thira would be the Altana Traditional Houses in the town of Imagoili, far enough to avoid the towns' tumult and crowds but close enough for you to walk into Thira along the cliff side walk. You might also choose to stay in Oia, where the architecture is somewhat more traditional and, if possible, the sunsets even more spectacular.

If you do stay in Imagoili, be sure to eat dinner at least once in the Imagoili Taverna, along the cliffside walk; just let your waitress order for you and you won't be disappointed. In Thira, you should eat in one of the restaurants on the main pedestrian cliff side "boardwalk"--Archipelago may be the best; you enter the restaurant through a "door" which appears to lead nowhere, as the steps go down the cliff on the other side of the door. Great food!

Santorini has several great beaches, but perhaps the most unique is Red Beach, which is inaccessible by car, requiring you to climb over a small mountain to reach the beach. Do it.

Greek Travel Tips

Good walking shoes, or even light hiking boots, are an absolute must. You hear this about every trip, of course, but for Greece, it is critical. You will be climbing the Acropolis, visiting monuments and ruins, sometimes walking back to your hotel in the dark on rough, uneven pavement, and perhaps even hiking the Samaria Gorge.

Travel light. You have heard this before also. Keep in mind that you (or someone you will pay) will have to drag suitcase up flights of stairs, over rough pavement, or over long distances. The cliff side hotels and guest house on Santorini are a real challenge.

Your biggest potential danger in Greece (other than driving in Athens) is running out of film. Double what you think you will need.

Take a flattened roll of toilet paper in your day back. Trust me.

Unlike most of Western Europe, credit cards are often not welcome, or call for a "premium" if you try to use them. Plan on carrying some local currency at all times, cashing traveler's checks or visiting ATM's as necessary. It's always useful to have some U.S. currency on hand as well.

If you are allergic to cigarette smoke or find it very annoying, you might think about a different destination. The dangers of smoking have not penetrated the Greek psyche--smoking is almost universal, even in--especially in--restaurants.

Work on the Greek alphabet and some Greek phrases before leaving home. Buy the cassette tapes, "Getting By in Greek (Barron's) to listen to during your commute in the weeks before your trip.

Istanbul is an easy side trip from Athens, with Olympic and Turkish Airlines running daily flights to and from this fascinating city which straddles Europe and Asia.

For a travel agent in Greece, an excellent source is Nick Amidis at Joss Travel, 30-1-8676204, fax 30-1-8561986.