

Greece, a country of real contrasts



The world-famous windmills in Mykonos.
Picture by Nigel Duncan Media

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Greece is a country of contrasts, from sleepy villages and crystal clear bays with sparkling sands to rugged mountains, vibrant cities and a strong clubbing scene.

It also boasts classical ruins and wonderfully hospitable tavernas, but it also provides surprises, like a cricket pitch in the middle of Corfu Town.

Let's start there. It dangles on the heel of Italy and the west coast of Greece and it is much visited by British tourists. It is easy to see why.

Yes there is indiscriminate development, but the island is much more than that and the competition for tourists among bars, restaurants and hotels tends to keep prices down. Also, the locals are friendly.

Corfu Town suffered from the Nazi bombardment during World War Two but we didn't see too many of the scars and the elegant island capital is well worth a visit.

The most obvious sites are the two forts with battlements, dungeons and cellars, but Corfu Town is ideal for strolling and some retail therapy.

It is also a short taxi ride to the cruise ship harbour and it can get busy if a number of ships come in so get in early and enjoy the shaded narrow streets, wide boulevards and homely tavernas in comfort.

That also goes for Mykonos. Direct air links to Europe has made this charming island surrounded by clear, blue seas, one of the most high-profile destinations and also among the most expensive.

However, don't let the prospect of tourist congestion put you off in high summer, it is still a laid-back island where many speak English.

Mykonos is also one of the most photographed islands in Greece – you must have seen the windmills – and it can also be confusing in the narrow streets which snake their way around the whitewashed capital – created, we were told, to confuse pirates.

You will find the map in the Rough Guide invaluable, not just for where to have coffee or a bite to eat – fish is a speciality – but also where to go for the best beaches and clubs as it is party time at night in Mykonos. We'd left by the time they had switched on the sounds.

Santorini provided a real contrast. Rugged, parched, red-brown cliffs dominate the landscape and cruise ships the harbour area which has made this an expensive playground.

There were five ships docked on the day we called and the

harbour area can get crowded, so can the transport to the main town, donkey or cable car.

Tourism dominates the economy but Santorini is also one of Greece's most important wine producers and the fresh, dry white wine is perfect for washing down some excellent seafood served in many outlets which hug the cliffs in the main town of Fira.

The island's dark sand beaches also prove an attraction for some who arrive by air and sea from around the world.

I've left Athens to last. It is a fascinating place dominated by The Acropolis and Parthenon but beware of the heat and take plenty of water as well as a good pair of shoes as it is a good walk from the bus park. Also take great care to note your bus as this is a busy place.

Tourists whizz in and out and don't really get a flavour of the real Athens with its history dating back to Classical times.

There are some poor examples of hideous building mixed with classical, caused by the need to re-build quickly after the Second World War, but city fathers have woken up and things are changing for the better.

Cafes and restaurants are packed – watch where you go – and the streets are lively until the early hours and, because of the climate, much of the activity is in the open air.

Chic suburban malls are augmented by lively, street markets and bazaars and the good public transport system, and the Rough Guide, helps sight-seeking tourists get around.

Enjoy Greece but pack one of these essential guides in your luggage. You won't regret it.