

The Magic of Mykonos

ECONOMIC
WOES AND
UNREST SEEM
SO FAR AWAY
IN THIS IDYLIC
PARADISE



HOLIDAY HUES: The quintessential shades of blue and white, characteristic of the area, are to be seen everywhere

EVERYTHING ABOUT THIS CYCLADIC ISLAND IS ARRESTING — FROM ITS AZURE SEAS AND SUPER-FRIENDLY POPULACE TO ITS REPUTATION AS A ONE-TIME HAUNT FOR THE GLITTERATI OF NEARBY ATHENS

BY KALPANA SUNDER



MAZE OF YORE: The narrow whitewashed streets, originally laid out to confuse olden day pirates, is today a tourist attraction

PETROS WADDLES around town, followed by his friend. They enjoy the attention they get from the flocks of tourists, who pat their heads and take photographs with them, as well as the raw fish the local fishermen feed them. Petros, the petulant pelican, has his face plastered all over postcards and books...

It all started when after a big storm in the 1950s, in Mykonos, Greece, a pelican was found by a caring fisherman. He was looked after by the town residents and looked upon as a sign of good luck. Since pelicans are not found in the Cyclades islands, it was thought that it probably was on a long migratory route from somewhere far away. They say that down the ages, many attempts were made to find the pelican a female companion (Jacqueline Kennedy is supposed to have sent two pelicans) but Petros remained steadfastly monogamous and loyal to his lost companion! When he died after residing here for almost thirty years, the residents who mourned his loss adopted

another new pelican and today, it's become a local custom. Now, the town has three well-fed pelicans that live there and have become its mascots. We can see the 'new' Petros near the waterfront, skulking behind brightly coloured boats, followed by a gang of shutterbugs.

Mykonos, an island of 30 square miles, is touted to be one of the most sophisticated islands in the Cyclades. Azure seas, barren ochre hillsides and that blinding white architecture of Cubist homes sprinkled on hillsides... the first glimpse of Mykonos is arresting. This is the Greek island of celebrities. In the 60s, it used to be the haunt of the glitterati of wealthy Athens who used to bring their yachts here. From Grace Kelly and Brigitte Bardot to Queen Latifah and designers Dolce and Gabbana, this has been a favourite retreat for all of them. Today, the island is the haunt of cruise ship junkies and sybarites who flock to the islands in the summer season. Its narrow whitewashed streets were designed to thwart the pirates of yore who — according to legend — had their

AT 30 SQUARE MILES, MYKONOS IS FAMED FOR AZURE SEAS, OCHRE HILLSIDES AND BLINDING WHITE CUBIST HOMES

wives and mistresses on this island. Today, it's a pleasure to get lost in this maze, making serendipitous discoveries of an atmospheric café or an attractive boutique.

We are here before the official start of the tourist season. Everywhere, we hear the drone of the electric drill and smell fresh paint, as the residents spruce up their shops, restaurants and homes. This town is feline heaven: stray cats peer at us from

PET PASSION: The island's pelicans are its good luck charms and mascots, fed and cared for by the local inhabitants



CELEB HAUNT: (left to right) Designers Stefano Gabbana and Domenico Dolce of Dolce and Gabbana fame; singer Queen Latifah and actress Brigitte Bardot all favour Mykonos as a retreat

MYKONOS IS ALSO KNOWN AS THE ULTIMATE PARTY ISLAND BUT ITS QUAIN, IDYLIC SIDE IS FAR MORE APPEALING

every flight of steps and street corners, preening themselves in the glorious sunshine. Pots of geranium and flaming pink bougainvillea spill out of fences, adding the much-needed splashes of colours to the town.

I see a Greek priest in his long black robe and rambling beard, crossing the deserted street and disappearing into one of the hundred churches on the island. They say that sailors used to pledge to build a church, if spared from the clutches of the ferocious sea. Today, these tiny one-roomed bulbous churches, with smoky icons, line the streets. Glitzy shops beckon to the tourist, with loopy gold links in traditional designs and gargantuan rings, embellished with semi-precious stones. The Greeks have been making gold jewellery since the time of Alexander.

In the mornings, the locals head to the waterfront and buy fruits and vegetables from the back of a van parked there. Around noon, the waiters set up red and white checkered tables on the waterfront, and lunch with a view seems to be the norm. The local population are in great spirits and we are greeted with a cheery 'namaste' by all. The sea, the wind and the huge droves of sea birds make this the ideal place to hang out. Fried calamari and fish seems to be the popular choice followed by local wine. We walk through Little Venice, a quarter with wooden sea fronting buildings overhanging the azure waters. With the hippest bars and taverns, there are people nursing



WINDY CALLING: An iconic line of windmills stands guard on a cliff on the western side of the island, since the 6th century



APPETISING VIEW: Lunch with a view, on the waterfront is the norm; (below) the magnificent lions of Naxos stand guard



glasses of ouzo and looking out at the tide.

The squat Paraportiani Church dating back to 1475 is actually made of five smaller churches fused together. The iconic line of windmills standing guard on a cliff on the western side of the island has been there from the 6th century, when this island was a major port on the trade route between Asia and Europe. Used to powder the grain, and powered by the fierce wind on the island, these remnants of ancient times are a great photo-op today! Mykonos has some of the best beaches in the Cyclades — most of them pebble beaches with volcanic sand. Paradise Beach is a popular one, with a beach club and loungers.

We take a short boat trip to the ancient island of Delos. This barren island studied with red poppies, pink wildflowers and chamomile patches was the birthplace of the Greek God Apollo, and his twin Artemis. From times of yore, no one was allowed to give birth or die on the island. Today, it's a World Heritage Site where no one is allowed to spend the night. Day-trippers visit the archaeological site and the museum and then head back to Mykonos. We stroll through the sprawling ruins, with the sounds of bees and cicadas, map in hand, finding treasures like the magnificent lions of Naxos and the House of Dolphins with its exquisite mosaics intact. There are resident chameleons that look up, posing on ancient columns. Students on a field trip follow their teacher towards fallen pillars with inscriptions. At Kynthos, the highest elevation on the island after a gruelling climb, is the sanctuary dedicated to Apollo and a magnificent view of the islands and sea.

There is another Mykonos... the one where people party like there is no tomorrow. But we are quite happy with this version — having lunch on the beach and collapsing under the parasol. The economic woes and unrest of the country seem so far away on this idyllic paradise!

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