

Saronic Gulf Islands

Νησιά του Σαρωνικού



The Saronic Gulf Islands offer a fast track to the Greek island dream.

They may lack the romantic image of the hazy Cyclades or the far-flung Dodecanese, yet the main islands of the group have enough allure to satisfy anyone's expectations and they all have facilities aplenty. There is a reassuring sense of accessibility about the Saronics and collectively the islands seem to merge the best of Greece's mainland attractions with all that is the best of island life. Yet the islands are also remarkably distinctive. You can ring the changes as you island-hop between classical heritage, resort beaches, stylish architecture, a sense of island escapism and top-class Greek cuisine.

The most accessible islands, Aegina and Angistri, are just under an hour by ferry from Piraeus. Aegina is almost an Athenian suburb, yet this lively bustling place has more than its fair share of cultural sights. Twenty minutes to the east of Aegina lies pine-clad Angistri, a typical holiday island but one with reassuring corners of tranquility, even in high season.

Further south is Poros, only a few hundred metres across the water from the Peloponnese and with several decent beaches and a peaceful forested hinterland. Next comes the Saronic showpiece, Hydra, where a tiered jigsaw of pastel-hued houses rises from a harbourside that is always frothing with fashionable life. Deepest south of all is pine-scented Spetses, only minutes away from the mainland yet entirely part of the Aegean Island world.

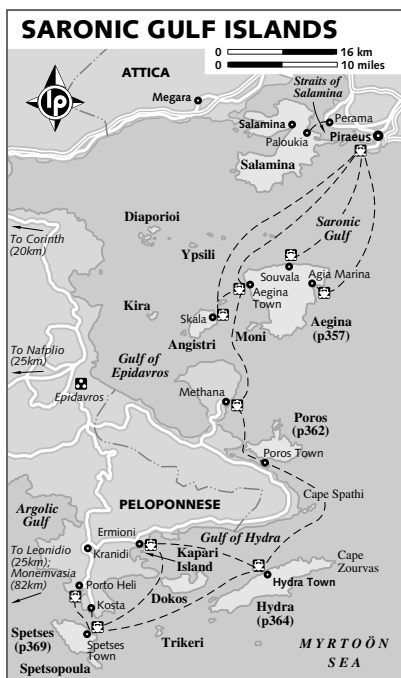
HIGHLIGHTS

- **Glorious Past** Exploring Aegina's ancient history at the Temple of Aphaia (p359)
- **Good Food Guide** Being spoiled for choice among Spetses Town's top restaurants (p370)
- **Dolphin Divas** Diving near Hydra on a nonintrusive dolphin safari (p365)
- **Slow Tourism** Exploring the peaceful interiors of Poros (p361), Hydra (p364) and Spetses (p368)
- **Museum Musing** Enjoying some of the best small museums in Greece on Hydra (p365) and Spetses (p370)



■ POPULATION: 45,600

■ AREA: 318 SQ KM



AEGINA ΑΙΓΙΝΑ

pop 13,500

Beyond its bustling port, Aegina (*eh-yi-nah*) has the seductive, easygoing character of a typical Greek island but with the added bonus of having more than its fair share of prestigious ancient sites and museums. Weekending Athenians sharpen the mix and visitors should bear in mind that, even in winter, fast ferries from Piraeus are often fully booked prior to the weekend.

Aegina was the leading maritime power of the Saronic Gulf during the 7th century BC, when it grew wealthy through trade and political ascendancy. The island made a major contribution to the Greek victory over the Persian fleet at the Battle of Salamis in 480 BC. Despite this solidarity with the Athenian state, the latter invaded in 459 BC out of jealousy of Aegina's wealth and status and of its liaison with Sparta. Aegina never regained its glory days although in the early 19th century it played a bold part in the defeat of the Turks and was the temporary capital of a partly liberated Greece from 1827 to 1829.

Today the island plays a more mundane role as Athens' island suburb and Greece's main producer of pistachio nuts. Past glory lingers, however, not least at the splendid ruin of the 5th-century Temple of Aphaia. There are modest beaches too and an enjoyable taverna and nightlife scene.

Getting There & Away

Aegina's main port is Aegina Town, which has links to Piraeus, Angistri, Poros and Methana, in the Peloponnese. There are no direct ferries from Aegina and Angistri to Hydra and Spetses or to mainland Ermioni and Porto Heli. For these destinations you need to connect with fast ferries at Piraeus or Poros. The smaller Aegina ports of Agia Marina and Souvala have links with Piraeus in the high season only. You should always check details close to the date of your planned trip. For details see Island Hopping (p744).

A local small ferry, the distinctive blue and yellow *Agistri Express*, which is owned by the Angistri community, makes several trips daily to and from Aegina to Angistri's main port of Skala (€5, 20 minutes) and then on to neighbouring Mylos (€5.20, 25 minutes). It leaves from midway along the Aegina harbour front and timetables are displayed there.

Another option between Aegina and Angistri is the **water taxi service** (☎ 22970 91387, 6972229720). It costs €40 one way, regardless of numbers.

Getting Around

Buses run frequently between Aegina Town and Agia Marina (€1.70, 30 minutes) via Paleohora (€1.40, 15 minutes) and the Temple of Aphaia (€1.70, 25 minutes). Other buses go to Perdika (€1.40, 15 minutes) and Souvala (€1.40, 20 minutes). Departure times are displayed outside the ticket office on Plateia Ethnegerias and you must buy tickets at the booth.

There are numerous car and motorcycle hiring outfits. Prices start at around €30 to €40 a day for a car and €15 to €25 a day for a 50cc machine. Bicycles are about €8 a day. **Sklavenas Rent A Car** (Aegina Town (☎ 22970 22892; Kazantzaki 5); Agia Marina (☎ 22970 32871), on the road towards the Temple of Apollo, hires cars, jeeps, scooters, motorbikes, quads and mountain bikes.