

Understand Greek Islands

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As the islands weather the nation's economic crisis, the spirited and passionate Greeks remain anxious but, by and large, get on with life.

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Greece's cultural influence and turbulent past have left deep historical footprints. Follow them through the ages.

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The Greek islands balance tourism, agriculture and tradition. Get an insight into seasonal life, island customs and characters.

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From traditional home cooking to modern cuisine, Greek food offers plenty of tasty treats.

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With mountainous interiors tumbling down to unending ribbons of coastline, the Greek great outdoors offers everything from birds and turtles to orchids and oregano.

Greek Islands Today

Life on the Greek islands seems to carry on relatively unfettered, despite the gloom of the nation's growing sovereign debt crisis. The islanders undoubtedly feel the economic pinch, and tourism hasn't been the miracle balm hoped for. Bad press abroad showing strikes and demonstrations in Athens, along with Greeks' own shrunken holiday budgets, mean the market hasn't recovered. Nevertheless, some of the younger generations have returned from Athens and the islands have a hip, hopeful feel about them.

Best on Film

Shirley Valentine (1989) Classic Greek-island romance on Mykonos.

300 (2007) Testosterone-fueled retelling of the Spartans' epic stand against the Persian army in the 480 BC Battle of Thermopylae.

Mamma Mia (2008) Skopelos island shines to the soundtrack of ABBA.

Guns of Navarone (1961) Compelling boys-own thriller, in which Allied soldiers enter Nazi-occupied Greece.

Captain Corelli's Mandolin (2001) Lavish retelling of Louis de Bernières' WWII novel, awash with romance on occupied Kefallonia.

Best in Print

The Magus (John Fowles; 1966) Creepy mind games set on fictional island Phraxos.

The Island (Victoria Hislop; 2005) Spinalonga leper-colony days.

The Odyssey (Homer; 8th century BC) Plagued by Poseidon, Odysseus struggles to return home to Ithaca.

Zorba the Greek (Nikos Kazantzakis; 1946) A spiritual bible to many; one man's unquenchable lust for life.

Falling For Icarus: A Journey among the Cretans (Rory MacLean, 2004) A travel writer fulfills his ambition to build his own plane in the land of Icarus.

National Crisis

While the languid islands may feel a long way from Athens, the islanders closely watch developments on the mainland and are not immune to national controversies and events.

In the three decades since Greece joined the European Union, increased wealth and improved living standards have gone hand in hand with skyrocketing unemployment, mushrooming public debt, corruption allegations and a credit crunch that has left many Greeks disillusioned and angry. At a shocking 63%, youth unemployment in Greece is Europe's highest and has brought with it a huge rise in prostitution and street drugs. With few prospects in the capital, many young people are returning to the islands to help with family businesses.

In 2012–13 average Greeks, whether doctors or office workers, saw their wage severely cut, some say by as much as 30%, while living costs were soaring at an unpalatable rate. At the same time, the rising unemployment rate has reached around 27%, and there are plans to shell one in four public-sector jobs to help cut the deficit. The enormous impact this is having on current lifestyle and future prospects for youth means it's a constant topic of discussion and debate.

Spirit of Rebellion

Personal freedom and democratic rights are sacrosanct to Greeks, the concept of democracy (*demos* meaning people, and *cratos* meaning power) having been hard fought for since the 5th and 4th centuries BC. A residual mistrust of authority and disrespect of the state is integral to the national psyche. This spirited characteristic has recently been evident, with many Greeks resisting economic reforms crucial to help curb Greece's soaring national debt.