

THE CYCLADES' CIRCLE



The four beautiful islands of Milos, Sifnos, Ios and Paros in the Cyclades have a lot in common yet each hold a different appeal for visitors. The 220 islands that make up the Cyclades played their part in Western civilisation and photojournalist **Aline Dobbie** offers a personal account of her recent visit to the Aegean to discover why they have such an enduring appeal today. Greece... it's oh so much more than just sangria and sunshine!

Greece I first visited 50 years ago; this was, however, my first time in the Cyclades and it was pure enchantment. A quick visit to the Acropolis in Athens was essential and then we embarked on a Speedrunner ferry to take us to our first stop, Milos.



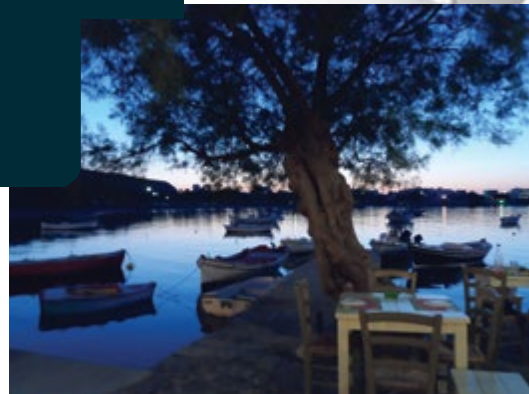
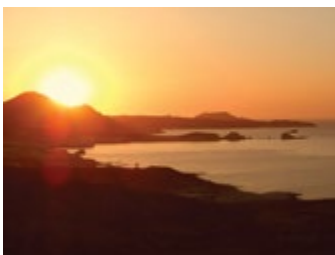
Milos is known as the Island of Venus or Aphrodite whose statue was discovered in 1823 and sold to the French. This volcanic island emerged from the Aegean Sea around two million years ago and is a spectacular place with its amazing multi-coloured beaches. In the Mesolithic period the mineral obsidian was traded widely for tool-making. The island is covered with herbs and beautiful creepers, oleander, bougainvillea, roses and stunning pelargoniums in vibrant colours. In late May the whole island is ablaze with colour against the iconic blue and white Cycladic architecture.

The resident population is 5,000 and Milos provides a warm welcome with authentic Greek cuisine and a whole host of lovely places to stay. Adamas is the port with a magnificent bay having once been the crater of the volcano that made Milos. Pollonia is in the extreme north east with a scenic bay and beaches and the capital is Plaka. The fishing village Klima nearby was once an ancient city with Christian catacombs and the cave in which the Venus was discovered. Plaka has an archaeological museum with an exact copy of the Aphrodite statue dating from the end of the Hellenistic period 323-146BC and is worth a visit. Sarakiniko, with its pumice rock, is absolutely fascinating as are the small ruins of the city of Phylakopi, the important centre for the obsidian trade. Adamas has a very good mining museum and the small Ecclesiastical Museum in the ancient church of the Holy Trinity. Having lunch in simple tavernas where the seafood is fresh really is a sheer delight.

On our last day we relaxed on the Thalassitra, a replica of a typical old Milos yacht. It was glorious swimming in the azure water off the west coast, and delicious food cooked by the skipper added to the enjoyment. There are daily flights from Athens for the time-pressed traveller.



MILOS



Sifnos is reached by sea jet and we drove from the port of Kamares to one of the many good hotels in a beautiful bay with a glorious beach and well-kept tavernas.

There are 2,000 permanent residents - the picturesque churches, 55 ancient towers, whitewashed villages, historical monasteries, dovecots and the capital town of Appollonia with its narrow charming lanes and squares and the beaches all combine to make it so beautiful!

Being a small island it is easy to drive around. Apokofto beach is near the iconic church of Chryssopigi. Vathy beach has a small colony of houses and tavernas along with the island's only 5* luxury hotel which is truly beautiful and in Cycladic style with elegant pool and green lawns. We drove up to the prehistoric ruins on the Acropolis of Agios Andreas and the church at the summit. Human activity is evident from the Neolithic period to the beginning of the Early Bronze Age (late 4th millennium BC). The strongly fortified citadel dates from the Mycenaean Age in the 13th century BC.

Kastro is the heritage 'castle' village with its Cycladic fusion with Venetian architecture. Artemonas is adjacent to Appollonia which also has strong Venetian influence; we visited a potter and also tasted the local unusual sweets being made by the confectioner. We watched the gathering of the caper berries from hundreds of bushes growing everywhere.

I would happily return to Platis Yialos or Vathy for a relaxing beach holiday. I particularly enjoyed the breakfast buffet at our hotel... the glorious preserved citrus fruit and fig jam with as much fresh orange juice as you could drink, or good coffee, set you up for the day.

The Speedrunner IV ferry departs daily from Piraeus for Sifnos so it is easily accessible on the water as well as via the helipad too.

SIFNOS



PAROS

Paros is the third largest island of the Cyclades and in the evening light as we arrived it was equally as beautiful as the other, smaller islands in the region.

Excavations reveal remains of Neolithic civilisation dated from 4,300 – 3,700 BC. This is considered to be the first signs of life in the whole of the Cyclades. Paros and Antiparos developed through the era known as the pre-Cycladic 3,200-2,800 BC. The Arcadians led by Paros son of Parrhasios settled the island in the first millennium BC.

The lovely beaches are fairly evenly distributed around the island including Port Parikia in the west with its fine bay; it has an archaeological museum and a 'kastro' – castle – and very sophisticated shopping. Parikia's Katapoliani Church is one of the best-known orthodox churches in the whole Aegean, dedicated to the Virgin Mary and dating from the 6th century. Being different from the usual iconic Greek chapel or church it is interesting with superb iconography and interesting Baptistery.

We stayed at a family hotel on the outskirts of Naoussa in the north of the island which is a charming town with a lovely harbour and ancient Venetian ruins. The shopping here is also sophisticated and the restaurants with al fresco dining are attractive with excellent food.

A sunset cruise on a restored fishing boat around Naoussa's Bay whilst sipping ouzo and eating nibbles was so enjoyable and ripe apricots on the trees, vines promising a bounty of grapes and vibrant pelargoniums were all around us. A truly beautiful island and well worth a visit...

Tradition links the island of Ios to Homer, the greatest epic poet of all time. The author of the Iliad and Odyssey is apparently buried on a hill top overlooking the Aegean at Plakotos. The island is home to 2,000 residents and has 365 churches. The Port of Ios with the lighthouse on the one side and the church of Saint Irini on the other is a scenic marvel. It is a popular yachting base and there is also a lovely beach with several good hotels with their own pools.

Hora, the capital, is a superb example of Cycladic architecture and the topography makes it stunning. The Cycladic architecture is respected in all the islands and there are no high-rise or unfinished buildings on any of the four islands we visited. The elegant town square and the ancient church of the Annunciation are very inviting with the many lanes and small squares and huddled little chapels and churches... enchanting. The hillside has three iconic white chapels ascending at intervals along with heritage windmills. This island encourages the young and energetic and from about noon onwards the lanes and squares become busy. The covered streets are called stigadia and the décor of the little shops, restaurants, night clubs and bars are all individual.

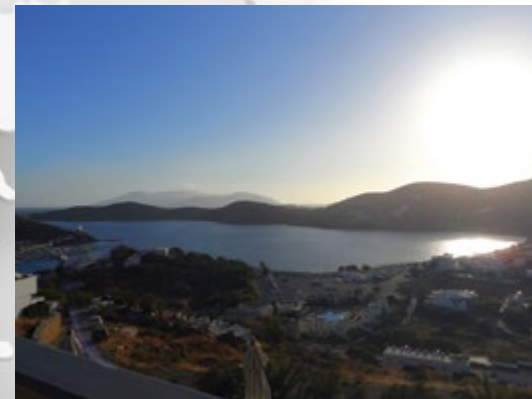
The stone and marble Greek-style open theatre seats 1,000 people overlooking the Aegean and Mylopota Bay and the small archaeological museum reminds visitors of the antiquity of this gem of an island. The Acropolis at Skarkos is dated to the Protocycladic period of 2,800 -2,700 BC. The antiquity is all around with the ancient walls of Hora, the Roman aqueduct in Aghia Theodoti, the Byzantine Paleocastro in Psathi and other heritage sites.

We stayed at a hotel with an elegant pool and stunning vista of the bay – looking down from my balcony as the sun set is a memory to treasure. Ios has a number of very good hotels to suit the traveller's budget but also accommodation designed for the young.

En route to Magganari beach we visited Homer's grave and one of the goats' cheese dairies. The thyme-clad hills with small wild flowers and the evocative tinkling of goats' bells in the distance soon showed us the flock. The cheese is excellent and honey too is another important product - both are flavoured by thyme in springtime and heather in the autumn. Yet again the food was excellent with lots of fresh seafood and authentic local dishes with vegetables which are grown on the island. Walkers would love this island as there are several dedicated walks. Snorkelling and water sports are available at Mylopotas as well as Magganari and the Port beach; the Port is considered the safest natural harbour in the Cyclades for yachts. The light on Ios, reflected from the sea and mountains, seems to surpass light anywhere else in the world!



IOS



My abiding memory is of a warm welcome, lovely Cycladic architecture and the sheer antiquity of each of these glorious islands. A most beautiful two weeks in Greece and one I hope to repeat very soon...

INFORMATION

See Aline's own website for more island photos
www.thepeacocksall.co.uk

• For more information on each island see also
www.milos.gr/www.sifnos.gr/www.ios.gr and
www.paros.gr