



Soak up the scene – literally

With a rich history and relaxed ambience, Syros is the perfect choice for a low season Greek island break, finds Neil Geraghty

A word of warning, if you're sunbathing on a bathing platform on a Greek island, make sure you place your belongings well away from the water's edge. I've just finished swimming in Ermoupoli, the beautiful capital of Syros in the Cyclades, and shivering from the chilly water, I lie down and let the sun warm my body.

Only a few tourists are sunbathing on the platform whereas the locals have chosen the rocks above. We should have used our common sense and followed their example. In the distance a ferry is leaving port and a few minutes later the wash reaches shore. The first two waves throw up tiny flecks of spray but the third is like a mini tsunami. Crashing over the platform, the wave leaves us gasping for breath

as our sodden belongings are scattered left, right and centre. The locals can't suppress their chuckles.

Syros, a 40 minute ferry ride from Mykonos, is little known outside Greece but played an important role during Greece's War of Independence in the 1820s. When rebellions broke out against the Ottoman Empire many merchants fled from islands near the Turkish coast and settled in Ermoupoli which quickly grew from a sleepy backwater to one of Greece's most important towns. The new wealthy classes employed European architects to build mansions and civic buildings in the fashionable neo classical style which today gives Ermoupoli a grandiose elegance more redolent of the French Riviera than a small Greek island.

Ermoupoli's revolutionary era



View of Ermoupoli on Syros island, main; a narrow street in Anos Syros, above

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During its heyday Ermoupoli had 130 factories and the busiest port in Greece

architecture is strictly protected by the Greek government and any restoration project needs to preserve the buildings' historic elements. A short stroll uphill from the bathing platform lies the newly opened Hotel Argini, originally the home of Grigoris Paikos, a leading figure of the Greek Revolution. The current owner Yiannis Polykretis grew up next door and was always fascinated by the history of the derelict house. Seven years ago he bought the property and embarked on a renovation which was overseen by the Hellenic Ministry of Culture.

Balancing historical features with comfortable design for hotel guests can be challenging in listed buildings, but by utilising softly lit exposed stonework, Scandi-chic furniture and exotic tropical plants the hotel achieves this with seamless panache. A striking additional feature is the subterranean stone cistern which has been converted into a small hammam and spa where a statue of Aphrodite looks out over a bubbling hydrotherapy pool. Just after sunset I head up to Under the Stars, Argini's delightful rooftop bar which has 360 views over the Aegean and Ermoupoli's Old Town. I order a glass of local white wine made from serfiotiko, a Cycladic grape variety which has a pronounced citrus taste and dry minerality. It makes a perfect aperitif and as I sit back and relax, a blood red moon rises over the Aegean.

Nothing quite beats an al fresco breakfast when the weather is chilly back home. In the hotel's atmospheric courtyard I order strapatsada, a rich dish of scrambled eggs,

feta cheese and tomatoes. Afterwards I join a history-themed walking tour of Ermoupoli. Our first stop is St Nicholas Church which dominates the town with a striking blue and gold dome and slender twin campaniles. When it opened in 1870, it was one of the largest Orthodox churches in Greece and lavishly illustrates the wealth Syros enjoyed in the 19th century. During its heyday Ermoupoli had 130 factories and the busiest port in Greece and was so important economically, it almost became Greece's capital.

Ermoupoli's growing prosperity attracted many Greek migrants from Izmir who brought with them the architectural and culinary traditions of mainland Anatolia. Walking down to the town centre we pass Ottoman style mansions with ornate balconies and window grills. One speciality the island became renowned for was loukoumia, a lighter fluffier version of Turkish delight that was exported to many of the royal courts of Europe. In the bustling market district we stop for a tasting at Sykouris, a small family business that dates back to 1928.

The next day I embark on a driving tour around the island. The dry hills of Syros have always been poor for agriculture but figs, carobs, fennel and capers all flourish in the dry conditions. The big exception to the arid landscape is a lush oasis near the pretty fishing village of Poseidonia. The seafront at Poseidonia is lined with good value tavernas where I sit down to mountainous plates of Greek salad and fried sardines. My

last stop is a picturesque windmill from where I get tantalising views of Ano Syros, a medieval village that clings to a steep mountain topped by a Cistercian monastery.

The village looks so enigmatic that in the afternoon, I don my walking shoes and set out for a steep climb up to the monastery. A flight of hundreds of steps leads up from the outskirts of Ermoupoli but it's well worth the effort. The village was originally built by the Venetians in the 13th century as a safe haven from pirate attacks and the labyrinth of lanes that coil up towards the fortress-like monastery still exude an aura of brooding history.

Back in the Argini Hotel I head down to the restaurant which has become known in Syros for updating Greek classics. A traditional Greek salad is given extra sparkle with tangy foraged capers and sweet slithers of carob rusk. A light orzotto pasta dish of fresh prawns is given a pleasing punch with aniseed-flavoured fennel and ouzo sauce. After dinner I return to Under the Stars for a glass of Skinos mastiha, a liqueur flavoured with gum mastic which gives it a fresh resinous kick. The stars are indeed out above the bar and the town's historic buildings are also beautifully floodlit. As I gaze from the rooftop at the elegant domes, church towers and classical facades of Ermoupoli, it looks every inch the beautiful capital of Greece that never was.

The Hotel Argini is open all year round with low season rooms starting at £175 including breakfast, www.arginisyros.gr



The spectacular Saint Nicholas Church in Ermoupoli, Syros



My new favourite Obsession

With 312 square miles of fells, deep valleys and peat moorland, the wild and wonderful Forest of Bowland is also home to foodie haven Northcote, writes David Robinson

If you're driving down the M6 for a short break in the north of England, the chances are you're either turning right and heading into the Lake District or turning left and going over the Pennines to the Yorkshire Dales. What you're probably not doing is aiming for the Forest of Bowland.

Well, you should. Confusingly, it's not a forest at all – the word just means 'royal hunting ground' – but an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty comprising 312 square miles of fells, deep valleys and peat moorland. There are no A-roads, bus services, railways, market towns or indeed villages of any size at all. Look on booking.com for anywhere to stay there and you'll probably not find anything: the places

that claim to be in the Forest of Bowland are mostly just outside.

This is, in other words, as quiet, unpopulated and as scenic as Lancashire gets. Drive through the Trough of Bowland and, apart from the absence of midges, you could easily convince yourself you are in the Highlands.

You could be also forgiven, as you follow the long and winding road south towards the Ribbles Valley – the opposite direction to that taken in 1612 by the nine Pendle witches when taken for trial and execution in Lancaster – for thinking that you are a long way from civilisation. But if you are thinking that, it is only because you have never been to the foodie heaven that is Northcote.

Most Scottish visitors to

Northcote will take the quicker route down the M6: "We're only nine miles off the motorway, and almost equidistant between Gleneagles and London, so we're a handy place for anyone wanting to break their journey," says general manager Craig Bancroft, who has a double dose even of the normal bonhomie that goes with the job. "But we want to be a lot more than that."

Bancroft, who has worked at Northcote ever since he joined as a management trainee 43 years ago, is a legend in the hospitality industry. In that time, he has seen the hotel transform from a Victorian villa with four bedrooms for guests to one of the premier luxury destinations in the north-west of England, with 85 staff, a cookery school, and a 56-cover restaurant that has retained its Michelin star since 1996.

Right now, Bancroft is getting ready for Obsession, the annual food and wine festival (23 January to 8 February) Northcote likes to bill as "Europe's Glastonbury of Gastronomy". Now in its 26th year, it showcases the talents of Michelin-starred chefs from all over the world. The appeal is obvious: suppose you want to sample what two Michelin-

starred John Williams produces at the Ritz or three-starred Kim Ratcharoen rustles up at Restaurant Gordon Ramsay, you don't have to travel to London to do so. And not just London: the chefs at Obsession in the first eight days next month, with 16 Michelin stars between them, also include ones from Belgium, the Netherlands and the USA.

Chef-patron Lisa Goodwin-Allen was in London picking up yet another of her many awards on the night we visited, but judging by the gourmet menu we ate, standards didn't seem to have slipped in her absence. I don't know whether it was because of the number of staff (24 in the kitchen and almost as many serving) or their natural friendliness, but there was a convivial bustle about her restaurant and a complete absence of the intimidating stuffiness that still persists in some temples of haute cuisine.

Generally, says Bancroft, these are hard times for fine dining. "But we're lucky. We have a strong local base so we might have 40-50 for lunch on a weekday, with far more at weekends. Even for Obsession, most customers come from

The exterior of Northcote, which has held a Michelin star since 1996

within 50 miles of here." The hotel's new owners plan to build on that success by building a new fine dining restaurant and adding a spa, pool and gym. Work will start in the spring.

As well as the Forest of Bowland, this was my first time exploring the Ribbles Valley, which turned out to be far more scenic and historic (Clitheroe Castle, Whalley Abbey) than its Blackburn postcode might lead one to expect.

If you don't mind a half-mile walk from the station, you can even arrive at Northcote by train, although apparently only about 20 people a year do so. From Scotland, it's an awkward timetable, though it would at least take in two spectacular viaducts (Ribbleshead on the Settle-Carlisle line and Whalley on the Clitheroe line from Manchester). But as I'd love to go back, I'm working on it.

Northcote is at Langho, Lancashire BB6 8BE; tel: 01254 240 555. B&B from £240 per room, gourmet menu £155 per person, and cookery school £235 per day. More details on www.northcote.com

Head off the beaten track in 2026

The Faroe Islands, an archipelago of 18 islands, are a must-see destination, writes Cat Thomson

As visitor spending has become an important part of the Faroe Islands' economy, its tourism focus is not on vast visitor numbers but on more meaningful, longer stays and extending the visitor season. For those who make the short flight from Scotland, there is much to enjoy.

Tunnel of love

The Faroe Islands are famous for their network of inter-island tunnels, which have completely revolutionised island life. The most famous is the (11km) long underwater tunnel connecting the islands of Streymoy and Eysturoy. The toll tunnel even has its own creative illuminated artwork roundabout and site-specific sound installation.

Heimablidni

Visitors can enjoy a range of traditional Faroese home-cooked meals in locals' homes. I ate at Sølvi's house in Miðvágur, a village close to the airport. He served up a tasty plateful of fried cod, boiled potatoes and onion, washed down by a local beer and a slice of Faroese cake.

To book a "home hospitality" experience at Sølvi's visit, visitfaroeislands.com/en/whatson/places/place/solvis-heimablidni

Tórshavn, the capital of the Faroe Islands

Also known as Thor's harbour, the colourful harbour of Tórshavn is famous for its turf-roofed buildings of the Tinganes peninsula, one of the oldest parliamentary meeting places in the world.

Elsa Berg, 29, the city's mayor is a keen environmentalist who is passionate about



Múlafossur Waterfall is near the village of Gásadalur

improving the environment and her hometown. "I want to make future generations able to live in the same environment and to improve it."

The main issues she and the coalition members face are the need for affordable housing, environmental concerns and other issues that are part and parcel of island life. Tourists have seen more cafes and restaurants opening, which she says, "make the capital area vibrant and exciting."

Be sure to visit the National Gallery of the Faroe Islands, which showcases Faroese art, and the National Museum of the Faroe Islands to learn more about the fascinating geology, history, and culture.

Where to stay

The Hotel Føroyar is known for its stunning views across the fjord to Nólsoy Island. If you want to have a slice of tranquillity, book a treatment at the hotel's Röss Spa House with its heated pools, saunas, and stunning views.

hotelforoyar.com

Closer than you think

Located halfway between Scotland and Iceland in the Northeast Atlantic, Atlantic Airways, the national air carrier, offers direct flights twice a week from Edinburgh to Vágar Airport between March and December. The flight only lasts 1 hour and 25 minutes.

www.atlanticairways.com