

# A Guide to the Aegean Islands

## 2012

### The Cyclades

When I picture the Greek Islands, I think of the Cyclades. This may be a limitation, but that is where Barbara and I have been and returned to many times between 1971 and 2005. They harbor the white and blue villages above a bare seascape where even a palm tree is an eye sore.

I will briefly describe the islands I know (and provide links to their websites). However, I have not been back since 2005 and many of our old haunts have deteriorated so as to be no longer attractive. In the second part I'll search the internet for "undiscovered" islands where the old ways have not died out – and to my surprise, there are many!

In this search I have made copious use of [Matt Barrett's](#) website and Panoramio's photos in Google-Earth.

### Our Islands

#### Amorgos

[Google-Maps](#)

Amorgos is our favourite Cycladic Island.: 5 hours by boat from Naxos and 10 from Pireus. It is far enough from the tourists and the cruise ships to be visited only by the few who know and seek the solitude of an unspoiled Greek island. There are no great, sandy beaches and no hotels deserving the name, but there are plenty of private rooms and eateries available in Katapola and a few in the Chora and in Egiali.



Amorgos, The Domes of the Chora ready to rise to Heaven

It is a long spiny island with many hiking trails and an 11th-century monastery. It was the home of most celebrated Cycladic sculptures (3000–1700 BC) in the museums of the world.

More see on [Rolf's Amorgos Website](#)

For an expanded GE kmz-file for Amorgos click on "[Hiking on Amorgos](#)"

# Naxos

[Google-Maps](#)



Naxos, Moni Christos Fotodoti (8<sup>th</sup> cent) and the Lesser Cycladic Islands in the distance

Besides Amorgos we have explored Naxos for many years and love it.

More see on [Rolf's Naxos Website](#)

For an expanded GE kmz-file click on "[Hiking on Naxos](#)"

# Paros

[Google-Maps](#)



Paros, the Bay seen from the Moni of the Anargyroi high above Paroikia

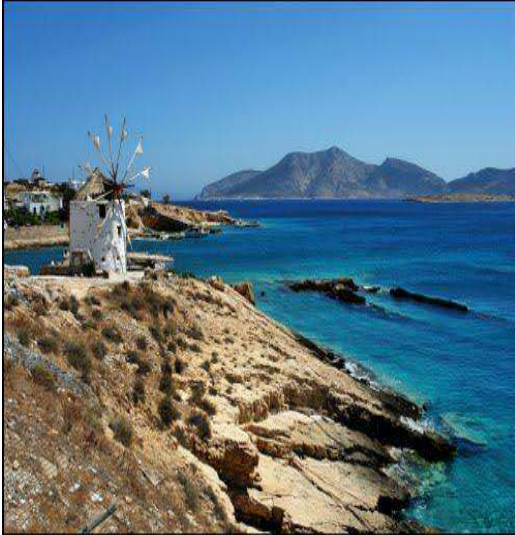
The people of Paros are soft-spoken and love beauty – compared to those on "Cretan" Naxos. While Naxos is endowed with many Byzantine chapels Paros has one magnificent Byzantine cathedral – the oldest church in Greece (326 AD).

More see on [Rolf's Paros Website](#)



# The Lesser Minoan Islands

[Google-Maps](#)



Apano Koufonissi



Schinoussa Bay

There are actually about a dozen “little Cyclades”, but only three are inhabited in our times: Irakliá, Apáno Koufoníssi, and Schinoússa. Donoússa is separate and has a larger permanent population. They are barren but are strikingly different from one another, each with their particular tourist clientele – though none now rank as undiscovered, and all of them, given limited accommodation, are no-go areas from mid-July to September 1, unless you have a rooms reservation – or are happy to camp out. Athens agencies are unlikely to be able to help with advance hotel reservations, except on Páno Koufoníssi and Skhnioússa which have some luxury complexes. But a room can often be found. Apáno Koufoníssi also has the best beaches, with Donoússa not far behind; Mountainous Irakliá has the best walking, with Donoússa running second. Accommodation can be on the cheap side, but dining out is definitely not – little islands do not mean little prices. While all four have a bank ATM apiece, best not rely on these but come equipped with plenty of cash.

I have gone by ferry through these islands, but have never got off the boat.

For more on these islands see [Marc Dubin's Guide to the Little Cyclades](#)

The “uninhabited” islands were populated during Minoan times, as the Cycladic Idols (2800 BC) from their grave sites prove. Famous is Keros, where the large “[Keros Hoard](#)” of broken idols was found by looters in 1963 – nobody seems to know why they were broken.

# Islands to Avoid:

## Ios, Mykonos, and Santorini

All three are hopelessly ruined today, they have become expensive, noisy and brainless tourist traps. Unfortunately all three are among the most beautiful Cycladic Islands

### Ios

[Google-Maps](#)



Ios, View from our room over-looking Ios Bay, 1971

Ios gets a nostalgic mention because we discovered it in 1971 and fell in love with it before it slid into the abyss. The Chora was wonderful so were the beaches. The people we met were students (who are still friends), a US lawyer practicing in Paris, a beautiful French woman – a cultural attache of the Belgian embassy in Paris.... all interesting, memorable people. Ten years older than they, we never felt so young and frivolous. We stayed 2 weeks. Five years later we returned. – Ios had turned into the drug capital of the Greek Islands. A terrible crowd mostly from the UK and Australia. We gave Ios one more try, off-season in May 1994: the Chora and its people were like walking ghosts.

I consulted [Matt Barrett](#) about the present state of this once beautiful paradise. He writes: *"There was no island in Greece like Ios. And there is no place in the world like Ios today!"*

*Some might tell you, it is like Spring Break in Daytona Beach or Panama city or even Cancun, but the reality is that those places are tame compared to los. los is an all out international party of college age people that lasts from June until the end of August on one of the most beautiful of the Greek islands"*

Stay away from los! – It is burnt out even in off-season.

More see on [Rolf's los Website](#)

## Mykonos

### Google-Maps



Mykonos 1971 – “Our” beach 10 minutes from town. It is now a concrete yacht harbor  
Jet-set Mykonos needs no dress down – but it provides access to [Delos](#), so it gets a one day reprieve.... Someday do go and see Delos. Especially, spend a day watching the sun turn from the top its island mountain – it is the magical center of the Kyklades.





Delos, View from Mt. Kythnos on Tinos and Mykonos 1971

More see on [Rolf's Mykonos-Delos Website](#)



# Thira–Santorini

[Google-Maps](#)



The Caldera of Santorini with Thira town in the distance as seen from Ia (1996)

Somehow *you must see* Thira–Santorini. It is the most spectacularly scenic island in the Aegean – if not anywhere: The huge caldera of a volcano to the sides of which the town and villages cling. The light, coming from the sky and reflected from the sea, is indescribably intense. – For a suggestion on how to resolve this dilemma go to [Anafi](#) further down.

Its great archeological attraction was/is [Akrotiri](#), the true *Atlantis* – a Minoan town which was buried by an explosion of the Thira volcano in around 1650 BC – As of 2011 the excavation site of Akrotiri is closed, because of a fatal accident in 2005. But copies of its spectacular frescoes can now be admired in a museum in Thira/Fira town and in the Athens Nat. Archeological Museum. – We went twice on day-excursions of Santorini in 1971 from Ios and in 1992 from Crete, at which time Akrotiri was still accessible. We revisited the island in 1996 for 3 days with the Mays to never return....

More see on [Rolf's Santorini Website](#)

# New Discoveries 2012

My search for new non touristy islands has led me to the eastern Cyclades. Between the tip of Attika and Milos lies a string of islands: Kea, Kythnos, Serifos, Sikkinos, and Kimolos, some of which Peter has seen but I never explored. I couldn't say why, prejudice? Their closeness to Athens? Their relative obscurity in my time before the 1990s? – Anyway, from a look at the Panoramio photos in Google–Earth I learned that some of them are as interesting as any of the Western Cyclades and all have better beaches.

I tried to provide selected Panoramio photos and descriptions for each place from Matt Barrett's website, Wikipedia, and a few other sources, to enable you to make *your own* decisions. Report back to me, if you have been successful ([rolf354@gmail.com](mailto:rolf354@gmail.com)).

## Kea

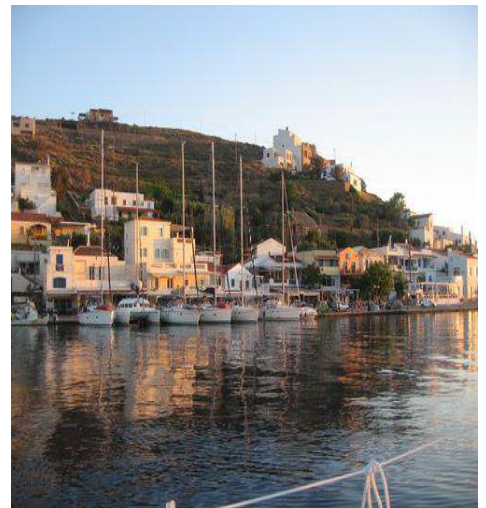
[Google Maps](#)



Korissa Lighthouse



Ioulis, the Kea Chora



Yachts at Vourkari

Quiet and traditional. Like going to the most remote island in the Aegean, but it's close to Athens. The *ferry leaves from Lavrion, in Attika* (not from Pireus) an hour plus bus ride from Athens, less from the airport. One reason why Kea has been overlooked.

Kea itself is not quite ready for prime-time international tourism, but it is an interesting and beautiful island with a long history. It is popular with Athenians, many of whom have summer houses here or come for weekends – [not the most congenial neighbours! *Rolf*]

The village of Ioulis is a labyrinth of white Cycladic houses perched on the side of a mountain, with a small main square. Because it is an island popular with Greeks there are lots of good

restaurants.

There are nice beaches, and many of them are off the road and reachable only by hikes through beautiful settings.

There are few boat connections from Kea to the rest of the Cyclades, though several times a week there is a ferry to Kythnos and Syros, where you can make other connections.

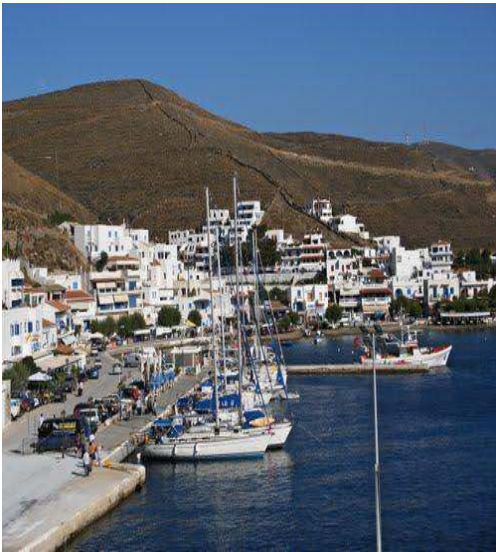
Most foreigners come here by sailboat and stay in the small harbor of Vourkari which has a row of fish tavernas. Kea is known for its extensive ancient path network, which is still largely intact making it a paradise for hikers.

From [Matt Barrett](#) who lives in Kea.

# Kythnos

[Google-Maps](#)

Kythnos in the Western Cyclades is a surprising island of beautiful beaches, traditional villages, hot springs, agriculture, and with a feeling that it is much further than the short ferry journey from Pireus. Kythnos is no secret to those who stay for the night on sailboats cruising the Aegean, since the small port of Loutra is usually their first stop. But to really see the island you need time and a car.



Merichas Kythnos' Ferry  
Harbor



Kythnos Chora



Dryopis

In the 13th century BC, a pre-Hellenic tribe, the Dryopes, originally from Thessali migrated first to Euboea, and later to the islands, spreading to Kea, Kythnos, and beyond. The name of this hill town is a reminder of them.

Kythnos was until recently considered to be one of the last Cycladic islands unaffected by tourism, but this is inexorably changing. Still, the island has not yet been overdeveloped, and in the more remote areas of the villages, traditional ways live on relatively unchanged. There are two main harbours on the island, the main ferry harbour of Merichas on the W coast (which is not particularly yacht friendly) and the popular harbour of Loutra, which regularly accommodates up to 20 or so yachts on passage through the Cyclades.





Loutra Yacht Harbor



Loutra Hot Springs by the sea

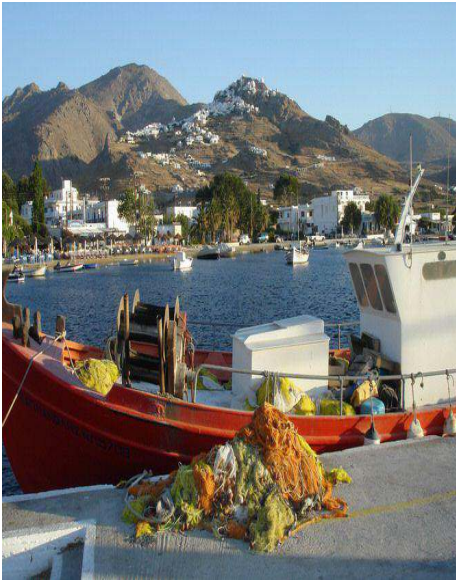
At the northeast end of the island lies Loutra (pop. 63), a village famous for its hot springs, which are said to have curative properties. Although the large tourist hotel there has been closed for several years, the bathhouse is still functioning and visitors may use its marble tubs for a modest fee. Alternatively you can soak where the hot water runs in a stream into the sea at the town beach. There is a “tub” of rocks where the sea water mixes and makes the temperature bareable.

There are also a number of lovely anchorages on both the E and W coast of the island which can be used in adverse wind conditions. Kythnos is at the western fringe of the prevailing Aegean weather system and does not normally experience quite the same wind strengths as the islands further east.

From [Matt Barrett](#) and [Wikipedia](#), which also has extensive historical information on Kythnos (mesolithic settlement 10'000 BC, 3000BC copper smelting, the Dryopes 1300 BC, etc)

# Serifos

[Google-Maps](#)



Serifos, Livadia Harbor  
and the Chora in back



Koutalas Beach and an  
abandoned mine



Aghias Ioannis Beach  
on the east coast

Serifos is an island with about 1,400 inhabitants and several fine sandy beaches. It also boasts a number of abandoned mines. The first settlers of Serifos were Ionian Greeks from Asia Minor. The island was fairly wealthy in antiquity because of its rich iron and copper mines and minted its own coins. In Hellenistic times it was conquered by the Macedonians and the Ptolemies from Egypt. During the 3rd century AD it was taken over by the Romans who used it as a place of exile. After the Byzantines in 1204, Serifos was taken by the Venetians who ruled it like the rest of the Cyclades. They built the castle of Chora. Following the Venetians it fell to the Ottomans.

In modern times Serifos took an active role during the Greek War of Independence in 1821 following which it became part of Greece. In 1916 there was a violent miner's strike, after which the mines declined and were, by 1960, eventually abandoned. The island's population dwindled to about 1400 inhabitants. Today tourism has given the island a new prosperity



Serifos, The Chora, (photo: Matt Barrett)

The Chora of Serifos is one of the most spectacular in the Cyclades, perched on the side of a mountain it overlooks the large harbor at Livadi. The trip is about 20 minutes of hairpin turns, going back and forth across the face of the mountain until you come to a spot where the bus leaves you at the entrance to the lower square of the village.

Following the signs to the Kastro one comes upon the main square, in front of the Dimarcho building, a carbon copy of the town-hall in Ioulida, Kea. In fact the Chora of Serifos is very similar to Ioulida, another Cycladic village built amphitheatrical on top of a mountain to deter pirates. The square, called Pano Piatsa which means upper square, is as cozy as a platia can be, with tables from several small ouzeries and a taverna called Zorba's occupying a good portion of it. There is also the 17th-century church of Aghios Athanasios.

A rental car would come in very handy. [Matt Barrett](#)



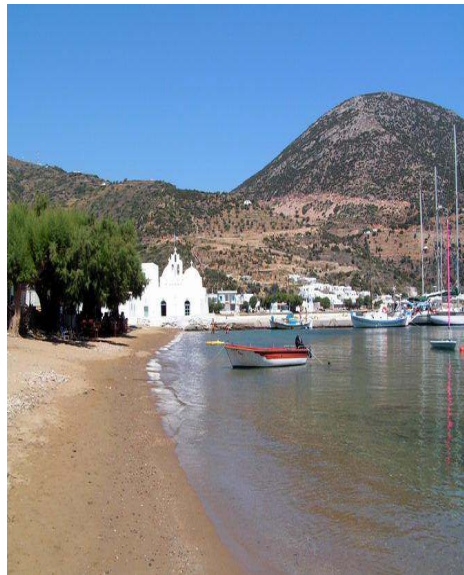
# Sifnos

[Google-Maps](#)

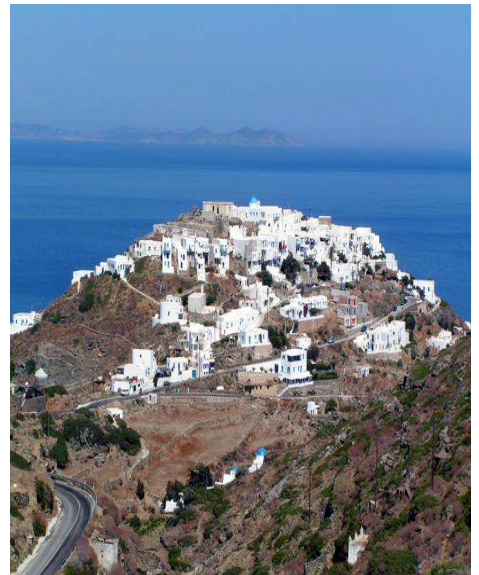
If you are looking for that perfect Greek island with a balance of beautiful beaches, nightlife(!), white Cycladic villages, low-tourism and maybe the best food in the Cyclades, then look no further than Sifnos, where I have been going to for over thirty years. [Matt Barrett](#) and also [Wikipedia](#)



Kamares Harbor



Vathy Beach and the  
church of the Taxiarkhis



Kastro

Sifnos was inhabited from at least 4000 BC. Archeological evidence indicates the island was part of Late Neolithic and Early Bronze Age Cycladic civilization. In classical times the island became very wealthy thanks to its gold, silver, and lead deposits, which were being mined there as early as the 3rd millennium BC. Proof of this is the treasury which the Siphnians built at [Delphi](#) in the 6th century BC to house their offerings. Remains of ancient mines, some dating back to prehistoric times, are still to be seen at Ay. Sostis. Remains of ancient fortifications, dating from the third millennium to the sixth century BC, have been found at Ay. Andreas, Ay. Nikitas, and Kastro. Little is known of Sifnos during the Roman, Byzantine or Turkish eras.

From *Kamares*, the island's ferry harbor, you can get buses to all the other villages, or you can stay here and enjoy one of the nicest beaches and some of the best restaurants on the island.

*Vathy* is a beautiful little harbor with rooms for rent and excellent, inexpensive



restaurants – and a fantastic beach. The nightlife here is quite enjoyable, because it is so small it does not take very long to get to know people. – A good sheltered yacht harbor! (Matt Barnett)

Many consider this the best beach on the island. Though its strip of fine sand is narrow in parts, it's very long and on a beautiful enclosed bay which keeps the water calm. In the past it's been one of the least crowded of the major Cyclades beaches, but recently this is changing with new development. (Wikipedia)

*Kastro* is the medieval island capital and is worth seeing as an almost perfectly preserved medieval Cycladic town, beautiful and unspoiled. It's on a rocky hilltop right above the sea. Kastro has been inhabited for over 3000 years. To get to Kastro you can take a bus there or by car or motorbike. There is also an old footpath from below Artemona which is a beautiful walking trip in Spring due to the abundance of wildflowers and interesting plants and the fact that it is entirely downhill. – Antiparos in the distance.

## Kimolos

[Google-Maps](#)

[Greek Tourist Map of Kimolos](#)

Kimolos, the small norther-eastern satellite of Milos, lies separated from it by a narrow channel. This channel used to be an isthmus connecting the two islands. On this isthmus was a Mycenaean town. In antiquity the island was known as Achinousa from achinos – sea urchin. Its present name comes from “kimolia” – chalk which was mined there.



Psathi Kimolos Harbor,  
Chora on the hill



Chora Kimolou



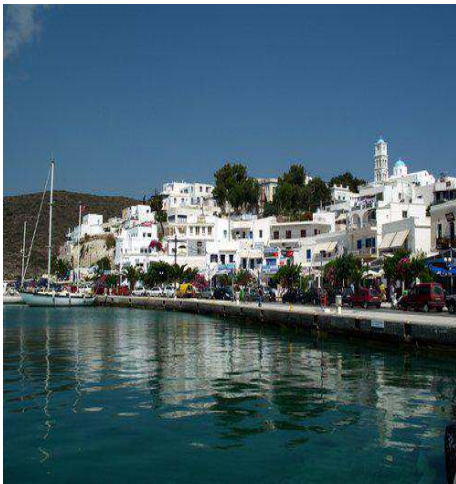
Chalk formations at  
Ellenika Beach

The island has only 720 inhabitants living in three villages: Mesa Kastro, Exo Kastro, (sometimes these two are referred to as Chora or simply as Kimolos) and Psathi, the little harbor. The place has been dominated by the Venturis family who have become very successful owners of ferry boats

## Milos

[Google-Maps](#)

Milos is a volcanic island with spectacular rock formations and hot springs. Bikes or a car are useful if not essential. This is a beautiful island with fantastic beaches like Paliochori, Hivadolimni and the tiny cove of Sarakiniko, one of the most interesting places to swim.



Adamas the sheltered harbor of Milos



View from Mt. Prophetis Ilias on Milos Bay



Chalk rocks at Sarakiniko on the north coast

At Sarakiniko beautiful smooth white chalk rocks form a long narrow inlet with a tiny beach on the end offering a safe place for children to swim and great snorkling, while the rocks let you sunbathe without getting sand all over you. A hundred yards or so to the west is the remains of a freighter that has been smashed on the rocks and is half out of the water, another great place to snorkle. Nearby are sheltered coves and tiny beaches made by lava flow. [Matt Barrett](#)



Polonia across from  
Kimolos, north coast



Volcanic rocks at  
Firiplaka Beach, south coast



Plaka, The Chora of Milos

The village of Pollonia has great swimming, restaurants and you can take a boat to the island of Kimolos. The main village of Plaka is made up of the cubic white Cycladic houses. The island is rich on archeological sites including Christian catacombs, a roman ampitheatre, venetian castles and museums. [Matt Barnett](#)  
For the history and geology of Milos see, e.g., [Wikipedia](#)

## Andros

[Google-Maps](#)

“Andros is a case by itself, large, very close to Athens' airport (via Rafina). Andros should have been ‘discovered’ decades ago. This fascinating Cycladic island meets all the criteria for being on the list of top spots to spend the summer. It’s only two hours from *Rafina* in Attica, has dozens of stunning beaches, extravagant natural beauty, pretty villages, museums, history, seaside tavernas – and just about everything a place needs to attract tourists, foreign or local.

But it neither needed or wanted them. Andros is the island of shipowners. Some have names you’ve heard of like Goulandris and Embirikos, others are less familiar, but they have two things in common: a certain affluence and a desire to keep the island to themselves.”

Read [Diana Farr-Louis' “Andros, the Enigmatic Island”](#) where from I obtained these quotes. She gives you the unadorned facts, but she also gives credit to the Goulandris for the unique attractions of the island:

The Archaeology and Modern Art museums of the Chora, both gifts of Basil and Elisa Goulandris in the early 80s. The former, right on the square, will not knock your socks off



with gold, but it does have a couple of memorable statues and its models of the pre-Classical buildings at Zagora show that architecture changed little on Andros between the 9th century BC and the 19th century AD.



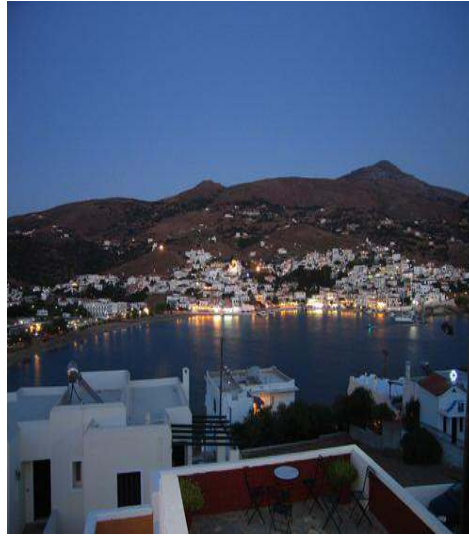
The “[MOCA Goulandris](#)”, an outstanding [Museum of Contemporary Art](#) in Andros Chora.

Otherwise the Chora is a disappointingly drab "little Athens" – a narrow road flanked by hardware stores, grocers and double-parked cars. As you walk down the grey marble plaques of its main street, you'll see a town little changed since the early 20th century. Neoclassical stately homes, some a tad faded, rise on both sides, at what must have been a posh address. Some are now cultural or philanthropic institutions – the Kairis library with its exhaustive archive, the Kydonievs art gallery with an annual summer exhibition devoted to an avant-garde Greek artist, the Embirikion Old-Age Home – while one has become a chic hotel.





Andros Chora, Main Street



Batsi



Moni Panachrantos

*Batsi* has tripled in size with all manner of accommodations and places to eat without becoming ugly; the coast between Gavrio and Batsi is filling up with villas, maisonettes and one attractive hotel (the Perrakis) that overlook sandy beaches which are rarely jammed even in August. The exception, Chryssi Ammos – Golden Beach, the smallest, shallowest and most protected, proves the rule that Greeks abhor solitude; it attracts more Golden Youth than anywhere else on the island. They flop onto its sunbeds, lap up the cantina's beers and music, and generally free up the rest of Andros's superlative strands for the more adventurous.

Batsi also accounts for most of what passes as the island's nightlife. Another reason for Andros's low profile is that this commodity can't be said to exist apart from a handful of bars and a club or two. Between the farmers who go to bed early and the shipping crowd who entertain at home, Andros lacks one essential ingredient in the popularity contest: decadence and a sense of frivolity.

*Moni Panachrantos* south of Chora, a fortress-like monastery built in the 960s. Byzantine Andros was no backwater; it fostered both a thriving silk production and a brilliant school of philosophy as well as rich monasteries. Now, beautiful and well-endowed though it may be, Panachrantos supports just one monk but receives many pilgrims and sightseers. If you hike up there in winter, the abbot may cook you a meal of spaghetti – he loves company.

# Syros

[Google-Maps](#)



Ermoupolis



The restored Ermoupolis  
Opera House

[Program of the Seventh  
Annual International Festival  
of the Aegean, July 2011](#)

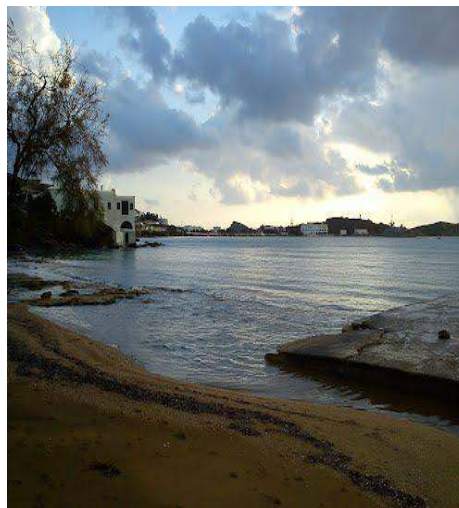


The rusting Ermoupolis  
shipyards

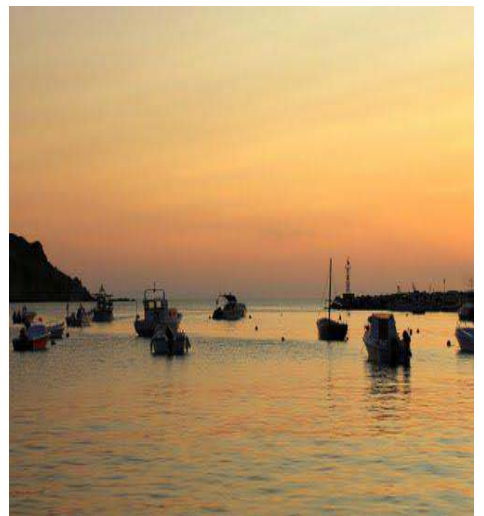
The island of Syros has become a special place. The town of Ermoupolis, the de facto capital of the Cyclades has turned into one of the most architecturally fascinating ports in the Mediterranean, a living museum with many beautiful old buildings, Catholic churches, an opera house, and declining shipyards – in the 1980s it used to be a working man's town....



Delfini Beach



Poseidonia Finikas Beach



Vari Beach, every day sunset



Seaside villages like Finikas offer beautiful beaches *without* beach chairs and umbrellas, or the throbbing disco beat you will find blasting at some of the more popular islands. Syros is a real Greek Island, fun to visit any time of the year. Go to the west coast for Sunsets....

[Matt Barrett](#)

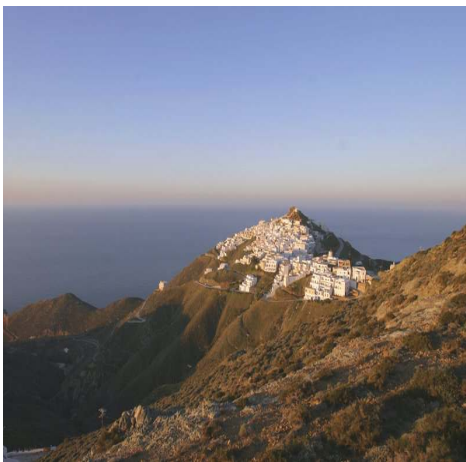
## Anafi – the farout Island

[Google-Maps](#)

Even Matt Barrett has only one paragraph on Anafi, but a beautiful [“official” Website](#) attracted my curiosity and might convince you to a visit. All photos from the “gallery” of the Anafi website.

Anafi is a tiny island hiding 1-hr by boat east of Santorini.

In fact Anafi may be the inducement to pay a brief visit to Santorini: Take the big [Blue Star Ferry “Delos”](#) to Santorini (arr. 15:00), stay overnight to see the sunset over the Caldera, and on the following evening around 20:00 take either the [“Artemis” \(ANEK Lines\)](#) or the [“Aqua Spirit” \(NEL\) to Anafi](#). You'll arrive around 21:30, but don't worry all the women with rooms to let will await you at the landing.



Anafi Chora



Chora, Ovens or cisterns



Mt. Kalamos, the mythical island mountain

In spite of its small geographical size, Anafi offers archaeological as well as mythological interests. At the monastery of Zoon Pigi, there are ruins of a temple built as an offering to the god Apollo Aegletos. Ruins can also be found at Kasteli. Most of the findings, such as the statues, can now be found crammed into one small room at the "Archaeological Museum" in the Chora.

A peninsula at the eastern end of the island is dominated by the monolithic slit breast of Mt. Kalamos, at 584 m among the highest in the Aegean. Perched atop this massif is the Panaghia

Kalamiotissa church, rebuilt in large part after an earthquake in the 1950s.

Anafi is very much an island for walking. On the old monopatti (foot paths) around the steep hills you can walk to the other side of the island. The most popular beaches are Kleisidi and Roukounas on the south coast. There is even a nude beach!



Sunday in the Chora



Impromptu music



Pressing olives

But it seems that the treasure of this island are its people. Like on Karpathos they are still holding on to the old traditions, unfazed by the pretty tourists swimming at the nude beach. This is how it was on Ios in the 1970s and still was on Amorgos in 2005. – Write me what you find....