

A Guide to the Aegean Islands

2012

The North–Eastern Aegean Islands



Early Morning at Fourni Island, Ikaria in the distance
photo Tasos, flickrriver.com

The Eastern Aegean Islands have for millenia been bridge and bulwark to and against Anatolia. Around 7000 BC the Neolithic people brought agriculture and the Great Goddess across this bridge to the Old Europe and in the 14th to 20th century AD the islands prevented Islam from swamping Greece. The islands are inhabited by a hardy and industrious race of men, who in some places still hold on to their traditional values and at the same time have produced the owners of almost one fifth of the world's merchant shipping fleet. It is no surprise then that the history of this archipelagos is confusing. In the Middle Ages the Islands changed from Roman to Byzantine to Venitian and Genoese domination to finally being usurped by the Ottomans after 1466. Uprisings in Chios, Samos and Ikaria against the Sultans left many dead and the villages devastated. Their natural setting and history have effected the three groups of Islands in surprisingly

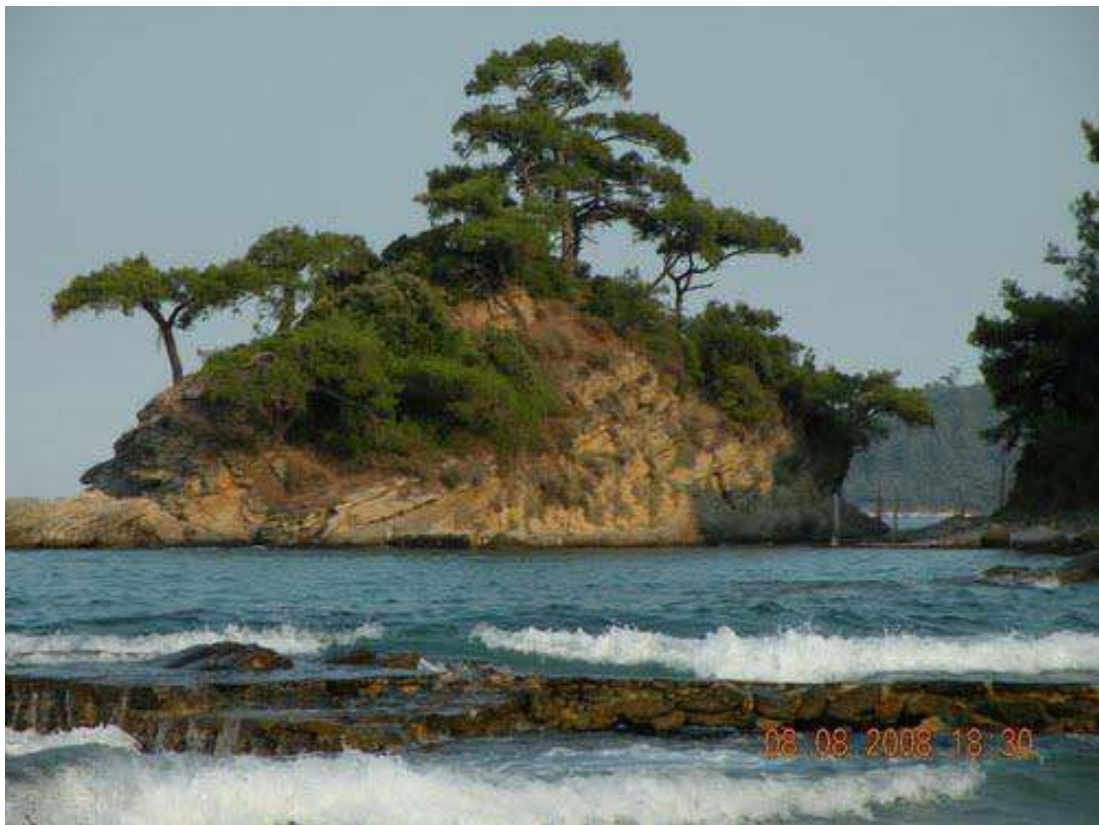
different ways. The Cyclades are bare rocks in a blue sea, the Northereastern Islands and the Dodecanese are wooded and green with plenty of water. Historically the Dodecanese was marked by the fights between the Orders of the Knights (1099–1522) and the Ottomans. After 300 years of Turkish domination, the Italians usurped the Dodecanese in 1910 and held on to it until 1945. In the Middle Ages, after the Fourth Crusade (1204) the Cyclades became a Venitian Dutchy, the Northeastern Islands were eventually run by the Genuese and the Byzantines until they too fell to the Ottomans.

The occupation of the islands by the Turks in the 15th and 16th cent brought much persecution but eventually a period of economic prosperity. The Turkish massacres of Greeks in Chios (1822) and Psara (1824) drew the attention of the European powers to the area, but it was not until 1912 that these islands were incorporated into the new Greek state.

I have only been to the Eastern Aegean islands once for a few hours on Chios in 1954. My brother Gerhard spent a longer time on Samos. So there are no memories, and this attempt to sort out these islands is based entirely on the internet – in particular I owe much to Matt Barrett's [Northern Aegean](#) and [Dodecanese](#) Websites.

Thassos

[Google-Maps](#)



A Japanese island in the Aegean?

Thassos is one of the jewels of the Aegean. Visited by Germans, and Eastern Europeans,

who can drive to Kavalla, it is little known and has been spared commercialization, if not packaged tourism. Its wooded interior hides slate-roofed villages, goats, waterfalls, and a splendid monastery of the Archangel Michael on the south coast. You can circle the entire island in 2 hrs along a 95 km asphalted road, but then you miss the interior. Take your time and walk.



Thassos harbor from the
Greek theater



Slate roofs in the village of
Theologos



Waterfalls in the interior

Thassos harbor is at the northern most tip of the island, only 12 km by ferry from the Port of Keramoti (10 min from Kavala airport) on the Thracian mainland. The ferry takes an hour and runs often, and there are 6 hydrofoils a day to Kavalla town in the summer. Connections to the other Aegean islands are tenuous

See [Steve Allan's Thassos Information](#).

Samothraki

[Google-Maps](#)



Sunset at Kamariotissa the modern Harbor of Samothraki

This small island in the northeastern corner of the Aegean is famous for one of the old pre-Greek sanctuaries. The “Nike of Samothace” in the Louvre comes from here. It is a beautiful island of forests and olive groves, springs and waterfalls and some of the most abundant wildlife in Greece.



Old oak in the
interior



The Local Nymph in her pool



Waterfall in Fonia
Canyon

Samothraki the Sanctuary of the Great Goddess



Samothraki the Sanctuary of the Great Goddess
photo Karolos Trivizas, [Panoramio](#)

The Samothraki sanctuary lies at the northern most coast of the island. Like in Eleusis and on Naxos it served the Mystery Plays celebrating the various chthonic manifestations of the Great Mother Goddess. The origin of the cult predated the arrival of the Greek colonists on the island in the 7th century BC. The sanctuary and its buildings are easily visible on the Google-Map – if one pushes the magnification.

The Great Mother was often depicted on Samothracian coinage as a seated woman, with one or two lions at her side. Her original secret name was Axiéros. She is associated with the Anatolian Great Mother, the Phrygian Mount, and the Trojan Mother Goddess of Mount Ida. The Greeks identified her with Demeter.

The Great Mother was the all-powerful mistress of the wild world of the mountains, venerated in sacred rocks where sacrifices and offerings were made to her. In the sanctuary of Samothrace, these altars corresponded to porphyry outcroppings of various colors (red, green, blue, or gray). For her faithful her power also manifested itself in veins of magnetic iron ore, from which rings were fashioned that the initiates wore as signs of recognition. A number of these rings were recovered from the tombs in the neighboring necropolis.

Her venerated manifestations were Zerynthia (Hecate) and Aphrodite-Zerynthia. Two important nature goddesses, whose cult were separated from that of the Great Mother during Greeks times.

Kadmylos (Καδμῦλος), the spouse of Axiéros, was identified by the Greeks with Hermes; originally a phallic deity whose sacred symbols were a ram's head and a baton (kerykeion). Two other male deities accompanied Kadmylos. These may correspond to the two legendary heroes (Kabeiroi) who founded the Samothracean mysteries: the brothers Dardanos (Δάρδανος) and Éétion (Ἑτίων). The Greeks associated them with the Dioscouri, divine twins popular as protectors of mariners in distress.

A pair of underworld deities, Axiokersos and Axiokersa, were identified with Hades and Persephone, but do not appear to be part of the original Pantheon of pre-Hellenic deities. The legend of the rape of Persephone by Hades the god of the underworld also played a part in the sacred dramas at Samothrace; although less so than at Eleusis. – During a later period this same myth was associated with that of the marriage of Cadmos and Harmony, possibly due to a similarity of names to Kadmylos and Electra (Axiéros)

A unique feature of the Samothracian mystery cult was its openness. Compared to the Eleusinian mysteries, the initiation had no prerequisites for age, gender, status or nationality. Everyone, men and women, adults and children, Greeks and non-Greeks, the free, the indentured, or the enslaved could participate. Nor was the initiation confined to a specific date and the initiate could on the same day attain two successive degrees of the mystery. The only condition, in fact, was to be present in the sanctuary.

A detailed description of the initiation ritual – as far as it can be gleaned from classical descriptions – is given in the concise [Wikipedia article on Samothraki](#) (translated from the [French Wikipedia](#))

Limnos

[Google-Maps](#)

Far enough away to have avoided the mass tourism which has infected other islands, Limnos has some of the best beaches in the Aegean. The town of Myrina is famous for its excellent fish restaurants and massive volcanic rocks. There are ferries from Piraeus, Thessaloniki and Kavala and excursion boats to the nearby island of Aghios Efstratos. Matt Barrett

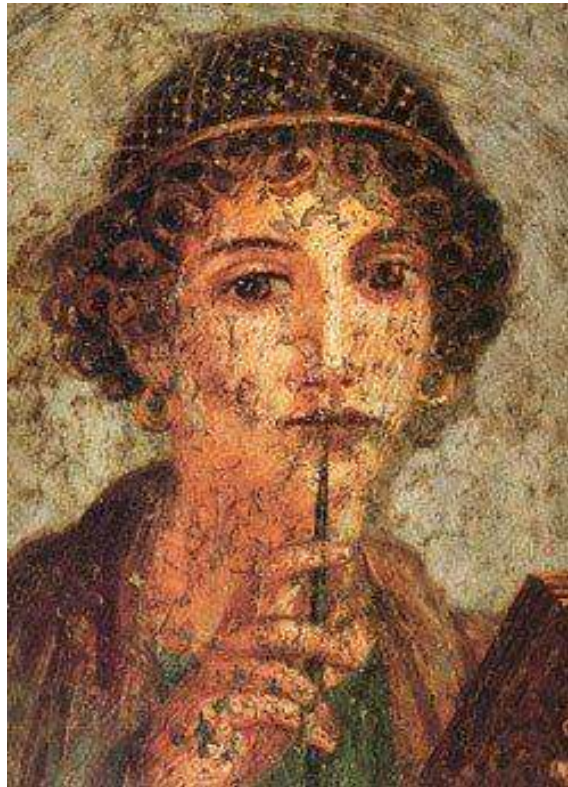
Limnos is flat (highest elevation 200 m) and agricultural. It was the granary of Byzantium.... Its tourist attraction are its more than 30 sand beaches. Find them with Panoramio.

Limnos has an airport with an extra long runway for flights from Russia....

There is a detailed [historical account in Wikipedia](#)

Lesvos–Lesbos, Mytilini

[Google–Maps](#)



Sappho of Lesbos, from a mural in Pompeii.

Matt Barnett: The virtues of Lesbos:

I love this large, green island which is also known by the name of Mytilini. City port. Great market. The best food, especially seafood. Famous for ouzo and sardines. Try Dimino and Gianatsi which are my favorites and are distilled in the traditional way. Popular brands like Mini, Plomari and Veto are better than the commercial brands you will find in the airport or at home. (tip: to find the best ouzo check the alcohol content. The closer to 40%, the better the taste). The sardines come – surprisingly – from the two big inland bays, Gera and Kaloni.

Eressos is the birthplace of Sappho. It has one of the best beaches, a popular family destination as well as alternative tourists in this case – lesbians, who congregate at Eressos in September for a great festival in honor of Sappho.

Molyvos is built around a medieval castle. Many foreigners, some visiting, some living there. There's a Zen center and other spiritual and cultural forums.

Plomari is famous for having the best ouzo, and the strongest.

Kaloni is the bird-watching capital of Europe and in Spring has more wildflowers than anywhere in Greece. The best sardines too.

Thermal spas at *Skala Thermi*, *Eftalou* and *Yeros* can cure a variety of ailments. (They worked

on my back). The beach at Vatera is about seven kilometers long. The town of *Sigri* has beautiful beaches, most long and empty and a summer wind that keeps the place so cool you don't need air-conditioning.

The island is big. Too big for motorbikes. You will need a car if you want to explore but you can be perfectly happy without one. Lesvos is inexpensive ! You can save money by going here and have as much fun or more then you will elsewhere

[Matt Barnett](#) raving about Lesvos, its ouzo, sardines, and beaches.

Mytilini



Mytilini the harbor and main town

Mytilini is not a town. It's a city. But it is an amazing little city full of life and surprises, and if you are someone with a long history in Greece it may actually remind you of Piraeus or Smyrna-Izmir in the fifties.

Mytilini is one of the most culturally enlightened cities in Greece perhaps due to its proximity to Asia Minor where the Greeks flourished until 1922 when they were forcefully evicted by the Turks. Many of these Greeks had property in Mytilini and many Mytilinians had businesses in Asia Minor. For this reason the museums are full of interesting remnants of the last three thousand years of history. [Matt Barnett](#)

Eressos



A modern minimalist sculpture of Sappho on the beach of Skala Eressou

In the southwestern corner of Lesbos is the village of Eressos and the beach town of Skala Eressou at the coast. Eressos is the birthplace of the poetess Sappho, the Mecca for lesbians. Skala is also a popular family destination, not to mention a favorite place for honeymooners and a favorite weekend beach destination for the islanders. [Matt Barnett](#)



Mythemna-Molyvos

Mithymna, or Molyvos as it was called during the middle ages, is an amazing town. The town is situated on a small mountain topped by a dramatic medieval castle, built by the Byzantines and renovated by the Gattelusi, who were from Genoa and were ceded the island when Francesco Gattelusi married the daughter of the Byzantine Emperor John Paleologos. The original castle which this one replaced, was conquered by none other than Achilles during the Trojan war.

Text from [Matt Barnett](#)



Agiassos

The town is a complete traditional village of narrow stone streets and picturesque lanes. Many of the houses have projecting upper floors known as *sachnisia* with wooden balconies decorated with flower pots of begonias, carnations, geraniums and other ornamental plants. The women of Agiassos still spin and weave. For many years the town was known for its pottery and this tradition is carried on today.

Chios

[Google-Maps](#)



In search for an image of Chios that would reflect the mood of the island I came upon this [Panoramio sunset](#)

To me it expresses the contradictions and incongruities which that island poses to the visitor. Do these two goats also feel the nostalgia that hangs over Chios, a sadness that is absent elsewhere in the Aegean?

Chios town, where one arrives, is a, if somewhat faded, 20th-century mercantile harbor city which is surrounded by numerous medieval stone towns in the interior, abandoned ghost villages, Genoese castles *and* older Venitian towers. Ruins of Catholic churches and mosques. An 11th-century monastery “Nea Moni” housing some of the most magnificent mosaics in Greece. The towns show buildings with Venitian sgraffiti decorations and wooden Turkish second stories and balconies painted in gay colors. – And behind all lurks the memory of the “Chios Massacre”, the tragic end of the Greek uprising against their Ottoman overlords in 1822.

It is, of course, its convoluted history which explains today's Chios. Like few other islands

Chios exemplifies the role of the Aegean as the millenia old bridge *and* bulwark between Greece and Anatolia. The oldest settlements (Emporeios) date at least to the Neolithic era. No sites between 2300 and 1600 BC have yet been found. The development between 900 and 500 BC is still unclear. According to early Greek sources the island was populated by Anatolian, non-Greek [Leleges](#), who were driven out by Greek Ionians in the 7th cent BC. By the 4th cent BC Chios had a population of 120 000 – five times that of 2005! Several revolts against Athens took place during the classical and Hellenistic periods.

For six centuries Chios was a part the Byzantine empire. This was the time when Nea Moni was built (see below). After the sack of Constantinople by the Fourth Crusade (1204) Chios became Venitian. However, at the end of the Latin Empire their Genoese adversaries took over in 1261 under Byzantine suzerainty. Hence there are older Venitian towers and later Genoese castles. The Genoese family of Benedetto Zaccaria exercised a benign rule over Chios, balancing the landowners and the Byzantines until 1326, when his grandson was expelled from the island by the Byzantines. The Genoese recovered the island. Their rule survived a Chian uprising (1347) but by 1566 Genoa lost Chios to the Ottomans, who ruled lightly leaving the valuable, industrious Chiosians to themselves. And so Chios continued under Turkish rule until 1822, when the Chians tried to join the Greek War of Independence. An Ottoman army slaughtered, enslaved, and expelled 5/6 of the population of Chios town. An earthquake in 1881 killed another 5–10 000 people. The town lay deserted.

In the London treaty of 1913 Turkey was forced to cede Chios to independent Greece. After the disastrous Greco-Turkish War of 1922–29 thousands of Greek refugees from Asia Minor settled in Chios and eventually rebuilt Chios town and populated many a devastated town on the island.

Today, the island has perhaps the highest per capita income of any Greek prefecturate thanks to the fact that Chians own roughly fifty percent of the Greek merchant fleet (about 12% of the world's commerical shipping) thanks to the presence of large Chian communities in New York and London which maintain strong ties with the island.

Tourism, other than visiting diaspora Chians around Easter, is a negligible factor in the island's economy. According to the 2001 census, Chios has a permanent resident population of 51,936.

For a more detailed account of the intriguing history of Chios see [Wikipedia](#)

Nea Moni



Byzantine mosaic of the Baptism of Christ (1049).

Same time as [Ossios Lukas](#), but what a difference in this imperial monastery!

The monastery was built in the mid-11th century, by Constantine IX Monomachos and his wife Zoe. In 1042, Constantine became emperor, and in gratitude began constructing the monastery, dedicated to the Theotokos. The main church (the katholikon) was inaugurated in 1049, and the complex finished in 1055, after Constantine's death.

In a chrysobull of July 1049, Constantine Monomachos granted the monastery the head tax of all Jews(!) on the island of Chios, and set the monastery apart from any superior ecclesiastic or secular hierarchy.

At its peak, around 1300, its estates covered one third of Chios (the Jews of Chios must have been rich!), and it is estimated that up to 800 monks belonged to it. The subsequent Genoese domination reduced its wealth, but the monastery prospered again during the Ottoman era, when it was subject directly to the Patriarch of Constantinople.

The monastery's decline began only after the destruction of Chios town by the Ottomans in 1822 during the Greek War of Independence. The monastery was sacked and looted, and never recovered its former glory. In 1952, due to the shortage of monks, Nea Moni was converted to a convent. According to the 2001 census, it is inhabited by three nuns....

[Wikipedia](#)

The Villages and Towns of Chios



Pirgi

Everywhere you go all walls of the houses are decorated with these incised patterns. The designs are scratched into the exterior walls of the houses, known as sgrafitti or ksista. Mostly geometric forms, ksista has gone through several periods and may have originated in Genoa, Italy in the 13th century. The process begins with the spreading of a mixture of sand, asbestos and cement on the walls of the house. This is then covered with white asbestos. When it dries the patterns are drawn onto the outer layer and then scratched with a fork to reveal the darker layers beneath. Another feature of the village are the *tomatoes* which hang drying beneath many of the balconies of Pirgi, adding a splash of color to the black and white designs on the houses.



Olympos

The outer wall of this village is still intact though windows and doors have been cut into them. There is a beautiful little square and a couple of cafeneon—restaurants and the church of Aghias Paraskevis. The central tower is still standing though in ruins.



Mesta

Mesta is a completely intact fortress town of 300 inhabitants, the best preserved of the mastic villages, a living history and cultural museum where life goes on the way it has for hundreds of years.

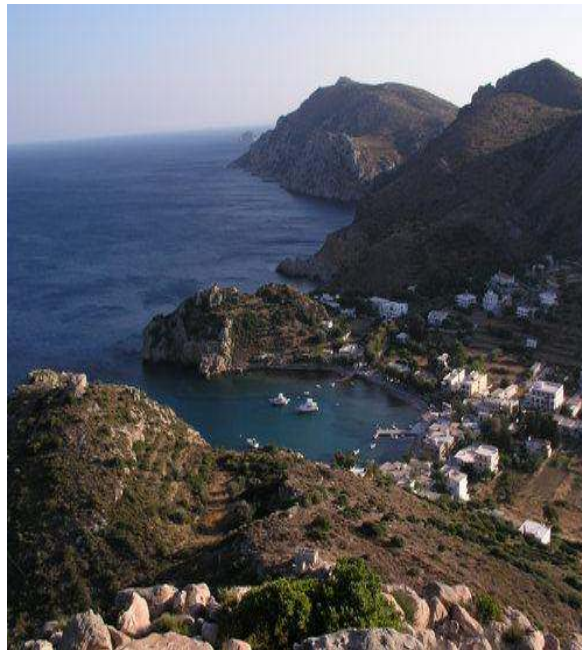
Mesta is one of those perfect villages for families. There are several gates into the town, none wide enough for a car so kids are safe to play in the streets.

There are numerous trails to hike including many that lead to the beaches and the path between Mesta and Olympoi that goes past the church of Ag Antonios as well as the old aqueduct and stone wells.

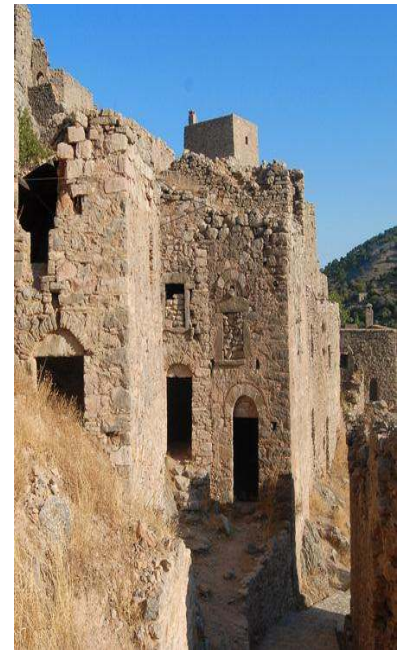
If you have a week to spend in Chios my advice would be to base yourself in Mesta for at least 3 of those days and use the town to explore southern Chios. [Matt Barnett](#)



Blue house in Vessa in the north



Emboreio, The town is believed to be the ancient Leukonion mentioned by Thucidides and excavations have unearthed a temple to Athena and other buildings including a sanctuary to the Goddess near the harbor below. Over fifty houses have been excavated and as work continues they expect to uncover more.



House in the northern ghost village of Anavatos

Samos

[Google-Maps](#)



Searching for Pythagoras in the Underworld (Mt. Kerkis), photo [Panoramio](#)

Mystical Pythagoras was born here – one doesn't quite know where, but he looms large in Samos. – Big and green, nice beaches, writes Marc Dubin. Tourism is down for some reason, so take advantage while you can. A car or bike is essential. Industrial city of Karlavassi with deserted warehouses and leather factories would make a cool set for a movie about the end of the world. It is an up and coming tourist destination with bars, cafes and restaurants. The main port is busy but fun. Samos was the island that was on fire for a week during the summer of 2000. But don't let that scare you away, because even though some of the forests in the interior of the island were pretty much destroyed, the coastal areas, beaches and resorts were unscathed and tourists given the choice to continue their holiday elsewhere opted to stay. [Marc Dubin](#) There is another shorter description of Samos by [Toula Foustanelas](#).

Not much to recommend a visit to Samos. However, there exists an archeological site south of the airport with ruins of one of the largest Ionian Hera temples:

The Heraion of Samos



Besides a single column these two maidens are the only tangible remains of the Hera Temple

The Late Archaic Heraion of Samos was the first of the gigantic free-standing Ionic temples, but its predecessors at this site reached back to the Geometric Period of the 8th century BC or earlier.

The first temple dating to the 8th century BC was a Hekatompedos, (100 ft long). A much larger temple was built by the architects Roikos and Theodoros ca. 570–550 BC. The Roikos temple had a tremendous influence on Ionic temple architecture especially in Sicily.

Unfortunately it stood for only about a decade before it was destroyed, probably by an earthquake. After the destruction of the "Roikos temple", an even larger one was built approximately 40 m to the west. This temple had the largest known floor plan of any Greek temple and is known as the "Polycrates Temple". Construction continued into the Roman period, but this Heraion was never finished, again like the temples in Sicily.

The German Archaeological Institute at Athens began excavating the site; work that was interrupted by the Second World War but recommenced in 1951. The site has been minutely described in a series of volumes in German under the general title "Samos".

[The Heraion Wikipedia](#)

Fournoi

[Google-Maps](#)



Undiscovered Fourni Archipelago

What Samos lacks Fourni, its unknown western neighbor, provides in abundance. The Fourni-Korseon village, clustered round its busy harbor filled with working fishing boats, is quintessentially Greek, with a line of tavernas and restaurants (especially fish restaurants) on the water front, many with tree-shaded tables outside. This is Greece as it has been for centuries. Mulberry trees line the main street from the harbor to a charming square shaded with leafy planes protecting the taverna the locals frequent.

There are several sandy beaches within 10–30 minutes walk of the village. The nearest lie just north of the end of the harbor-front and the further you walk the emptier they get. In the opposite direction, you climb up from the far end of the town beach, past the *charming cemetery* to a saddle which offers a wonderful view back over the village and across to the off-island of Thimaina (which you can visit and where there are walks and beaches. Then it's down a path to a string of sandy coves and a few tavernas on a gloriously tranquil bay. Except on the town beach foreigners may swim in the nude. You may be the only one on the beaches and coves.



Fourni-Korseon, the harbor



Petrokopios,
ancient marble
quarry



Chryssomilia in the north

You can take a four hour trek (though part of the track has now been asphalted) along the spine of the island to Chryssomilia – or rent a scooter. Chryssomilia, a lovely village clinging for dear life to a steep hillside rising from a series of sandy bays. This is surely a place just waiting to be discovered – and we are watching. It is already a port of call for the local caique service linking Fourni (and Thimaina) with Samos as well as for the taxi-caiques serving it from Fourni, so you don't have to do the four hour walk there and back; but don't miss the hike because the views across to Samos and Turkey and of the many deserted bays of Fourni below you are superb.

From the only website which mentions Fourni [Hidden Greece](#)

Ikaria

[Google-Maps](#)



An electric storm over the Aegean Sea seen from Iraklia during a total eclipse of the Moon
Famous photo by [Kim Arcand](#)

Artemis Tauropolos in Ikaria



Artemis, the Lunar Mistress of Wild Animals riding a bull (rare Greek coin)

Veiling the eclipse of the moon by lightening must have been Artemis's work, who came to Ikaria with the Neolithic people from Anatolia (Pelasgians). She was called [Artemis Tauropolos](#), from Tauros. A mystical form of the goddess riding a bull with an orgiastic ritual that at least in the dark past included human sacrifice – as [Iphigenia's story](#) shows. Also Ephesos to the east is very close.



Nas, the Artemis sanctuary



Kampos, Agh. Eirini the site of the Artemis sanctuary

Around 750 BC, Greeks from Miletus colonized Ikaria, establishing a settlement in the area of present day Kampos, which they called Oinoe for its wine. They also built a small temenos to Artemis Tauropolos at Nas, on the northwest coast of the island. Nas, situated at the mouth of a small river had been sacred to the pre-Greek inhabitants of the Aegean and an important island port in antiquity, the last stop before testing the dangerous seas around Ikaria. It was an appropriate place for sailors to make sacrifices to Artemis Tauropolos, who, among other functions, was the protectress of seafarers; here, the goddess was represented in an archaic wooden xoanon.



Another spot sacred for millenia – and still in use today – is Thermea, where a thermal spring spills its hot, mineral water into the sea.

Mythical Ikaros



The Fall of Icarus, 17th cent marble plaque, Musée Antoine Vivenel
photo [Wikipedia](#)

Ikaria's name derives, of course, from Ikaros who, when his wings were melted by the sun on his attempted flight from Crete (the Labyrinth!) fell into the Sea near Ikaria and drowned.... Nobody seems to know where, but a huge abstract metal sculpture in the harbor of Aghios Kyriakos celebrates the island's name-Saint.



Aghios Kyriakos the harbor and
main town of Ikaria



The Ikaros sculpture
looks like two
fighting goats.



Monastery Panaghia
Mavrianou in the far west