

Mykonos: Resistance is futile



For all its gaudy reputation, the island of Mykonos is one of the most delightful in the Mediterranean. A reluctant John Gimlette (of the Daily Telegraph May 20, 2008) is forced to admit that he was bowled over.

To my horror, I've just discovered how much I love Mykonos. Few places are so compactly Mediterranean. The rock's red, the sea's like liquid amethyst, and everything else is icing white or cobalt blue. So, why horror?

Well, it's hardly the cradle of culture. In Greek mythology, the island was just a dead giant. Even now, Mykonians look slightly baffled at the thought of culture, and would far rather direct you to the freshest fish or the loudest music. One of the old boys told me that he hated winter because there was no "boom-boom".

Not that the Gimlettes are snooty. With a little Greek blood of her own, my wife, Jayne, is well-attuned to a society that can happily park decorum and dance on the tables. As for our

toddler, Lucy, how could she resist an island where even the policeman stops for a cuddle? Perhaps this is why celebrities enjoy it here – no one cares who they are.

It helps, of course, to stay in a lovely hotel on a headland all of its own. The Santa Marina was like the villain's lair in a Bond film, perched on a cliff and scooped from the rock. It had its own sandy beach, its own helicopter, and its own luxury motor yacht, which lit up the seabed at night.

Like all good lairs, the hotel was well-furnished with beautiful people, and at dusk all its terraces glowed a pleasing swimming-pool blue. One of these pools was our own, grandly extending outwards where the bedroom came to an end.

Most of the time, we swam in the sea. Even the fish seemed rather exclusive here. One looked like an eel designed by Bulgari, and most of the others were dripping in gold. Every evening Lucy's favourite waiter, Stavros, chased them

around with his spear gun, and then – one day – he produced a photo of a tidler caught on his prongs. This was bounty indeed, and there was much discussion of soup.

It would have been easy to spend our entire week up here, watching the sea turn from silver to claret and back to blue. But then we remembered there was the island to explore. Mykonians, it seemed, lived up one end, and beyond that, there were only mountains, beaches and little black crosses – "365 churches," announced Stavros, "and no trees!"

At first, we set off on foot. It was a beautiful walk to the head of Ornos Bay, but it took us all morning to do a mile. We had to scramble over rocks, shin down a cliff, negotiate bushes and then tiptoe through the gardens of various absent millionaires.

After that, we hired a small car and tacked our way through the hills. It took a while to shake off the furniture shops, but soon we were on the surface

of Saturn. Amid the orange dust, we could make out huge old walls and derelict pigeon lofts. No wonder Mykonians now crave noise and crowds. By the time we reached Cape Ivros, there was no sign of life at all, just the great purple cliffs plunging to the sea.

We realised that the reward for all this desert was to be found around the edge. We noticed that each bay was like a club, pampering its members; the rich had their valet parking at Psarou, the ravers had Super Paradise, and there was Kalafatis for those who'd rather be in Malibu. But by far the most magnificent was Panormos, where we saw no one except two naked men, who spotted us and slipped back into the sea.

Although the Santa Marina provided some spectacular dining, most nights we headed up the shore. A short walk away was Ornos, where the fishermen served their catch on the beach, on furniture cut from old boats. Beyond that was Mykonos Town.

Every now and then, several cruise ships would appear, transforming the skyline and tripling the population. But, at other times, Mykonos seemed like the town it's always been, a last outpost of the Most Serene Republic of Venice. It had Venetian mansions, a Venetian waterfront, six windmills (that once made ships' biscuits), and an eating quarter known as "Little Venice".

Naturally, food loomed large in these adventures. In town, you only had to look hopeful, and a feast of herbs and fish and cutlets arrived with jugs of wine. The taste of this time will probably linger long after any other memory – partly because we brought it home, or at least a few gallons of the greenest olive oil. Now, every night, we work away like alchemists, trying somehow to recapture a little of the curious magic of Mykonos.

