

Glorious Greek islands

Nestled against the Turkish mainland, the Greek Dodecanese Islands are closer to Asia Minor than mainland Greece, but remain thoroughly Greek.

BRENDA WEBB visits.

With a wealth of archeological remains, spectacular seaside villages, gorgeous beaches and fertile valleys, the Dodecanese Islands are a treasure chest waiting to be explored.

From sophisticated Patmos in the north to ancient Rhodes with its stunning medieval old town in the south, these islands are worth taking time over.

Sure, the package holiday makers have become a problem in some islands, particularly Rhodes, Kalymnos and Kos, but venture past the crowded beaches and you will still find a deserted spot.

Drive or bike inland and it's not far until you find an unspoiled village.

And the more remote islands in the group such as Agathonisi, Arki and Kasos are almost completely overlooked by tourists so if it's traditional Greece you want go there.

The Dodecanese (Greek for "twelve islands") are strung out in an arc along the western coast of Turkey, and due to their strategic position, have undergone a chequered past with various occupations and invasions including Italian and Turkish.

This has endowed the islands with some stunning architecture and fascinating ruins.

Each island has its own unique flavour and despite the proximity to Turkey they are most definitely Greek.

Ferries run continuously between all islands as well as mainland Greece and Turkey.

Fertile Kos with its green landscape gave the world the lettuce of the same name and its market gardens produce vegetables and fruit that are cheap and delicious.

Kos was the home of Hippocrates (460-377BC), the father of modern medicine and the first doctor to take a rational approach to diagnosing and treating illnesses rather than relying on herbs and potions.



The magical ruins of Asklepieion, a healing centre and religious sanctuary to Asclepius the God of Healing, sit on a ridge above the main town and harbour, with views across to Turkey just five kilometres away.

The centre followed the teachings of Hippocrates and became famous throughout Greece.

Sadly Kos town has become a magnet for young holidaymakers in search of cheap duty-free booze and when you can buy a 1125ml bottle of gin for \$20 it's easy to see why.

Bars selling cheap booze line the waterfront and at night the young, mainly British, are out in force.

But during the early mornings Kos town takes on a charm of its own while the drunk sleep off their hangovers and before the dozens of day trippers arrive from Turkey.

You can wander through the astonishing archeological sites including a Roman villa, an amphitheatre, an ancient agora from the 3rd century BC and the massive Castle of the Knights that dominates the port.

Rhodes is the biggest island in the group and its medieval port town has become a World Heritage site. It can be seen from miles away.

The beautifully maintained town is encircled with high walls and the inner cobbled streets and courtyards are home to bustling restaurants, cafes, bars and tourist shops.

Rhodes has always been an important trading centre between Africa, Asia and Europe and that continues today with tourism the main attraction.

Several cruise liners and dozens of



ferries visit each day so it can become crowded an early morning visit is the best way to beat the throngs.

The east coast of Rhodes is a swathe of white sandy beaches and it's where the sun-starved British and Scandinavians flock to.

You can hardly see the beaches for deckchairs and umbrellas! Nearby Simi is a sheer delight and was our pick of the Dodecanese.

The Italian influenced pastel-hued houses climb the steep mountains that surround the natural harbour.

Wandering through the maze of back streets is an adventure in itself and you're likely to run into packs of mules

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that are used for transport on these carless streets.

Simi is mountainous and has dozens of tranquil anchorages in deep natural harbours with spectacular holiday homes set into the rocky hillsides.

Tom Hanks has a house here we are told and it's fun trying to pick which gorgeous mansion it might be or perhaps he's in that massive motor yacht anchored off the main town?

Leros is like a breath of fresh air there's no one here except a few lost yachties. The port town of Lakki was built as a Fascist showpiece during the Italian occupation and some of its grandiose buildings are now being restored thanks to EU money.

The main town is so thoroughly Greek that you won't find a souvenir shop and, unlike other Greek islands, everything is shut on Sunday. Its Venetian castle on the top of the highest point gives sweeping views over the entire island and across to Turkey in the east.

Patmos in the north is perhaps the most sophisticated of the Dodecanese, offering a mix of culture, good beaches, fantastic shops and great restaurants.

It's a wonderful spot, and, like most of the popular islands, at its best in the early mornings before the cruise ships and ferries arrive or in the evenings when they have all left.

The Marlborough Express

