

Alonnisos, the idyllic Greek island

In autumn, when the August hordes have long gone, Alonnisos is near mythically perfect

More self-deluding guff is written about Greek islands than about anywhere else on the planet. Their enduring out-of-the-wayness, raw beauty and sparse, matriarchal communities, even now, foster the illusion of personal discovery - of ownership almost, as if we were staking out a private paradise handed down by Homer.

There is another illusion, too, a hang-over from the islands' colonisation by hippies, of a freewheeling, free-loving detachment from time and toil, in which everything drips with honey.

Within a day or two we are on first-name terms with at least one fisherman and a shepherd, and eating goat with our fingers.

Not everyone buys into it, though.

One visitor to Alonnisos, the northernmost and most beautiful inhabited island of the northern Sporades, described its nameless hilltop settlement, the Chora (old village), as "Disneyland".

This was gratuitously insulting, but I could see what he meant. The village appears typically Greek - old houses leaning against new; ruins craning suicidally over a hanging precipice; narrow stepped lanes lazily furred with cats. The postcard view is classic, a heroic blend of beauty and endeavour, where ingenuity is spiked with cussedness.

Buildings are suckered like limpets onto rocks; roads swirl around contours and unravel in deep, thyme-scented voids that spill onto beaches. "Unspoilt" is the lamest of clichés, but it fits.

The illusion is to believe that unspoilt means unchanged. The village, fortified and built at a commanding height, was once the capital of a well-populated island known for its wines.

Phylloxera in the 1950s did for the vines; an earthquake in 1965 did for the houses. What happened next mirrored the destiny of islands right across the

Aegean and Ionian seas. Over the water came not the murderous pirates that had once driven people into their mountain redoubt, but a waft of hippies lured by the promise of lotus-eating (in reality, bread and tomatoes) and the absence of sniffer dogs. The die was cast.

In their sandalprints soon came escalating numbers of conventional tourists, to whom the more enterprising villagers rented rooms that often bore the imprint of hen or goat but cemented the islands' reputation for rustic charm. The innocence of these places overwhelmed us. People wrote seriously of beauty that made them weep.

The beauty is still there, but the innocence has taken a hit. The last pack-saddle maker in Alonnisos died 20 years ago; his tools are in the local museum in Patitiri. So are the relics of the wine-making industry, agriculture and other traditional crafts (piracy and guerrilla warfare included). In the hills, olives, pomegranates and lemons drop from trees no longer harvested.

The old village on its crag is alive again, but the money that restored it was German, Italian and English; its function - its only function - to receive and entertain visitors. There is no bearded patriarch of the Orthodox Church to attend daily to his flock (there is no flock); no old men playing backgammon in kafenions (there is no kafenion); no old women in traditional dress. But there are restaurants, bars, gift shops and villas.

The lingua franca is English; waitresses are as likely to be Scandinavian or Dutch as they are to be Greek, and raised voices less likely to mean a family argument than possession of a mobile phone. There are few donkeys, but plenty of hired motor scooters in this (literally) high altar of the tourist trade.

And yet... I have stayed here twice, happily so, in consecutive Septembers,

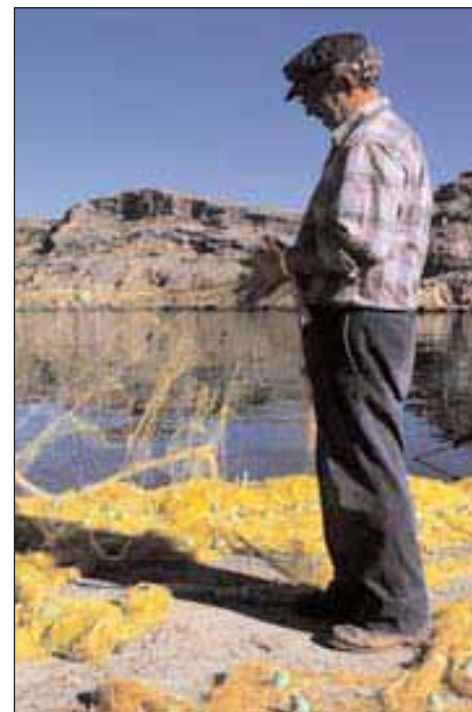
and would not rule out going again. The time of year is important. For anyone seeking the traditional island virtues of peace and seclusion, high season may be a challenge too far. By September the crowds have thinned, the temperature dropped from broiling to merely hot, and quietness returned.

Most of the tavernas are still open, and only the pernickety kind of gourmet (not a species well understood in Greece) will find much to complain about. More primitive fish- and meat-lovers, for whom paradise is fired by charcoal, will find Alonnisos nibbles at the margins of heaven.

A communications glitch one night brought to the table double portions of lamb chops, pork chops, pork belly, sausages and meatballs, all on the same dish with side orders of chips, cheese and salad, and all just for me. It was a forlorn battle, but one which - at the approximate cost of an English ploughman's lunch - I could well afford to lose. Greek island food is local, not local, but still often low-cost.

The real attraction, though, is food for the eye. From any viewpoint - boat, bus, taxi, beach or balcony - Alonnisos is a stunner. It is for the pedestrian, however, that notions of beauty may have to be revised. One of the greatest pleasures is the island's network of footpaths.

These are clearly shown on a widely available 1:2,500 hiking map, which (by Greek standards) is unusually detailed and accurate, though another of the local myths is that the routes are conspicuously waymarked and that the paths themselves are obvious and easy to follow. They are often not. If the trail does go cold, over bare rock or in an olive grove where sheep, goats and their keepers have worn lookalike trails in every direction, you will usually - if you work at it - find a helpful dab of paint left by some previous traveller.



Your reward if you make the effort is as close to prehippie, mythical Greece as it is possible to get. Early one morning, heading uphill towards the forest and Alonnisos's spectacular west coast, we are greeted by the last person we'll see for more than two hours - an elderly man exploiting the recent rainfall, hunting snails. The classic Greek recipe for these involves tomatoes, olive oil and redwine vinegar, but it's not something you'll find on taverna menus (goat is now about as folksy as they get), and it's hard to imagine any future generation enjoying this prototypical convenience food.

Next come some small, well-tended vineyards with hyper-sweet fruit turning to raisins; an immaculate tomato plot; a ramshackle farmyard where we raise a cacophony of dogs and geese, but no people; an evidently well-used spring; and then the great billow of pine forest with its prickly scents and sudden, startling vistas of the sea. Many of the trees have been tapped and cupped - one resin-tapper apparently is still at work on the island, supplying the retsina industry, but all these have the look of long-term abandonment.

The path brings us eventually to a rocky ledge where two tiny clifftop churches command one of the most spectacular views in the Aegean. One thing remote Greece now has in common with urban England: both doors are securely locked. A short, steep descent through the trees leads to a tiny cove where we find, draped among the rocks like a stranded seal, a solitary Englishman reading a biography of Laurence Olivier.

One of the ironies of this kind of travel, in which a good part of one's purpose is to reconnect with something lost, is that one can contribute to its survival only by subscribing to the very force that threatens it. Tourism is the reality. There is no alternative, and one cannot wish people to return to a peasant economy. The consolation in Alonnisos, as in others of the smaller islands, is that the British holiday companies generally behave respectfully and leave only the lightest of footprints.

Article From The Sunday Times

Ios among six locations in Europe awarded the EU's Cultural Heritage Prize

The Aegean island of Ios in the Cyclades (which many associate with for clubbing and its great beaches) in was among six European locations awarded the European Union Cultural Heritage prize for 2008. Ios received the award for "outstanding quality of conservation work and above all the minimal and extremely sensitive character of the interventions, having no detrimental impact on a unique landscape" at the island's archaeological site of Skarkos. Not only was the site carefully conserved, but efforts to rebuild rural houses using local methods and material from the Skarkos area have given it a unique



and special setting. Prizes were also awarded to two projects in the Netherlands, and one each in the Czech Republic, Spain and Romania. Each prize is worth 10,000 euros. The prizes are given in recognition of outstanding conservation, research and education efforts. They are awarded jointly by the European Commission and Europa Nostra, the pan-European Federation of Cultural Heritage.