

Beauty & tradition on unspoiled Greek island of Karpathos

We asked several Greek friends if it's still possible to find an island where traditions are more important than trinkets, where legendary Greek hospitality isn't eclipsed by impersonal hotels and hordes of tourists.

The response: Karpathos. This island of only 6,000 people, known throughout Greece for its thriving folklore, is midway between Crete and Rhodes. It is also the ancestral and often-visited home of many New York-area Greek-Americans.

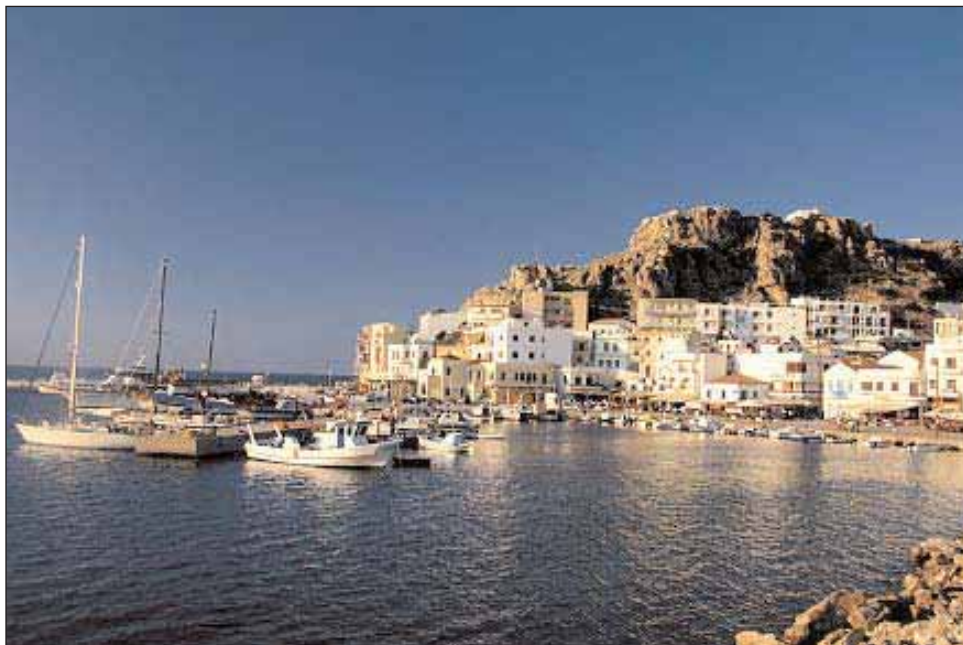
After a 30-minute flight from Rhodes, we entered Karpathos' tiny airport terminal. There are no rental-car kiosks, so we asked the rep where to return the Jeep we'd be driving.

"Leave it in the airport lot with the key in the ignition," she explained. Incredulous, we asked about thieves. "Don't worry," she laughed. "This is Karpathos!"

We sensed our search for that special island was about to be rewarded.

Most tourists stay in nearby Pigadia, which offers the Aegean Sea's best snorkeling and world-class windsurfing. But we headed north toward the most remote, traditional area of Karpathos, which is only 30 miles long and 7 miles wide. As we navigated the bumpy, winding mountain road that bisects the northern half of the island, we were treated to spectacular views of jagged peaks and pine-forested terrain sloping precipitously to the sea.

Driving along the spine of the mountain, we saw only three other cars - we were among the privileged few savoring vistas more glorious than those of Italy's Amalfi Coast or Big Sur's Highway 1.



Pigadia and its harbor on the island of Karpathos.

After an hour, we wound our way down to the tiny village of Diafani. We settled in the Glaros Hotel, with its spartan, spacious, light-filled rooms. Our balcony had a stunning view of the village, its harbor and fishing boats. After a welcome from Georgos and Ana, the hotel's owners, we walked down a twisting, narrow path lined with white homes - and doors and shutters painted blue to deflect evil.

Diafani has no Internet cafts, no large hotels, not even a bank or gas station; its sole ATM broke a year ago. Three wizened women, repairing fishing nets, greeted us with "Kalispera" - good afternoon.

The main street along the crescent-shaped harbor has six cafeneion - cafis - meeting places for village news and gossip. In one caft, men with weather-beaten faces were arguing and laughing as they played tavli, the Greek version of backgammon.

"Where there's nothing to do," observed a man stirring thick Greek coffee, "the people become the newspaper."

Spirited Greek music invited us to Caft Rahfti. On the roof is a huge statue: a woman waving toward the sea with two children clutching her hands and skirt. Their looming presence reflects how villagers depend on men who must work abroad to support their families - Karpathos gets more money from emigrants in New York and New Jersey than any other Greek island.

Rich cultural traditions draw Greek folklorists and anthropologists to Diafani and nearby Olympos to record music and interview elderly people. To see more of this "disappearing Greece," Georgos and Ana encouraged us to visit Olympos.

On the 5-mile drive to this mountain village (on a newly paved road), we



A woman sells handicrafts.

passed centuries-old donkey and foot paths. Because of pirate raids between the sixth and 13th centuries, people moved inland to Olympos, which is perched high above the sea. With only 300 residents, the village is a living museum, where traditional clothing, crafts, music and a local dialect are preserved. People used oil lamps and candles until electricity came in 1980. Because it's remote, with only a few small rooming houses, it isn't overwhelmed by tourists.

We strolled along the main street, wide enough only for donkeys, and paused at Sokaki Shop. The owner, Sophia, proudly told us that her husband is the only man in the village who still makes stivania, hand-crafted yellow suede goatskin boots with decorative, red leather-tipped toes. Introducing us to an elderly lute player, famous for his songs of herding, fishing and exile, she offered to sell us his CD.

The female shopkeepers of this matriarchal village compete for survival. That's why many villagers work in nearby Rhodes or have settled abroad - primarily in New York and Baltimore.

On Olympos' pathways, we smelled bread baking in outdoor communal ovens and nodded to curious women peeking from windows. Aware of the widespread belief in the evil eye, we were careful not to compliment women wearing multi-colored embroidered skirts and scarves. Flattery and praise might bring bad luck to the person receiving it.

Wandering to the northern end of Olympos, we were awed by 14 imposing white windmills overlooking a dizzying descent to the sea. On the terrace of the Moulin Taverna, we sampled island specialties: makarounes - homemade pasta with crisp caramelized onions and melted local cheese - and melitzanes papoutsakia, sumptuous eggplant stuffed with meat, garlic and tomatoes. The fresh bread was made from barley, ground - as it has been for centuries - in the windmill above us.

When we returned to our hotel, Georgos and Ana told us the dirt road to the airport was closed for construction at 8 a.m. and warned that we'd miss our early-afternoon flight if we didn't leave by 6:30 a.m. So they sent us off before dawn with homemade cakes.

The drive along the dusty ridge was uneventful, save for wind whooshing through olive and pine groves and goats bleating as the sun lit the sky. Shortly before 8 a.m., with less than a mile before the dirt road ended, a construction worker stopped us. He said we'd have to wait a short while. After we'd spent nearly two hours watching bulldozers move boulders, another driver pulled up - a civil engineer from Athens named Vaspar, who was philosophical about the delay, which he'd often experienced. So we enjoyed kouvenda, the Greek art of conversation - playful, spirited and opinionated.

At noon, a construction worker finally motioned us through. "Too bad the road's open," Vaspar said. "I'd like to speak to you more." As we parted, he added, "Ta leme." Though it's Greek for goodbye, it literally means, "We'll talk."

At the airport, we left the key in the ignition, a symbol of our intention to return and take him up on the offer.

BY DONNA ROSENTHAL AND JOE LURIE