

Blue and White

The Big Story: Greece

When one has decided on a holiday to a Greek island, one is quickly confronted with the problem, which Greek island? Selecting an island to go to in the Cyclades or Dodecanese becomes an exercise in discovering something essential about yourself: will you choose one of the larger, heavily-touristy yet lovely islands, such as Santorini, or one near the coast, like Andros, or perhaps Mykonos, a green island further north?

I'm not sure what it says about us that we chose Sifnos (Seef-nos), an island that is not on many lists of popular islands. It is tiny, rocky and dry, and is reported to have about 365 Greek Orthodox churches, more than eight per square mile of island. That's not counting monasteries. Yet it was an excellent, if arbitrary, choice, even if we didn't need all those churches.

Sifnos is about halfway between Piraeus, the main port near Athens, and Santorini. We arrived at the port town of Kamares on the high-speed ferry in mid-June, a date we'd chosen in order to beat the height of the summer tourist season. One could stay in Kamares, I suppose, and never venture further onto the island, and have an excellent visit. Everything one might need on a holiday was there, in limited quantities: a tourist office and a few gift shops, an Internet cafe (actually an Internet bar, with good gin and tonics), a few hotels, a couple of the obligatory beach-side restaurants under a shade tent, a long beach, and motorcycle and car rental. But we were headed further inland, to a tinier place, by taxi we thought. One missing piece of information about the island was that one needed to call ahead for a cab to meet the ferry; otherwise, more experienced visitors had claimed them all. Fortunately most services are clustered around the port, so I walked 50 metres and rented a car, quickly and easily and cheaply. We hadn't planned on renting a car, but as it turned out this was the right move: it might be charming to take the buses that regularly traverse the few roads on the island, but for a visitor there only a week or less, too time-consuming.

Leaving Kamares in late afternoon, we headed uphill and in 5km were at the top of the island, where two roads intersect in the village of Apollonia. There are seven communities on Sifnos, none of which quite rise to the level of a city, only towns. The most ancient of them, Kastro, perches on a cliff above the eastern shore.

From the spine of the island, you can look down on Kastro, a walled-in cluster of houses, all blue and white, and you suddenly realize why the Greek flag is blue and white — those two colors are inescapable here, whether in the sea and sky, or in the buildings. Sifnos is coloured

entirely that way, with the domes of churches blue, the walls white, the doors and shutters blue, the paving stones leading to the door white, and so on. It makes for a brilliant effect, and the fact that the sea is visible from almost every spot on the island, with those blue and white buildings in the foreground, makes the claim I read in a book on Greek traditional architecture, that Sifnos "is the most beautiful of the western Cyclades" plausible.

Carefully following the directions I'd received from the English-speaking man who rented me my car — a lucky event, as English on the island was sometimes spotty — we found the right road towards Faros, a very small fishing village on the southeast edge of the island. We had reservations at the Lighthouse Hotel on top of a ridge (the island is all ridges) a few kilometres before Faros. A relatively new construction, the Lighthouse is not a lighthouse in any sense — not now, not historically, and it isn't built to resemble one, either — it is simply in a location which could conceivably provide a lighthouse function. The hotel was one long building of stone and brilliant white plaster, and blue doors, naturally. Our room was typical of the upper floor of apartments, which each had a kitchenette, a king bed, bathroom, and a loft, with two small porthole-like windows, where our daughter slept happily; finding a place that a 15-year-old will be happy while travelling with her parents is crucial. The back door of our room opened onto a kind of deck, where we sat every night to read, facing out across the Aegean towards the trendier island of Paros.



Cool it: By the pool at the Lighthouse Hotel near tiny Faros on Sifnos

On our first night we took the recommendation of Iphigenia, the deeply-tanned and elegant young woman running the front desk, and went down the hill to Fasolou, a place (not a town) which was close to the village of Faros; the only things there were a beach, a guesthouse, and an open-air restaurant beneath a grove of fragrant tamarisk trees.

What a pleasure it is to finally arrive after a long trip, hoping to find a place to eat that won't be the same old experience of home, or of airports, quick food, chains; that will somehow represent the place you've landed. The restaurant wasn't exceptional, but by George it was Greek, thoroughly Greek.

We had chicken souvlaki, a dish I'd never heard of called Imam (baked eggplant and tomato), huge salads with Sifnos cheese, and excellent cheap table wine. Most refreshing of all, when it came time to pay the bill, and I discovered what should have been obvious, that they didn't take credit cards, the waiter shrugged and said, "no matter, pay tomorrow if you like". This was one of those moments that clarify that you are no longer at home. When I went back the next evening to bring him the money, the waiter said, "I think this is not what you do in America if you can't pay the bill? Here, we say if you lose some money, you'll find some later, so it is all right."

Figuring out how to pay for meals was a persistent problem. Another night we went into the village of Faros, parked right on



Orthodox Vistas: One of the main churches on the eastern side of the island and the main harbour of Kamares, right; Sifnos has many beautiful beaches to lure heat-struck tourists

the beach along with everyone else, and with some difficulty found a restaurant we'd been told to seek, at the top of a building, open to the sky.

While we were waiting for our meal, a fisherman came in with a bag of fish which instantly became someone's meal, as did the vegetables that a woman brought in a few minutes later. When we were finished we asked for the bill, but no one knew what we meant.

It turned out my wife had to go into the kitchen and wait while the people in front of her discussed every one of the black and white photos on the wall with the woman at the register, then the two of them consulted with the cook for the total.

Of course, the only real reason to go to a Greek island is beach and sea, and we tried several; like churches, there was probably a beach for every day of the year. Our first was at Platis Yalos, the southern-most town on the island.

Yalos is an end-of-the-road place, one way in and the same way out. The beach at Platis is a long strip, between a ridge on the east and a hotel on the west. It was, like most beaches on the island, backed by tavernas and restaurants and guesthouses, none especially precious. The Aegean was a perfect temperature for our baptism: warm enough to enter without hesitation, cool enough to be utterly refreshing, a temperature one could stay in for a long time, floating and diving and thinking about how cold the water in the ponds at our home in Maine would still be in mid-June.

Everywhere we went there were churches, churches and churches. There were so many that we drove past many of them, oblivious, not suspecting that this structure or that could be yet another church. One we recognised was off to the ocean side of a road that wound through the hills, with a tiny parking area next to it, and a key in the front door. Inside, it was church in miniature: one short pew at the back, a censer to the

right of a little altar, with candles burning, devotional paintings high on the walls, a holy water font near the front door, and of course the windows looking over the sea.

We were told about another church by two American men, island hopping for a month, whom we met on a beach. The directions were a little cryptic, but we memorised the name "Chrysopiggi" and found a sign for it as we left Platis Yalos. The road was a one car-width track that ended at the church, another blue and white masterpiece, this one full grown, perched on a rocky thumb sticking into the bay of Faros.

As we passed through dazzling white gates we realized that locals were wedged into little rocky ledges all around the three sides of the thumb, occasionally sliding into the sea for a brief swim.

It was so inviting that Harper, our daughter, had to jump from a small ledge into the blue and clear Aegean, becoming, for a time, a Sifniot.

That evening we had dinner at the restaurant Apakafto down the beach from the church of Chrysopiggi. As we were finishing our wine, I struck up a conversation with a man who had been sitting at a nearby table with about a dozen other men.

They had been there since before we arrived, and were now heading out to two yachts anchored in this tiny harbour.

I asked the man what they were up to. In halting English he told me the group of them had rented sailboats together every summer for 27 years, and sailed from island to island in the Cyclades for a month. I told him I was jealous.

Sifnos had just enough of everything for my tastes — beaches, tavernas, restaurants, and plenty of churches — but now I'd seen one island of the Cyclades, which invited a slightly different question from the original one: now it was, which island is next?

Michael Burke drops anchor at one of the lesser-known islands in the Cyclades, where there is a church and a beach for every day of the year.

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