

All is not well in paradise

The Marlborough Express

BRENDA WEBB visits Kalymnos, one of Greece's less-accessible islands, and discovers the global economic downturn has arrived there.

It's 7 o'clock on a warm Mediterranean evening yet we're the only ones at a waterfront taverna in beautiful Vathi on the stunning Greek island of Kalymnos.

A few locals are playing backgammon, smoking cigarettes and drinking coffee at a taverna next door, but there are no tourists.

At the quay, six yachts are tied up but, like us, their crew are budget cruisers who tend to eat and drink on board most of the time.

We're only here for an aperitif, despite the enticing aroma of lamb roasting on a spit and fresh fish grilling on the barbecue.

Stavros, our friendly and informative waiter, tells us that last May there were many independent travellers and a group of 75 Australians. That made the tavernas and pensions hum and their owners smile, but now they're frowning and hoping that June, July and August will be better.

But with people generally reluctant to travel, that's unlikely and worrying for the islanders, who rely on tourism to survive.

Stavros feels the only way forward is for tourism operators to drop prices to meet the market, but he says the Greeks



are reluctant to do so.

A Greek Australian his parents were from Kalymnos, but he was raised in Australia he returned to the island paradise in 1986.

His cheery Aussie accent and friendly manner is a drawcard for English-speaking visitors and the only reason we are enjoying ouzo and octopus (a culinary sensation) at the taverna.

We met him earlier during a walk through the town and he insisted we swing by later for a drink. We did and he repaid the favour by giving us the octopus for free, along with a bagful of the most delicious home-produced olives we've had in Greece.

In recent years, Stavros has seen the island's population plummet and he's even sent his own children back to Australia to be educated rather than stay on Kalymnos, where opportunities are limited for the young.

Everywhere on the island are abandoned houses a sad sign of the times and an indication that many locals are choosing to leave for more prosperous destinations such as Athens or Australia.

Kalymnos has an uphill battle. Other Greek islands such as Mykonos, Santorini and Hydra, on the well-beaten tourist trail, attract wealthy, discerning travellers as well as a continual flow of

big-spending superyachts and cruise ships.

Rhodes, Crete, Corfu and Kalymnos' close neighbour, Kos, appeal to the package-tourism market and thousands of low-budget holidaymakers flock there, arriving on direct charter flights from European cities.

Kalymnos relies heavily on independent travellers. It doesn't have an operational airport and it's a 12-hour ferry ride from Athens, so takes some effort to get to.

But it is all worthwhile. The island is stupendously beautiful there are rugged mountains, fjord-like inlets, picturesque towns, pristine waters and lush and fertile valleys full of market gardens and citrus and olive groves.

Its port town is a horseshoe-shaped bay with neoclassical, pastel-hued houses clinging to the hillside. Many of those houses are shades of blue, harking to the days of the Italian occupation during World War II when the islanders showed their patriotism by painting their houses, shutters and doors in the national colour.

The waterfront is a delightful mix of colourful fishing boats, vegetable and fruit stalls, and the foreshore is cluttered with fishermen mending their nets.

Tavernas lining the waterfront serve up delicious fresh fish for which the island is renowned. However, when we visit, many are quiet.

The resort areas of Myrties, Masouri and Armeous are slightly busier, but nowhere near as busy as Kos, from where we have come. Many English holidaymakers this year are opting for all-in-one package deals including direct flights to destinations such as Kos, or avoiding the eurozone altogether and heading for Morocco, Turkey or Egypt, where their pound goes much further.

In Turkey, two can eat out well for \$20 in Greece it's \$40. A pretty bad cappuccino is \$2 in Turkey an equally bad one is \$7 in Greece. Even fresh fruit and vegetables are double the price in Greece.

The one ace Kalymnos has up its sleeve is its fantastic landscape that attracts rock climbers from around the world. Its precipitous cliffs are regarded as a mecca for rock climbers, offering seriously challenging extreme sport.

The country has a chequered past, including an unhappy Italian occupation during World War II.

In its headiest days, it was the prosperous sponge-diving capital of the Mediterranean until that industry collapsed.

Islanders then turned themselves to tourism, but have struggled to attract the numbers this beautiful island deserves.

We loved our time in Vathi, where we swam in the turquoise waters, walked the precipitous slopes exploring ancient Byzantine and early Christian churches, biked through the lush valleys and wandered through tiny villages. We hope others discover this gorgeous island, so that its future is assured.

Greece's ancient paradise

BRENDA WEBB finds an island that comes close to perfection.

Ancient Greek mythology says that Odysseus was held on the island of Lipsi for seven years under the spell of the sea nymph Calypso. We've been here only a few days and no-one has cast a spell, but we are well and truly hooked by Lipsi's loveliness.

There is so much here to wax lyrical about: lush terraces of grapes, figs and citrus, whitewashed villas perched on hillsides with beautiful views and a picture-postcard-perfect port town with the ubiquitous collection of brightly coloured fishing boats. It all seems too good to be true.

Lipsi lies well off the beaten tourist track and that's part of its magic. There is no airport and no direct ferry link from Athens, so the island takes some getting to, which makes it so special.

There are no hordes of tourists to spoil the idyllic scene, just the 700-odd locals going casually about their business, the handful of holidaymakers who rent villas on the island and a few boatloads of day trippers from nearby Patmos.

Then, of course, there are a few lost yachties like us, who stumble upon this paradise and find themselves reluctant to leave. Few cars spoil the serenity. There are a few scooters and the small, three-wheeled trucks that are so typical of tiny Mediterranean islands, along with dozens of bicycles.

Lipsi really is one of those Greek Islands you didn't think existed any more totally unspoilt with beautiful sand and pebble beaches lined with shady tamarisk trees and turquoise water with unbelievable clarity. Unlike most Greek islands, Lipsi is lusciously green. Its soils have been preserved and the residents cultivate and fertilise it well.

Tiny valleys are full of crops and wildflowers blooming while we were there, as well as oats to feed the many goats, sheep and cows. The islanders produce some of the best sheep and goat cheeses we have tried and very quaffable wines to wash them down with.

The gorgeous whitewashed houses have vivid blue shutters and doors that seem to match the blue domes of the prolific churches and chapels that dot the island. They say there is one church for every family on the island and, indeed, from one hilltop, we could count 19.

Many of the holiday villas are set snugly into hillsides, with sweeping views across to the Turkish mainland in the west or Patmos in the east.

Lipsi is only 16 square kilometres, so it is easy to walk or bike around, and you will get fit in the process, because there are hills to make your heart pump. Many of the best beaches are within walking distance from the port.

Daily life on Lipsi is definitely low key. The friendly fishermen seem to spend all their days drying, cleaning and mending their nets and selling their catch to tavernas, locals and curious yachties like us. The womenfolk clean their spotless houses, tend to the gardens and stand on street corners talking.

There are only a handful of essential shops, including several tavernas, a supermarket, a post office, an electrical shop and a clothes shop, and none of the tacky souvenir shops that spoil other islands. Lipsi was thrust unhappily into the limelight a few years ago when the leader of the Greek November 17 terrorist group, Alekos Giotopoulos, was found to be living a double life there as retired academic Mihalis Oikonomou.

The group had for 28 years terrorised, looted and murdered its way through Greek society. Giotopoulos, a Marxist activist in the 1970s, ran the group from his home on Lipsi, at the same time mingling with unsuspecting islanders and holding secret meetings with international terrorist Carlos "The Jackal". In 2002, special forces descended on Lipsi and arrested Giotopoulos in his rose-pink mansion overlooking the harbour.

Today, islanders prefer to forget the incident and shut down quickly any conversations pertaining to it, preferring to talk about the island and what it has to offer.

