

# Greek islands: Discover poetry in motion on Ithaca and Kefalonia

*Trudging up a steep, 1,900ft-high pretty hill towards the Cave of the Nymphs at Merovigli, we reached a small opening in a craggy rock. Homer's Odyssey records that this was where Ithaca's king, Odysseus, stored the treasure of gold, precious stones and other luxury goods he had obtained in his epic ten-year struggle to return home. When we got there, a few thousand years later, it looked like a hole in the ground and, once inside, the smell was not entirely pleasant. What was all the local fuss about? But then I understood.*



Unspoilt: The fine beaches and coves of the Ionian island of Ithaca

As we climbed out gingerly and stood still, the view to sea was breathtaking, the si-

lence was as timeless as Homer. A guide had told me the previous day that on much of Ithaca you can idle away hours and the only sound you hear is the occasional tinkling of goats' bells. Right on cue, I could hear a nearby goat - a cliché moment, but nonetheless memorable.

Despite its status in classical legend, mass tourism has so far passed Ithaca by. At barely 45 square miles in area, it's tiny, tranquil and largely unspoilt.

It gets day trippers - mostly to its charming main town, Vathy, rather than to the Cave of the Nymphs - and a few island-hopping sailors.

But it's well worth making a visit to 'dwell in shining Ithaca', as Homer urged, at least for a few idle days of peace and stillness, interrupted only by the goat bells. In the north-east of the island, Kioni is one of the prettiest little harbours I have seen on any coast - three windmills on a low-lying promontory, and below, a few old houses in the Venetian style much favoured in Ionian Islands, which in the late medieval period were occupied by Venice.

There are two splendid beaches easily reached by car or foot - Polis on the west coast of Ithaca and Filiatro on the south.

In both, fine white pebbles turn the clear sea a milky turquoise. Rent a boat in Kioni and find remote bays and inlets where you will be completely on your



Riviera charm: Fiskardo Harbour, Kefalonia

own. Vathy, incongruously for such a sleepy place, possesses a hip and trendy boutique hotel, the Perantzada. Originally a rich Greek merchant's mansion in the mid-19th century, many rooms have recently been lavishly refurbished with bold colours, art work and imaginative split-level interiors using the sea views by some of the top modern designers, including Philippe Starck.

It is in the town, a short walk to a dozen tavernas - the cheap and very cheerful O Zois was our favourite - but still feels like a seaside hotel, with wonderful sunsets from the hotel balcony.

There's a great literary association in Ithaca's sibling island, just 45 minutes away by (slow) ferry: the far bigger and busier Kefalonia. It is altogether more contemporary, though.

Author Louis de Berniere's bestselling novel Captain Corelli's Mandolin and subsequent film starring Penelope Cruz and Nicolas Cage raised a fledgling tourism industry into a vibrant, thriving one.

Kefalonia was devastated by an earthquake in 1953 and rebuilding work did



Film location: Kefalonia was used to film Captain Corelli's Mandolin

not begin seriously until relatively recently. Much of the new development is ugly, particularly close to the capital Argostoli and around Sami, where a lot of Captain Corelli was filmed. Now its many bars and restaurants use the movie for marketing purposes.

An exception is the delightful harbour village of Assos in a dramatic setting at the foot of the hill on the island's west coast. The village was partially destroyed in the quake.

Some of it has been lovingly restored, while other parts, with magnificent old Venetian buildings, have been left alone. It adds to the charm that some of the village looks as though it's crumbling away - but it also looks relatively prosperous.

A glass of Metaxas or retsina in hand by the harbourside, there is no better place to contemplate nature, either when it's violent and wreaks destruction, or benevolent and beautiful, as on an ordinary late summer afternoon.

A few miles along the coast, Myrto is the most famous beach on the island,

two thirds of a mile of fine pebbles and emerald sea.

One part of Kefalonia escaped the earthquake: the north-east, where the main town, Fiskardo, has been described as the St Tropez of the Greek Islands. Maybe not quite.

I didn't see any Russian oligarchs or their molls (they were probably still in France) and the moored yachts, though plenty, were on a smaller scale.

But the smartly dressed clientele at seafront restaurants and cafes and in the designer shops (with prices to match) gives it a Riviera feel.

Uphill along the coast a mile or so is a luxury hotel to match anything near St Tropez.

The Emelisse is fast gaining a reputation as one of the finest in Europe. Elegant and understated, it has all you'd expect from a first-class hotel - a splendid spa, impeccable service and beautifully appointed rooms. But it also has something many more formal and less self-conscious luxury-hotels do not have: all kinds of snuggly, comfy sofas and seating areas, where guests can just relax.

And then there's the view from the pool and the delightful little bay below with a sand and shingle beach. As the sun goes down, just across the sound, you can catch a perfect glimpse of Ithaca.

Homer liked describing the water between the islands as 'the wine-dark sea' - though when the sun glints across it, it seems the clearest deep blue.

His great hero in the Odyssey spent a decade reaching legendary Ithaca, with many dramas en route, as well as a lot of aimless wandering about elsewhere. I've promised myself I'll be back a lot sooner than that.

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