

The island of Santorini is famous for its beauty and its sophisticated hotels, but as Rachel Howard reveals, other islands in the Cyclades have different attractions.

Which of these Aegean idylls is for you? Photographs by Yiorgos Kordakis.

# Your idea of HEAVEN

## ARTICLE FROM THE TRAVELLER

JAMES THEODORE BENT, the intrepid British scholar who toured the Cyclades in the 1880's pronounced Santorini's hideous island, fascinating in its hideousness'. Today, the most famous of all Greek islands is renowned for its ravishing beauty. However, if you fly into Santorini, your first impressions might lean towards Bent's school of thought. Unsightly buildings pockmark the landscape. It is only when you catch sight of the caldera - the flooded crater created by a volcanic eruption 3,500 years ago - that you will appreciate why this is one of the world's top honeymoon destinations.

It's what the Americans call the million-dollar view', says Joseph Gaoutsis, co-manager of the Santorini Grace Hotel. This isn't just a turn of phrase. An acre of land on the caldera costs more than a million euros. Ironically, land on this part of the island was traditionally given to the black sheep of the family because the sheer, windswept cliffs couldn't be cultivated with vines or cherry tomatoes (the cornerstones of the local economy before tourism). Now those rogues are millionaires. Thankfully, building regulations along the caldera are tight, so there's nothing to mar the mindblowing view.

Some of Greece's finest (and priciest) hotels are lined up along the caldera, mainly in the pretty village of Oia, marooned on the island's northern tip, and the black sand beaches are no match for the infinity pools spilling over the edge of the abyss. It's not the grand captains' houses but their crews' humble cave dwellings, burrowed into the cliffs, that have been converted into five-star lodgings. The lowliest sailors were relegated to the lower rungs of the rock face - still something to watch out when booking your hotel room. Santorini is not for the unfit or those protective of their personal space. Rooms are tightly stacked, so you can check out who has the biggest plunge or bikini collection. Serious voyeurs even bring binoculars.

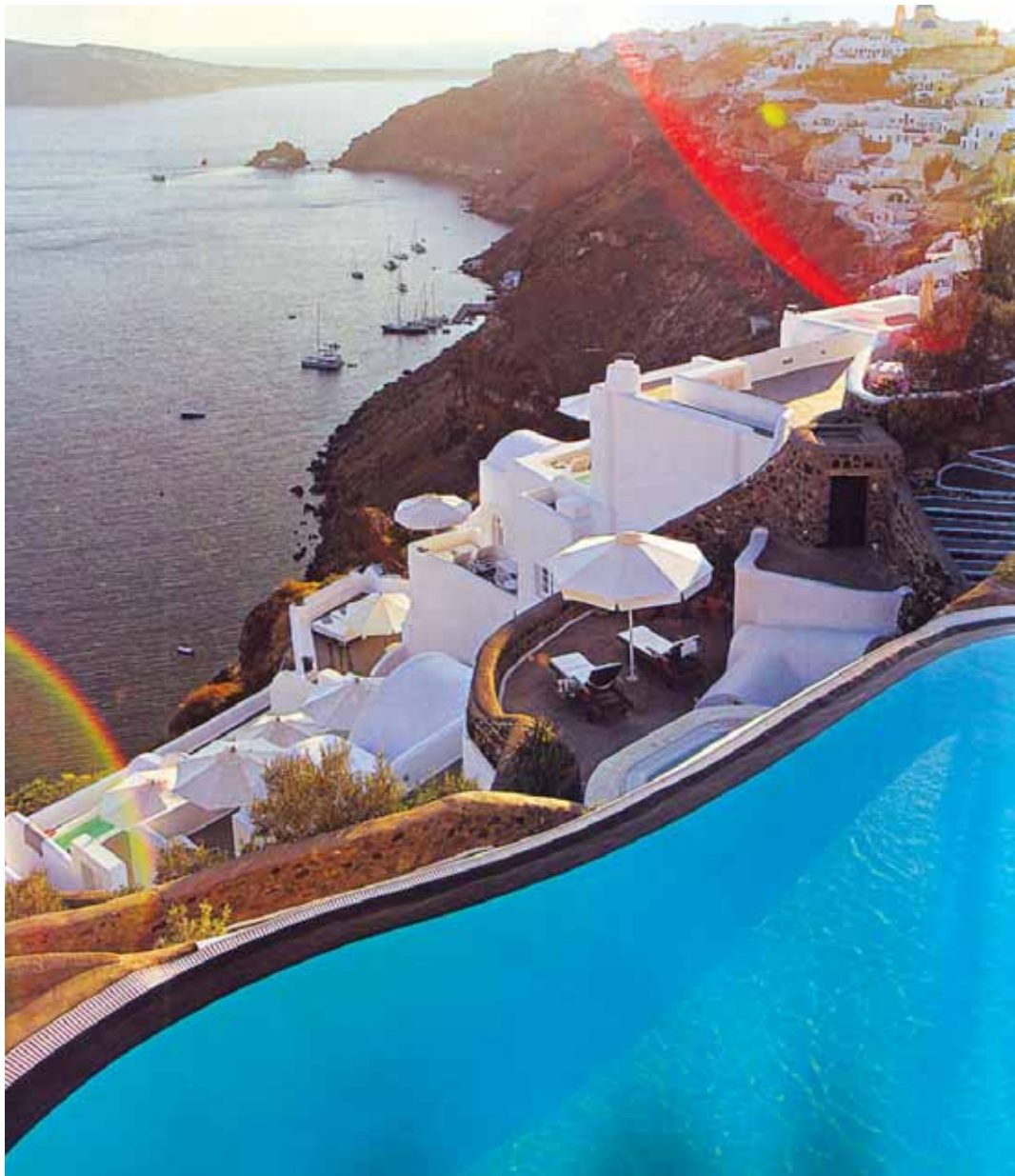
Joseph leads us down the vertiginous path to Santorini Grace. The Hotel and surrounding village of Imerovigli on the brink of the cliff. Here, cooing couples are smearing each other in sunscreen by the pool, so feeling self-conscious, I set off to climb Skaros, a rocky outcrop that was once the island's capital. It's like stepping inside a View-Master: a widescreen panorama of streaky black and red cliffs, crested by whitewashed houses which look like seagulls poised for flight. The charred islets of Palea Kameni and Nea Kameni - ominous remains of the volcano - sizzle in the glassy sea. There were once 200 houses on Skaros. An enormous bell rang out whenever a pirate ship appeared on the horizon. Now the cruise ships drifting into the caldera send ripples of anticipation rather than alarm through the entrepreneurs waiting on shore.

As dusk falls, coachloads of excitable tourists jostle for space along the ruins of Oia's Venetian castle to watch the sun slip into the sea. A firing squad of zoom lenses take aim. A bride in improbably high heels appears on a donkey. I slink off to savour the sunset with a glass of Assyrtiko at the Sigalas winery.

Not so long ago, Paris Sigalas was the local maths teacher. Now he's an award-winning vintner who, over the past decade, has helped put Santorini back on the map as a world-class wine destination. The island's volcanic terroir has been cultivated with vines for thousands of years and in the 19th century, ship owners made fortunes exporting sweet Vin Santo to the Black Sea and beyond. But the schooners that set sail for Odessa are long gone. In their place are a handful of fishing boats that provide the catch of the day to the waterfront tavernas at Ammoudi, the harbour that lies 200-odd zigzagging steps below Oia. A haul of bream arrives just in time for my supper.

AT FIRST LIGHT, I catch the ferry to Folegandros, an island 'where the steamer does not touch, and where sometimes in winter they are weeks without a post', James Theodore Bent observed in 1885. Surprisingly little has changed. Folegandros is on the 'agoni grammis', the unprofitable line; one of several remote islands serviced infrequently by state-subsidised ferry routes. Recent allegations of officials demanding bribes in return for licences to run these routes have not shamed the government into improving the service.

Article continues in Thursday's edition



The pool at Perivolos Oia



The hilltop church of Panagia