

SBLS

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THE ART OF SELF-CARE

AEGEAN AZURE

GREEK ISLAND
HOPPING TWO WAYS,
FROM MAJESTIC
SANTORINI TO RAW,
UNTAMED PAROS

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KALLOS SPA ROOFTOP



THROUBI RESTAURANT

SANTORINI

The airplane's shadow ripples swiftly over blue-capped domes and volcanic rock as I touch down on the world's most famous island. If an ancient oracle had told me I would return here after just five short years, I'd have instantly called her bluff. But alas, some prophecies are self-fulfilling. So the Aegean and I lock eyes once again.

I'd always known that I would return to this island; the birthplace of mythology, an archaeological wonder, the screensaver of many a digital nomad; without knowing when or why. But when the opportunity presented itself for a once-in-a-lifetime European summer to visit friends living in Spain, I had one thought. *Well, if I'm traveling all that way, I sure as hell better make it back to Greece.*

My first encounter with the Cyclades occurred as a bright-eyed 18-year-old fresh out the halls of high school, and lasted all of a few days. That was all I needed to fall in love. Back then, my airport pickup was much less glamorous; shared with two strangers, a couple, who were noticeably uneasy with the driver's laissez-faire lack of a seatbelt. "Relax, relax," he had said in a thick accent, rolling his eyes at the Americans' penchant for punctuality (and basic car safety). "No stress..." I was starting to like the Greeks already.

On this much-awaited return, our upgraded Tesla escort ascends higher and higher above velvety cobalt waters, carving slowly through Assyrtiko vineyards on our journey up Santorini's black-rock caldera. An island as

dramatic as a Greek tragedy—it's only fitting. Absorbing the Herculean vistas in person, it's easier to believe the myths are true; that the jagged islands were formed by angry gods who threw clumps of earth into a thrashing sea, protecting their lovers from a Titanian wrath.

We pull into the desert-toned cul-de-sac of Andronis Concept Wellness Resort, nestled high in the village of Imerovigli above a cascading sea of blue domes. Ironically, this resort is one of the only non-white buildings in Santorini, its earthy hues exuding a monochromatic environment of stillness and sophistication away from throngs of tourists summering in town. Herb gardens abound, and sculptural lines meet exposed black concrete to form our so-called perch above the clouds. A Grecian treehouse, if you will.

We're handed a sangria and shown to our room, one of 28 suites whose sliding glass doors open up to a private infinity pool and a sheer drop off to a view older than antiquity itself. A knock on our door soon follows, and an attendant emerges with a bottle of local wine (Santorini's main export) and a platter of mignardises. Pouring a glass and taking a rightful plunge in our pool, my friend and I make eye contact with breathless hikers trekking the 6.5-mile footpath from Fira to Oía, an odyssey in and of itself. Ah, how they wish they were us.

From our vantage point on the plush daybed, I'm struck with the realization that I can see both Santorini's very beginning and end, two tips of land that once merged

before their violent divorce via volcanic eruption at least 5,000 years ago. I imagine that if I were an ancient Minoan settler gazing out across the leveled sea, I, too, would believe the earth was flat...that if I sailed just a bit too far I'd fall right off the inevitable edge. Thank goodness for Aristotle!

It's not long before we set foot on that very volcano; our vessel, a pirate ship. Sailing the irreplicable azure of the Aegean, I feel an unnerving connection to history; these waters carried the ancestors of Western philosophy. From the boat, Oia's white buildings look like a light snowfall against a dark mountain. Attempting to hike in the beastly heat, the volcano's unforgiving black rock is impertinent enough to shatter my friend's iPhone, but kind enough to spare her camera lens for the rest of the trip. *Santorini's drama strikes again*, I think. We don pool noodles and jump into volcanic hot springs, both the water's buoyancy and the sheer ecstasy of swimming in the Mediterranean keeping us afloat. For those too advanced for pirate ships and pool noodles, Andronis Concept readily supplies a luxury catamaran, or, for the airborne, a private helicopter ride to Mykonos, Crete, or Athens. Greece, where island hopping for dinner is just another manic Monday.

Back at Andronis, I freshen up using the room's matte-black cave shower. I wonder, would this seem out of place in my white-picket-fenced California home? The previous night had been spent gorging on lobster pasta and an obligatory Greek salad at the cult-favorite Ammoudi Fish Tavern, where fresh-caught octopus hang from clothesline and the waters are iridescent even after dark. Tonight, we're embarking on a fine dining adventure at Throubi, the center of Andronis Concept's holistic wellness philosophy featuring fresh, raw ingredients sourced from the gardens on-site—"throubi," we later learn, is a Greek herb reminiscent of thyme.

Executive Chef Charalampos Koukoudakis presents eight lavish courses in perfect synchronization, our very own ambrosia and nectar. Artful presentation accompanies a holistic experience for the bold epicure: leek mousse,

umami mushroom tea, shrimp in sundried tomato water, sea bass ceviche, wagyu with a foamy sweet potato and provolone purée. It's a testament to the true Mediterranean diet of fish, fats, and vegetables that so many followers seek to replicate.

The etesian winds blow, hot and dry, as I sip on a cocktail called *All Day Euphoria*. The sky turns to fire at 8:26 p.m., vessels rocking in the distance like toy boats on a liquid gold sea. A sunset as old as myth itself, dancing between blue domes. The cats watch, too; their nightly cinema.

Come morning, Throubi transforms into a luscious breakfast buffet, overflowing with Greek yogurt, fruit, eggs, and croissant baskets as we dine in the morning mist. Through the maze of walkways we find Kallos Spa, rated one of the best wellness resort spas in the world, where we're presented with a shot of vanilla lemongrass water and choice of three aromas. I choose to "*be distressed*" with a eucalyptus oil massage in the quiet serenity of the cave-like vicinity. Its sliding doors lead directly out to the main pool, where we meet Andrea Bohlheim, Group Director of Andronis Spa & Wellness. She walks us through Andronis Concept's approach as a romantic, uncrowded, wellness-centric alternative to its bustling sister properties, like Oia's sprawling Andronis Arcadia. Afterwards, I indulge in a *caffè freddo*. The mysterious mist is gone, the sun is blazing, and I dive into the matte black pool, a more abrupt wake-up call than the coffee.

That night before bed, I sneak away to sit on the patio, watching the lights of ethereal Oia float like a frozen ship in the distance. Some dare to say that Santorini is overrated; they are mistaken. Here, everything is perfect. The very intrigue knit into its velvet waters, the sunset that rises and falls as if a goddess is taking millenia-long breaths. I take solace in the fact that next time I return, the goddess will perform her dance again for me.

But, that's not where the prophecy ends. We're off to explore a new island, embracing an even slower, even simpler way of Greek living...



ANDRONIS CONCEPT WELLNESS RESORT





PAROS

Our 9 a.m. ferry unloads a Noah's Ark-style swarm of bodies the next morning on Paros, an imperfectly round mass of land somewhere in the middle of the Cyclades. Unlike ultra-luxe Santorini, Paros lacks the global fanfare, a charming respite from tourist lines and a glimpse into authentic seafaring village life. A stranger to this environment, new things stick out to me. Quaint fishing harbors, ancient ruins littering rocky planes, Byzantine paths that have weathered the winds of a thousand years. The intoxication of a slow life, spent between whitewashed alleyways and crystallized ocean dips. The stuff of epic poems and siren songs.

We've chosen to dive even further off the map with our accommodation, down the southwest side of the island where few taxis roam. All the action is up in Naoussa, but if you've come to truly unwind, you'll find Seesoo Paros a paradise. It's the kind of *happy place* that makes you dream of ditching society and living out your days the traditional way, hanging clothes to dry and baking pita in the sun. I suppose, for some, it could get repetitive. But I suppose, for some, it could be perfect. I've yet to discover my fate.

We're in desperate need of a bite when we arrive at Seesoo, which sits proudly on a windswept kite-surfing shore and boasts 11 rooms of pure bliss. I could easily lie to my friends and say this is where Mamma Mia was filmed, with its stark white terraces, thatched straw awnings, blue shutters, and ladders propped up against stone walls. I sit for breakfast with Seesoo's owner Claudia Bontus, her deep tan glowing against a neon pink tank top. Each May,

she, her husband Christian, and their labradoodle Ellie move from home in Austria to Paros and stay through November. After falling in love with the island as teens, they returned years later with a vision to transform an undeveloped plot of land into this eco-chic barefoot bohemian hideaway, with the company of longtime friend and local, Mania, as their concierge. There's something to be said for a hotel that started as a haven for its owners; a prophecy fulfilled.

Claudia thanks me and returns to her seat at a large family-style table, where she and Christian welcome guests and employees alike to dine and converse. Seesoo, unofficially, means family. I gaze across the scene: a picturesque private dock protrudes into a translucent ocean, where a fishing boat tethered by rope tinkers back and forth in the waves. To my left lies a coconut-shaped hut where massages are to be had; to my right, a straw-clad Tiki Bar and outdoor shower. Posh furniture litters the poolside and fruit baskets overflow as if they're replenished hourly. I nurse a cappuccino the size of a bowl, scoping out where my ideal tanning spot will be.

The goddess soon stirs, and the sun sets on night one. We ask Mania where we should have dinner. "Go to Antiparos," she says, referring not to a restaurant but to an entirely different island. "Will we make the ferry?" we ask, concerned. "Yes, *run!*" she says, and we do, catching the last ferry just in time. Only five minutes have passed until we land on Antiparos's shores. We stroll by a local fisherman in the midst of hanging several octopi out to dry. He holds one up in each hand as I pause to take



SEESOO PAROS POOL

“It stays with you, that *striking blue*, and those *mysteries* contained in the ruins that scatter the island’s *undeveloped landscape*.”



SEESOO PAROS

a photo, proud to show off his catch of the day. On our walk back from dinner, we encounter a litter of stray kittens on the side of the road, motioning for traffic to stop as we usher them to safety. One local seems rather irritated that we’ve interrupted his drive for a motley crew of felines as he picks one up by the scruff and places it back in the dirt, driving off without another word.

Our minutes on the island are numbered, so we take advantage of our final day with a rental car and a well-stocked beach bag. Lesson learned: ATVs travel where cars cannot. Traversing to Monastiri Beach proves a rocky feat, just past the famed Kolymbithres, where massive smooth boulders jut like sleeping cyclops out of the water. At the highly anticipated beach club, we encounter sun umbrellas and cocktail menus. It dawns on me that it’s the Fourth of July, though thoughts of home couldn’t be further from mind. Besides—I think we’ve just found a new one.

It’s our last meal on Paros, yet another Greek tragedy. I slip a linen skirt over my swimsuit as we head to Naoussa’s waterfront, with a months-old reservation at seafood mecca Barbarossa—which, we quickly realize, is arbitrary, as we’ve arrived at American dinner time and the tables are empty. The air is salty and gargantuan sea creatures rest on ice baths, awaiting their demise over the open flame. After dark, the tables indeed become thick with hoards of napkin-swinging diners gathering over platters of spicy vongole and crayfish risotto. I’m thankful our waiter talked us out of another Greek salad.

Without nearly enough time to lose ourselves amongst winding, whitewashed alleyways and witness ancient sunsets cradle the horizon, we are on a plane from the world’s tiniest airport early the next morning, soaring over the Aegean. It stays with you, that striking blue, and those mysteries contained in the ruins that scatter the island’s undeveloped landscape. You feel connected to a humanity of eons ago.

I’m always in Greece, I think to myself, maybe not in real life, but in spirit. I close my eyes and take a deep breath; the prophecy has been fulfilled, expectations have been met, and all is right in the world.*

andronis.com/hotels/andronis-concept
seesoparos.com

WHAT to PACK

Gilded Greek Goddess

1 LILI CLASPE LA MER BAROQUE SHELL EARRING \$330

The objet d’art your wardrobe is missing. These 14k gold-coated shell and baroque pearl earrings evoke memories of sun-soaked days spent sailing the Aegean and rendezvousing for dinner of fresh-caught lobster.

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2 IDÁH SEASHELL BRA TOP \$253

Reminiscent of Botticelli’s Birth of Venus, style this oceanic bra top as an ultra-feminine swimsuit, or pair with linen pants for an effortlessly monochromatic daytime look.

idah.uk



3 CULT GAIA ALEXA GOWN \$998

A gown worthy of Aphrodite herself. You’ll compete for attention with ancient statues in this artisan metallic silk gathered gown, ideal for sampling Greek wine as the sun sets over Santorini’s caldera.

cultgaia.com



4 ANCIENT GREEK SANDALS VICTORY OF SAMOTHRACE SANDALS \$355

Channel the messenger of the gods in these winged sandals, featuring real feathers painted in gold. Inspired by the Louvre’s mighty Winged Victory of Samothrace, these shoes + you will create a rivaling work of art.

ancient-greek-sandals.com



by ALEXANDRA LEE