

Small packages

Good things are in store on the smaller Dodecanese islands, finds Rebecca Hall

With its clean beaches, delicious gastronomy and welcoming people embracing visitors as if they're long lost family members, it's not surprising that Greece tops the charts for returning visitors year after year.

Tourists gravitate to the Greek islands, especially the ones they know best or can get to most easily, which in the case of the Dodecanese chain means Kos and Rhodes. There are, however, some beautiful and lesser-known islands in this region that are worth recommending to well-travelled clients who've already explored the larger ones and are looking for something more traditional, peaceful and a little more upmarket.

► SYMI

Approaching by ferry you'll see the colourful neoclassical houses that Symi is so famous for, spilling down from the hillside to the harbour. The sight always has tourists scrambling to take photos, many of them day-trippers from Rhodes. While it doesn't boast sandy beaches, it's worth making the effort to spend more time here, gently hiking through the rugged mountains, meandering through the streets of the Old Town at the top of Symi, or simply relaxing in a quiet cove.

Best for: Definitely one for romance, couples and honeymooners looking for a less-commercialised place to celebrate.



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Getting there: In the height of the season, there are seven ferries a week from Kos, taking anything from one-and-a-half hours to four hours, depending on stops; and there are three to four each day from Rhodes, which is nearer, lasting 45 minutes to an hour.

What to see: Symi is an upmarket destination. The quality of the

Venetian mansions spilling into the harbour upon arrival sets the tone nicely. With mainly pebbly beaches, it's better for couples in their 30s upwards, who are also a good match for the quality of accommodation on offer.

A mountainous island, Symi has some great gentle-to-moderate hikes, and the Taxiarchis Michael Panormitis monastery, set in an enclosed inlet in the south of the island, has two small museums.

The harbour has an abundance of yachts, many of them day-trippers from Turkey due to its close proximity to the country.

Where to stay: Emporio is a boutique property in the small, quiet village of the same name, just over a mile from Symi harbour. Set right on the



→ waterfront, it offers six luxury suites and has a wedding licence, making it a perfect spot to combine wedding and honeymoon. Rates from €200 a night in low season and €250 in high. emporiosymi.com

▶ ASTYPALEA

Shaped like a butterfly, the island of Astypalea is not particularly well known as it doesn't attract package tourism at all, due to its remoteness. That's also its appeal. With a population of just 1,300 residents spread across the island, it makes a perfect getaway with a more relaxed, traditional feel. Note that the season runs from Greek Easter to mid-October, so check places are open. **Best for:** An escape from the crowds, due to its remoteness.

Getting there: Five ferries a week from Piraeus (nine to 11 hours), one a week from Rhodes (nine hours) and Kos (three-and-a-half hours). The tiny airport welcomes six flights a week from Athens and three from Kos and Rhodes aboard propeller aircraft. **What to see:** Astypalea is a good destination for a fairly traditional Greek getaway. Its beaches may not at first glance appear appealing – they tend to have reefs underfoot and the winds sweep seaweed onto the shorelines – but there are places, such as Livadhia, that offer sandy spots. The village of Hora has ancient cobbled streets and whitewashed houses through which to meander, while the castle at the top offers 360-degree views of the island and sea.



ABOVE: Converted windmills, Leros

LEFT: Agios Savvas Monastery, Kalymnos

FAR LEFT: Windsurfing, Karpathos



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Astypalea's food is also worth mentioning, with culinary delights including local cheese, honey and lobster.

Where to stay: Gerani Studios, with a taverna attached, is run by a lovely local family in the bay of Livadhia, right opposite the beach. Its 10 rooms have luxury beds, terraces that open on to the garden and a welcome pack of local wine and products. From €35 a night. astypalaiaagerani.gr/en

▶ KARPATHOS

The third-largest Dodecanese island, Karpathos is also the farthest south. It is mountainous and barren in the interior, but more touristy along the coast, offering more things to do than some of the other islands, especially in the evenings.

Best for: Alternative beach and nightlife island to the 'usual suspects' of Kos and Rhodes. Retains some remote spots.

Getting there: In the summer season there are daily flights by propeller aircraft from Athens and one or

two flights a day from Rhodes.

Ferries run three times a week from both Piraeus (18 to 19 hours) and Rhodes (five hours), and weekly from Kos (12 hours).

What to see: Hiking is popular due to the island's mountainous terrain, with peaks of up to 1,200m. Water sports are also available. Strong winds, especially off the south coast, make for good windsurfing and kitesurfing and even attract the pros.

Scuba diving offers underground caverns to explore and visibility of up to 20 metres, while those looking for a slice of tradition should visit the mountainous village of Olymbos in the north, where local women still dress in traditional garb.

The main port town of Pigadhia has a two-mile stretch of beach, and some good nightlife.

Where to stay: Hotel Alex offers 25 rooms over two floors in landscaped gardens, just under a mile from Pigadhia. It's walking distance to the beach, and the hotel has a pool. Rates start at €55 a night. alexhotel.gr

▶ KALYMNOS

Near Kos, but less touristy, Kalymnos attracts visitors year-round. Its prosperity originated from the sponge trade and many shops in the main port town of Pothia still sell sponges.

Best for: Hikers and rock climbers, thanks to its mountainous interiors.

Getting there: Six weekly flights from Athens to the tiny airport and four ferries a week from Piraeus (nine to 14 hours), plus one or two daily ferries from Rhodes (two to eight hours).

What to see: The beaches towards the north of the island are the better ones. Emporios village has a sandy beach and rock-climbing facilities. Alternatively, the tiny island of Telendhos – a half-hour boat trip from the west coast – offers excellent remote sandy bays. There are daily boat excursions to various shingle and sandy bays. The goats that dot the landscape add to the remote Greek island atmosphere.

Where to stay: Hotel Apxontiko in Pothia is a small boutique property in a tastefully renovated Venetian mansion. All 10 rooms have balconies with harbour views. From €55 a night.

▶ LEROS

Approach Leros from the sea and it's hard to miss the windmills that grace its skyline. Italian-style architecture dominates, and it's a popular destination for small families. The attraction for many is the absence of package tourism.

Best for: Low-key tourism and exploring Venetian buildings, the castle and windmills.

Getting there: A tiny airport on Leros has one daily flight from Athens and Rhodes, four weekly ferry services from Piraeus (nine to 11 hours) and one or two daily services from Rhodes (four hours).

What to see: There's not a lot on Leros, but there's a nice beach at Alinda. Car hire is recommended to reach the castle and windmills at the top of the island, and farther beaches of Pandelli on the east coast.

Where to stay: Leros Princess in Alinda sits atop a hill and has a pool with sweeping views of the bay. Its 21 suites come with a pool, garden and sea views. From €152 per night. lerosprincess.com



Islands of Greece offers a multi-centre holiday combining a night in Rhodes Town, ferry to Symi with seven nights at the Old Markets boutique hotel, and hydrofoil to Kos, with flights from Gatwick to Rhodes and returning from Kos, from £1,189 based on travel on October 1, including baggage and transfers. islandsofgreece.co.uk

Sunvil offers seven nights' self-catering at Harry's Paradise Garden in Emporios, Kalymnos, from £999, including flights from Gatwick to Kos and onward ferry transfer, based on two sharing a studio, valid from September onwards. sunvil.co.uk



LEFT: Harry's Paradise Garden Restaurant, Kalymnos