

You can reach dramatic Myrtos Beach
by public bus from Kefalonia's port

Cruise Region Focus | FROM THE BRIDGE

Island ENVY

Cruise to these less-visited Greek islands
for an authentic, uncomplicated
experience of the region's highlights.

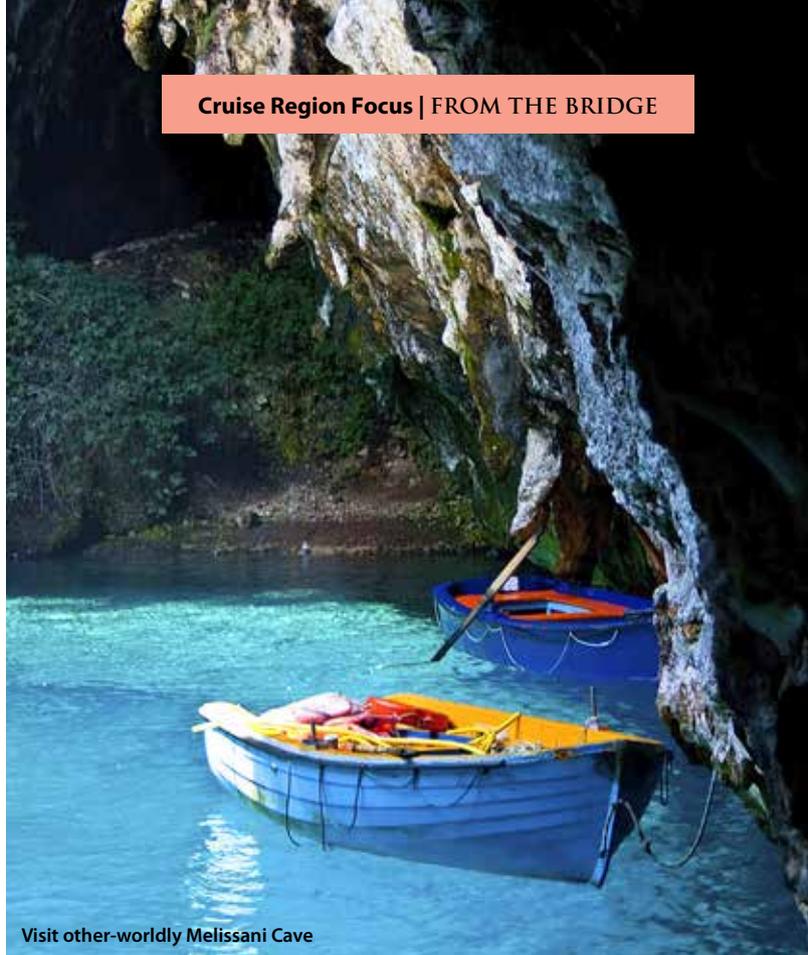
WORDS: LIANI SOLARI



Donkeys at Hydra's port wait to give visitors a ride



You'll invariably see octopus hanging in the sun to dry



Visit other-worldly Melissani Cave

Like Prince Paris, whose judgement of a beauty contest between three Greek goddesses led to the Trojan War, you'd be in a pickle if you had to choose Greece's most beautiful island. But a popularity contest? Well, sure. Ironically, the winners would be the less-visited Greek islands, which often hold the most appeal for cruisers. The following ports of call are among those unaffected beauties not overwhelmed by tourists.

Just 37 nautical miles from Athens, yet a world away from the frenetic energy of Greece's capital, the island of Hydra is famous as singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen's creative sanctuary in the 1960s. Having purchased a villa here, he penned *Bird on the Wire* in response to the arrival of telephone poles

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on the island, bemoaning the end of "this 11th-century life that I thought I had found for myself". That said, Hydra's only town remains in a time warp, its car-free streets encouraging you to plod at donkey's pace—literally—or to stop and people-watch from the tavernas on the picturesque waterfront.

Off the west coast of the mainland, Ithaca is the home of Homer's legendary hero, Odysseus, and neighbouring Kefalonia is the celluloid hero of *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* and

glossy travel magazines—Sami village and Antisamos Beach appeared in the film, while Myrto is Greece's most photographed beach. Absorb Kefalonia's natural beauty on an excursion to the turquoise underground lake of Melissani Cave, named after a nymph whose love for the god Pan was tragically unrequited.

Sailing in the north-western Aegean, film buffs will recognise Skopelos as the fictional Greek island Kalokairi in *Mamma Mia!* After scouting out 25 Greek isles, the filmmakers chose Skopelos for backdrops such as white-sand Kastani Beach, pebbly Glysteri Beach and cliffs, and the diminutive Church of Agios Ioannis for the wedding scene.

In the north-eastern Aegean, Lesbos is renowned as the birthplace of lyric poet Sappho ('the 10th Muse') and the island that produces Greece's best olive oil and ouzo. From the capital, Mytilini, it's an hour's drive to the ouzo museum and distillery near Plomari, where the Barbayannis family has produced this aniseed-flavoured 'white lightning' for 150 years.

Over-enthusiasts beware: As the locals will >



The Terrace of the Lions guards Apollo's sanctuary on Delos

The Church of Agios Ioannis starred in the wedding scene in *Mamma Mia!*



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tell you, ouzo stamina requires plenty of *mezedes* (small plates of food).

If your cruise visits the fishing town of Molyvos, scale the cobblestoned streets to the medieval castle for panoramic views of Lesvos' northern coastline, or conquer a plateful of fresh seafood in a harbourside restaurant and still get an eyeful. From Molyvos, it's an hour's drive to the tranquil fishing village of Sigri and the Petrified Forest Park dotted with 200 prehistoric fossilised tree trunks. Lesvos' thermal mineral springs have long been claimed as a cure-all. Miracle hype aside, the old spa at Eftalou, on a pebbly beach 2.5km east of Molyvos, is sure to get your heart pumping when you alternately immerse yourself in the 45°C spring water and the sea.

While nearby Chios is reputedly the birthplace of epic poet Homer, the isle's other claim to fame is mastic, a resin collected from mastic trees to make varnish, *mastiha* liqueur, chewing gum, jam and skin care. Depending on the time of the year, watch farmers in the south harvest the mastic 'teardrops' that ooze from the bark. Closer to Chios port, admire glittering examples of Byzantine art in the mosaics of Nea Moni monastery.

History and mythology converge at Samos, the island birthplace of the mathematician Pythagoras and the goddess of marriage, Hera. From Vathi port, head 20km south-west to the ruins of Pythagoreion, an ancient fortified port with a tunnel-aqueduct dubbed the 'eighth wonder of antiquity', and the Heraion, a huge temple dedicated to Hera.

From the port on Patmos, the road winds inland for 7km to the 11th-century Monastery of St John the Theologian. Marvel at how the complex dominates the island from its godly vantage above the whitewashed houses of medieval Chora, then explore the elaborate, frescoed interiors of this rare example of fortified monastic architecture.

On the nearby island of Kos literally walk in the footsteps of Hippocrates, the 'father of medicine', who founded a medical school here in the fifth century BCE. Visit the archaeological remains of the Asclepium (healing complex) just outside Kos town, and sit in the shade of the tree in town that marks the spot where Hippocrates taught.

Located in the primarily touristy islands of the Cyclades, Paros remains unspoilt and unhurried. If you're looking for attractions with all the bells and whistles, forget Petaloudes Park butterfly sanctuary. But if you want to linger in shady lushness among delicate tiger moths while writing old-school postcards and sipping a frappé, you've found your happy place. If your cruise departs late evening, pull up a chair at a taverna near the port and watch the fireball-red sun disappear behind the sea.

At the centre of the Cyclades, Delos is a barren and almost waterless 3km² rock. But thanks to the gods behaving badly, it became the principal cult centre of the Aegean from the eighth century BCE. It was on Delos that Leto gave birth to her divine twins, Apollo (god of the sun) and Artemis (goddess of the moon), by the philandering god Zeus, despite

the wrath of his incensed wife, Hera. While you can't stay on the island, you can walk among the relics of Delos' glory days, including the photogenic Terrace of the Lions. Up until 1999, when they were replaced with replicas and moved to the on-site museum, these marble guardians of the sanctuary, though weathered 'sightless', were still magnificent in carrying out their charge, silently roaring across the island.

Still in the Cyclades, when you arrive on Sifnos venture 8km beyond the tavernas at Kamares Beach to the old capital, Kastrol. In this car-free coastal village perched on a rocky outcrop lose yourself in the medieval maze of flagstoned streets lined with Escher-like whitewashed houses.

From here, tackling the steep stone walkway to the Church of the Seven Martyrs has its earthly rewards: a camera-ready blue-domed church silhouetted against the Aegean. And not a world-weary tourist in sight. ■

VISITING CRUISE LINES

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