

Kythera: Occupied, never conquered



From the Romans to the British, everyone has left their mark on this beautiful island

Nature has created a bountiful variety of landscapes on the island of Kythera, located at a distance of 12.5 miles off Cape Malea, the southeastern tip of the Peloponnese.

There are steep mountainsides plunging into the sea, creating small coves, cultivated plateaus and deep, shady gorges with waterfalls and lush vegetation, impressive caves and beaches, with golden sand or pebble-strewn, sloping into deep or shallow waters ranging in hue from pale azure to deep blue.

The island's average temperature is 19 degrees, one of the highest in Greece, which makes for a temperate climate drier on the coast than the mountainous inland areas, where the clouds that cling to the hilltops (locally known as "provenza") are occasionally dispersed by high winds.

The island's equally rich history is reflected in its heritage and architecture: imposing castles and settlements deserted for centuries reflect Venetian as well as British elements blended into the style of stonemasons from the Peloponnese.

In antiquity, Kythera was known as the island of Aphrodite, the goddess of love and beauty. It came under Roman, Byzantine, Turkish, Venetian and British control before joining Greece in 1864. It has an area of 278 square kilometres and its population numbers roughly 3,500.

The picturesque capital, Hora, on the southern coast, is built on a hill dominated by

an impressive Venetian castle, which commands the port below known as Kapsali, the smaller island of Antikythera and also offers a glimpse of Crete further in the distance, weather permitting.

The main gate of the castle is located at the edge of the town and leads to the inner section via an arched tunnel. Several churches and Venetian buildings, including the palace which now houses the island's Historical Archive, are sure to impress the visitor.

A joy to stroll around, Hora is full of old mansions and other buildings dating back to the days of Venetian and British rule.

The main entry points to the island are Aghia Pelagia and Diakofti, on the eastern coast. Diakofti, a former fishing village, retains many old, simple houses and has one of the longest sandy beaches on the island. Avlemonas, a contrasting Cycladic-type settlement a few kilometres to the south, is a rocky inlet full of little boats -- with its modest stretch of sand, it is a charming little place to spend an afternoon. Its Venetian fort, adorned with the lion of St Mark, is a gem rather than a fortification. Local hospitality is equally inviting.

Yet another contrast is offered by Paleopoli, Kythera's old Byzantine capital in the northern part, abandoned in 1537 after being invaded by the infamous admiral of the Western Ottoman Fleet, Hayreddin Barbarossa. It looks over a wildly beautiful, naturally fortified spot at the confluence of two gorges. Paleopoli's many ruins, including some important churches and iconography, give the place quite an eerie atmosphere.

Another area not to be missed is the Neraida waterfall, near the village of Mylopotamos, in the midwestern part of the island. It is situated in an incredibly green environment with several decaying along with some finely restored watermills. The stretch with the watermills, marked with blue signs, is ideal for swimming in the natural ponds or resting under the huge plane trees. A trek down to the beach of Kalami takes three-and-a-half hours but is worth it.

In Potamos, the commercial village north of Paleopoli, the old abandoned mansions and many derelict houses offer a glimpse into past prosperity, long before many residents left in search of a better fortune in Australia in the 1950s. The high altitude occasionally treats visitors to sudden changes in weather, which can

From Potamos, the route to Aghia Pelagia on the coast goes over a fine, old British-built bridge, the 13th-century Church of Aghios Nikolaos and one of Kythera's most scenic settlements, Trifyllianika, with many examples of 16th- and 17th-century architecture.

What to see

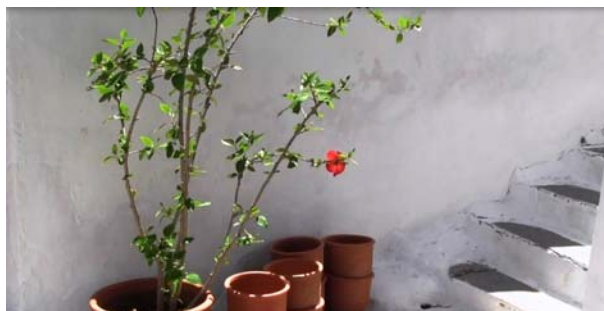
See the lighthouse at Moudari, in the northern part of the island; at a height of 25 meters, it was one of the most impressive built by the British. It is accessed via the village of Karavas, past the Amir Ali spring on the way to Aghios Nikolaos beach; take the Alexandros glass-bottom boat (tel 6974.022.079) from Kapsali to Hytra islet. Best beaches: Kapsali, organized and busy; Sparagario, opposite Kapsali; Kaladi -- turn right toward Paleopoli after Fratsia, past the bridge and 2 km of dirt road; Kalamou, near Kalamos, with red pebbles.

Transport & basic info

Olympic Airlines (tel 210.966.6666, www.olympicairlines.com) flies to Kythera daily in the summer and five times a week during the rest of the year, but keep in mind that waiting lists are long. Boats from Piraeus usually make the journey once a week. Two boats depart daily (only one on Sundays and Mondays) from Neapoli in the southern Peloponnese (Port Authority, tel 27340.22228). There is also a boat from Gytheio at 1.30 a.m. on Sundays (27330.22262). The island is big and a car is needed. Area phone code: 27360.

Where to stay

Accommodation prices are above average. Nostos, in Hora, six rooms with antique decor, fine old coffee shop (31056); Margarita, 19th-century house, rooms with sea views (31711); Pitsinades, tastefully restored old houses (33877); Porfyrousa, in Mylopotamos, fine guesthouse serving organic products (38281); Cengo, in Kapsali, modern rooms and suites (39026); Stavros Villas, an architectural entry in the 2006 Biennale (39139). The island's only four-star facility is Kythea Resort in Aghia Pelagia (39150).



Where to eat

Toxotis, in Livadi: homemade pasta, classic dishes, good grill; Filio, in Kalamos, one of Kythera's best, with homemade traditional dishes and local organic wine; Steki tis Gefsis, in Avlemonas, and Magos, in Kapsali, for fish and classic cuisine; Moustakas, in Aghia Pelagia, with very good Greek cuisine; Sotiris, in Avlemonas, makes special spaghetti with lobster and fish soup; Mihalis, in Mitata, offers local and organic products, rooster cooked in wine; Belvedere, in Hora, good basic Italian cuisine with views of the castle.

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By Haris Argyropoulos



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