

# IN THE SHADOW OF MOUNT ATHOS

## **EAGLES PALACE, HALKIDIKI**

In the distance, Mount Athos beckons. Like a beacon it shoots skywards through the clouds toward the heavens. No wonder pilgrims are drawn here.

The monasteries of this secretive enclave on the Macedonian coastline of northern Greece resemble waterside fortresses, save for their onion domes. Squat sandstone towers stand watch. All of them have piers, but no one is allowed within 500 metres of the shore.

A swim along the coast towards this reclusive republic – Mount Athos has its own laws and government, protected by Greece – is relaxation itself. One can only imagine the treasures inside: gold, silver, art, icons and rare books. Once there were 300 monasteries and over 40,000 monks. Today there are 20 monasteries and about 2,000 monks from the Eastern orthodox faiths.

The protective walls lining the sea are a sight to behold, but from a distance. For while it is possible to visit the monasteries and stay with the monks, you need to be male and to apply well in advance.

The Agia Sophia, that most holy former place of worship for orthodox Christians, is visible from the summit of Mount Athos. All you need is a clear winter's day and a head for heights.

In nearby Halkidiki, **Eagles Palace** bills itself as a spiritual spa hotel, a bright and airy affair of tiled floors and wrought iron detail. A member of the Small Luxury Hotels of the World group and the Macedonian Hotels association, it's open from April to October each year. The surrounding landscape is a bit like the Scottish Highlands, only warmer. Patches of olive groves and superb greenery blanket the hills.

Over a glass of Peloponnese Moschofilero Skouras, our host Ismini tells us that nearby Thessaloniki is a 'lively city', home to Greece's largest university, and where the story of the **Eagles Palace** actually began. "It's actually very Mediterranean – a bit like Barcelona with its big promenade, and fantastic for a city break, with lots of history, museums and things to do."

Ismini's father-in-law opened the city's first luxury hotel, the Mediterranean Palace, in 1925. It was destroyed in the catastrophic earthquake of 1978, but remnants found their way here to the **Eagles Palace**, named after the symbol of Byzantium and orthodoxy. Here visitors can expect a relaxing mix of rooms, suites and bungalows, with a choice of private pool, jacuzzi or the golden sandy beach of Ouranoupolis. Two villages nearby offer interruption from relaxing by the pool or at the onsite spa, while during the season there are themed weeks focusing on different activities, from yoga and cross-fit to scuba diving.

"The food in northern Greece borrows heavily from Istanbul," Ismini tells me, so on that front expect lentil

salads with wild herbs, chickpeas and tahini, fava beans, fresh meat and fish, and tingling local wines.

"Every month we have a monk who comes to cook for the guests. He brings wood and vegetables from Athos," she says. A spiritual experience indeed.

## **GRACE MYKONOS**

Mykonos is one of the most popular islands in Greece, with idyllic beaches, buzzing nightlife and plenty of sports activities for couples and families. The Grace Mykonos is an exclusive boutique hotel just north of Mykonos town, with stunning sea views over the sandy protected beach of Agios Stefanos.

Traditional architectural elements and local craftsmanship combine with high-spec modern facilities and elegant design touches throughout the property, making the Grace one of Mykonos's most chic beach hotels. The stylish poolside area next to the Grace bar and restaurant is the hotel's hub, while larger suites have a plunge pool and deck with private sea views. A fabulous range of Mediterranean dishes is available all day so you can appreciate local cuisine at your leisure, and you won't be able to resist a bit of pampering at the ultra-relaxing spa.

## **GRACE SANTORINI**

Santorini is the largest island in a circular archipelago which is the remnant of an enormous volcanic eruption that destroyed the earliest human settlements on what was once a single island. For the last 3,600 years the extinct volcano's caldera has been filled by a vast 12 km by 7 km lagoon surrounded by steep 300-metre cliffs, and this dramatic setting has been a magnet for travellers for decades.

The Grace Santorini is a minimalist treasure perched on one of the clifftops above the caldera, with amazing views and gorgeous sunsets. Individually styled suites and rooms are among the best in the Cyclades and a treat for romantic couples. In a Grace Suite you get an indoor plunge pool with a partition for ocean views or total privacy, and an extra one on the terrace. VIP Suites have the same (but larger) and private steam rooms. The restaurant's gourmet dinners are legendary, or you can wander into picturesque Imerovigli village for simpler fare.

## **BLUE PALACE, CRETE**

Crete is the largest island in Greece and the southernmost in the Mediterranean. It is known for its rich history, crystal-clear waters, traditional villages and dramatic landscape. The Blue Palace is a 5-star Luxury Collection Resort & Spa with 247 bungalows and suites and four private villas, overlooking the sparkling sea and the small fishing village of Plaka. Its spacious and secluded accommodation, built

into the sun-drenched hillside, offers balconies or terraces with unbeatable sea views. Many rooms have their own private infinity pool. A half-board stay is a great way to dip into a diverse array of international cuisine at the resort's five top-class restaurants, while retaining the freedom to explore nearby mountain plateaux, Minoan ruins and secluded beaches, as well as other attractions around the island.

#### **LINDOS BLU, RHODES**

Lindos Blu Luxury Hotels & Suites has the distinction of being the first family-unfriendly hotel on the whole of Rhodes, providing an idyllic location for an adults-only romantic escape. Inspiring views, impeccable service and contemporary elegance create the perfect

setting for relaxation and rejuvenation. For the most intimate and exclusive stay, a villa or maisonette with a private pool and jacuzzi offers chic luxury and heightened privacy. At the Five Senses Gourmet Restaurant you can sit beneath the stars and indulge in fusion cuisine with a Mediterranean touch, while the Spa & Health Club delivers an equally tempting menu of holistic and traditional treatments by highly skilled therapists.

Further afield, explore the ancient Byzantine and Hospitallers Knights remains of Lindos, including the famous rocky acropolis that bears testimony to a rich maritime past, the extensive medieval Rhodes Old Town and the site of the Colossus, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.



