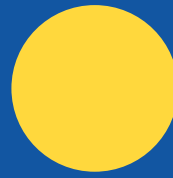


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None for the road
Meet the New Yorkers
making sobriety cool


Mars on Earth
Why space robots roam
the red sands of Lanzarote

Spelling bees
Do pollinating insects
need to go to school?



Join the crew

The new eco-sailing adventure
that gives working guests a more
authentic taste of the Greek islands



Want your holiday to make a difference? A new Greek island cruise allows guests to help grow local businesses while making zero environmental impact. We hopped aboard to learn more

Words / Bre Graham → Photography / Manos Chatzikonstantis



“Greece has some of the most beautiful landscapes in the world. I want them to still be here for the next generation”



From far left ✓
Loulis, Kea, at sunset;
honeycomb at local
deli Aristaios (*pictured
below*); captain Loucas
Gourtsoyannis; lemons
at Kea's Folk Museum



It's funny how, out at sea, you can smell the land before you see it. The scent of green hills and herbs blending with the salty breeze is a welcome hello. It gives this uncertain sailor an aromatic taste of how the ancient mariners must have felt as they plied these same trade routes across the Aegean.

My delight is echoed by Loucas Gourtsoyannis, my captain and guide for the next six days. "I'm the luckiest of men for this to be my Monday," he says. "We are doing what has been done since boats were built." He gestures as we sail past Makronisos, an island whose inhabitants have included Helen of Troy, prisoners during the Greek Civil War and now, no one at all.

We're on our way to Kea, the first stop on an 18-island trip with Aegean Cargo Sailing, an initiative that combines sustainable tourism with a back-to-basics supply chain that transports eco-products around the Greek islands. Below deck, we have similar stock to that which boats moved back when Odysseus was sailing – bottles of wine, wheels of cheese, herb-fumed honey and bars of earthy floral soap. »



From top left
Bottles at Aristaios deli;
loading products; acorn
cookies from Kea's Red
Tractor Farm; cycling
with electric bikes; the
theatre of Carthaea
on Kea; cheeses from
Tyrakeion dairy

Tourism to Greece started not much later than that – Romans first came on pilgrimages to centres of philosophy here around 2,000 years ago – and it’s been a driver of the local economy ever since. Today 33 million annual visitors provide up to 20% of GDP. Now Gourtsoyannis and his non-profit, Sail Med, want to harness this power in a concrete way.

“Greece has some of the most beautiful landscapes in the world, and I want them to be appreciated and still be here for the next generation,” he explains, over a pre-trip breakfast of almond cookies and oranges in Lavrio port, near Athens. The idea of Aegean Cargo Sailing is for “a network that connects the islands”, bringing goods from local producers to be sold on other islands. Tourists can pay to join parts of these two-month-long trips, which run twice a summer, and add packing and unpacking of goods – a pretty unusual holiday activity – to the usual highlights of the famously beautiful islands, all on a carbon-neutral, wind-powered vessel.

Gourtsoyannis sees the trips as a mutual process where tourists and islands can both see benefits. “We want this to be a holiday, but we want people to see authentic Greece in a way that gives back in a more meaningful way than standard tourism,” he says. “It can work both ways.”

I’m joining him for a two-island, six-day leg, eager to find out if this unusual cruise could be a game changer for eco-travel. We’re joined by Gourtsoyannis’s Polish partner Rosabelle Tarnowska, local skipper Kostas Pishinas and Kyriakos Panaritis, a sailing enthusiast and retired architect who saw an ad for the trip in his local sailing club. “This week is a gift to myself,” he tells me as we watch the waves roll by.

On arrival on Kea, I find some time for a swim at Gyaliskari Beach, relishing a quiet moment with my cold Mythos beer, and feeling a bit apprehensive about my lack of upper-body strength. Although Gourtsoyannis has explained that guests can do as much work as they want, it’s also made clear that this is a group trip and every organised activity is embarked on together.

After just an hour or so, I join them at local deli Aristaios, where owner Andreas Mouzakis makes truly extraordinary things: a rose and geranium-scented liquor; traditional pasteli with honey he harvests himself; and everything from ice cream to pasta, sweets and jam, blended and boiled from local produce. “I want to do things the way they’ve always been done,” he says, as he packs up products for us to take to another deli on Andros, the next island. »



“We want people to see authentic Greece in a more meaningful way than standard tourism”



From left
Korissia port, Kea;
Tyrakeion's Xynotyri
cheese; dolphins
accompany the boat
on the journey from
Kea to Andros



“If people on the islands feel like they can be a part of something bigger, they’ll stay”

As we sit in Andreas’s mother’s garden down the road, underneath laden lemon and orange trees, he tells me their family has stayed here long after others left. Greece has had so many waves of emigration over the past 100 years, and its effect is most clearly felt on these smaller Greek islands.

That’s something that Gourtsoyannis hopes these trips can help with. “If people on the islands feel like they can be a part of something bigger, they’ll stay and produce things if they have a way to sustain themselves and their businesses,” he tells me.

Over the next few days in Kea, we meet other producers who are creating burgeoning businesses around artisan products. Alexandros Mykoniatis, who runs Tyrakeion, a handmade cheese business, loves the idea that his cheese is being transported by sailboat. “The idea of sailing suits me, traditional things are usually better,” he muses, stirring an enormous pot of goat’s milk.

Later we sit in the sunshine and sample the cheese we watched him make. The *tyros* (island version of feta) is scented like olive leaves and trees, and tastes like the air we’re breathing up on Kea’s sweeping hills. In the case of this cheese and the *tsipouro* (pomace brandy made from distilled grape juice) that accompanies it, I certainly agree with Mykoniatis that traditional things taste better. »



“We want to build a new path of eco-tourism in Greece, which can sustainably revive these islands”



From left
Delivering products;
handmade soap from
Andros; oregano and
Volaki cheeses – the
latter is a speciality of
the island; Andros town



Sailing as a means of moving from place to place seems to slow down time, and there's a lot of waiting for the wind on the Aegean. With no control over the weather, I settle into the pace of boat life, sunbathing on the deck under hypnotic blue skies. The leg to Andros takes hours longer than initially thought but as we watch dolphins brush past us, it's relaxing to know there's nowhere else we need to be.

On Andros we fall into the same balance between relaxing, seeing the sights and meeting the producers. We walk to waterfalls, pick lemons in citrus groves and get to taste the truly exceptional things we are transporting, like Dimosthenis Varoutis's ouzo and Filippas Dionysis's hand-dried herbs. These ingredients feel even more special because I know how they've been made.

Adriakon, an organic deli, stocks several of the products. "I'm so proud to be a part of this project; I hope it works," owner Yannis tells me as he sets up a display of Tyrakeion cheese and Aristaios pasteli we've just unloaded from below deck. "This shop aims to include all the amazing products from the islands; ideally they'd all get here in a way that doesn't harm the environment."

Gourtsoyannis's own association with Sail Med came out of a chance meeting with the project's founder, Jan Lundberg, an ecological activist and sailor who first set up a cargo-sailing project around six islands in 2017, inspired by the history of sailing in the Med. After he passed away last year, Gourtsoyannis committed to making it an even more ambitious project. "We got a bigger boat and started to give lectures to schools, port authorities, mayors, local politicians and cultural associations to try and get the message of what we do," he explains. "We want to build a new path of eco-tourism in Greece, a blue economy, as it's the main thing that can sustainably revive the islands that were so battered by the economic crisis."

So far, he tells me, they've been running off donations from friends and family, but this year marks a big step in the expansion of the project. In order for them to continue, they need tourism to fund their trips. His words are a reminder that, »



“Greece has some of the best produce in the world – I want it to be proud”

although the beauty of the islands and the languid rhythm of our days mean this feels like a pleasure cruise at times, this is a serious business. Along the way we meet producers struggling to sustain themselves and see how mass tourism can pollute the more popular islands. Each moment makes me feel proud to be a part of something different.

It’s not all plain sailing, of course. We only use electric cars or bicycles when on land, which isn’t easy on every island, and hefting boxes is sweaty work. It takes conviction from everyone involved.

But there are still plenty of opportunities to enjoy the islands, and I spend an afternoon wandering around the town of Korthi on Andros. Between the modern art of the Goulandris Museum, the ancient bridge down in the bay and the dappled light on the whitewashed houses, it feels quintessentially Greek.

It also feels like a real immersive experience rather than just surface tourism. That evening I watch Katerina Remoundou cook us the most incredible six courses at Tou Josef taverna, from produce harvested by hand. We eat slow-roasted baby goat with dark green vine shoots and soft goat’s cheese spooned onto bread with electric orange spicy loquat jam. It’s a meal that I couldn’t eat elsewhere, in a restaurant I’d never have found if I was here alone.

“Greece has some of the best produce in the world,” says Gourtsoyannis as we marvel at the meal. “I want it to be proud of what it produces.”



From top ✓
A chapel on Andros; dining with the crew on home-made produce at Tou Josef; sailing from Kea to Andros

On my last night, Rosabelle Tarnowska makes a pot of pasta sauce from sweet onions and local lemons that we feverishly eat alongside smoked garlic cloves from Mykonos sourced by Yannis, devouring it all with great dustings of Mykoniat’s cheese, which we watched him make back in Kea. We drink wine from Skyros, the next island on their trip, while Gourtsoyannis tells me about a jeweller on Santorini that he wants to sign up. His passion about producers is infectious and for a moment I’m tempted to stay onboard to see more of their journey.

Alas, in the morning I’m off to board a ferry back to Athens – so huge compared to our diminutive 13m vessel that it looks like a skyscraper on the sea. From the deck I watch the boat that has been my bedroom for the past six days push forward with the wind. I take home a suitcase full of herbs and honey, hoping that both this project and the feelings I’ve found here find a way to keep sailing.

“We’ll be in Santorini in August, come back and stay for a few weeks,” says Gourtsoyannis, temptingly. “We’ve only just started.” sailmed.org
Norwegian flies to Athens, Corfu, Crete, Kos, Lefkada, Kefalonia, Rhodes and Santorini. Book flights, a hotel and a rental car at Norwegian.com

Other slow travel trips

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