

FALL/WINTER 2019

# bon vivant

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# THE ISLAND THAT TIME FORGOT

Two hours by boat from Athens, crowd-free Hydra has a tendency to steal the hearts of those who seek a taste of traditional Greek life

BY RACHEL LEES



No cars allowed. Donkeys on the Greek island, Hydra.

**N**AVIGATING SLICK COBBLESTONE staircases on donkey back can be a nerve-racking experience, especially for first-timers. *Should my jack put a hoof wrong, I worry as we make our way down into town, we could slide comically, if not dangerously, down the stairs, legs akimbo.*

Of course, this scenario takes on significantly more gravity when you're also carrying a feast of Greek take-out food for your husband's entire family.

It's early fall – no pun intended – on the idyllic island of Hydra in Greece, when I find myself in precisely this situation. We – my husband, his parents and two sisters, along with their partners – have flown in for one week of relaxation and reconnection.

Two large bags of souvlaki, gyros, several Greek salads and a massive size portion of baklava, balance precariously on my knees while I try to hold my position as we clip-clop up the steep staircases to our villa on the hilltop. Though the journey makes me mildly anxious, most of it is spent laughing and bonding with my sister-in-law over the absurdity of it all. Well, that, and being struck by the beauty of the location we are in.

"Aesthetically it is perfect," said American writer Henry Miller of his first view of Hydra (pronounced *ee-drah*) – and he was right. There's something undeniably enchanting about the crescent-shaped island in the Saronic Gulf which, Miller says, "rises out of the sea like a huge loaf of petrified bread."

The town wraps, amphitheatre-like, around a postcard-perfect port that glimmers in the sunshine. Content cats laze on those cobblestone streets, which weave through piazzas and past whitewashed houses adorned with pink and purple bougainvillea, before tapering off to make way for rock-strewn hills, speckled with wildflowers and pine trees.

And then there's the sunset, when a golden tangerine glow spans the horizon, turning the surrounding islands indigo and casting the ocean in a steely blue.

Miller and I aren't the only ones enamoured with Hydra; Italian actress Sophia Loren described it as "one of the most beautiful places in the world." The island was the setting for her 1957 romantic film "Boy on a Dolphin," in which she plays a local sponge-diver – during the 1940s and 50s, sea sponges were the island's main industry. ▶

In the 1960s, Canadian singer-songwriter Leonard Cohen bought a house here for \$1,500, a few days after his 26th birthday. In a letter to his mother, he wrote, "It has a huge terrace with a view of a dramatic mountain and shining white houses...I live on a hill and life has been going on here exactly the same for hundreds of years."

He wasn't exaggerating. Back in the 1800s, the island hummed with wealthy merchants, admirals and sea captains who built Venetian-style stone palazzos, in the hills surrounding the port. By the time Cohen arrived, it had begun attracting artists but little else had changed – and was still largely devoid of running water and electricity; Cohen's seminal hit "Bird on the Wire" was inspired by the introduction of powerlines, which provided the island's winged creatures a new place to perch.

Even today, Hydra clings to vestiges of a simpler time. Although we arrive by hydrofoil, when we step onto the dock, there are no cars, scooters or bikes waiting for us – they're not allowed on the island. Rather, donkeys and mules wait to ferry fresh produce and luggage from the port to the homes, tavernas and inns throughout Hydra. We chose this island because unlike Greece's famous party islands, life moves at a gentler pace here. Our days are spent hiking through the hillside, plunging into the ocean off pebbled beaches, and eating home-style Greek food at family-run restaurants in courtyards and on cliff sides.

Cohen and his bohemian pals – Australian writers George Johnston and Charmian Clift among them – could often be found below the clock tower on the port at Kafenion O Katsikas, a small grocery store with a few tables outside. It was here he played his first concert with just a guitar and a handful of friends for an audience. Now Rolo Café, we discover it's a lovely place to sit with a coffee or ouzo in hand and watch boats dock.

One of the most enduring portraits of Cohen, which appeared on the cover of LIFE Magazine, was taken beneath the tree outside Xeri Elia Taverna. Often referred to as Douskos Taverna, it has been run by the Douskos family for close to 200 years. We stumble upon it by accident during a late morning stroll, and decide it's too inviting to pass up, so we stop for lunch.

Occupying a private square strung with white lamps, the taverna is known for its fresh local seafood and authentic Greek dishes such as *gemista* (roast tomatoes and peppers stuffed with rice). Though it's off-season and we have the courtyard to ourselves, save for a few locals, the music lives on during the peak of summer, if in a slightly different guise; old men play guitar and sing Greek songs on weekends.

It's an almost farcical scene – the stereotype of a Greek feast, where the residents of a close-knit community come together, linking arms, clinking glasses. While Hydra may not have celebrity chefs, there are slick trendy restaurants such as *Techne*, which serve fine modern Greek cuisine and inventive cocktails.

Still, the island's heart can be found in its tavernas,



Left to right: Traditional taverna, patrolling the port of Hydra

which offer an authentic taste of traditional life and culture. Wooden chairs and chequered tablecloths aren't a gimmick for the tourists, and the kitchens are truly a family affair. And, just like at Xeri Elia, the emphasis is on locally caught seafood and traditional fare. It's no wonder we gravitate to them repeatedly during our time here.

We gorge ourselves on classic staples of the Hydriot table, including *meze* (small share plates) laden with fresh dill or parsley, *fava* (yellow split pea dip), *gigandes* (butter beans roasted in tomato sauce) and moreish lemon-drenched *dolmades* (stuffed vine leaves). They're followed by entrées of grilled octopus *xiato* (marinated in oil and vinegar) and *keftedákia* (meatballs) served with homemade *tzatziki* (yogurt, garlic and cucumber dip), and washed down with a shot of anise-flavoured aperitif, ouzo or *tsipouro*.

Plates decorated by customers, including celebrity diners British model Kate Moss and fashion designer Vivienne Westwood, may line the walls of *Piato* restaurant but in the kitchen, the owner's 80-something mother, Mrs. Keti, commands the stove. It's hard to pass up her homemade *meze*, like the *dolmades*, smoky *melitzanosalata* (roasted eggplant dip) and creamy *taramasalata* (cured cod roe dip) – made all the better by the port views. ▶



Rachel Lees



Left to right: Dinner at an outdoor taverna, traditional horiatiki (Greek salad)

Then there's Vlychos Beach, only five minutes away via water-taxi ride, where chef Marina is calling the shots in the kitchen at her down-home, eponymous tavern. Here, chunky eggplant dip, awash with garlicky oil and lemon juice, pairs beautifully with house-baked bread. We round it all out with a plate of grilled fish and a glass of rosé.

As a result of a tip from a local man we meet down at the port, our little clan also makes our way to Taverna Christina. Visitors and locals alike flock to this unpretentious family-run eatery in Kamini for grilled *fagria* (red sea bream) or melanouria (saddled sea bream), hauled fresh off the boat.

Nowadays, Christina's son Dimitris and his wife Maria are in charge of the restaurant. Herbs and vegetables, wherever possible, are plucked straight from the family garden, Maria tells us. They're used in favourites such as buttery *saganaki* (fried cheese), creamy beetroot salad and *horiatiki* (Greek salad) loaded with large chunks of feta drizzled in oil. Topping it off are "spoon sweets" of yogurt with cardamom and candied carrot.

The tendency to refer to restaurants by the owner or cook's name rather than its official moniker sometimes sees travellers led astray. Taverna Christina, for example, is not to be confused with another eatery in Hydra Town called Gitoniko; previously owned by Christina and Manolis, it is now in the capable hands of their son Constantinos.

At Gitoniko, elevated traditional Greek fare is served in a typical old Hydriot house with stone floors and wooden ceilings, and on the vine-covered roof terrace. The specialty here is *magirefta*, classic Greek dishes cooked deep dish-style in the oven or in a pot on the stove, such as octopus *stifado* (stew) or *moussaka* (lamb and eggplant lasagne). We end on a sweet note, with a flourless *amygdalota* (almond cookie).

Famous among the coastal villages of the Saronic Gulf, in the old days, sailors packed the macaroon-style cookies for long journeys at sea. Typically made with only a handful of ingredients – ground almonds, rose water, semolina and

powdered sugar – the delightfully chewy treats kept well, and are still sold in bakeries all over Hydra today. We should know as we almost buy the island clean of them but despite our impressive haul, none even make it as far as the airport.

At Tsangaris, a store near the port, 80-something Anne Tsangaris has been making *amygdalota* for more than 50 years and shares her recipe with willing students in her charmingly antiquated bakehouse. Her secret ingredient? Like so many kitchens across this special little island, Anne's food is made with love. 🍪

## SAVOUR THE EXPERIENCE

▶ Shipowner Lazaros Koundouriotis played an important role in the Greek War of Independence, and his 18th century mansion on the hill to the west of the port now serves as the **House Museum**. While the architecture alone is worth seeing, the paintings, Greek handicrafts, period costumes and photographs breathe life into the island's naval history.

▶ Whether you're up for a gentle 35-minute stroll along the coastal path to Vlyhos, or a challenging 90-minute trek to Limnióniza beach on the south coast, there's a trail to suit most hikers – including a 6.5-hour longitudinal island traverse. A handful of walking routes are marked, and maps are sold in town for more adventurous spirits.

▶ In the crystal waters off **Vlychos Beach**, gain a new perspective on previous generations of Hydriots, who earned their living by diving for sponges – at great risk to their lives – with Hydra Diving Centre. While there are no wrecks to explore despite the area's naval history, the water clarity makes seeing large fish, rays and sea anemone effortless.

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