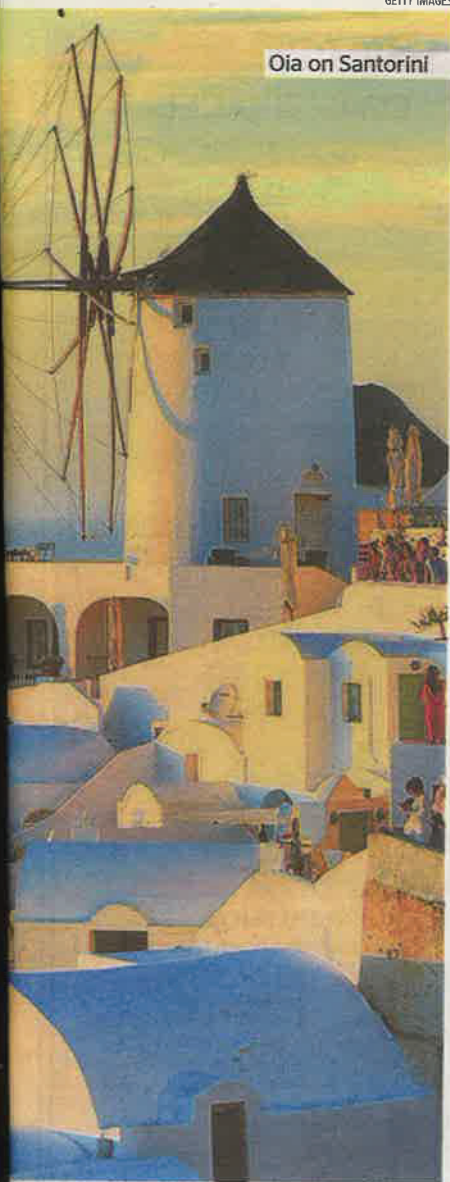


Oia on Santorini



Santorini may be Greece's best-known island, certainly its glitziest, and synonymous with luxury and honeymooners. Two million visitors come each year to take in the dramatically beautiful caldera — created by a huge volcanic eruption in 1646BC as a result of which two thirds of the island disappeared into the sea. In summer up to six cruise ships a day disgorge thousands of day-trippers into the whitewashed villages of Oia and Imerovigli; roads are jammed, the streets heave with people and hotel prices are some of the highest in the Mediterranean.

Which is exactly why visiting the island out of season — in October/November or March/April — when many hotels are closed and the crowds are gone, is by far the best time. The weather is pleasantly warm, but not too hot to hike, ride or cycle, the restaurants that remain open are the good traditional tavernas filled with locals and it's possible to get around without sitting in traffic. The downside is that direct flights from the UK stop at the end of October, although you can still get here via a 45-minute internal flight from Athens that runs year-round, two or three times a day, with Aegean and Ryanair.

There's only one moment that I witness anything resembling a crowd, when suddenly the ruined fortress is packed with tourists, couples and families gathering to watch the sunset, all waving selfie sticks and elbowing their way to the front.

The next morning the island shows itself in very different colours. I meet Kevin, a grecophile American from Santorini Walking Tours, and we spend a couple of happy hours striding out of town from Oia and up on to the island's rim. It's a stiff pull up, but the views are worth it: to my right the vast, shimmering arc of the caldera, to my left the swathes of vineyards and agricultural fields that swoop across the southern half of the island to the sea.

You don't have to be on Santorini long to realise that its past volcanic eruptions affect every aspect of life here. The "soil" on the island is ash, pumice, solidified lava and sand, meaning very little grows, although



Suites at Erosantorini

the island is famous for its tomatoes, fava beans and capers. To my surprise, it is also a big wine-growing destination, with neat rows of vines spreading across the barren, volcanic landscapes. After the walk we call in at the Argyros Estate, a leading winery, where I sip my way through crisp dry whites and hearty reds. The estate is most famous for its 20-year-old Vinsanto — unctuous and treacly, and dangerously moreish accompanied by chunks of dark chocolate.

In between the walking and the sunsets and the wine tasting, my island retreat is Erosantorini, a super-exclusive bolt hole with four suites and a caldera view that comes with the kind of privacy and space the clustered hotel rooms of Oia can only dream of. From June to September, it's mostly rented for exclusive use, but in the quieter months suites can be booked individually. It's quietly luxurious: meals are bespoke, wine tastings are available in the Bond-esque subterranean tasting room and the suites ooze comfort, with Venetian fabrics and antique mirrors. The food is spectacular: a whole salt-baked sea bass that flakes off the fork, salads thick with salty feta and plump figs, and bottles of the island's signature crisp white wine.

On my last morning Antonis takes me to the village of Pyrgos, the island's former capital and its best-preserved medieval settlement. Winding paths climb upwards, beneath ramshackle houses that have much more charm than sanitised Oia. There are a handful of cafés and restaurants (closed), but little to disturb the sense of history that rests in the quiet streets. Antonis tells me that few cruise-ship tours come to Pyrgos, that in spite of its rich history it's off the mainstream tourist track.

Later, waiting for my flight, I read several reviews of Santorini that describe it as overcrowded, overpriced and overrated. I suspect that if I had visited in high summer, stayed in Oia and did battle with hordes of cruise passengers every time I set foot out of the door, I'd feel the same.

Instead, I found it to be unlike anywhere else in Greece, a pleasingly eccentric island with a strong independent identity. Would I go back? To walk, drink the wine and watch the sunset from a café in Pyrgos, you bet. But only out of season.

Need to know

Annabelle Thorpe was a guest of Erosantorini (00 30 211 0129 116, erosantorini.com), which has suites from £589 a night B&B in low season. Less expensive off-season accommodation can be found on santorini.com. Santorini Walking Tours (santoriniwalkingtours.com) offers private and group hikes (a four-and-a-half hour Caldera hike costs €75pp/£67pp). Easyjet (easyjet.com) flies from Gatwick to Santorini from about £66 return



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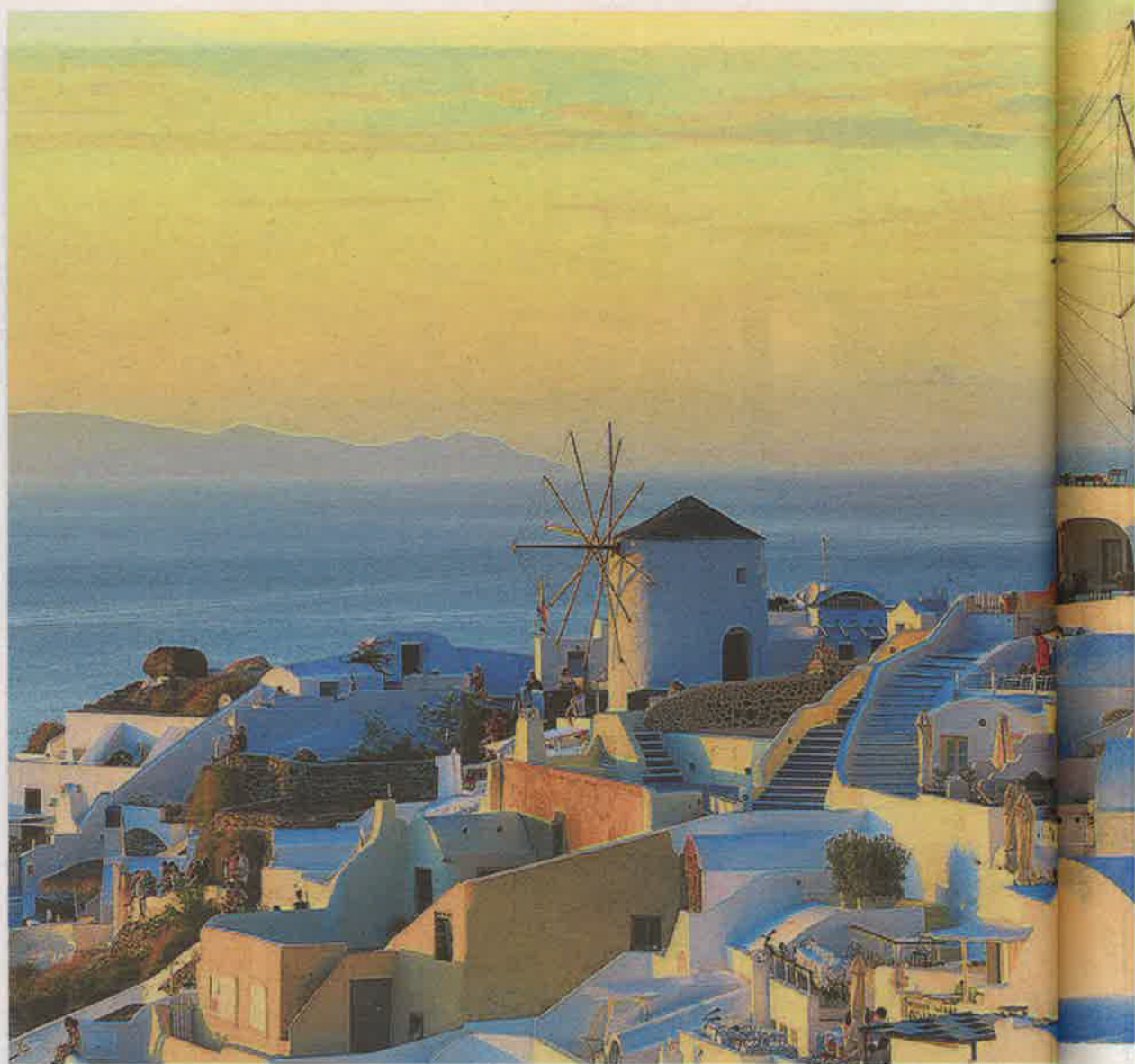
Greece

See Santorini's sunset without the crowds

The Greek island is best visited out of season, when the summer rush is over, says

Annabelle Thorpe

It's a strange experience, walking through Oia. This is my first visit to Santorini, and yet the clustered white houses that cling to the sheer cliffs are so familiar from a thousand brochure covers I feel I've been here before. It's late afternoon, and we're strolling along the town's gleaming marble promenade towards the old Venetian fortress of Agios Nikolaos, the best place to see the island's legendary sunset. There's a handful of other tourists, a few local families, a gaggle of small boys playing football in the square. "Very few visitors ever see Oia like this," Antonis, my guide, tells me. "There are times you can't actually move along this street. It's just one long queue."



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