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Seductive Symi — the quietly

It has secret beaches, historic towns and great restaurants where the A-listers go.

Caroline Phillips discovers little-known Symi

We develop a spring in our step on the island of Symi. No wonder — there are apparently 374 steps from its harbour, Yialos, to our villa. This is according to its owner, George Kalodoukas — an erstwhile sea captain — who sports a moustache that could double for a thatched roof. Regardless of his impressive facial decoration and his impossibly white Panama hat, his maths proves wonky. I count only 278 steps.

As we climb, we pass neoclassical villas of umber and ochre with pointed red-tiled roofs — step 82, huff, puff — while the lights of the amphitheatre harbour of Symi twinkle below. We're entranced by 19th-century mansion ruins with porticos engraved with dates such as 1878 and 1883, and fig trees growing inside. Eventually, we arrive "home" with stinging thighs, and



clamber up more treads to bed. Little wonder property on Symi is valued according to the number of stairs to reach it.

My daughter, Ella, 16, and I are in Symi for a summer holiday. It's one of the closest Greek islands to Turkey — a place of history and halloumi, of mythology and meatballs. It's also one of the smaller and lesser-known Dodecanese islands, especially compared to Rhodes, a mere 22 nautical miles away. It's to this island you need to fly before taking the ferry to Symi.

Unlike Rhodes, Symi is quietly smart. Historically it became wealthy through having sponge-diving rights throughout the Ottoman Empire. (In its quayside shops 2,000 types of mustard, citric and yellow sponges still hang today.) In Yialos now there are €10 cocktails, boutiques selling white linen shirts, and Muses, a restaurant, serving octopus in ouzo cappuccino. Roman Abramovich, Johnny Depp and Naomi Campbell have all been here on their superyachts, but once we climb the steps to our villa in Chorio, we leave behind the 21st century and sophistication.

It's easy to get lost in sun-bleached lanes and lose track of the hours. Time seems to stand still in Symi, and days merge into each other. Every morning the septuagenarian *papas* (Orthodox priest) in traditional black garb, hat and flowing beard,

sits sipping his Greek coffee at the local café until his cat comes to collect him.

"If the harbour's quiet, you know it must be Tuesday, because very few ferries arrive," resident Jill Quayle says. "If there are Greeks visiting, it's definitely a Sunday." The presence of Italians indicates that it's August; Brits, September; and as for the sense of years passing — just witness the ruins: bombed-out buildings that are relics of Germany's attacks on the island in the Second World War.

One day, who knows which one, we take to the turquoise Aegean in a glass-bottomed water taxi, the swell splashing and soaking us as we pass beaches in hidden coves. At St George's, we snorkel in the crystal-clear sea — teeny colourful fish dart between our legs. It's accessible only by boat. Then we lie without a care on its remote pebble beach at the foot of a sheer rock face. There's a clutch of people, a tiny chapel and nothing to disturb our summer idyll. That is, until I turn my head to take a sip from my bottle of water. Suddenly something with horns and testicles the size of Greece is eyeballing me — a goat. Its departing bleats are drowned out only by Ella's gales of giggles.

There are no goats when we take a trip on *Poseidon*, a pleasure boat — just little churches dotted on high coastal rocks to

Need to know

Caroline Phillips was a guest of Kalodoukas Holidays (00 30 22460 71077, kalodoukas.gr), which has self-catering accommodation in Symi. The Original Villa George costs from €100 a night. EasyJet (easyjet.com) flies to nearby Rhodes. For details of ferries scheduled from Rhodes to Symi, see anes.gr

More information
visitgreece.gr

The island of Symi and, below, the 18th-century monastery of Panormitis



smart Greek island

which either donkeys or magicians must have carried the buildings' stones. We stop at St Vasilios for a swim and lunch on a beach shaded by cypress trees. We feast on chicken — baked, incredibly, in the sun and finished on the barbecue — as we gaze at sheep wearing neck bells, and olive trees daubed with white paint up to their mid-ribs. Why wouldn't "hedonism" have its etymological roots in Greek?

The next day our villa owner George takes us out in his battered car, driving out of Chorio past Vespa-scooting holiday-makers wearing shorts and no helmets, through car-scrappingly narrow streets. George bids endless *yasou* (greetings) to all his friends and relations, seemingly everyone on the island.

Soon we're driving through the heartland of the mountainous, arid island, our hearts cheered by Greek music, panoramic views and oregano-scented hot air blowing on to our faces. George regales us with stories. "I came from a family of 10 and my grandmother's uncle lived to 136," he asserts. "I have paperwork to prove this." Then he stops to pick sage for us from the roadside. "It makes tea that's good for everything. It cleans your blood."

We visit the 18th-century monastery of Panormitis — dedicated to the archangel Michael, protector of the island. Here we



discover Orthodox Greek pilgrims, swaying silver lanterns, Byzantine frescoes of saints and flickering beeswax candles, plus waxen effigies of babies and dangling votives of silver body parts. There are also piles of model boats and bottles. "Messages in bottles have been thrown into the sea and have turned up here," George says. "Many of these model ships have also sailed on their own to the monastery."

Afterwards, we lunch in a beach taverna in nearby Marathounda by a farm with persimmon trees. We savour the island's speciality of fried Symi shrimps — the tiniest seafood, gathered in baskets from the deep. It's then that three cheeky goats poke

their heads through the fence on to our table, trying to pinch our lunch.

There's certainly something different and magical about this island. According to Greek mythology, it took its name from the nymph Symi, who had a son with the god Poseidon. It was also the birthplace of the Three Graces. We keep meeting tourists who've been coming back over decades. Call them Symi worshippers. The Olive Tree café is run by two English women. "We've both left the island permanently, three times," laughs co-owner Tina.

There's one little problem, but it has a happy ending. Ella gets sunburnt shoulders. "Put Greek yoghurt on," counsels the lady who sells *matiasma* (evil-eye) charms in the harbour. "It'll take the burn out." It cracks like parched earth, and smells like cheese, but draws the heat from her skin. Aloe vera lotion, your days are numbered.

As for the steps that lead to our villa, we learn to love them. They're the island's most important, widest ones, offering the best vista over the harbour. They're called Kali Strata, which means "good steps". Who am I to disagree? But it's not until the last day of our holiday that I meet someone who shows us how best to climb them. "You must walk up like a donkey," he reveals. "Take the steps at a diagonal." He's right. But is that how a goat would do it?

Island hopping from Symi

Kastellorizo

Like Symi, Kastellorizo boasts a natural horseshoe-shaped harbour and handsome neoclassical mansions. It is one of the smallest Dodecanese islands, and Greece's tiniest permanently inhabited island. Take a water taxi to the Blue Cave (a dazzling, luminous sea cavern) and snorkel in the clear waters. There's also a monastery and castle ruins.

Details Ferries on Wednesdays (Dodecanese Express) or Fridays (Blue Star Ferries) take about three hours. Stay at the harbourside Megisti Hotel (megistihotel.gr), which has great sea views from its 19 rooms, from £60 per night

Tilos

Pygmy elephants disappeared from Tilos 4,000 years ago — although the exhibition about the discovery of the remains of one of these creatures is still on display. The island — which can be visited as a day trip from Symi — is a vast ecological park, with valleys full of wild flowers and more species of bird than on any other Mediterranean island. Plus

there are Byzantine chapels, Crusader castles, a monastery and abandoned village and 19 beaches, some of which can only be reached by boat.

Details The Tilos Star ferry takes one hour and 20 minutes and sails daily

Kalymnos and Telendos

You'll need several days for Kalymnos, the third-largest and most northerly island of the Dodecanese. It has cliffs so vertiginous that climbing boots and a mountaineering spirit are required. The island also has coves, hidden bays and is criss-crossed by verdant valleys. Visit the early-Christian settlement at Ellinika — perhaps the best-preserved settlement in Greece. Known for its history of sponge diving, Kalymnos has shops bursting with these sea treasures. Take a 10-minute water taxi to Telendos, which has no cars, one village and a population of 54.

Details The daily Dodecanese Express catamaran takes two-and-a-half hours. Stay at the Hotel Philoxenia (philoxenia-kalymnos.com) from about £40, B&B