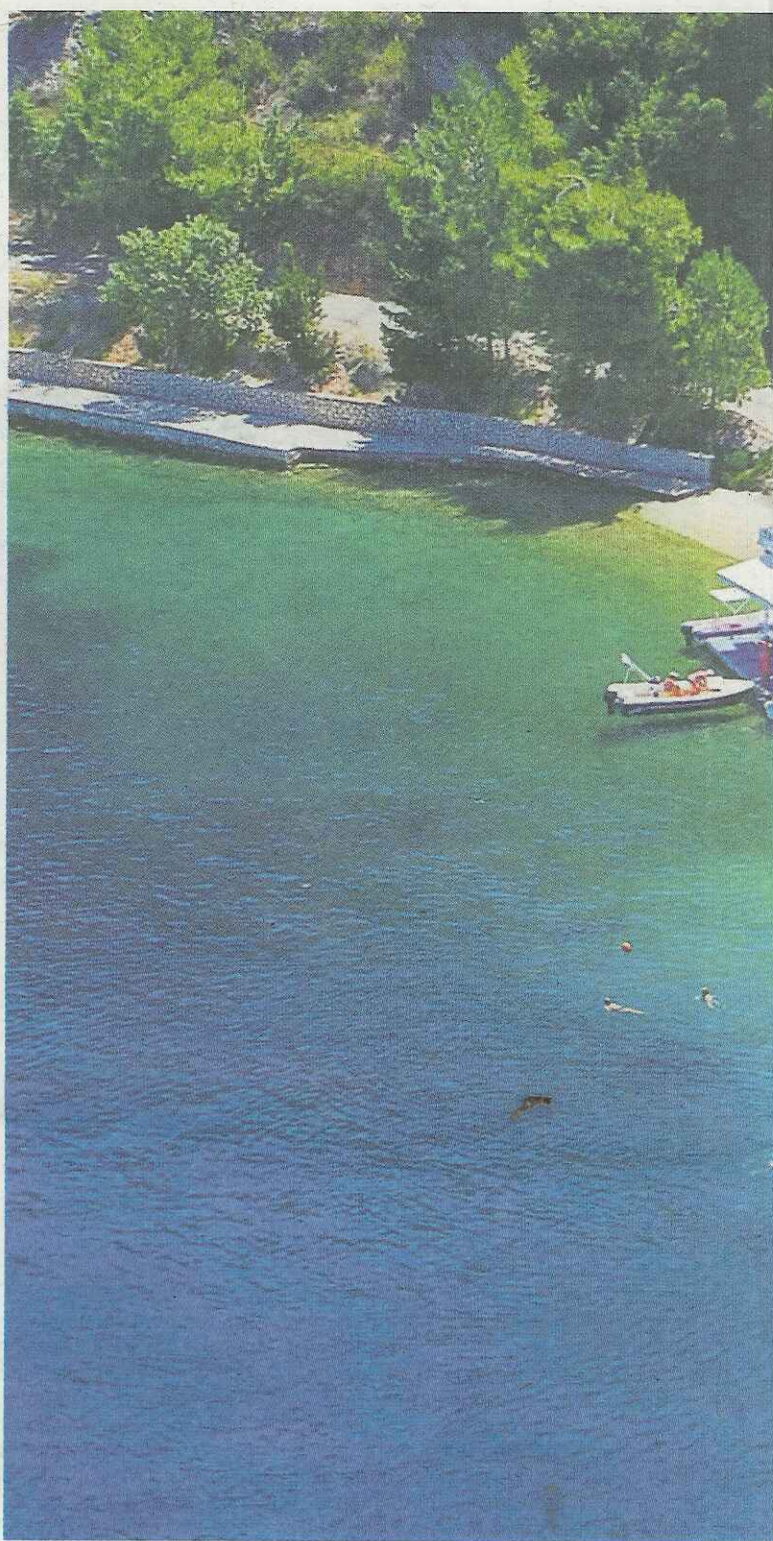


## Mediterranean

Sea, sand and solitude  
— welcome to  
Greece's secret island

Idyllic Meganisi in the Ionian Islands is luring the rich and famous but remains firmly off the tourist radar, writes **Caroline Phillips**



Above, one of Meganisi's unspoilt beaches, inset right, a roadside chapel in Port Vathy, and above right, Villa Alexandra

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It's a place of Olympian beauty where emerald isles rise languidly out of a patchwork turquoise and wine-dark sea. But my two teenagers and their friends disregard this scenery that's fit for the gods. Instead they are focusing on our fellow passengers. One has his wedding anniversary tattooed on his arm. "31.12.07 Mrs Fox" it reads. The other is Mrs Fox, Billie Piper, in our water taxi with her family. It's fitting that such hipsters are holidaying here on the island of Meganisi, off the west coast of Greece. Not since Odysseus fought the cyclops to get back to Ithaca have people been as keen to visit the Ionian Islands.

The emir of Qatar recently snapped up six uninhabited islands; designer Marc Newson is building on Ithaca, and last year the daughter of the potash oligarch Dmitry Rybolovlev bought Skorpios — formerly Aristotle Onassis's private island. Oprah, Spielberg, Madonna and Armani all cruise the region's waters in their megayachts. British banker Lord Rothschild has nabbed an 8km stretch of Meganisi's 22 sq km and is planning summer homes for family and friends, including the sculptor Sir Anish Kapoor.

We arrive in Meganisi (population about 1,200) via Preveza, a tiny airport on the mainland. Will the four teenagers survive here for a week? "I can live with its not having a dentist, but no hairdresser? Do you think they cut each other's hair?" wonders an appalled Secondborn Teen.

It's a land of sheep's milk and Greek honey where the internet connection is unreliable, the mobile signal variable and traditional values still hold. It's a place for beach holidays, nature lovers and time travellers looking to voyage backwards, but not too far. "Even the financial crisis hasn't really come here," says the driver of Meganisi's only taxi.

There are white and lemon buildings nestling prettily against a fertile backdrop of cypress and olive trees in Vathy port. Our villa overlooks it. "They've got a bar

### Need to know

Caroline Phillips was a guest of Ionian Holidays (020-8459 0777, [ionianislandholidays.com](http://ionianislandholidays.com)), which has seven nights' self-catering in the three-bedroom Villa Alexandra with flights and car hire from £566pp, based on six sharing in May. Cooking lessons cost €45pp.

down there," remarks Firstborn Teen — and there's a collective teenage sigh of relief that it's not Hades. We are on a fault line, though, and there are tremors every few months. Today, the bells of the Greek Orthodox church on the marina clang lethargically, like discordant saucepans, and the flat sea dozes under an August sun almost strong enough to roast a goat on a spit.

In Vathy village they've pressed "rewind" then "pause" on Time's winged chariot. Yes, the super-wealthy come here with their super-yachts and fancy Versace-decorated helicopters, but they land on a helipad that is merely the town hall's car park of hosed-down sand. People leave the doors of their homes unlocked, a memory of a gentler era. They leave their cars with the windows open (for natural air conditioning) and the keys in the ignition.

Shopping entails time travel too. When we buy basic provisions, the shop owner, Nicos, makes us a present of a bottle of wine and a jar of local honey. He takes us to his wife's gift shop — but only because he doesn't accept credit cards. She hasn't got a machine but quaintly rubs a Biro over the credit-card slip to make an impression of our spending. "Island life," she explains.

Even the locals come from a different era. Everywhere there are islanders seemingly auditioning for the Second Coming — with wild hair and full beards to a man. I seek out 104-year-old Mrs Kiria Lefki, reportedly the oldest resident.

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There are several black-garbed women with sun-creased faces gossiping in front yards who look a century old. Later they sit in rapt attention by the marina when a sailing boat anchors. Its crew enact the tale of Odysseus enchantingly, with mermaids on board and its lights powered by a pirate on a bike.

We settle happily into life on the island — despite Meganisi's lack of obvious teenage attractions — and hours soon stretch seamlessly into undifferentiated days. The kids give up on attempts at Facebook; playing on water is what life is about here. We take out a 50hp speedboat, a mere sardine can beside the Russians' water-borne summer palace anchored by Skorpios. "Which way's Mykonos party town?" asks Teen's Friend, hopefully.

Instead we bounce around hidden bays and swim to the beach pulling our picnic sandwiches through the water in a sealed bin bag — pure Famous Five. Dolphins play beside us; later we snorkel and collect sea urchins. (Who was it told us it's the season to eat their roe?) Our 1950s day is not even marred by the sight of a corpulent

German sailing his boat in the nude. Later, we head off for a cookery lesson in Hotel Meganisi — a 15-minute drive from Vathy — with its Dionysian owner Dmitri and his wife Christina. It's a surprising hit — possibly on account of the way Dmitri smokes heroically in the kitchen. He oozes carpe diem spirit, leading us amiably to the quayside to pick up "sargos, rofos and fagri". (One of these fish

proves to be a grouper with a mouth big enough to swallow a tennis ball.) Cigarette in mouth, Dmitri lovingly descales and guts the fish in the hotel's kitchen, which has panoramic views, surely better than those enjoyed by Zeus. He chucks the fish bones out of the window for the cats. His work done, he disappears for a three-hour siesta.

Now Christina — wearing neat apron and tights and working hard underneath fans that shift around furnace heat — teaches us to make fish stew. There is no recipe and no weighing — just a bit of this and that, then pour in a bottle of olive oil. The result tastes as delicious as the *kokoretsi* they feed us later — a traditional Greek dish of innards and kidneys

wrapped in intestines, grilled over charcoal. "So good it's banned from the EU," translates the waiter.

Most days, however, after a strenuous morning of the kids turning themselves brown, mahogany and chestnut, we just feast on excellent home-made stuffed vine leaves and the freshest of grilled octopus and squid at Vathy's Family Taverna Stavros overlooking the marina. At €20 (£16.50) a head, it's a bargain. Nikolas (son of Stavros and as cheery as his papa) knocks the octopus off the bill. "I must give you something," he says. "Next time you pay double," he jokes.

Finally, the Teens take to the water at night. They go to nearby Nidri by ferry, returning with the dawn. ("Great club," concludes Secondborn Teen.) They're sleeping off their exertions when I visit Lord Rothschild's private peninsula on Meganisi. It's not an obvious teen magnet anyway. Goats wander across its rough road. Olive groves step down the steep hills and there are plans to grow grapes here. (Taverna Mouton Rothschild, perhaps?)

It looks over the nearby islands of Ithaca, Cephalonia and the endless sea. Far below are bobbing sailing boats. Standing amid the ruins of a chapel and shepherd's hut on his plot, I can hear only the sound of cicadas. No buildings, no people on fabled islands as far as the eye can see. Elysium? Heaven? Olympus? Tick off all three. Who wouldn't fight a cyclops to get here?



## From Tom Hanks to Madonna — who goes where in Greece

### Antiparos

Antiparos in the Cyclades is one of the quainter islands. The main town's single bougainvillea-lined street leads from the small fishing port to a square in the ancient castle. Lined with bars and boutiques, it's the perfect place for people-watching ... you might even see Tom Hanks, who owns a house here. There are no luxury hotels but Kouros Village has comfortable rooms, a harbour view and a decent pool. Seven nights' room only is from £200 in June (booking.com).

### Cephalonia

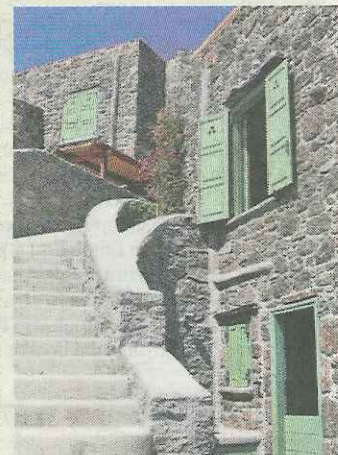
Cephalonia has attracted attention since featuring in Louis de Bernières's *Captain Corelli's Mandolin*. Sex and the City star Sarah Jessica Parker sailed to the island last year in a luxury yacht with husband Matthew Broderick and fellow celebs Jeremy Irons and Sinéad Cusack. You can live the life of a celeb at Villa Kalliste outside island capital Argostoli. It has five bedrooms, a cinema room and a pool with hot tub. Seven nights' self-catering is from £3,200 for ten (homeaway.co.uk/p1068368).

### Santorini

Set around the caldera of a sunken volcano, Santorini, below, is home to tiny villages which hang on the edge of the cliff with the deep blue of the Mediterranean hundreds of feet below. Khloé, Kourtney and



other Kardashians visited last summer and stayed in one of the villas at the Volcano View Hotel (bottom), where the infinity pool has incredible vistas over the lava islands in Santorini Bay. Double rooms start from €75 per night, B&B (00 30 22860 24780, volcano-view.com).



### Mykonos

This Greek island is a celeb magnet: Jon Bon Jovi and Naomi Campbell visited last summer. The party atmosphere starts late afternoon on beaches such as Paradise and Super Paradise, restaurants such as Matsuhisa at the Belvedere Hotel, and clubs that close at sunrise. In Ano Mera, Villa Paradise (above), overlooking the sea, has four en suite rooms, lovely gardens and a maid service. Seven nights' self-catering is from £5,082 for eight (0800 988 5586, villaretreats.com).

### Ithaca

Madonna rocked up on tiny Ithaca last summer for a holiday and declared an interest in buying a holiday home. While you might not have the money of the original Material Girl, Villa Marina is a two-bedroom holiday home in a secluded setting with its own pool and great views out to sea. Seven nights' self-catering is from €700 for four (owners direct.co.uk/greece/GR1913.htm). James Ellis