

TRAVEL

Islands In The Sun

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If you want to holiday with the oligarchs, sheikhs and buhzillaionaires, pick up the phone to Ionian & Aegean Island Holidays and book a trip to a world that's out of this world, says Caroline Phillips.

There's an area so desirable that the masters of the universe are snapping up islands and peninsulas there. The new, must-buy or must-visit place for the richest men on earth is the Ionian. So it's bye-bye to St Trop, Tuscany and the Hamptons and hello to Meganisi - an Ionian island where there's no tourist infrastructure and which only even got mains water and electricity in the Eighties. Are you surprised that that's where the super-wealthy are going?

Well, listen up. If you already own enough camels, Chelsea barracks, Qatar and Al Jazeera, what would you spend your oil money on next? Ionian islands, naturally. In May, the emir of Qatar bought six islands just two miles from Ithaca. (Remember your Homer? Incidentally, Ithaca is also where designer Marc Newson is building a house.) The Sheikh's islands include Oxia - roughly 20 nautical miles from Meganisi and the largest is 1200 acres - and cost a mere £7.35 million. They're uninhabited and he fell upon them when he moored his superyacht nearby.



In April 2013, Aristotle Onassis's granddaughter, Athina Onassis Roussel, sold a 99-year lease on Skorpios - another private island in the Ionian Sea. It went for a snip at £100 million - fortunately the lavish pink villa that the late shipping buhzillaionaire Aristotle Onassis built for Jackie O and the nearby islet of Sparti were also included in the sale. The happy purchaser is Ekaterina Rybolovleva, 24, daughter of Russian billionaire businessman Dmitry Rybolovlev. (The potash man/owner of AS Monaco FC who has a fortune estimated by Forbes at \$9 billion.)

British billionaire banker Lord Rothschild also caught the bug for the region by holidaying in Kensington-on-Sea, as his bit of Corfu is now known. Now he's snapped up 8km of Meganisi - roughly 3500 acres of a peninsula - and the neighbouring 200-acre island of Kythnos. Roman Abramovich and sculptor Anish Kapoor are both keen to build homes on Lord R's Meganisi estate. Enough said. You can't get cooler than Kapoor.



The Ionian is the new, must- buy or must-visit place for the richest men on earth.

History is repeating itself. Onassis could have bought anywhere in the galaxy - and snapped up Skorpios. Niarchos bought Spetsopoula, a small island off Spetsai. Fifty years later, the diamond-

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encrusted wheel has turned full circle – this little spot in the Ionian is turning again into the epicentre of the jet-set world.

Now Tom Hanks, Spielberg, Abramovich, Bill Gates and Madonna cruise its waters on super yachts – the £200,000 to £700,000-a-week type. Little wonder. It's one of the lovelier places in the universe (or certainly Europe) for sailing.

And what of Meganisi, the place that Lord R has selected as his little bit of paradise? (Or Tafioussa as the island was known in the Odyssey.) It's where Aristotle Onassis visited in the Sixties, alongside Maria Callas, Winston Churchill, and Jackie O – who went for ouzo and appetizers at the local tavernas in Vathy.

Go to Meganisi and you'll find a place lost in time. You'll reach it by boat from Nidri, passing Skorpis on the way. It's small (just 9 sq km) with just 1041 inhabitants. It is little developed and is home to a lot of sheep and olive trees. Not hooked yet? Ah, but you will be.



The island is as naturally beautiful, secluded and unspoiled as it gets – one of the great and untouched parts of Greece. There are pebble beaches and ones like finest sugar crystals and waters so clear you can see forever, hidden bays and enough privacy to deter even the most determined paparazzi. There are wild green valleys, steep cliffs honeycombed with caves only accessible by boats, secret coves and ooh-ah views from the top of Lord R's peninsula over to the mainland. The locals are also incredibly friendly – call it 'philoxenia' (friendliness to strangers)...they do.

The most wow! villas weren't available before for rental. But because of the crisis, top properties are coming onto the open market. Alexandros Matsukis – director of Ionian & Aegean Island Holidays and market leader in renting out villas on the sort of islands on which the big boys have set their sights – is picking up the best. His villas currently have locations that would turn Zeus green with envy, with panoramic views over the endless sea and direct access to almost-private beaches. Book for next year, and Matsukis will be offering ones with splendid interiors, great quality builds and fabbo infinity pools too.

So get there. Go sailing on the aquamarine sea. Take out a speed boat. Whizz around the narrow traffic-free lanes. Sit in a taverna sipping Retsina. See for yourself why Giorgio Armani, Bill Gates and Madonna have been scrambling to buy in the region. And why party time is coming there again.

Caroline Phillips (www.carolinephillips.net) is an award-winning journalist and PR who specialises in luxury brands. She writes for the better nationals and glossier glossies – from Vanity Fair and the Financial Times to everything in between.

Ionian & Aegean Island Holidays Tel: 020 8459 0777 www.ionianislandholidays.com.

- *Ionian Island Holidays are one of the few remaining independent tour operators specialising in the less commercialised areas this beautiful country has to offer.*
- *Ionian Island Holidays are celebrating 11 years of operation offering quality holidays to Greece.*
- *November 2011 & 2012 Ionian Island Holidays were awarded the "Best Independent Tour Operator to Hellenic Europe" at the British Travel Awards voted by Travel Agents and the general public.*
- *Their impressive portfolio offers a choice of over 200 diverse properties which include villas with pools, waterside apartments & boutique hotels in the Ionian & Aegean.*