

LODESTARS

ANTHOLOGY

GREECE



THE FAIR ISLE

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Embracing sunsets and slow living in Santorini.

Scarped cliffs plummeting into azure waters, whitewashed houses and scented garden terraces cleaving to the rocks, Miro-blue domed churches, black-sand beaches, pastel sunrises and burnished-gold sunsets: this is an island of drama and romanticism, myth and legend, colour and light, wild beauty and opulence.

Most of you will be acquainted with Santorini's picture-perfect charms. Perhaps from a postcard sent by honeymooners, a spread in a glossy magazine or an Insta selfie with just a hint of dormant volcano or iconic windmill in the backdrop. And when you do visit this island (for you absolutely must) we promise that it's all quite true, for no less than utter in-your-face gorgeousness is exactly what you'll find.

Some believe that Santorini was Plato's inspiration for the legend of the lost city of Atlantis: while this may never be verified, what is known is that around 1600 BC, a catastrophic volcanic eruption sunk the centre of a larger round island into the Aegean Sea, leaving what is now known as Santorini - or *Thera/Thira* in local parlance - its villages clinging to a line of pitched hills and rocky promontories around three edges of a cauldron.

If you're seeking rest and relaxation, we highly recommend starting your trip with a stay at Andronis Concept near Imerovigli village. This sleek hotel

is a far cry from the bijou abodes and guesthouses more commonly found across the island, with a calming curved concrete exterior and interiors that meld traditional Greek simplicity with high-end luxury, its palette inspired by the pale greys, tawny browns and putty pinks of the volcanic landscape that surrounds it.

Wellness is at the heart of Concept, a theme that weaves through everything on offer here, be it geared toward mind, body or soul. Start your day with yoga and a cool-down in the cave shower, breakfast by the pool before heading for a treatment in the hotel's spa, and then retire to your private terrace (each room boasts a pool, most with breathtaking views of the caldera to the west and acres of Aegean to the east) and take a dip while waiting for your Greek salad topped with punchy capers and a feta mousse as light as air to be delivered.

At the hotel's poolside restaurant, Throubi (named for a local herb with therapeutic properties), the modern menu is designed by head chef, Pavlos Kiriakidis, in tandem with nutritionist, Margarita Gavala, with much of its fare coming from the hotel's kitchen garden. Highlights included locally-grown fava with cuttlefish and wild greens, guinea fowl slow-cooked in wine and served with dry-aged soft cheese, wholemeal spaghetti with sea urchin and ouzo, and *trabana* (a soup inspired by an ancient recipe of kibble and whey) with wild mushrooms and

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smoked cheese. Begin with a sparkling toast to the sun as it sets in a pastel riot over that flawless sea, have the sommelier select wines to match your courses - anything white and crisp from Gavalas or one of the island's other mineral-rich wineries is sure to delight - and then finish off with a trio of bitter chocolate delights and you'll be reassured that healthy eating can also be delectable.

For a helping of food for the soul, Concept is set just off the caldera's clifftop path, so energetic guests may like to walk the famed trail from cosmopolitan Fira up to dazzling Oia. This 10-kilometre hike takes in the villages of Firostefani and Imerovigli and plenty of those iconic blue churches and resplendent views along the way. Herewith a confession, in that we didn't actually do this hike ourselves, but we hope that the facts of one of us being heavily pregnant and the other being obsessed with photographing toy-sized boats tacking across the water far below seem reasonable enough excuses.

After a few days decompressing in this quiet corner of the island you'll probably be ready to hit Santorini's most famed spot: lively little Oia, where those picture-perfect scenes you've seen before most likely came from. In contrast to the natural understated beauty and calmness of Imerovigli, Oia is all pouty-lipped, flicky-haired, bejewelled gorgeousness and it's great fun.

Oia's pretty whitewashed buildings jigsaw across the hillside, petite terraces, restaurants and shops all butted up against one another. Space is the ultimate luxury in this pocket of paradise and for this you'll want

to head a little way out of the village to Arcadia - another lavish offering from the Andronis group - where it's available in bags.


Named for the harmonious and enchanting mythical home of the god Pan, Arcadia (with its pale concrete floors, soft-pink plaster stucco finishes and accents of traditional white, sand and blue) takes inspiration from the Greece of old. At in-house restaurant, Opson, the menu is created around ingredients from the ancient Hellenic land, with nods to archaeology, literature and art offering up such sublime combinations as: 'Meeting of the Ionian, Aegean & Black Seas' (herby langoustine tartare with black caviar), 'Oriental Trades' (quail with cracked wheat and flavours of coriander and dates), 'From Afar' (soft lentils with coriander, honey-vinegar, olive oil and sea salt) and, joy of joys, 'Homer's Wine-Dark Sea' (calamari in black ink with fresh fennel).

For groups seeking an *uber*-luxe experience there's the Eden Villa, with space for twelve, two pools, a kitchen larger than our entire London flat and its own spa room. But there's plenty here for those with more modest budgets too. All of the villas and suites have their own plunge pools, but for the ultimate loafing situation we recommend you park yourself on a bed jutting out over the resort's infinity pool (the island's largest) with a view of the Aegean or curl up in a shady nook, paddling over to the pool bar for a freshly-squeezed juice every now and again.

Come sunset, avoid the scrum at Oia and enjoy a massage at the Evexia Spa followed by preprandials on your private terrace. Only once the silvery



Interiors - Andronis Arcadia



moon is dancing high over the sea and dusk has seen off the ballgown-clad, stick-wielding selfie-seekers is it safest to saunter up the hill, walk along the marble promenade in a balmy breeze and meander through the narrow passages around the castle, dropping in to Atlantis Books for a browse before heading for Lycabettus Restaurant for dinner.

Just before we take the 80 or so steps down to Lycabettus' bougainvillea-scented terrace, let's take a moment to nose about the tome-lined caves of Atlantis Books. The tale of how this glorious little bookstore came to be, like that of many good independent bookshops the world over, is one of love, impulsiveness and bravery, with a good dash of bookish eccentricity and drunkenness. As founders Oliver and Craig write: "We found an empty building in Oia, drank some whiskey, and signed a lease. We found a dog and a cat, opened a bank account, built some shelves and filled the place with books."

And that's not even the half of it! Sadly there's not room in these pages for even the novella version of Atlantis' tale but here are some further tempting snippets: its two cave rooms are packed to the rafters with new and second-hand titles including some seriously lust-worthy hardback first editions; they refused to stock *Fifty Shades of Grey* and instead steer would-be readers to a 'sexy books' section featuring the likes of Georges Bataille, James Salter and Anaïs Nin; and the staff occasionally sleep in bunks in the walls amidst the works.

With a bagful of books stashed under the table, take your seats for supper on the terrace at Lycabettus, acknowledged as the island's most romantic dinner setting. We can't promise you'll be fortunate enough to be treated to a stunning display of fireworks flying like lava out of the volcano over the water - we happened to be there the night of the annual Ifestia Festival, which marks the island's volcanic heritage - but you'll be so delighted by its fare (cold soup with creamy ricotta ice-cream and fresh green apple, Dover sole with white asparagus, wild-herring caviar and oyster sauce, and slow-cooked peach with verbena gel and a heavenly moscato sorbet are just some of its highlights) and so bewitched by the countless stars twinkling over Amoudi Bay that you won't mind at all.

When you're planning your trip to Greece, do be inspired to visit Santorini, even if you just hop on a ferry from a neighbouring island for a day-trip. If you're staying for more than a few nights, you might like to add the picturesque town of Megalochori with its tiered bell towers, winding alleys and shaded squares, or a visit to one of the island's wineries to your itinerary too. So, is Santorini really as magical as those postcards, glossy spreads and selfies promise? It's a resounding 'yes' from us. And whenever or however a trip becomes a possibility, we urge you to visit and bask in the magic of this fair isle.

andronisarcadia.com
andronisconcept.com
atlantisbooks.org
lycabettusrestaurant.com

