

# GAYTIMES

TRAVEL

## A Room With A View. Okay, a cave.

Inside Santorini's hidden world of luxury

BY SIMON GAGE + STEPHEN UNWIN

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'Sexy car for sexy guys!' says Alex with the asymmetric silver hair and deep chestnut tan as he explains how to open the door of the sleek white Tesla that has come to take us to Andronis Boutique, perhaps the original smart hotel on Santorini.

The funny thing about certain Greek islands is that to the naked eye they look all kinds of pretty with their regulation white-box houses balancing on rocks over a sea that really is a different colour, but there's always a sort of scratchiness to proceedings. But, chip away, and underneath that *Wish You Were Here* patina there is a level of glamour that is delicious and moreish and kept just - just - out of sight.



Take Mykonos, a kind of companion island to Santorini, where people – gay men in particular – often have a week of crazy before retiring to this island, where the pace is less hectic, to recover. There the winding streets may look typical and picturesque but look at the shops: Halston, Gucci, Fiorucci doesn't even begin to cover it.

It's the same with Santorini, especially Oia, the town perched on the side of a drowned volcanic crater – the Caldera – that gives the whole island its identity: if you've seen a picture of Santorini, it's from here with buildings seemingly tumbling down into the sea. It's the sort of place you can't stop taking pictures of... if only those other people taking pictures would get out of the way.



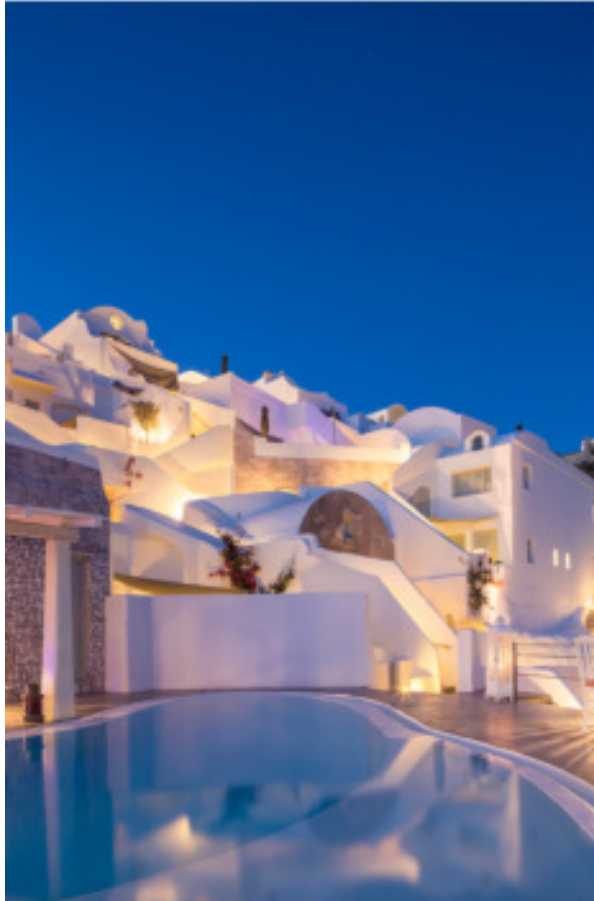
The winding no-cars-because-it's-not-wide-enough main street of Oia is dotted with little boutiques (big-name designers very much available) giving a sweet, almost made-up impression, like the whole thing has been built in a studio and perfectly lit for a big-budget movie. But, just off that quaint street, the real glamour begins. And it is literally through a waist-high gate from that street.

Andronis Boutique is built sort of upside down. Through that gate you'll find a little outdoor reception lounge with a view over the sea, where sweet sparkling wine is served to get you through the ordeal of signing your name on a piece of paper, then it's downhill all the way. We're talking literally.



'You're lucky, you're just one floor down,' says the nice Romanian girl as she sets off down the stone stairs with our key, the sky right there in front of you, through the bougainvillea, 'if you want to go down to the pool or the restaurant or the bar...' Yes, we do! 'There are 95 steps.' So not exactly accessible if you don't have a good pair of legs or lungs? 'There's nothing we can do,' she says with a shrug. 'There's nowhere to put a lift.'

Because this place has been here since time immemorial, though not as a luxury hotel. Our suite, through a little courtyard with a bubbling little Jacuzzi seemingly carved out of the rock, is basically, well, carved out of the rock, a former fisherman's cave. That means the light comes in the front and then you go back, back, back until you get to a Flintstones-style bathroom in the rear, far from any window. Seems strange but, with the heat hitting 35 degrees before you've even gone down for breakfast, the cool dark interiors soon become a refuge, something you look forward to going back to.



Down the steps - we counted slightly less than 95 but you do feel them, especially coming back up after two martinis. Maybe five - we find the bar, hewn out of the cliff, where you can sit up on high stools and look out to sea, and the fanciest restaurant on the whole island, Lauda, where, since 1971 special occasioners and honeymooners have gazed at the boats bolting by while cheeky waiters lay course after course after course of international-standard dishes on fancy crockery in front of them. The pool is there, the sea is there and the light wind knows just how to ruffle your hair.

During the day, this is poolside proper, with sunloungers where the tables-for-two are in the evening (a Santorini-fan friend warned us of the honeymoon-heavy atmos and she wasn't wrong: even we, just mates, get red roses as we sit down to dinner). Over there, in another cave-like spot, all silver and white Louis XIV-style furniture mixed and matched with sun-bleached woods, is the breakfast nook, while if you wanted a private dip, there's a second pool just beyond the first one where couples go to canoodle.



Mixing and matching the high style of Andronis Boutique with regular spots just past that gate is all part of the buzz (the best souvlakis on the whole island can be had a minute's walk away, even if you do have to stand up to eat them) because there's just something about the high/low of being here, and we're not just talking about those steps.

Oia is cartoon-cute, the blues round here need a neologism to do them any kind of justice, and everyone - from the avuncular bistro owners to the very-nice-ladies leaning out of tiny boutiques selling friendship bracelets that make your suntan pop - are cheeky and friendly and not even in a screw-the-tourists kind of way. But, if you know where to look, maybe through a little waist-high gate... it's a whole other world.

[andronis.com](http://andronis.com)