

Postcard from Greece

The ferry journey from Athens to the Cyclades group of islands in the southern Aegean Sea is postcard Greece spectacular. Reflected sun rays dance in pools of intense azure atop an opaque ocean. Sunlit alabaster-white houses glimmer against rocky island cliff faces, while the ebb and flow of the Aegean sings ancient mariner's songs

It's about a six-hour sail to Mykonos, neighbor to Paros, Naxos, Andros, Siros, and Santorini.

The ferry stops briefly at Naxos. It is a most worthwhile stop; the unusual greenness of this fertile island (an oxymoron amongst islands so arid) is all at once calming, as is the beauty of the Venetian port architecture. Here also, a harried vendor quickly boards the ferry to sell chunks of Naxos nougat, a local delicacy. He hands it out using tissue paper. My friend and I buy several pieces and savor the chewy, creamy goo on the remaining half hour of our journey. Never mind the mesmerizing Aegean, the nougat is all too preoccupying.

Ahead, Mykonos springs forth white-upon-white. More classic postcard Greece: Cubical whitewashed houses and churches marked by sky-blue and blood-red doors and domes cluster together around a harbor. We disembark the ferry and suddenly pension and hotel reps have engulfed us singing out, "Come with me, Come with me." We go with a young girl who has convinced us that her mother's pension is cheap and clean and within walking distance of the Chora (town). It is, and we are happy.

Once an extremely poor island whose inhabitants scratched a living out of rocks and soil so forbidding, Mykonos now thrives as the most popular of the Aegean islands. Over the summer months it's the hot destination for Europe's gorgeous gay crowd who strut their stuff on the beaches during the day and in the evening, promenade the Chora esplanade wearing the very latest Gaultier. The local folk appear unfazed by the influx of affected European boys, but instead seem quite entertained by the colorful tourists.

Tourism has upset the traditional rhythm of life here, but still there is a rhythm. Every morning, long before daybreak, the local fishermen leave port in their brightly painted boats to retrieve their lines and nets. By 7.30 a.m., returned seafarers and local farmers gather on the quay to do business. Mykonos market is a flurry of activity, bartering, color, and distinctive aromas. Bright crimson geraniums, wild-pink carnations, sun-yellow daisies, basil and staple vegetables, fresh fish and octopus, pungent goat cheese, fetas and crusty breads all spill from woven baskets, trays and rickety tables. Agitated donkeys stand by carrying the burden of extra produce in baskets slung over their backs, while stray cats run frenzied between legs, meowing for fish-gut scraps. By mid-morning the market breaks, and the men congregate in groups, seating themselves at one of the many cafes lining the esplanade to tell tales of the sea while drinking thick, bitter-sweet coffee.

Behind the esplanade, the Chora hunkers down against the wind and the sun into a confusing maze of flagstone alleys that wind every which way. White houses with blue balconies festooned with flowering fuchsia vines blend into storefronts, sweet shops, bars and tavernas. Ouzo, the national licorice-flavored aperitif, is ceremoniously consumed on Mykonos around sunset at

tavernas and ouzeries in Little Venice (so called because it's the artists' quarter of Mykonos).

Facing east, this small enclave of neo-classical, three-story homes and chi-chi cafes religiously watches over a glorious setting sun, changing color as the alabaster white catches the burnt orange glow.

In the mid eighteenth century, Little Venice was home to rich merchants and sea captains who built houses unlike the rest of the Chora. In particular, the homes are tall and narrow and situated right on the water with sea-doors at sea-level that open up to courtyards that lead to underground storerooms. One theory has it that Mykonos, rather than attempting to fend off attacking pirates in the seventeenth century, eventually became a haven for pirating, where caches of loot were transferred to the underground storerooms via Little Venice's sea-doors.

Beyond the clustered dwellings of the Chora are the beaches and the meltemi. A cooling wind from Northern Europe, the meltemi blows constantly. In summer it picks up, sometimes being blown out by the sirocco, a hot wind from the Sahara. There are sheltered beaches to escape the wind, some within walking distance from the Chora, the best being located far enough away that a moped is required to get there. Though even on the sheltered beaches, the meltemi is always present.

It's easy to establish island rhythm on Mykonos, but apart from the hedonistic routine of sun, sand, food and wine, there is extraordinary antiquity waiting to be explored on the nearby island of Delos. Just one nautical mile south, Delos is a vast archeological site, a Pompeii without the ash. From a flight of stone steps you reach the highest point on Delos, Kynthos hill. At 368 feet,

the Chora of Mykonos is clearly visible -- the modern Greek isle village, pulsating with color, vitality and life, echoing the spirit of Greece, born in the ancient ruins below.