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A SHINING ARC IN THE AEGEAN

By CHRIS HEDGES

THE beauty of the Greek islands lies in the light, unlike any other in Europe. It is fiercer, stronger, sharper and silhouettes the mountains and the whitewashed houses in stark razorlike patterns against the sky. The sun plays havoc with the nooks and crags of the ocher landscape, tossing out long shadows that ripple across the arid soil. It turns the sea from opal in the morning to sapphire to gold, to silver and finally to dross before descending swiftly in a bright red ball.

It is the light of sculptors, not painters, who love the soft diaphanous hues and tones of Italy or France. Out of that light came not only the great statues of ancient Greece and the long, clean lines of the Parthenon, but the precise vocabulary for abstract ideas that gave birth to Western philosophy. The light is all. And in the Cycladic Islands it remains, along with the sea, a primal and overpowering element of daily life.

Of the many islands that lie scattered off the southern tip of Greece, perhaps none is more famed for its beauty than Santorini. Its present shape, an arch surrounding the volcanic peaks of Palaia Kameni and Nea Kameni pushing up out of the sea, was formed 3,500 years ago when an eruption wiped out all life on the island along with all the cities on Crete, obliterated in the towering wall of water that followed. About three-quarters of the land mass of Santorini vanished. Plato believed that it was the lost Atlantis. Today the island, 63 miles north of Crete, has a land mass of 30 square miles and 13,000 inhabitants in about a dozen villages. The population swells in summer, so that parts of the island are crowded and traffic clogs the narrow streets.

The rain of lava and ash that fell over the landscape for at least four days and blotted out the sun can be seen in the red, gray and brown layers in the cliffs that plunge dramatically some 900 feet into the sea. The eruption formed the caldera, the sparkling water-filled crater, seven miles across, that rests in the outstretched arms of the island that is now a harbor. The volcano, still active, huffs gently in the center of the caldera, its sulfurous jets spitting out from the porous rocks. There was a series of heavy eruptions from 1925 until 1950 that threw molten rocks into the night sky. The bays of the islands of Palaia Kameni and Nea Kameni have hot springs, popular with tourists, heated by the activity brewing beneath the water.

Certainly an advanced civilization -- a worthy precursor to ancient Greece -- was destroyed, as

can be seen from the archaeological excavations on the island. The magnitude of the event haunts the island, from the ancient pottery shards found along the beaches to the layers of volcanic rock.

But that said, there are two Santorinis, each very different. One is for the backpacking, beer-guzzling students who in summer turn the capital Fira into a gigantic fraternity party until dawn and then crash in self-induced stupors on the black sand of the beaches of Perissa and Kamari. Fira has the feel of many such towns along the Greek coastline where developers have not been kept at bay, too many buses clog the streets and cruise ships disgorge thousands of sunburned tourists at regular intervals.

The beauty here has been marred by too many hostels and bars and the detritus of tourism, aided by the expansion of the local airport in the early 1990's that permits direct charter flights. Hotels and villas line the beaches of Kamari and Perissa. Tourism was down about 20 to 30 percent when I visited last July, and local authorities say it should be about the same this summer.

Fira is cheap and it looks it. It must be hard to sleep there, given the heavy nocturnal activity. Bars don't close until after the sun comes up. When I left for the airport shortly after dawn, having spent a week on the island, young men and women were still drinking in the central plaza or just beginning to saunter home. It looked like Florida during spring break.

But the other Santorini is quiet, refined and centered on the northern town of Oia, where the town fathers had the foresight to prohibit live music, keep the bars to a minimum and create zoning laws that catered to a different clientele. Most important, they did not allow the local population to be driven out. Oia is the most beautiful town on the island, and each night hushed tourists gather on the ramparts of a 13th century castle that was built by the Venetians to watch for pirates.

Through tourism, the town has recouped the prosperity it had in the late 19th century when it was a thriving port. The wealthy merchants and captains built large neo-Classical homes out of red and black stones, with large verandas overlooking the sea. Many were heavily damaged in the 1956 earthquake. The modest, traditional homes built by the sailors on the island were barrel-roofed caves hacked out from the pumice. Long, narrow and with vaulted roofs, they are hundreds of years old.

The main street of Oia, Marmara (marmaro means marble), was paved in the 19th century with white marble flagstones. The street still separates these two quarters, of the sailors and fishermen and the elite. But all was in sad repair until 1976 when the Greek government began to restore historical and tourist sites.

The work in Oia was supervised by Voula Didoni, an architect who protected the harmony and beauty that makes Oia the crown jewel of Santorini. In the last two decades, most buildings have been lavishly refurbished as vacation houses and rental villas, and Oia is one of the most fashionable vacation spots in Greece.

In this village with fewer than 1,000 people, I saw mostly older couples. They strolled along the narrow, smooth marble street, past the white-washed cubes and blue domes or sat holding hands in the cafes. Oia's jewelry and carpet shops are pricey, as are the restaurants that serve until after midnight.

But repose was what I sought. And in Oia it was possible to find privacy and solitude, as well as unmarred vistas of the sea. I had time to read, bask in the sun and dine on two meals a day of fresh bread and coffee and, late in the afternoon, fresh fish, tomato salad and the slightly bitter and inexpensive white wine that is the hallmark of the island. The cuisine is simple, consisting mostly of fresh fish, olives, bread and tomatoes.

SANTORINI is desolate. Its arid soil offers little other than tomatoes, eggplant and grapes, and even then the vines grow no more than a foot from the ground. They are kept low to the soil to absorb the dew as there is no rain for at least six months. The fresh branches are plaited in autumn between the older branches, making the vines look like upturned wicker work. This formation protects the plants from the winter storms. Most of the men on the island made their living as sailors or fishermen, although tourism is now the largest industry.

The sun in summer is as unforgiving as it is beautiful. Shade was hard to find in July and the town shut down in the blistering waves of heat each afternoon. There were slopes outside Oia on the walk down to the beach where under foot I was able to scoop up ancient pottery shards, some with black lines of paint slashed across the ocher chunks. I steered clear of the major tourist spots and was willing to walk, so I always found desolate stretches of rocky coast where I spread out my towel, smothered myself in powerful sunscreen and read away the day. The rocks on most of the coast line are large and uneven but the water is clear and inviting..

I stayed in a whitewashed villa carved out of the rock that belonged to Triantafyllos Pitsikalis, a former Greek seaman, who owns the Chelidonia Traditional Villas with his Austrian wife, Erika Moechel-Pitsikalis, and their three boisterous boys. My villa was simple and clean, with a small kitchen, sitting room, domed bedroom and two patios with umbrellas and tables -- one completely out of public view -- that looked over the caldera. It had a new air-conditioner, and although it was smaller than others, it had more privacy. None are much larger than a one-bedroom apartment in Manhattan. It cost about \$130 a night.

Each morning, I had my coffee with fresh bread and honey on the patio. I heard nothing but the noisy chatter of seabirds. I made my own breakfasts and usually ate a late supper at one of the fish restaurants.

There is no shortage of places to stay on the island, up to the exclusive Tsitouras complex outside of Fira where rooms cost more than \$600 a night. And there is no shortage of unscrupulous booking agents who, for 30 or 40 percent commission from equally unscrupulous villa owners, will park you in an overpriced, dingy room. I found the Chelidonia Traditional Villas through friends who had stayed there. It is best to deal directly with owners or rely on guidebooks with establishments that have been checked out in advance.

I loved the simplicity and intimacy of the Chelidonia villas, as well as the care taken by the owners over detail, despite their keeping a respectful distance. When I needed a new clothesline, Erika told her husband to make sure it could be taken down so as not to mar the view.

"Erika," he intoned, "This is Greece. He doesn't need one that can be taken down."

But when I came home that night, after walking the five-mile ridge from Oia to Fira, I noticed it indeed had hooks so that, when not in use, the line could be removed.

Chilling out on a volcanic island in the Aegean

Where to Stay

During the off-season, in the fall and spring, rates at villas drop by about 25 percent.

At Chelidonia Traditional Villas, (30-22860) 71287, fax (30-22860) 71649, www.chelidonia.com, the nine villas run by Triantafyllos Pitsikalis and Erika Moechel-Pitsikalis do not have some of the amenities that other more upscale villa complexes have. There is no pool and there are no telephones in the rooms or breakfast or bar service. But the villas offer a good location, efficiency and privacy, as well as a reasonable price. A villa for two costs \$122 to \$170 a day, at \$1.15 to the euro, although the owners prefer that guests stay at least a week. It is possible to negotiate a stay for a few days if space is available. The villas have daily maid service and air-conditioning. Each also has a kitchenette, bathroom and terrace overlooking the caldera.

The 20 units at Fanari Villas, (30-22860) 71007, fax (30-22860) 71235, on the Web at www.fanarivillas.com, are clustered around a small swimming pool with a bar that serves breakfast and a light lunch. It has amenities of most upscale hotels, including color televisions, safe-deposit boxes, coffee makers, hair dryers and kitchenettes, and some rooms have a tub or Jacuzzi. It is located at the tip of Oia, where many tourists gather to watch the sunset. Double rooms run from \$282 to \$308.

Canaves Oia, (30-22860) 71453, fax (30-22860) 71195, www.canaves.com, like Fanari Villas, is a more upscale collection of accommodations. There are about 35 villas overlooking the sea that come closer to traditional hotel service. It has a small pool, a bar and breakfast and lunch service. Tastefully furnished rooms have telephones and minibars. A double runs from \$333 to \$380.

Where to Eat

Restaurant 1800, (30-22860) 71485, www.1800.gr, in Oia, is in an old ship owner's stone mansion built in 1800, with authentic decorations, Mediterranean cuisine, and a roof garden with view of the caldera and sunsets. The price of a meal with wine is about \$52 to \$58 a person. Reservations are required.

Also in Oia, Restaurant Skala, (30-22860) 71362, has a huge terrace with caldera view and a kitchen that uses mostly local products. A meal with wine is about \$23 a person.

Restaurant Sunset, (30-22860) 71614, is at the small fishing port of Ammoudi. The tables are at the pier, and it is very pretty at sunset. It specializes in fresh fish and seafood, and delicious appetizers. Meals are \$23 to \$29 a person with wine.

Cafeteria Pelekanos, (30-22860) 71553, www.pelekanoscafe.gr, is on a terrace with a 360-degree view. It serves coffees, drinks, sweets and light meals. Drink prices average \$8. It has a nice veranda that overlooks the caldera.

There are various simple taverns in Oia, such as Thomas Grill, (30-22860) 71769, which offer meals for economic prices. Souvlaki or chicken (from a coal grill) with potatoes, salad and wine for less than \$12. They pack meals to take out.

Sightseeing

Boat trips, including the sunset tour with Bella Aurora, (30- 22860) 24024, are very pleasant. The boat is a replica of a 19th-century Greek schooner. You board at the Port Athinios at 3:30 p. m. and return about 8; tickets are \$38. Tickets and information about other tours are available at tourist offices.

In Oia, it is worth visiting the Naval Museum, (30-22860) 71156, a restored ship owner's villa in back of town hall. It honors the maritime history of Oia with ship models and old photos. Books about Oia and naval history are available.

Beyond town hall on the way to naval museum, the Traditional Weaving Mill sells handmade carpets and curtains. Visitors can watch girls weaving. The carpets are priced by the meter, at \$16 a meter.

Sigalas Winery, northeast of Oia in the middle of wine fields, is open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. in spring and 10 a.m. to 8 p.m. June through September. A guided walk through the winery with wine tasting is \$4.25; glass of wine, \$2.30; various local cheeses and local specialties, \$3.50 to \$9.25 a plate. CHRIS HEDGES

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