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Enjoying the sea views from a villa atop Santorini

By Philip Hersh | Chicago Tribune reporter
July 13, 2008



The private terrace for the villa at Chelidonia offers views some 250 feet above the Aegean. (Tribune photo by Philip Hersh)

OIA, Greece—Three days after returning from Santorini, my wife grinned as she showed me a magazine advertisement for Greek cruises with a photo of the whitewashed, cliff-side cave houses, blue-domed churches and sea far below that we had just seen.

Finding the picture at that moment was coincidence, but it was hardly a surprise the cruise line had used the signature image of Santorini to lure customers.

Yes, Santorini has become such a time-tested symbol for the Greek islands that it almost is a cliché. The disdain some people express, with no small degree of condescension, for visiting such places once they become well-known reminds me of the wonderfully ironic line in the movie "Atlantic City," when [Burt Lancaster](#) says, "You should have seen the Atlantic Ocean back then."

Having experienced the cliché for four days from the panoramic terrace of a modern cave house at Chelidonia villas, I must say the view is as timelessly stunning as the Atlantic Ocean and as mesmerizing as it must have been in the years before photos and cruise ships made the island a highly popular destination.

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There are hundreds of lodging choices on Santorini, our destination for a June celebration of a 33rd wedding anniversary that fell in August, when I would be at the [Beijing Olympics](#). We narrowed them first by choosing to stay in Oia (pronounced "ee-yah,"), which hugs a crest at the island's northern tip. The quiet (Oia has many restaurants but no discos) and view (enhanced by a decision several years ago to bury all power lines) created an ambience that matched our aims for R&R&R (rest and reading and romance—yes, even after 33 years together.)

My wife then found Chelidonia on the Internet. We were immediately convinced it was the place we wanted by the warm and prompt e-mails owner Erika Moechel-Pitsikali sent as we arranged a reservation for one of the property's nine

accommodations, all cave houses built after the 1956 earthquake that devastated Oia.

Moechel-Pitsikali, an Austrian, and her husband, Triantaphyllos, a native Oian, opened Chelidonia with one villa in 1986 and have added accommodations slowly over the

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years. Three more are under construction.

Our villa proved a perfect blend of comfort and simplicity, neither posh nor lacking in any way. Its private terrace, sitting some 250 feet above the Aegean, provided the most breathtaking view—over the sea, Oia and nearly the entire west coast of the island—I have ever enjoyed from a lodging in the 50-odd countries and 46 states of my travels.

We were so taken by the atmosphere that we chose to utilize the kitchenette and eat nearly all our meals in the villa, a decision that also saved a considerable amount of money. We had a rental car but used it almost exclusively for trips to local swimming spots, all of which you could also reach with 10- to 30-minute walks (steep uphill on return).

The only "scheduled" event for us each day was a stroll to the tip of Oia to join the crowd watching the sun set over the crater of a dormant volcano that reshaped Santorini, with major eruptions about 1650 B.C., A.D. 46 and A.D. 1707. Then we returned to the terrace for dinner as the fading sunlight painted the cave houses in a soft orange tint, and the now shadowy sea turned deeper blue.

CHECKING IN: There is no lobby. You give Chelidonia your arrival information, then call when you arrive in Oia, either by taxi or rental car, and someone comes to meet you and haul bags to the little reception building above the villas. From there, you are guided to your room.

ROOMS: Ours was classified as a suite (more private location than those called villas). It had two bedrooms, one with a double bed, another (which we used) a king, plus a living dining-area with dining table and desk, well-equipped kitchenette with hot plate and electric coffee maker (no oven). Space galore for two adults, workable for four adults. Air conditioner in the main area, which we never needed in June, despite bright sun and 80-degree midday temperatures. Cave houses are naturally cool. Free wireless Internet, with a router in the villa to guarantee good service. No TV.

This is a place to read and gape at the vistas from the terrace, which had an umbrella, deck chairs and chaise longue. Chelidonia's modest Web site (www.chelidonia.com) underplays how beautiful the panoramas are. "We prefer not to have a professionally done site so that visitors will be pleasantly surprised rather than somehow feel disappointed," Moechel-Pitsikali said.

BATHROOM: Small, with a glassed-in stall shower and adequate space for toiletries. Large, fluffy towels. Beach towels provided as well.

PERKS & PEEVES: The peevess are minimal, the perks great. It would be nice if the master bedroom, which has a skylight, also had either a window or way to open the skylight. And having no phone in the room means relying either on Skype via the Internet or walking to the reception area to ask a question.

The terrace views were so spectacular we chose to eat just two restaurant meals (one lunch, one dinner) in four days. (That made us the exception, according to Moechel-Pitsikali, who said 99 percent of guests eat in restaurants.)

The kitchenette allowed us to make dinner from scratch one night. A roasted takeout chicken from Oia Souvlaki (not the souvlaki stand on the bus station square; the one around the corner) provided one dinner and two lunches (be flexible; the day we planned to dine on the chicken, the cook went swimming and didn't start the rotisserie until about 9 p.m.!) We also got carryout from the Thomas Grill. There is a decent market within easy walking distance, an excellent bakery across the street from the market and a butcher about a 10-minute walk.

ROOM SERVICE: None. Daily maid service, with bed linens changed every three days.

OTHER SERVICE: When our coffee maker broke, it was replaced within three hours. When the power went out on a Sunday morning, we learned it was a planned outage for all of Oia, and it went back on just when we were told it would.

KID FRIENDLY: While this is a favored spot for honeymooners, families are welcome. Baby beds are offered.

FITNESS FRIENDLY: From the suite to the main street involved a cardio-challenging climb of 90 steps, which could be just as challenging on the way down. It would be difficult for a person with walking issues and, like all the cliff-side accommodations in Oia, virtually impossible in a wheelchair. Our villa was the lowest, with the most steps to navigate.

BOTTOM LINE: High-season rates range from \$250 to \$375 per night, depending on size of the villa and the exchange rate, now so unfavorable for U.S. visitors that Moechel-Pitsikali felt compelled to apologize. Our villa was 220 euros (about \$360 at the time we were there). Five percent discount for seven nights or more. Minimum three nights for advance reservations; shorter rentals possible at last minute. No credit cards; cash or wire transfers only.

Chelidonia Villas

Oia, Santorini, Greece

e-mail erika@chelidonia.com; www.chelidonia.com

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