

THE WILD ONE

PAMELA GOODMAN DISCOVERS SERIFOS, THE SLEEPY, UNSPOILT ISLAND THE GREEKS LIKE TO KEEP TO THEMSELVES

Serifos. Nope, I hadn't heard of it either. In fact, I am yet to get a glimmer of recognition from anyone to whom I mention its name. I was introduced to this small Greek island in the Cyclades by Elena Papanicolaou, a self-styled travel designer who quit a busy corporate life to set up a small agency delivering bespoke trips within Greece. Exclusive private houses, yachts, cooks, cars, hotels, guides - you name it, she can organise it, tailoring elaborate itineraries for those who want the undeliverable delivered or who want the pain of organisation extinguished from their holidays. I had asked her to recommend an island that was wild and unknown (particularly to the British market), which still felt authentically Greek and where tourism had made barely a footprint. And thus I encountered Serifos.

We arrived on the island by helicopter, straight from a small helipad some 40 minutes' drive from Athens airport. If not the way we would normally travel, it was an interesting excuse to sample Elena's recommendation of fast, ferry-free access to the Cyclades, while providing the perfect aerial context for Serifos and its neighbours. Hovering above the island's barren, mountainous contours, ribbed with ancient and abandoned terracing, we could see south to Sifnos, Kimolos and Milos, and east to Paros and tiny Antiparos - each a hazy silhouette in a sea of blue.

From the air, it was impossible to gauge the steepness of the hillsides, where the sparse road network twists and turns in precipitous coils around the island or down towards the sea. Villages are few and far between; instead the rocky, predominantly treeless landscape is defined by a web of dry stone walls, remote farmsteads and a multitude of tiny, blue-domed chapels. There are 136 of them altogether - not bad for an island with a mere 800 full-time inhabitants. But, like other lesser-known Greek islands, Serifos's fortunes have fluctuated. In the past, it has produced bountiful wine, wheat, vegetables and, most significantly, iron ore. Traces of its mining past, when the population swelled to 20,000, are still in evidence around the coast.

And there are tales of pirates, too, hence the strategic position of the *chora*, or old town, on a dramatic pinnacle above the port. Many of the islands have *choras*, but Serifos boasts both the prettiest and best preserved in the Cyclades, its labyrinth of tiny, cobbled passageways and whitewashed houses as confusing today as 500 years ago. If the *chora* is best for an evening preamble, a spot of shopping and dinner in the main square, the tourist focus - such as it exists on this island - is predominantly centred round the port of Livadi, with its characteristic sweep of waterfront tavernas, shops, apartments and busy moorings. The season, though, is short here, and beyond July and August the island is quiet.

Elena had done much of the research before my arrival, testing out the best places to eat, sampling the best things to do, and booking a private boat trip. Antonis, it seemed, was the Serifos jack-of-all-trades, both the guide for the mining tours and chief boatman, with a crafty monopoly on boat rental and scuba diving. He took us by rib to the deserted island of Poliegos, where the sea is bluer than I had ever seen it and chalky white cliffs formed jagged spurs like the meringue peaks of baked Alaska. We went on to lunch at sleepy Kimolos, on grilled red mullet and white wine from Santorini, with the sand between our toes. And later in the week, we rented a boat from Antonis so we could circumnavigate Serifos, with its 72 beaches and bays, many of which are accessible only from the sea. Our favourites were sandy Kalo Ambeli, picture-perfect Agios Sostis, remote Sikamia and sweet Platis Gialos with its pretty taverna - but there are plenty more, many of which we returned to by foot or by car.

While the Greek meltemi wind ripped ferociously across the island, we spent our last evening at an ancient house in the *chora* discussing the merits of Serifos with Steven, Elena's husband, who is an architect and designer. It was with a certain wistfulness that he talked about the authenticity of the island, the pleasure of its simple ways, the lack of glitz and glamour, the beauty of its wild and windswept landscape, and the peace and quiet. We found it hard to disagree.

THIS PAGE FROM TOP Kalo Ambeli beach, which is accessible only on foot or by boat. A bedroom in one of Coco-Mat's eco residences. The blue-domed Agios Athanasios church in the centre of the *chora*, or old town. OPPOSITE FROM TOP The uninhabited island of Poliegos. An aerial view of the *chora*'s white buildings



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WHERE TO STAY

The variety of accommodation on Serifos is not wide, but Elena has access to the best villas - ranging from a quirky, bohemian village house in the *chora*, belonging to a Greek fashion designer, to an exquisite villa owned by a stylish Athenian photographer in a picturesque location above Kalo Ambeli. The best hotel on the island is Coco-Mat (serifos.coco-mat-hotels.com), with its 13 simple, elegant 'eco' residences (some with two bedrooms) set right on Vagia Beach, a 15-minute drive from Livadi.

WAYS AND MEANS

Pamela Goodman travelled as a guest of Fly Me To The Moon Travel (flymetothemoontravel.com). A week on Serifos, including return ferries and six nights in a villa, costs from about £3,500 per person; international flights are not included. In high season, it is advisable to rent a car (avis.com) in Athens and bring it over on the ferry. For further information, see visitgreece.gr □

ELENA PAPANICOLAOU; PAMELA GOODMAN; SUPERSTOCK; 4CORNIERS IMAGES

