

Greek island holiday guide: the Sporades and Evia

In the first of a new series on holidaying in the Greek islands we look at the Sporades – including Skopelos, where Mamma Mia! was filmed – and Evia, the country's second largest island, where the Greeks go on holiday

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theguardian.com, Wednesday 30 April 2014 06.00 BST



Agios Ioannis beach on the Greek island of Skopelos. Photograph: Peter Schickert/Getty Images

The Sporades, which stretch out into the Aegean off Greece's eastern coast, consist of 24 islands, but only four of these are permanently inhabited: Skiathos, Skopelos, Alonissos and Skyros.

Skiathos is the most-travelled of the islands thanks to its international airport, and its fame lies mainly in its sandy beaches. Away from the coast you can still find isolated hiking trails and the odd Byzantine monastery.

Skopelos is larger, but less visited than Skiathos. Its rugged scenery is perhaps more beautiful and certainly less developed. Its charms were celebrated in the film *Mamma Mia!*.

Much more rugged Alonissos lies in the middle of a marine park and is surrounded by a group of uninhabited satellite islands. Visitors have increased in the last decade or so, but it retains an exclusive air and some exceptional hiking routes.

Skyros is by far the least visited of the traditional Sporades, at least by non-Greeks (there is a domestic airport). Those prepared to find their way here, however, are amply rewarded by an atmosphere that blends traditional Greek village life with an increasingly trendy "alternative" vibe.

Although not strictly part of the Sporades, Evia also lies off Greece's eastern coast. The second largest island in Greece after Crete, and located conveniently close to Athens, it should be much better known (classicists might recognise it as Euboea). From its fertile north to the mountainous south it offers a wealth of travel opportunities.



All prices are for one week's accommodation for two in August, and include breakfast unless otherwise stated. Prices outside of this month can be considerably cheaper. You can usually expect to eat well for €15-20 per person. If eating places are

cheaper/more expensive than this it is stated in the text.

FF = family-friendly

Southern Skiathos



Vromolimnos beach.

Photograph: Alamy

Where to stay: Skiathos Holidays

Skiathos caters mainly to package tours but these apartments and villas, located right by sandy Vromolimnos beach in the south of the island, offer stylish white-washed accommodation among the pine forest and the bougainvillea of their gardens. The accommodation is simple but good value and also quietly sophisticated.

• +30 24270 21596, 21597, skiathos-holidays.gr, €630, breakfast €6 (children free), FF

Where to eat: Taverna Stathis

Just five minutes' walk away, this traditional taverna is renowned as one of the best on

the island, with a changing menu based on what is fresh that day (this should be true of every good taverna). Leave room for the baked apple and yoghurt dessert.

• +30 24270 23508, panghaig.com/tavernastathis

Don't miss

Skiathos is all about the beaches, and the fine sandy strip of Vromolimnos is one of the prettiest. It is more low key than some, but still lined with cafes and offers waterskiing.

Skiathos Town



Bourtzi Boutique

Hotel

Where to stay: Bourtzi Boutique Hotel

For a different slant on Skiathos try this haven of designer living right in the heart of Skiathos Town. The hotel offers elegant, marble-lined rooms, and a courtyard pool, while the old town is a warren of back streets and squares that are a delight to explore.

Meanwhile Skiathos' many beaches are only a short drive or bus ride away.

- +30 24270/21304, hotelbourtzi.gr, €1200

Where to eat: The Final Step

Probably the best dining in town, if not the Aegean. The Final Step is run by Pam and offers her modern Mediterranean twist on local produce; for instance the grilled octopus starter is not only perfectly tender but comes with the added flavour of a sweet chili sauce.

- +30 24270 21877, finalsteprestaurant.com, *slightly expensive*

Don't miss

A trip to Kastro, the old fortified capital of the island, is well worth the effort. Abandoned in the early 19th century, little now remains on the atmospheric headland apart from the ruins of its defences and the town's many churches. You can get here on various boat excursions from the port, but the experience is more authentic if you lace on your hiking boots.

Skopelos Town



Thea Home Hotel

Where to stay: Thea Home Hotel

Skopelos Town is perhaps the most attractive and unspoilt of all the harbour towns of the Sporades, and this simple hotel lies at the heart of it. The rooms may be basic, but they are also clean and functional and offer great views down to the port. The local cheese pies for breakfast are becoming legendary.

• +30 24240 22859, theahomehotel.com, €525

Where to eat: Finikas

Finikas is a traditional family-run taverna (Lambros masterminds the food, and his two sons serve it up) with the best view over the harbour. Lambros specialises in the standard Greek dishes with the occasional local flavour – try the pork stuffed with apple and plums.

• +30 24240 23247, finikasrestaurant.gr

Don't miss

For great beaches head to the west coast of the island. Kastani is famous as the beach in Mamma Mia, but as a result can be overcrowded. For more unspoilt bathing you're better off heading on to isolated Armenopetra, where two pebble beaches split the crystal clear waters.

Port of Loutraki, Skopelos



Church of Ayios

Ioannis, used in the wedding scene of the film *Mamma Mia!* Photograph: Robert Harding
Picture Library L/Alamy

Where to stay: Hotel Selenunda

First the bad news; the rooms could be described as a bit spartan, and the steep steps up to the hotel shouldn't be attempted with luggage. On the other hand, a quick call to Karen and Babis will secure a lift up from the northern port of Loutraki, and most of

your time in your room will be spent on the balcony admiring the views over to Skiathos, particularly as the sun sets.

- +30 2424 0 34 073, hotelselenunda.com, €490, no breakfast

Where to eat: Steki tou Masteras

Every Greek holiday should include a good local grill house, and this one, 3km from Loutraki in the town of Glossa, is one of the best. Nothing fancy, just meat perfectly cooked over charcoal, along with more great views.

- +30 24240 33563, *cheap*

Don't miss

The wedding chapel from Mamma Mia looked like a piece of CGI perfection, but it's a real place, Ayios Ioannis Kastri. Steps lead up from the sandy cove to the improbably located church. Its movie associations mean that coach and boat trips can spoil the romance, but come in the late afternoon or early evening and you might enjoy the place to yourselves.

Patitiri, Alonissos



View over Alonissos

old town. Photograph: Alamy

Where to stay: Camping Rocks

This campsite, a few hundred metres away from the island's main port of Patitiri, is not as uncomfortable as it sounds. In fact it is that rare thing among Greek campsites and is based around tents rather than camper vans. Plenty of shade and the eponymous rocky beach just metres away lend themselves to lazy days. Facilities are basic.

- +30 24240 65410, alonissos.gr, €100, no breakfast, FF

Where to eat: To Kamaki

When you're this close to the sea you may as well go with fish, and the place to do this is at a traditional *ouzeri*, where seafood plates, large and small, are accompanied by plenty of ouzo (or any other drink you fancy). Back near the port, To Kamaki is a fantastic example of the breed. Ignore the menu and go with advice on what's good that day.

- +30 24240 65245

Don't miss

Alonissos is great for hiking and one of the easiest trails is up the cobbled kalderimi, or

old mule path, to Hora. This was the old capital of the island, abandoned after an earthquake in 1965. The views are immense; on a good day as far as Mount Athos, the semi-autonomous monks' republic in northern Greece.

Patitiri, Alonissos



Eleonas restaurant

Where to stay: Ikion Eco Boutique Hotel

Also close to the port, but slightly more refined, this stylish little hotel (14 rooms including 4 family rooms) offers all the comforts one would want. Renovated by the Athanasiou family in 2011, the traditional building now has modern, but tasteful, furnishings. The service, from the welcoming home-made lemonade to the breakfast based around local products, is top class.

• +30 24240 66360, ikion.com, €740, breakfast €10, FF

Where to eat: Eleonas

A drive up the coast, or a boat ride, takes you to the pretty pebble beach of Leftos Gialos, opposite the islet of Peristera. Right on the beach is this traditional, yet funky, taverna run by Nikos and the talented Magdna. She produces all the normal taverna favourites as well as more unusual dishes, such as *tzitzirafa*, the tops of the wild pistachio tree cooked in olive oil and lemon.

• +30 24240 66066, eleonas-alonissos.gr

Don't miss

Alonissos, and its neighbouring, uninhabited, islets, form the heart of a national marine park. This was founded in 1992, chiefly to protect the surviving population of the Mediterranean monk seal. You'll be lucky to see one of these, but boat excursions around the islets are still well worth it, and dolphin sightings are not uncommon.

Skyros



A woman on a writing

holiday on Skyros

Where to stay: Skyros

The island of Skyros has a distinctly alternative feel, which is partly down to this company, who have been promoting "lifestyle" holidays here for the past 25 years. Accommodation, in two locations, is basic, and the emphasis is on the plentiful courses provided, from yoga to writing. Participants come back year after year and many describe the experience as "life changing".

• +44 1983 86 55 66, skyros.com, €840

Where to eat: Istories tou Barba

The Skyros courses include buffet meals, but if you want to explore the island, a good trip would be up to the beach at Molos where this ouzeri, "Stories from your Uncle", has an enviable location right by the sand. They cook a mean lobster; prices are by the kilo, so don't be alarmed and get them to weigh and price your choice.

• +30 22220 91453

Don't miss

The alternative vibe on Skyros has been going on longer than you imagine. If you can, come for the annual Goat Dance, held before Lent starts. In this distinctly pagan festival men dressed as goats "marry" local maidens (also men dressed up). It's as wild as it sounds.

Enoria, east coast of Evia



Little Stone Villa

Where to stay: Little Stone Villa

Evia is little visited by non-Greeks, and those who do come tend to stay in all inclusive resorts. The alternative is to stay in private villas. This example, in the tiny village of Enoria near the east coast of the island, revels in its isolation, but is well equipped and has a private pool and breathtaking views.

- +44 7939 174714, littlestonevilla.com, €1,330, sleeps 6, no breakfast, FF

Where to eat: Vrahos

Set on the small square of Steni (see below) this mountain taverna specialises in meat-based dishes, either from the oven or the grill. Mountain spring water emanates mysteriously from a tap in a nearby tree.

- +30 22280 51546

Don't miss

The road up the mountains to Steni from the east coast is spectacular, and do-able in a normal car even when not paved. The village itself is famed for its mountain air and

spring water and is surrounded by hiking trails.

Pefki, northern Evia



Altamar Hotel, Evia

Where to stay: Altamar Hotel

Northern Evia is known for its fertility and this is certainly evident in the lushly green views afforded by this brand new hotel in Pefki. The minimalist design hides the fact that this is a friendly, family-run place. The surrounding countryside abounds in outdoor activities, including horse-riding, jeep trails and hiking.

• +30 22260 41437 altamar.gr, €525

Where to eat: Astron

Just outside the elegant port of Limni and 100 metres from the beach, this seafood based taverna has a great location. The Ioannou family were originally fishermen, and still bring in the catch and cook it fresh to order

• +30 22270 31487

Don't miss

Just to the south of Limni is the monastery of Ayiou Nikolaou Galataki, set on the wooded slopes of the mountains overlooking the mainland. The setting is superb, and the pretty white-washed complex is well worth the trip. If you are lucky, one of the few resident nuns will show you around.

Karystos, southern Evia

Where to stay: Aegea Hotel

Karystos is the main resort of southern Evia, and its neoclassical waterfront is mainly frequented by Greeks. The Aegea Hotel, just out of town, offers great views in a tranquil location. A swimming pool, and even some see-saws and swings, will keep the kids happy. Babis, the owner, knows the area well and can advise on lots of places to explore.

• +30 22240 27350, aegeahotel.com, €875, FF

Where to eat: Cavo D'Oro

There are plenty of tavernas on the waterfront at Karystos, but for a bit of authenticity you need to explore the alleyways behind. This establishment has been run by the same family since 1897. Forget menus and take a look at what's going on in the kitchen to spot what you want.

• +30 22240 22326

Don't miss

Southern Evia is all about the mountains, including the forbidding heights of Mount Ohi (1,399m), which has several hiking trails up it. An easier walk, but still hugely rewarding, takes you down the Dhimosari Gorge below the mountain. The route follows old, cobbled mule paths and passes watermills on the way. Start in the morning and you'll be enjoying a picnic on the beach by lunchtime.



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