

Aegean gems

Aby Dunsby falls for the myriad charms of the Sporades islands

@AbraDunsby

Now *this* is my kind of beach. A curve of glinting golden sand, water so bright and blue it looks like someone's put an Instagram filter on it, and a nose-tingling scent of pines wafting from the dense clump of greenery behind me. The best bit? I'm the only one on it.

The Cyclades might be having a moment right now, thanks to sublime Santorini and à la mode Mykonos, but for clients less keen on sharing their holiday with the tourist mass, there are the lesser-known islands of the Sporades, where the beaches are unspoiled, the food is cheap and delicious, and the atmosphere is wonderfully easy-going.

Lying off the eastern coast of Greece in the Aegean, the Sporades, meaning 'scattered ones', consist of 24 islands, most of which are permanently uninhabited, save for four: Skiathos, Skopelos, Alonissos and Skyros (the hardest to reach and the least-visited of the four).

When I visit Skiathos, Skopelos and Alonissos in early May, the weather is warm enough for sunbathing, and the islands' pretty ports, restaurants, cafes and beaches feel lively but not overcrowded, making them all the more appealing for clients seeking true relaxation.

Unlike other sun-parched Mediterranean islands, the Sporades are swathed in pine forest, making for a surprisingly green archipelago, and between

them they're home to an embarrassment of beautiful beaches. Here we give you the lowdown on the three main islands, and what to tell clients to see and do on each.

► SKIATHOS

The most popular and cosmopolitan of the Sporades Islands is also the easiest to reach. As well as its international airport, there are daily ferries and hydrofoils connecting Skiathos to its three siblings, making it the perfect starting point for an island-hopping holiday.

Skiathos is home to about 65 sandy beaches, the most popular of which are on the south side of the island and are kitted out for both families and couples, offering umbrellas and loungers for hire, and plenty of beach bars. All are blessed with water so blue and clear that you'd be forgiven for thinking



TOP TIP

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LEFT:
Koukounariés
beach

RIGHT:
Marmita
restaurant,
Skiathos Town

BELOW:
Skopelos Town



→ you were in the Caribbean, if it weren't for the backdrop of pines that often lines the beaches.

One of the best is Vromolimnos, which is flanked by cafes and offers waterskiing, while Koukounariés is often named one of the most beautiful beaches in Europe, drawing in plenty of locals as well as tourists.

Skiathos Town acts as the port, and its main street and seafront are dotted with restaurants, shops, cafes and clubs. Dubbed 'the straight Mykonos', Skiathos is abuzz with young revellers in August, who flock here to party.

In the spring, the atmosphere is far more relaxed: sunglasses-toting holidaymakers eat lunch and clink glasses onboard their glinting yachts or pearly white sailing boats in the harbour, and I'm able to enjoy the prettiest,

“The water is so blue and clear that you'd be forgiven for thinking you were in the Caribbean

hilliest part of town, peppered with garden houses and tiny churches, without the crowds.

I stop for dinner at Marmita in town, which boasts a fairy light-strewn courtyard, where waiters fill my table with dishes of grilled aubergine topped with crumbling feta, octopus with broad bean puree, melt-in-the-mouth lamb with fennel leaves, and a fantastic bottle of Greek wine.

marmitaskiathos.com

The island's hilly interior is perfect for hiking and cycling, and I spend an exhilarating morning mountain biking through the forest, working off last night's dinner. A guide from Skiathos Mountain Bikes leads me along narrow, wiggling trails and through bubbling streams, stopping to take snaps of deserted Kechria beach as my reward.

skiathosmountainbikes.com
aegeancars.gr

▶ SKOPELOS

The sleepy, low-key island of Skopelos has seen an influx of tourism since *Mamma Mia!* was filmed there in 2007. Fans of the film can hop aboard a *Mamma Mia!* boat tour, which will take them to the locations where filming took place.

The beautiful pebble beach of

Kastani might be prone to crowds of film buffs, but it's worth a visit for the emerald hue of the water. Diehard fans will also love the chance to visit Agios Ioannis Kastri church, a tiny white chapel perched high above the sea, where the film's wedding scene was filmed. Make sure clients are prepared to climb about 200 steps for the privilege – and they will likely have to share the view.

If a *Mamma Mia!* pilgrimage doesn't appeal, scores of beautiful, lesser-known beaches, rugged scenery and breathtaking Byzantine monasteries certainly will. More than half of the island is covered in forest, and there are several good walking trails, where clients will pass forgotten-looking villages and fields abundant in plums, oregano, olives and almonds. →





ABOVE: National Marine Park of Alonissos

→ A trip to Skopelos Town also makes for a lovely evening, where I saunter through flagstone streets, past slate-roofed houses with wooden balconies, and stop off for a glass of ouzo en route.

“I feel my pulse slow as soon as I step off the boat and on to the tiny, quiet island of Alonissos

▶ ALONISSOS

I feel my pulse slow as soon as I step off the boat and on to Alonissos, a tiny, quiet island that brims with Greek charisma. Home to about 3,000 people, its remoteness renders it ideal for clients craving total peace and quiet, offering a craggy interior, standout beaches and welcoming locals.

The greenest of the three islands lies in the middle of the National Marine Park of Alonissos, which was created mainly to protect the endangered monk seal that lives in its waters. Boat excursions leave from Patitiri, the port town and capital, and although clients will need to be lucky to see a seal, as boats are not permitted in the core protected area, dolphin sightings are frequent, plus there are 80 species of bird to spot.

Our guide steers us into the cool, stalagmite-filled Blue Cave, where the water is incredibly clear and teems with fish, before dropping me off for some sunbathing on Agios Dimitrios, a gorgeous slice of white-pebble



Islands of Greece offers seven nights' B&B at Hotel Yalis in Alonissos from £569, including flights and transfers. islands-of-greece.co.uk

Classic Collection Holidays a seven nights' B&B at Skiathos Princess from £873, including flights and private transfers. classic-collection.co.uk

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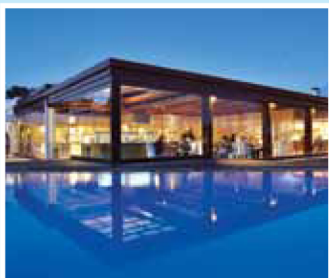
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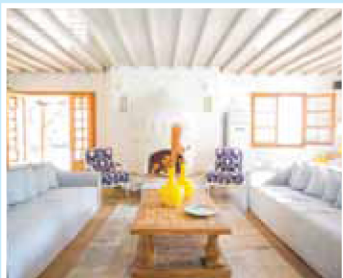
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SKIATHOS PRINCESS

This five-star hotel is set right on Paraskevi beach and is a short cab ride from Skiathos Town. The pool and bar are ultra modern, while the rooms exude an upscale beach-villa vibe. Clients can dine in the poolside bistro or opt for the beach taverna for fresh fish. B&B rates start at €51 a person per night, based on two sharing a Club Double room. skiathosprincess.com



MARPUNTA VILLAGE CLUB

This smart resort is nestled on a beautiful beach that offers scuba diving and boat tours, and the 105 rooms are bright and fresh, having been recently refurbished. Marpunta draws a largely Italian crowd thanks to its Italian-speaking animation staff, who run a wide range of activities. Junior suites start at €210 a night on an all-inclusive basis. marpunta.com



ABOVE: Patitiri

PICTURES: PSYCHN/DREAMTIME.COM; CHRISTOS DRAZOS PHOTOGRAPHY; SANDY FRIEND

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beach, which is the island's most popular, although wonderfully, it's empty when I visit.

Most of the hotels are located near Patitiri, and from there it's 10 minutes by hire car, or a 40-minute walk, to the incredibly pretty former capital of Chora.

The hilltop village was abandoned after being severely damaged by an earthquake in 1965, with most residents moving to Patitiri. It has since been restored, and it is an absolute delight to walk down the narrow streets, where flowers cascade from whitewashed houses and Byzantine churches linger on picturesque corners.

I refuel at Hayiati pastry shop, where the local goat's cheese pie and syrupy cakes are as good as the incredible views of pine forest and olive groves tumbling towards a vast sweep of sea. hayiati.com

Most of the beaches are located along the island's secluded east coast and southern, and my lovely Albedo Travel guide takes me to some of her favourites. We drive through mountain roads scented

TOP TIP

Dolphin of Skiathos can organise boat trips for clients dolphin-skiathos.gr

with oregano and pine until we pause at Glyfa beach, where I can't stop taking pictures of the sea, and proceed to Steni Valli, a quaint fishing village where locals dine on fish in seafront tavernas. albedotravel.com

My favourite beach is Chrissy Milia, the island's only sandy stretch, where pines grow up to the water's edge. We stop for sundowners in beachfront bar Leftos Gialos, where locals sip beer and watch the water ebb and flow to the beat of lounge-style house music, and the friendly waiters stop to chat. It feels authentic, and it's this realness, topped with a dollop of beauty and tranquillity, that makes the Sporades so irrefutably charming.