

Galileo, Galileo

Alex Spencer discovers some of the lesser-known Greek islands on a voyage with Variety Cruises

The waiter comes back to our table and apologises. He says the home-brewed beer – recommended by our cruise coordinator – has run dry. This is perhaps not surprising given that the lunchtime trade in the small sun-bleached taverna is unexpectedly boosted by our arrival on the island of Agios Efsthios, one of the most isolated isles in the Aegean, with a population of just 250.

Instead, we settle for some refreshing bottles of Greek beer Mythos and ask about the menu, most of which isn't written down. The waiter recommends some freshly caught sardines and they are duly placed on the checked tablecloth – a huge plateful served with out-of-the-oven bread, lemon and olive oil for €6.

CHANGE OF PLAN

This cameo typified our week aboard Variety Cruises' *Galileo*, a small ship that's more akin to a yacht and perfect for exploring the tiniest of Greek islands that many, me included, didn't even know existed. As well

as taking in well-known hotspots such as Santorini, Rhodes and Kos, Variety also goes out of the way, in every sense, to seek out virtually unknown isles.

We were on the first sailing of the new Hidden Greece: Unexplored Greek Islands round-trip Athens itinerary through the Cyclades and Dodecanese, set to call at islands including Ikaria, Lipsi, Kalymnos, Levitha, Amorgos and Serifos, and scheduled for three departures in 2022. But strong winds on our sailing that would have made for very uncomfortable conditions prompted the captain to change course completely and we ended up visiting a different set of islands, farther north in the Sporades.

Any initial disappointment was quickly put to one side, however, especially after the welcome-drinks party, which involved large, free-flowing measures of an unidentifiable but irresistible cocktail served by effervescent bartender Valeria.

Indeed, the daily 'surprise' of where we were heading as the new cruise plan was unveiled ➤

Sun deck on the 49-berth *Galileo*

PICTURE: Filip Kulisev

DESTINATIONS

GREECE & CYPRUS | GREEK ISLANDS



PICTURED: *Galileo* under sail; moored in Santorini; the ship's sun deck; and bartender Valeria PICTURE: Filip Kulisev



added to the excitement of seeing islands that very few visitors ever reach.

As we slid into the little harbour at Agios Efstathios, alongside a couple of yachts, we were not the only sightseers. Curious locals came out to take photos of *Galileo* and wave, while the captain revealed that in his 35-year career, he could count on one hand the number of times he had moored at some of the islands on our rearranged cruise.

LAID-BACK LIVING

Although itineraries can be altered, there are Variety mainstays that always remain a constant. Our days on board were leisurely and unrushed. Most mornings the anchor was dropped off secluded coves and horseshoe-shaped beaches and we variously swam off the boat, kayaked, snorkelled or had a go at stand-up paddleboarding with the free watersports equipment. There was also the option of going over to the beach by Zodiac and lazing until lunchtime before another tempting spread appeared in the restaurant.

Aside from days at sea, meals are half-board, and as *Galileo* often docks overnight or until the early hours, there was plenty of time to experience the laid-back lifestyle on the islands. We strolled along pretty waterfronts before picking a taverna. Invariably, most of the customers were local families, with children staying up late at night after an afternoon siesta out of the heat.

Everything was very relaxed and although excursions were on offer, there was no push to take them. Some



GALILEO, Variety Cruises

Launched in 1992, rebuilt in 2007 and refurbished in 2016, the 49-passenger *Galileo* is no seagoing spring chicken, but its classic looks and retro interiors are all part of the charm. Technically it's a motorsailer and the sails are mainly for show, but they still make for an atmospheric sight at sailaway.

The staterooms, which feature either portholes or windows, are small but day-to-day life is all about being outside and time in cabins is minimal. Meals are served in the open-seating dining room and the small ship means you soon get to know fellow passengers, which makes *Galileo* popular with solo travellers.

Crew members provide a friendly, personal service which, along with fresh, delicious food, is all part of the authentic Greek experience. Wi-Fi is patchy, but then again, these cruises are all about escapism and getting away from it all.

Book it: Seven-night Hidden Greece: Unexplored Greek Islands cruises departing in July and August 2022 cost from £2,891, including flights and transfers, port charges, wine or beer with meals and two hotel nights in Athens. seafarercruises.com

independent-minded passengers opted to hire cars to go around the islands and the cruise coordinator was happy to make all the arrangements. It was a breath of fresh air for anyone who didn't want to feel overly organised.

At the end of the week, I chatted to a fellow passenger, a veteran of four Variety sailings, who neatly summed up the experience and what to expect, even if that means the unexpected.

She said: "Greece is all about the wonderful combination of people and destinations, and it keeps drawing me back. Even if there are changes in the itinerary, you soon realise there are other equally exciting and unexplored islands to see. You need to travel with an open mind and go where the wind takes you." **TW**