

Abbasolutely fabulous

Classic charm and contemporary chic await clients that take a chance on the Sporades, writes Jo Cooke



North of Athens, south of Thessaloniki and just off the Pelion Peninsula, you'll find the Sporades archipelago.

Four of the 24 islands are inhabited - Skyros, Skiathos, Skopelos and Alonissos - and in the company of a particularly lively and seasoned bunch of travel agents, I got an insider's guide courtesy of specialist operator Sunvil and GIC The Villa Collection.

► SKIATHOS

Sell: Skiathos is the hub of the Sporades, home to the only airport in the island chain, and ferry connections to Skopelos and Alonissos leave from here. Sunvil charts weekly flights from Manchester and Gatwick to Skiathos with a stop in Kavala and Volos, respectively, on the inbound journey. Measuring just eight miles long, transfer times in Skiathos are short. Most

properties are dotted along the south coast, near most of the island's 50 sandy beaches, so you can be on that sunlounger within 20 minutes of leaving the airport.

Sell: Those who love burning the midnight oil will be in their element. Skiathos Town pulsates from sunset until daybreak with lounge bars stretching the length of the waterfront and DJs pumping out dance, soul, reggae and rap. The main



→ street is also pedestrianised, with many shops staying open late. A regular bus service links the town to the beach resorts, and taxis are plentiful. If you're seeking some respite, it can be found within the walls of Evangelistria Monastery. It sits atop a shady hill, has planters brimming with hydrangeas and a chapel chock-full of Greek iconography.

Stay: Skiathos has a faster pace of life and is more developed than its neighbours. Larger, upscale properties offer all the resort-style trimmings. We stayed at the beachfront Skiathos Princess, where each of the 131 rooms has a balcony or garden area and there's a pool, playground, kids' club, spa, live-music nights and sumptuous buffet breakfast. "It's not typically Greek, but for those who want luxury, it's perfect," says Leslie Clements, senior travel consultant for Emsworth Travel. In contrast, the low-key, 40-room Mandraki Village Boutique Hotel is set in manicured gardens. "It's stylish and in a great location," says Jean



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Heymann, senior sales consultant at Reigate Travel. A short walk through a nature reserve takes guests to lively Koukounaries beach, which offers water sports galore. There are also a handful of smart restaurants and shops a short stroll away.

ALONISSOS

Sell: A two-hour ferry ride from Skiathos, Alonissos is the least populous and sleepest of the trio. There's a feeling that time has stood still, tradition is king and there's simply no reason to hurry. For those seeking to shake off the stresses and strains of

modernity, this is the place. A thicket of pine trees lies at the heart of the island, a marine sanctuary edges its shores and a bounty of beaches have barely been touched by tourism.

See: A hire car is the best way to get around, although there are always taxis on hand. Alternatively, you could rent a motor boat from the jetty in Patitiri harbour, then set sail to claim one of the hidden coves that can be reached only from the sea. Hiking trails also abound, including a steep 45-minute stomp from Patitiri to Alonissos Old Town on an ancient mule track. Cobble streets, castle ruins and a labyrinth of architectural gems draped with vines await, many housing gift shops and tavernas.

Stay: Our room for the night was at the Atrium Hotel, a short drive uphill from Patitiri. This white-washed and stone-clad 30-room property was a universal hit with the group, boasting a swanky pool terrace, spacious rooms and panoramic views from the indoor-outdoor breakfast area. "I love the

decor," says Hilary Honess, co-owner of The Independent Holiday Shop. "It's so light and breezy, and easy on the eye."

Up in the old town, we viewed the eight-room, boutique-style Konstantina Studios. "The rooms are gorgeous," says Anne Mercer, owner of Mercer Travel. "But being in a more remote location, it would benefit from a pool."

For independent types, the rustic and romantic Limani Cottage in the fishing village of Steni Vala should delight. Sue Hunter, owner of Braunton Travel, says: "It's really close to the beach and footsteps away from tavernas, but has a sense of seclusion."

SKOPELOS

Sell: The A-list of the archipelago, Skopelos is the setting for *Mamma Mia!* But stardom hasn't changed it much. The largest of the three, tourism isn't the only string to its bow. Skopelos is a working island with a busy port, and Skopelos Town remains a maze of cobbled streets where bakeries, potteries, churches and craft shops

thrive, while tavernas spill out on to piazzas and the waterfront. "The harbour is lively, but the side streets are quieter," says Laura Dyer of Launceston Travel. "There's more activity than on Alonissos, but Skopelos is more reserved than Skiathos."

Skopelos can be reached by flying cat or ferry from Skiathos, with a transfer time of between 50 and 90 minutes.

See: Pine forest carpets the interior and narrow lanes lead you down the clifftops to pebble beaches with clear waters that make great snorkelling spots. Whether you prefer a bay with a bar and restaurant, or a secluded cove and a picnic, Skopelos can accommodate. Renting a car gives you the freedom to explore the monasteries and scenic villages such as Glossa in the northwest, and of course, to follow in the footsteps of the cast of *Mamma Mia!*

Fit fans of the film should make a beeline for Agios Ioannis in the northeast of the island, where a pint-sized church on a rocky outcrop played wedding venue for the characters. Just

be warned, you'll need to climb more than 100 steps to reach it.

Stay: Those who like to stay centrally could consider a villa in Skopelos Town. They're not immediately apparent as you stroll around, but occupy walled courtyard gardens giving privacy in a convenient location. Many also have pools. We visited Thalassa Vista Villa, which sleeps seven and has three bathrooms. Gabriele Scholes, travel consultant at Hallmark Travel, says: "The way the property is divided up could suit several couples or a family with older children, as there are lots of separate spaces, a mezzanine floor and rooftop terrace."

Elsewhere, midway between town and the peaceful Stafilos Beach, Alkistis Hotel Apartments offers 25 sizeable self-catering units that also give families the opportunity to spread out. "The large pool and gardens are attractive, plus kids can run free and it's easy to keep an eye on them," says Samantha O'Connor, assistant store manager for Fred Olsen Travel. **TW**



ASK THE EXPERT



Graeme Neil, Sunvil, overseas manager

"The Sporades stand out from other Greek archipelagos because of the ease of access from UK cities and daily ferry links between the islands. Skiathos is touristy and ideal for active families, with all amenities in easy reach. Clients can arrive and get into holiday mode immediately. For those who don't mind waiting times and early-morning connections, Alonissos and Skopelos remain unaffected by mass tourism and offer the chance to experience 'old' Greece but with the accommodation standards of the 'new' Greece. A twin-centre, of course, provides the best of both worlds: recharge your batteries and then enjoy some vibrant nightlife!"



Sunvil offers a 14-night holiday combining seven nights' B&B at the Mandraki Village Hotel on Skiathos, and seven nights' self-catering at the Konstantina Boutique Studios on Alonissos, from £1,683 per person. The price includes flights from Gatwick on June 14, and shared transfers, based on two sharing. sunvil.co.uk

GIC The Villa Collection has seven nights' self-catering at the Thalassa Vista Villa on Skopelos from £956 per person. The price is based on six sharing, and includes flights from Gatwick and shared transfers. gicthevilla.com



Alonissos



PICTURE: C DRAZOS PHOTOGRAPHY



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Skopelos; Thalassa Vista Villa; Atrium Hotel