

Blue SWOON

Picture-perfect Mykonos dazzles in the Grecian sun. Joanna Booth basks in the glow

Mykonos has the blues. Not in the traditional sense - I've rarely met a more upbeat island, and let's not forget this is the place that regularly vies with Ibiza for the title of Mediterranean party hotspot. But in the most literal sense, it has the blues.

The shades seem endless: the cobalt of the cloudless sky; the turquoise of a private plunge pool; the azure of the Aegean; even the contrasting tones of indigo and cyan from the myriad glass ornaments that hang from stalls in Mykonos Town to ward off the evil eye.

And with every blue tone set

off perfectly against the pristine white of the sugar-cube houses and squat, picturesque windmills so signature to the island, it is little wonder Mykonos has made its name as one of the most strikingly handsome of all the Greek isles.

Emerging blinking from the island's tiny airport - a refurbishment due for completion next year will double the number of check-in desks and expand the airstrip - I'm joining agents from across Europe on a fam trip organised by TravelCube.

Here to give us the inside track on the island's finest hotels, restaurants, clubs and bars are

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TravelCube market manager Samantha Mardkhah and Dimitris Palaioyiannis of travel consultant MTC Group, so we're in safe hands.

▶ A POPULAR CHOICE

Pretty costs more than pennies here, particularly in July and

August, when, despite the growing number of hotels on the island, every bed is filled and the party season is in full swing. Arrivals were just shy of one million last year, up 14% on 2015, and the vast majority visit between May and October, as the island goes into virtual shutdown in winter.

For TravelCube, whose beach portfolio is booming alongside its more established city hotel range, the UK market to the island is up 49% this year. Of the 72 hotels in Mykonos on the operator's books, most are four

PICTURE: CHRISTOS DRAZOS

Myconian
Avaton Resort

→ and five-star, reflecting the island's strength in the luxury market. This is a haunt of celebrities and the super-rich as well as the averagely wealthy, but Mardkhah is quick to reassure us that clients with limited spending power can book one of the high-standard three-stars on the island.

FROM POOL TO PARTY

This isn't a place where anyone is very concerned with ticking off an exhaustive list of sights. Days are for lazing around the pool or one of the island's beaches, lapped by stupendously clear Aegean waters. At most, guests might wander around the pretty boutiques of Mykonos Town, or venture into the hills to the village of Ano Mera, where the monastery of Panagia Tourliani hides its bejewelled, intricately carved interior behind simple marble walls. Some may manage a day trip to Delos, a 15-minute boat ride away, home to some of the most extensive and important archaeological remains in all of Greece.

Nights are when the island really

“Mykonos is a haunt of celebrities and the super-rich but there are high-standard, three-star hotels on the island too

comes alive, and the streets of Mykonos Town throng with the young and beautiful as they bar-hop until dawn – unless, that is, they've secured tickets for Super Paradise or one of the other beachclubs that are increasing in number and popularity on the island.

We popped in to Super Paradise to see what the fuss was all about, and found a cavernous club with a large VIP area fronted by a wide sandy beach, set in one of the island's prettiest bays.

In Mykonos Town, we danced the night away in Bao's Cocktail Bar in Little Venice, where the colourful historic buildings feel like they're

about to tumble into the sea, so close are they to the water's edge. Further around the bay, restaurant Salparo serves some of the island's finest food in a waterside setting that is as idyllic by day as it is by night, when the lights of the harbour are twinkling.

CENTRAL STAYS

Those who want to party with a vengeance should stay in Mykonos Town, within walking distance of the bars. Set back from the centre with hilltop views, three neighbouring properties from local hotel group behemoth Myconian Collection dominate the luxury landscape.

With just 18 suites, Naia is the smallest and most upscale, a peaceful hideaway with four-poster beds and butler service. With 40 rooms, next-door Korali is larger and livelier with a zingy shade of yellow deployed judiciously throughout the property. Design Hotels member Kyma has just shy of 100 rooms but still feels boutique, with the rooms' clean, simple lines contrasting with more showy

design in the public areas.

Right in the heart of downtown, Mykonos Theoxenia is part of the Louis Hotels stable, and is great for those who love to be in the heart of the action. Built in the 1960s, it's listed and so has retained the mid-century look Jackie Onassis would have experienced when she came to stay. The 52 rooms are comfortable but unassuming, but the mature, lush grounds and laidback atmosphere make it a popular choice with Brits.

With some of the best sunset views on the island from its rooftop bar, Kouros is another luxurious choice with 37 rooms just outside the centre, close to Tagoo beach. The pool isn't vast, but some suites have large terraces and soaking tubs so many guests hole up and hardly leave.

Closer to town, Semeli doesn't boast the incomparable views of some of the other properties, but has an atmosphere like no other. This trendy, sociable hotel popular with groups of friends is in a courtyard setting with large rooms and suites dotted around

pools and attractive gardens. The restaurant is abuzz every night and staff are friendly and attentive.

QUIETER CHOICES

Those who like the quiet life and don't plan to be out every night can look farther afield, including the peaceful bay of Elia, which is home to a handful of hotels from the Myconian Collection stretching up the hill from the beach.

All five properties are five-star and extremely luxurious, with sprawling infinity pools, large rooms and spas with thalassotherapy circuits. Differences are more in style than substance, with strong and individual design choices giving each property a unique feel. Avaton pops with vivid colour; Utopia is all about natural tones with exposed wood and stone; Imperial has a graphic, playful look; and Royal is dramatic to the point of theatricality. We stayed in Myconian Villa Collection, which differs in offering villas and multi-room suites, all done out in uncluttered Cycladic style, with plenty of – what else – white and blue. **tw**

PAROS



Parikia

Mykonos may be the bigger player in the UK market, but the neighbouring – and far larger – island of Paros, a 45-minute ferry ride away, has long been popular with French and Italian tourists, and is starting to attract Brits.

Paros is wilder and quieter than Mykonos, with a hilly interior, rolling countryside and deserted bays. It's more family-friendly, with a laidback nightlife and a higher concentration of reasonably priced hotels.

The larger towns of Parikia and Naousa share Mykonos Town's white-washed good looks, and visitors need make no sacrifices when it comes to eating out. Recommend Koralli restaurant in Parikia for fresh seafood, and Mario in Naousa harbour, where feta made by the chef's mother features heavily on the menu.

In the quiet village of Aliko, Parosland is a quiet, family-run hotel with a strong focus on sustainability and locally sourced ingredients, set in an olive grove. Breakfasts are outstanding. Families who don't need bells and whistles will love boho-chic four-star Kalypso in Naousa, a friendly spot with newly renovated rooms, including family options, and direct access to a sandy beach with safe, shallow water. Next door, the Stelia Mare boutique hotel is a haven of calm with classic looks that suits a slightly older market. At Paros Agnanti outside Parikia, the standard rooms are nothing to write home about, but the new suites with private pools designed in marble and wood are really something.



Naousa



Mykonos Town



Salparo restaurant



Mykonos Theoxenia hotel



TravelCube offers seven nights' B&B at the Myconian Korali hotel from £570 per person based on two sharing, including transfers from Mykonos airport, for travel in May 2018. Flights not included. travelcube.com/uk