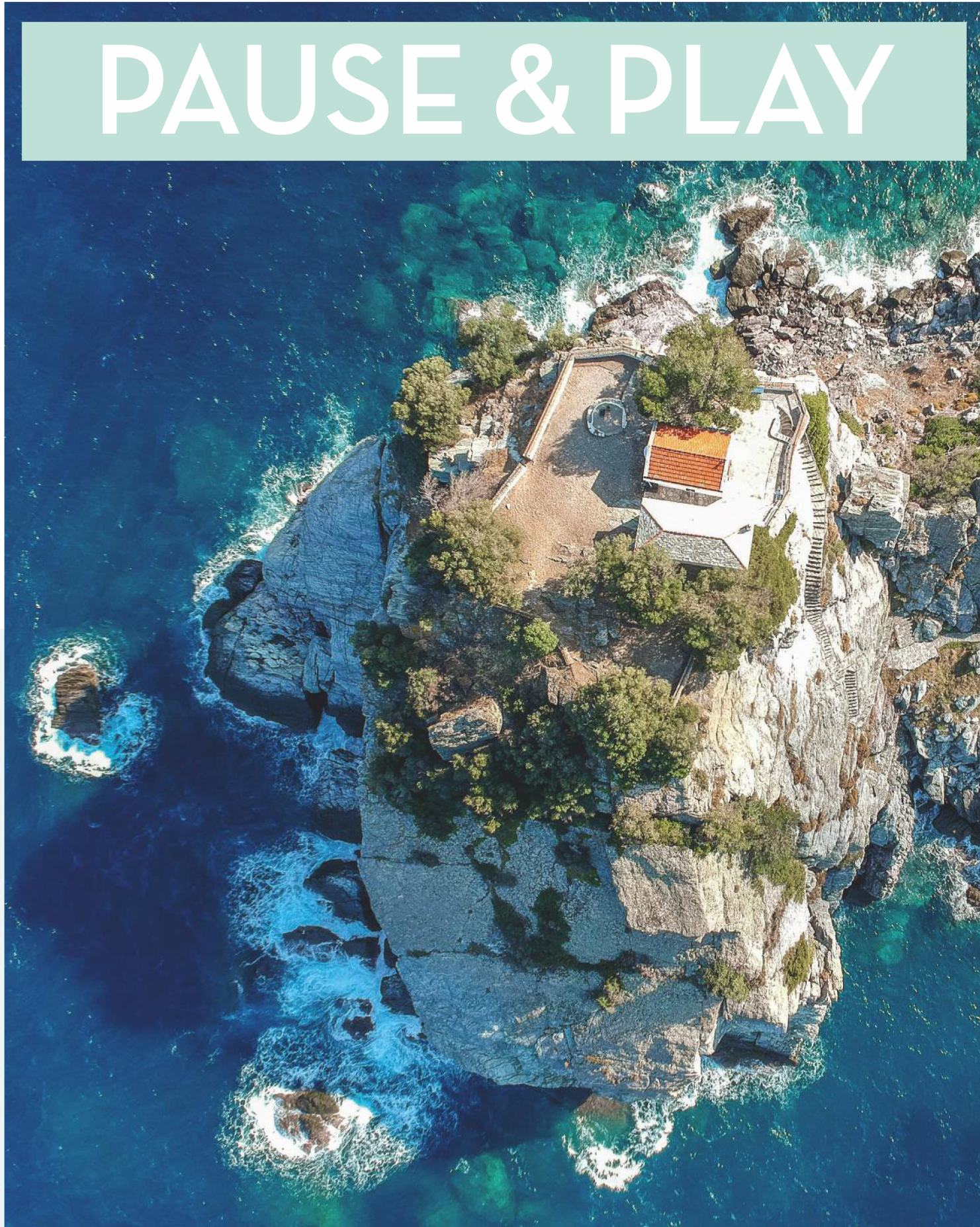


PAUSE & PLAY



Hopping mad

Why settle for one gorgeous Greek island when you can have three, asks **Kavi Shah** on an island-hopping adventure in the Sporades

There are about 200 steps but it feels like many more. They are chunky, uneven and rocky; the path is steep and winding and, with the sun beating down, the ascent is a real challenge. But the reward at the top is worth it: stunning views of the coastline and the teeny whitewashed 'Mamma Mia! chapel' – the church of Agios Ioannis Kastri, made famous in the 2008 movie and a highlight of our *Mamma Mia!* tour of the island of Skopelos.

Skopelos is the second of three Sporades islands on our Olympic Holidays fam trip, testing out the operator's expanded island-hopping programme. We start in buzzy Skiathos and conclude on more traditional Alonissos – two of the 24 islands that make up the Sporades, dotted across the Aegean Sea off mainland Greece's eastern coast. And it's immediately clear that they shelter some of the cleanest, bluest waters and are encircled by untamed pine forest and vegetation.

A week here makes me feel I've eyed every blue and green on the colour spectrum. The islands are compact enough to be explored in a few days and, as each has its own personality, it feels like three holidays in one.

SKIATHOS

Known as the 'boomerang island' that keeps people coming back, lively Skiathos is most famous for its pretty coastline (home to 60-plus beaches) and its nightlife. Getting around is easy: the bus service and water taxi run like clockwork, and driving is simple: clients can go from the top to the bottom of the island in half an hour.

“The islands are compact enough to be explored in a few days and, as each has its own personality, it feels like three holidays in one

Pause: Some of the best panoramic views can be enjoyed at Kastro, the island's old settlement, which once comprised 300 tiny houses and 30 churches, but was later abandoned. The first-ever modern Greek flag was sewn at the imposing Evangelistria Monastery in 1807, which played a big part in Greek independence. ➤

DESTINATIONS

GREECE & CYPRUS | SPORADES



WHERE TO STAY

SKIATHOS

Atrium Hotel

Built on a pine-covered hillside, this chic family-run hotel offers wraparound vistas of the Aegean. The 75 modern rooms are decorated in earthy tones and there are two lifts (which is a rarity on Skiathos).

Skiathos Princess Resort

Set right on the beach, this low-rise luxurious hotel has a spa, kids' club, gym, three restaurants and two pools. Guests can use the facilities at sister property Aegean Suites.

SKOPELOS

Skopelos Village Hotel

Rooms at this family-run hotel are bright and homely, with furnishings in warm pastel tones. Meryl Streep and Pierce Brosnan stayed here while filming *Mamma Mia!*

Rigas Hotel

A short walk from town, this charming hotel has grounds ringed by blooming gardens. Rooms are decorated in traditional style, with arch-ceilinged balconies or verandas.

ALONISSOS

4 Epoches Hotel

Located in a little port town in the northeast, this small, 22-room family hotel is close to a couple of beaches and tavernas, including the owner's grandma's restaurant, Tassia's Cooking.

Mandraki Village Boutique Hotel

Ultra-luxe and secluded, with two private beaches, this large hotel has a lot of steps so is best for very fit clients.



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Skopelos Old Town; Koukounaries beach, Skiathos; Atrium Hotel, Skiathos

PICTURES: Shutterstock



This is the only 'active' monastery on Skiathos, and it sells its own wine, honey and oil. Entry is free but there's a €3 fee for the museum.

Clients can settle in for the most romantic of sunsets at Agia Eleni beach, or venture farther north to Krifi Ammos (aka Hidden Beach) for seclusion and crystal-clear waters. The beaches towards the north (Mandraki, Elias, Agistros and Megalos Aselinos) are less crowded, but visitors will either need a jeep or quad bike to get there, or be up for a long walk. The more touristy beaches located towards the south, such as Koukounaries or Kanapitsa, offer a wide variety of watersports.

Play: Clients can paint the town red in buzzy Skiathos: there are clubs and bars to suit every taste, and they are open and ready to serve from early afternoon. "We call it the Mykonos of the northern Sporades," says Jane, Olympic's Skiathos rep.

SKOPELOS

The *Mamma Mia!* effect is still in full swing on Skopelos, the largest of the Sporades group. Since filming ended in 2007, fans have been flocking to see the sites. Even so, there's a laid-back vibe, which means it's quieter than Skiathos.

Pause: Arriving on Skopelos, visitors will be struck by whitewashed houses with red-tiled roofs. In the steep

tiny streets of Skopelos Town they'll find up to 140 religious buildings – Skopelians were fishermen and families frequented these to pray for their safe return.

Clients can relax at Cafe Bar Thalassa, tucked away by the town and perched above the sea. The views are great and so are the drinks. Platonos Square is good for souvlaki and gyros (Greek kebabs) – and no one should leave without trying the local cheese pie!

Beach lovers need to venture further from the port and the town if they want to find the best stretches of sand and sea. The western side has the most beautiful beaches, such as Panormos. It's great for families because the water isn't too deep, and there are tavernas right on the beach. The white sands of Limnionari beach are hidden in a cove, while the *Mamma Mia!* beach of Kastani looks like it could have come straight off a postcard.

Play: Clients can dabble in watersports (stand-up paddleboarding, sailing, kayaking and ➤

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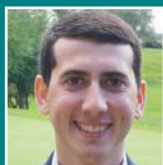
"Seeing the *Mamma Mia!* chapel in Skopelos was great – it's at the top of a big rock and we climbed all the way up to see it. We even played a clip from the movie to make it come to life. I'd never sell a holiday to Skiathos again without insisting clients also visit Skopelos or Alonissos. There's so much more to see!"

Jeff Watts, branch manager, Tailor Made Travel, Bridgend



"To do just one Greek island is leaving yourself short. We've made island-hopping easy with accommodation, transfers, ferry tickets and agents on the ground. Skopelos is beautiful and relaxing, with amazing hiking and churches."

Jonathan Star, product manager, Olympic Holidays



BOOK IT

Olympic Holidays offers 10 nights' island-hopping from £1,399 per person, including return flights from Gatwick, transfers and ferries. It includes three nights each at Mandraki Village Boutique Hotel in Skiathos, Skopelos Village Hotel and 4 Epoches Alonissos Hotel, and one night at Bourtzi Hotel, Skiathos. Price based on two adults sharing. olympicholidays.com



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: Alonissos; Skopelos Village Hotel; stone houses; Chrissi Millia beach

PICTURES: Shutterstock; Ioanna Roufopoulou; Thomas Catterall

diving are all on offer here), join the popular *Mamma Mia!* tours, or if they're feeling particularly nimble-fingered, enjoy a mini shipbuilding course – it was the major industry before tourism took over in the 1970s.

ALONISSOS

The most remote island in the Sporades, Alonissos is surrounded by waters rich in marine life, including dolphins, so areas around the island form part of the protected National Marine Park.

There are very few souvenir shops. "People are amazed that something like this still exists," says my guide and resident, Christina. "This is one of the remaining traditional, unspoilt Greek islands; it hasn't yet been commercialised." **Pause:** Alonissos' rugged interior – made up of acres of pine trees nestled alongside olive groves, fig and plum trees – carpets everything except its small bays and beaches, creating a feeling of splendid

"People are amazed that something like this still exists. It is one of the remaining traditional, unspoilt Greek islands

isolation. There are few cars, and prices in restaurants and shops are low. "People come here for the sheer quiet – to be left to their own devices," Christina adds.

One of the few golden sandy beaches on Alonissos is Chrissi Millia, hidden behind dense forest and reached via a gravel path, making it a gem in the rough. Kokkinokastro and Agios Dimitrios are shingle beaches, best reached by car or moped.

Take pictures in the narrow lanes of the Old Town. Most residents lived here until 1965, when an

earthquake flattened many of the old stone houses.

Play: The waters around Alonissos contain a number of shipwrecks, and the destination is set to grow in popularity next year as a wreck dating back to 400BC, *Peristera*, will be opened up for scuba diving. At the information centre in the Old Town, clients can use a virtual-reality headset to feel as if they're diving there (trippy but cool!), from €3. **TW**

fast fact

Ferries between Skiathos, Skopelos and Alonissos operate daily May-October for €6-11 each way, and take up to 90 minutes.