

Treasure islands

Laura French gives the lowdown on the Ionian islands you might never have heard of

I'm having a Bond moment. We're bounding across the sea on an adrenaline-blasting rib boat – water splashing, wind pummelling, heart pumping. Around us, tree-carpeted islands rise and fall in humps, and the ocean spreads out like a swathe of glass, parading all the blues: bright, glaring cobalt and deep, midnight indigo; glowing aqua and thick, milky teal.

We're heading for Meganisi, one of the tiny satellite islands that surround the larger Lefkas, and it's every bit as striking as I've come to expect after a few days exploring this lesser-known, ultra-photogenic region on a fam trip with Sunvil.

Soon we're pulling into a nigh-on empty harbour, tucking into mounds of crumbling feta and fresh sea bass against a backdrop of glittering turquoise, with the taverna – and possibly the entire island – completely to ourselves.

Welcome to the Greek Ionian islands, where remote spots like this are 10 a penny, and where you can easily feel like you're on your own private

island in the Indian Ocean, rather than on a publicly-accessible beach just a four-hour flight from London.

Hopping between its lesser-known treasures – Paxos, Antipaxos and Lefkas – across five days had me firmly head over heels, with lush green mountains, cut-off beaches, Venetian-style houses and cobblestone villages charming my every sense. Here's a guide to some of the highlights.

PAXOS

The vibe: Measuring about 10 square miles and with a population of only 2,500, Paxos is dainty in size, with quiet fishing villages, bottle-green olive groves and cobblestone harbours set atop verdant hills. It has a manicured, polished feel that lures well-heeled types after a serene escape from the crowds, and it was one of my favourite spots on the trip.

Highlights: At its heart is capital Gaios, where laid-back cafés wrap around the island's main port, and colourful villas in rose and lemon tell of its Italianate heritage (the Venetians conquered the Ionian ➤

WHERE TO stay



Theodora Apartments, Gaios, Paxos

Recommend these to clients who want a simple, traditional stay. Facilities are basic, but it's peaceful and secluded with only six apartments (each with a small kitchen, balcony and access to shared outdoor pool), set on the hillside a few minutes' walk from the village.



Daglas Studios, Nidri, Lefkas

With four studio apartments a minute's walk from the beach, this is a safe bet for clients wanting a central, good-value stay in Nidri. They're all twin-bed, open-plan apartments with a small kitchenette, and a few minutes' from the town.



Bacchus House, Antipaxos

This one-bedroom hilltop villa – bookable via GIC The Villa Collection – is about as secluded as it gets. Guests are given a shopping list before they come so supplies can be delivered. It has a private pool surrounded by greenery and



CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:

Vrika beach in Antipaxos; Lefkas Town; local life in Karya, Lefkas; Longos, Paxos

PICTURES: Shutterstock; Nigel Bowen; George Agapiou/Greektravelphotography.gr



islands and Corfu in 1386, and occupied them for four centuries).

Sitting at an outdoor cafe, coffee in hand, water rippling off into the distance, was about as idyllic as it gets – and despite it being the biggest village on the island, it was still almost silent, with a sleepy, slow-paced feel that felt authentically, undeniably Greek.

Much of the food here is also exceptional; recommend Carnayo Restaurant for gourmet-style, modern-meets-traditional dishes such as youvetsi – a tomatoey, cinnamon-infused concoction of orzo pasta and tender beef topped with crispy melted cheese.

Elsewhere there's plenty more to see, including Lakka – the island's second-biggest village, home to shiny boutiques and souvenir shops on elegant cobbled squares – and the hillier Loggos, where tiny fishing boats and harbour-side restaurants meet historic, narrow lanes and pastel-hued houses.

It's not just about traditions here as a smattering of trendy spots draw a young, cool crowd. Among them

Eremitis Bar & Restaurant, where quirky cocktails such as Bitter Ant (a mix of Campari and Jägermeister topped with thick, gooey caramel) came with a sky painted lilac, pink and peach at dusk, as the sun fell below the horizon.

Getting there: A hydrofoil from Corfu shuttles passengers to Gaios in about an hour; recommend booking in advance. There are also ferries from Corfu and mainland Greece.

ANTIPAXOS

The vibe: Located a mile south of its bigger sibling, the tiny Antipaxos – measuring just one-and-a-half square miles – is island paradise

BOOK IT

Sunvil offers seven nights at the Theodora Apartments in Paxos and seven nights at Kalami Bay in Corfu from £2,355, based on two sharing (self-catered) with flights from Gatwick and transfers on September 2.

Sunvil can arrange a 14-night stay at the Daglas Studios in Nidri, Lefkas, from £1,398, including flights from Gatwick on July 28 and based on two sharing on a bed-and-breakfast basis. sunvil.co.uk

typified; deserted, dusty paths meandering up tree-carpeted hills, verdant vineyards producing good-quality wines and soft white sands edging electric blue water. There are no shops or big-name hotels, with villas the main accommodation here, and there are barely any cars, with the permanent resident population numbering just eight.

Highlights: Vrika beach – where most boats from Paxos drop passengers off – is as beautiful as they come, with sugar-fine sand set around a calm bay. Voutoumi beach close by takes it up a notch and has barely any visitors. There's also plenty of hiking, with steep

gravel trails criss-crossing the hills.

Getting there: It's 15 minutes from Paxos to Antipaxos, with frequent boats departing from Gaios port. Clients can also hire their own – we got a private speedboat over, which had us whooshing across the waves and stopping at swimming holes for a quick (albeit freezing) dip.

LEFKAS

The vibe: Connected to mainland Greece by a bridge, Lefkas is bigger and more easily accessible than Paxos and its neighbour, with capital Lefkas Town more developed – but less polished – than the shiny, manicured cobbles of Paxos.

But apart from a few big resorts on the east coast, it doesn't feel touristy, with quaint villages, working olive groves and vineyards scattered among scores of mountains. It's also a hotspot for water sports, with rugged, shingle beaches luring kitesurfers from near and far.

Highlights: My favourite spot was Karya, a quiet mountain village known for its lace-making heritage, where locals use a stitching technique originally developed by a one-armed woman who opened an embroidery school here. This is the type of place where age-old traditions take pride of place. Patterned rugs and handmade leather wares hang outside bohemian craft shops, and

Quaint villages, working olive groves and vineyards are scattered among scores of mountains

colourful villas – some well-maintained, others half-crumbling – frame sloped, cobbled lanes dotted with lemon-yellow flowers.

At its heart is a cobbled village square where I had a hefty gyros (pitta stuffed with grilled pork souvlaki and chips) for €2, with a complimentary dessert thrown in from a smiling, friendly hostess.

Down on the coast there are plenty more spots worth visiting. Highlights include Agios Nikitas, a classic seaside resort with bougainvillea-bedecked tavernas sloping down to a swimmable, aquamarine beach; and Vasiliki, a harbour town in the south lined with shops selling locally made wine and olive oil, and yachts bobbing up and down on the ripples.

But most visitors base themselves in Nidri, a bigger resort town on the east coast with a calm, lagoon-like beach and harbour. Though the main strip of tavernas and shops feels a bit run-down and could do with a spruce-up, it makes a good base for clients who want to explore the surrounding islands.

It was from here that we hopped over to Meganisi on the aforementioned rib, and it's well worth recommending (it costs between €280 and €320 for a day including a skipper, but clients can also rent smaller, cheaper motor boats they can drive themselves). You could spend a whole day exploring the deserted enclaves in the area, with must-sees including the Papanikolis Sea Cave.

But the real standout for me was stopping to admire the much-fabled Skorpios, where Jackie Kennedy married shipping tycoon Aristotle Onassis, who owned the island, in 1968. A-listers from across the world came to enjoy Onassis's lavish, Gatsby-esque parties in its heyday – and if you make it here, you'll see exactly what lured them.

Like many of these islands, it feels remote, pristine and untouched – the type of place where nothing else really matters, where everything disappears for a while beneath the calming, twinkling ripples lapping its shore. **Getting there:** You can drive to Lefkas from the mainland – Preveza airport is about 12 miles away. **EW**

ASK THE agents



Julie Holland, Spear Travels

"A visit to Antipaxos is a must. I never imagined you could see beaches like this so close to home. It felt like the Caribbean with its white-sand beaches and glistening turquoise waters. I also loved Paxos – it's authentic and full of charm."



Elaine Ferry, Elaine's Travel

"My highlight was Lefkas. It has a relaxed and informal atmosphere and offers a true Greek experience with plenty to do, from exploring the surrounding islands to indulging in superb food. I loved it so much I'm returning in a few weeks with my husband!"



Jane Thornton, Gates Travel

"I fell in love with Paxos. It's so pretty and it hasn't lost its Greek feel, with excellent food and wine, the bluest of seas and the most amazing sunsets. Couples, honeymooners and families who want quieter resorts would all find something here."



Anne Washington, Camberley Travel

"The Ionian islands exceeded my expectations with stunning beaches and beautiful scenery. I'd recommend hiring a boat to access some of the quieter beaches around Paxos and Lefkas – there are so many remote spots to explore."