

# Looking up

The less-visited Cyclades island of Syros is the setting for one of Intrepid Travel's new retreat-style tours, reports **Katie McGonagle**

dipping my toes into the sun-warmed waters of the Aegean Sea, sailing boats bobbing gently against the jetty, sugar-cube houses snaking up the hillside to a tiny white-washed church, and a handful of sun-tanned tourists sipping beers in a beach bar, it seemed like any other summer in the glorious Greek islands.

The bars were busy serving drinks and playing music, the sunloungers spaced out along the water's edge were full, and a middle-aged man struggled to get onto a lilo with anything approaching dignity. But look a little closer at the scene in Kini Beach, Syros, last week, and it was clear there were few, if any, British tourists here.

While many of us have been flocking to Mykonos, Corfu and Crete – even more so with the shores of Spain, Portugal and now France off limits – the small Cyclades island of Syros barely registers on the radar of most British travellers, despite being a holiday hotspot for locals and Greek island enthusiasts.

Yet that's exactly why it was chosen for one of Intrepid Travel's new Intrepid Retreats, the series of closer-to-home tours that take into account new Covid-safe protocols with shorter durations and fewer hotel changes.

It was the first escorted tour to depart since operations were suspended in March, and the maiden

departure brought six of us – all from England – to Athens for a tour of the Acropolis, followed by four nights in Syros and a half-day trip to Mykonos.

## SCENIC SYROS

Unlike many other Greek islands, what's special about Syros is that tourism isn't its sole earner. The beaches are every bit as enticing as you'd expect, from the bays of Kini and Vari to the open stretch of sand at Galissas. But there's also the thriving capital city of Ermoupoli, built on the back of the island's ship-building heritage and 19th-century industry, home to a sprawling main square and grand town hall that showcases the island's one-time wealth.

Then there's the real jewel in the crown, Ano Syros, a 13th-century Venetian settlement built high up in the hills to defend from marauding pirates. It's almost too beautiful to be believed, all cobbled streets and winding stone staircases, whitewashed houses draped in bright-pink bougainvillea, all with sweeping views across Ermoupoli.

"This island has life," says our enthusiastic Intrepid Travel guide, Vasiliki Stergiopoulou. "It's not like the islands that have life only in the summer. You can go to the beach, enjoy siesta time, but it also has the vibe of the city, a variety of bars and amazing food."

"They call it the queen of the islands because ➤





**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Some of the group pictured at Vaporia, Ermoupoli; Greek and dakos salads at a restaurant in Ermoupoli; dining with a view over the harbour; Ano Syros

PICTURES: Shutterstock; Katie McGonagle; Matt Eadie



### top tip

Travellers to Greece must fill in a Passenger Locator Form (PLF) at least 24 hours before departure, and complete a UK government questionnaire on their return



of the architectural character and the elegant neoclassical buildings. At the same time, this is where a new type of musical genre called rebetiko started, which is like the Greek version of the blues. It's the music of the lower classes. Everything you hear in rebetiko is about pain, exile, broken hearts, and it's coming back – right now, a lot of young people are learning to play the bouzouki, which is the basic instrument of rebetiko.

"On the longer trips we do to Mykonos, Santorini and Syros, people tell me they love Syros the most because we get to know the people. They want authenticity and real life, and you can find that here."

### TOURING RESTARTS

As well as discovering the charm and character of Syros, seeing what group tours might look like in the wake of Covid-19 was just as much of an eye-opener. Pleasingly, it operated much like any other departure, with a few extra considerations along the way.

At the welcome meeting, guide Vasiliki gave us all a health questionnaire, and with no symptoms or Covid contacts to report, we were able to relax the need for physical distancing or masks within our group, although they were still required in taxis, ferries and public spaces such as museums or shops. That included visiting a local producer to see traditional Syros sweet loukoumia being made – although we did still manage to try a few bites despite the masks!

Intrepid switched its usual preference for public

transport in Athens and Syros for private taxis, while bar and restaurant staff wore plastic visors. Hand sanitiser was ubiquitous, and enhanced hygiene measures in each hotel included a temperature check on arrival in Athens, a served buffet and perhaps my favourite – clingfilm on the air con and TV remote controls, which was a low-tech but effective way to minimise the number of touchpoints around the room.

Other than a few small adaptations here and there – no more annoying than wearing a mask to Tesco or providing contact details at a pub – the trip did exactly what it was supposed to do, introducing us to a new destination while providing much-needed income for a local guide, small family-run hote and countless taxi drivers, shops, cafes and restaurants along the way.

As we gathered for dinner on our last night in Syros, feasting on traditional mezze in the open-air courtyard of Tsiouradiko 50-50 high up in Ano Syros, the strains of rebetiko music playing in the background, it seemed like a good first step towards the much-lauded ambition for travel to rebuild more responsibly than before. **TW**

### BOOK IT

**Intrepid Travel's** Greece Retreat: Syros Island starts at £780 land-only, including a guided tour of the Acropolis, four nights in Syros, a half-day trip to Mykonos, with ferry travel, breakfasts, one dinner and a tour leader.

[intrepidtravel.com/uk](https://intrepidtravel.com/uk)

### NEW TOURS

**Zina Bencheikh, managing director  
EMEA, Intrepid Travel**

"Safety has always been the number-one priority for us, so we came up with the idea of creating these retreats. These trips are much shorter, with a maximum group size of 12, and mostly based in one place; from there, we do activities in the area. We looked into accommodation, food, transport and making sure we are respecting the local regulations, which we need to consider in addition to our global guidelines. Our UK cycling retreats in the Lake District and Peak District have been extremely popular, and in Europe, Greece and Iceland are looking very good."