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TRAVEL + LEISURE

JULY 2007

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If you're looking for a place that's teeming with authenticity (not multitudes), follow **Eleni N. Gage** to these three undiscovered islands along the Peloponnese—each with its own distinct personality, all still blissfully under the radar
Photographed by Tim Walker

(Secret) Islands

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A hilltop terrace at Hotel Margarita, a 19th-century mansion in Hora, the main town on Kithira. Left: One of Kithira's many ruins. Right, from top: Surveying the island's Kaladi Beach; Hora's signature whitewashed buildings.

I spent my mornings in town, browsing art stores and dodging yachties photographing each other with their cell phones, and my afternoons playing *Gilligan's Island*, sailing a rented motorboat from one secluded, crescent-shaped cove to the next. One afternoon, I swam in solitude until a yacht sailed up and I decided to grant its topless inhabitants some privacy. So I motored on to the sandy beach of Agia (Saint) Paraskeví, eight miles southwest of the harbor, where pine trees scented the air and provided a dark-green backdrop for the cobalt sea and a whitewashed chapel. After a lunch of fried zucchini and perfectly spiced mini-burgers at the beach's nameless taverna, I reclined on a sun-bed, eavesdropping on a seven-year-old boy who spoke Greek with his parents, French with his nanny, and Arabic with his sister (they live in Dubai during the rest of the year, he told me).

Spetses' most famous inhabitant had a far less relaxing relationship with the sea. In the harbor in Spetses town, a grand statue of Bouboulina claims pride of place. The female sea captain led the Spetsiot fleet to victory in the 1821 War of Independence and she remains an important symbol of the island's erstwhile political power. A few yards on, I encountered a more modern Spetsiot legend when I passed a seafront house, battered but still handsome, like its owner, who was sitting on his balcony, barefoot and bare-chested, while his wife shelled beans in the cool of the living room. Demetrios Papadimitriou was a captain, like Bouboulina—except he spent 16 years commanding submarines, not leading revolutionaries. He

invited me in and showed me his medals, a photo of the Y-5 Triton submarine he'd been on when it sank in 1942, and a painting of his grandfather's boat from 1891. "We've always been captains, but not anymore," he said. "Now my son owns the Fanari grill, in the square." He smiled. "But he has photos of our boats on the walls."

• That evening, I met a real descendant of Bouboulina's, Christos Orloff, who added four faithful reproductions of his family home to the 1865 original to create the Orloff Resort. Tucked away in a quiet neighborhood just above the Old Harbor, the 22-room boutique hotel is built around a courtyard pool surrounded by ancient olive trees. I drank a glass of Chablis and studied the scene, unable to tell whether this particular olive tree or that clay urn was an ancient or modern addition. That was the point, Orloff told me: to bring a modern sensibility to old Spetses. Admiring the local architecture while drinking imported wine, I had to agree that he had struck the right balance. •

At the nearby Tarsanas restaurant, the *fagri* (white snapper) being served had been caught that day, and I ordered some while watching boatbuilders work at a trade as old as the island, sanding hulls at the boatyards at the end of the Old Harbor. Spetsiots have found so many uses for ships—from fighting for independence to picking up a few truffles; from submarine warfare to searching for the perfect spot to swim. Over the years, they've also honed their ability to navigate between modern and traditional pleasures, making the island the kind of place where sandy





SPETSES

IFIRST VISITED SPETSES, a small island with 18 miles of coast and a hilly interior of pine forests, as a teenager, while staying in my aunt's cottage in Portoheli, on the mainland. From my aunt's house, I'd hike down a dirt path to the port, then take a water taxi across the Gulf of Argolis over to Spetses town, a waterfront stretch of well-kept ship captains' mansions with pebble mosaics in their inner courtyards and massive anchors out front. Spetses seemed gloriously cosmopolitan to me then: British, Italian, and French visitors mixed with the wealthy Athenians who moored their yachts in the harbor.

It's not so different today. Less than two hours by hydrofoil from Athens, Spetses is still a favorite getaway for city dwellers seeking an escape from their manic megalopolis. "There are no cars on the island in summer, except a few belonging to local businesses," said the woman who welcomed me to the Nissia hotel, a complex of pastel cottages built on the grounds of an old textile factory, as she led me around a pool populated by nannies giving swimming lessons. "You can flag down a horse-drawn carriage on the harbor, walk, rent a bike or motorcycle, or have us call a cab. But be prepared to wait," she warned. "There are only four cabs in total."

The four cabs serve a population of 4,100 year-round inhabitants, all living in or around Spetses town. In 1821, when the Greek War of Independence began, Spetses had 13,000 inhabitants. Now, there are only enough locals to support one high school, but in summer and on holidays, the island's population swells to nearly its 19th-century level. During the time I spent on Spetses, I grew accustomed to the island's rhythm, swaying between the traditional life and the swanky summer scene. One night I ate a simple meal of tomato fritters and calamari at Rousos Taverna while a gypsy lady circulated, hawking embroidered tablecloths. When she stopped to take a bathroom break, my mustached waiter watched over her bundle of fabric, leaning against a wall under a string of octopi with his captain's hat pushed low on his forehead. The next evening, I joined friends who had piloted a speedboat over from the mainland to eat at their favorite restaurant, La Scala. We sat at a candlelit table on a rooftop overlooking the sea, and soon the blond owner, Fenella Catsoris, recognized my friends as regulars. She hurried over and exclaimed, in an accent and scene out of *Absolutely Fabulous*, "We've got fresh truffles! I went to Athens today on the catamaran and picked them up." Originally from England, Catsoris married a Greek and had been living on Spetses for 22 years. Now she is enriching the island's gourmet offerings, one truffle at a time.