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# GREECE LIGHTNING

Spend the day on an island beach and the evening with a view of the Acropolis. **Lisa Grainger** visits Spetses

ONE OF THE LOVELIEST things about sailing around the Greek islands is seeing just how different they all are. Ferry into Santorini and you'll be confronted by a town hanging onto the blackened cliffs of an ancient volcano cone. Cruise into Mykonos and you'll find designer boutique hotels squeezed between blue-shuttered fishermen's homes. Head

to car-free Hydra and you'll hear hardly a sound but the bray of a donkey or miaow of a cat.

Sail into Spetses and it will be neither its buildings, nor its beaches, nor its geography that stands out. It will be its people.

This small island, just off the Peloponnese mainland, has been a summer retreat for the cream of Athens society for more than a hundred years. It's where the

Niarchos family comes to play when they've had enough privacy on their own neighbouring island, where the Onassis family came to drop anchor, and where, the week I visited, the son of the former King Constantine of Greece was married, in a tiny Orthodox church, drawing royalty from all over Europe and yachts so enormous that at night the sea in the harbour shone like a pale



# Short breaks

The great getaway ★ Spetses & Athens ★ Five more dual-centre holidays



and Athens, and finds a two-stop break offers a perfect view of the country. Photographs by Matthew Buck

aquamarine, sparkling with hundreds of under-berth lights.

What makes Spetses different to other wealthy playgrounds – the likes of St Tropez or Costa Smeralda – is that almost all of its visitors are members of the Greek elite, who have no need to show off. As Petros Haritatos, the former political adviser turned historian who accompanied me to the island's museum, put it over lunch:

'The people who come here are the sort who understand the fine things in life: for instance, that a good restaurant is one that welcomes you and cooks tasty, fresh ingredients well, not one with gold curlicues and an effusive maître d.'

On a stroll along the town's 4km coastal promenade, the waft of old money and understated good taste is evident. Grand 18th-century stone villas passed down through

Approaching the harbour on the tiny island of Spetses

generations of shipping magnates line the harbour, cooled by gardens fragrant with pines, oranges and oleander. Glossy beribboned horses pulling old-fashioned wooden carriages – the main form of transportation on an almost car-free island – trot up and down the esplanade, carrying women with shopping and courting couples. Groups of giggling, golden-skinned children in swimsuits flit about ➤



## Short breaks



Left, 18th-century villa in Spetses. Opposite, clockwise from top left: the pool at Poseidonion Grand Hotel; the hotel terrace; the road from the harbour to the port; a villa at Orloff Resort; Poseidonion Grand's terrace; a hotel suite; the local fish market; boats in the harbour. Centre, a villa entrance

### ‘All along the waterfront, holidaymakers sit and enjoy the Greek pastime of whiling away the day, chatting’

➤ on bicycles, unaccompanied and clearly revelling in their freedom. And all along the waterfront, in the quiet harbour where every now and then a fast catamaran drops off passengers from Athens, hordes of sleek, linen-clad holidaymakers sit beneath Adriatic-blue awnings, licking submarines (cold, sweet vanilla and mastic treats), nibbling traditional, icing-sugar-covered almond cakes, sipping long, iced *freddo* coffees, and enjoying the quintessential Greek pastime of whiling away the day, chatting.

Socialising is one of the main reasons Greeks come to this quaint little island: to catch up with family and friends who have been coming here all their lives, too. There's very little else to do. Because cars are banned (other than a few taxis and a bus, which goes around the island's 7km perimeter once an hour), no one has built outside the town. Once you've popped into the two grand old villa museums, the Mexis and Bouboulina, built in former nobles' homes (see Dual Aspect, p50), wandered the

cobbled streets and walked the promenades, all that's left is to head to one of the five lovely sand and pebble beaches.

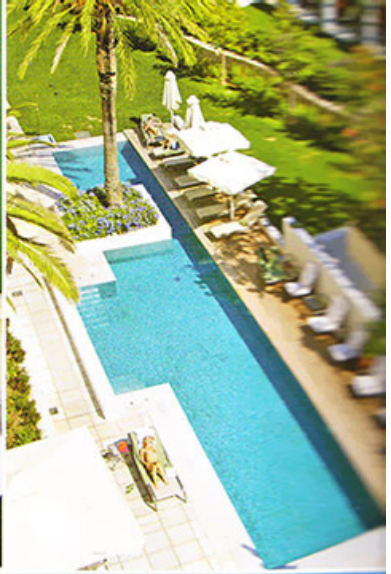
Which is what I do, hailing a water taxi at the harbour. Like taxi drivers anywhere, this Spetsiot is chatty. The late Princess Diana, he says, was a regular client. 'I took the princess everywhere on Spetses, and she was very natural, in her bikini, with no shoes. Very nice lady.'

On his 16-seater, he takes us to a royal favourite, Zogeria beach, on the quiet north side of the island. From the sea, it's easy to understand the island's appeal for Europe's privacy-seeking aristocracy. Because almost half the island is owned by a foundation that forbids further development, much of it remains green and unpopulated. The no-car policy makes beaches accessible only to those with mopeds or boats, so they're very quiet. And when return water taxis to the beach cost €100, it certainly dissuades anyone on a budget.

The small, secluded Zogeria beach is pretty dreamy. The crescent-shaped, sandy cove fringes shallow turquoise waters that slowly deepen to inky blue, and is surrounded by a sweet-scented pine forest. A few yards from the sand, a taverna owned by three generations of the same family serves four delicious dishes a day (including moreish lamb meatball spaghetti with sheep's cheese), cold beers and salads. And for post-lunch naps, umbrellas and loungers are set a few feet from the water.

**M**UCH OF THE APPEAL of Spetses, I come to learn, lies in the islanders' understanding of what real luxury is: delicious dishes using good local ingredients that haven't been messed about with; light-filled rooms with views of the ever-changing blues of the ➤







## Short breaks



The New Acropolis Museum, in Athens

➤ sea; genuine hospitality; and an absence of pretension.

Even at the island's smartest place to stay, the Poseidonion Grand Hotel, a three-storey former shipping magnate's home built in the style of a French château, there's a warm, friendly air. Yes, the ceilings are ornately pressed and the floors are original 1920s ceramics, but the walls are painted in fashionable pale greys and the informal sofas are covered in soft linens. There's caviar on the menu, but there are doner kebabs, too. Emerald lawns lead to a sleek lap pool, then a spa specialising in treatments using local thyme oils. And on the elegant stone terrace, groups of tousle-haired sailors with glamorous partners mix with children and grandmothers in floral-print smocks – princesses and magnates, fishermen and foresters chatting and socialising as they have done for generations. It's like a house party, on a rather elaborate scale.

**L**EAVING LAID-BACK Spetses for Athens would have been more difficult if there had not been two incentives: the new Acropolis Museum and a cluster of innovative restaurants that have opened since the 2004 Olympics.

Given that Spetses is just two hours away from the Athenian port of Piraeus by comfortable catamaran (or three hours in inclement weather), it's perfectly ➤

## DUAL ASPECT The lowdown on Spetses and Athens

### SPETSES

#### WHERE TO STAY

■ **Poseidonion Grand Hotel**, Dapia. (00 30 22980 74553; www.poseidonion.com). Former waterside mansion modelled on a Côte d'Azur château, with 52 modern rooms and three restaurants. Doubles from €195

■ **Orloff Resort**, 180 50 Old Harbour (00 30 22980 75444; www.orloffresort.com). A 19th-century shipping magnate's home, converted into two private villas and a minimalist mini hotel. Doubles from €120; villa sleeping 10 from €650

#### WHERE TO EAT

■ **Aneton on the Verandah**, Poseidonion Grand Hotel (contact details as above). Island outpost of the fashionable Athens restaurant, with palm-lined terraces overlooking the sea. Dinner about €100 for two, without wine

■ **Tarsanas** (00 30 22980 74490; www.tarsanas-spetses.gr). Casual harbourside restaurant, for fresh fish and tasty mezze. Dinner from €80 for two, without wine

#### WHERE TO DRINK

■ **Mourayo bar** in the old harbour (www.mourayospetses.gr), or hip **Throubi Bar** for waterside dancing (http://throubibar.wordpress.com).

### DON'T MISS

A tour with **Petros Haritatos** (petros.haritatos@gmail.com); an hour or two in the **Spetses Museum**, in the 1798 Mexis mansion; a visit to **Bouboulina's**



**Museum**, dedicated to the island's great naval heroine (www.bouboulinamuseum-spetses.gr).

#### GETTING THERE

The **Flying Cat** and **Flying Dolphin** (00 30 21041 99000; www.hsw.gr) ferry between Piraeus and Spetses five times a day, and cost from €70 return.

### ATHENS

#### WHERE TO STAY

■ **Grande Hotel Bretagne**, Constitution Square (00 30 21033 30000; www.grandebretagne.gr). Old-fashioned grande dame of Athens – all gilt, oil paintings and marble downstairs, and a

modern roof terrace above. Doubles from €260; dinner on the terrace about €140 for two, without wine

#### WHERE TO EAT

■ **Kuzina**, Adrianou 9 (00 30 21032 40133; www.kuzina.gr). Converted rustic mansion offering imaginative modern Greek food.

■ **Varoulko**, below, Piraeus 80 (00 30 21052 28400). The only Michelin-starred Greek restaurant in the capital; inventive, and expensive. Dinner about €240 for two, without wine

■ **Café Melina**, Lysiou 22 (www.melinacafe.gr). A characterful stop-off for coffee in Plaka.



### DON'T MISS

The **Acropolis Museum** (00 30 21090 00900; www.theacropolismuseum.gr); a tour with **Elsa Mastoridou**, booked through Breathtaking Athens (www.breathtakingathens.com); a couple of hours in the **Benaki Museum** (www.benaki.gr); a stroll around the chic shops of **Kolonaki**.

#### GETTING THERE

**Olympic Air** (www.olympicair.com), **British Airways** (www.ba.com) and **Aegean Airlines** (www.aegeanair.com) fly from Heathrow; **EasyJet** (www.easyjet.com) flies from Gatwick, Luton and Manchester. For general information on Greece, visit www.visitgreece.gr.

### JOURNEY TIME

Three-and-a-half-hour flight to Athens. It's then a 2.5- to 3.5-hour ferry to Spetses.

