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CYCLING GREECE

IT HAS ITS UPS AND DOWNS

DIANA BALLON



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THERE IS A QUIET meditative state that comes over you when you bike, the more your body moves, the more your mind quiets, clears and expands. The warm wind sweeps away the past and leaves you with a visceral experience of the present.

And when cycling on the Peloponnese mainland in Greece, the present isn't something you want to escape from. This peninsula in the southern part of the country is a land of many beaches, pretty seaside villages, archeological sites, classical history and dramatic landscapes. Riding over five days with Exodus Travels last September, the mountains would often envelope us, with the shifting shades of blue cast by the sea in the distance. One morning we passed two flamingos, their pink feathers clearly discernible as we cycled past a wetland. Then there was the morning we biked through orange groves, the unripened fruit looking like

Above: Aerial view of Nafplio.

Left: The author cycling the hills of Greece.

engorged limes, with the occasional pomegranate tree here and there, bright red globes against the green foliage. Olive trees had a different look, with green pellets and dainty leaves fluttering with the gentlest breeze.

Admittedly, when I first chose to do a Greek cycling trip with Exodus Adventure Travels, I didn't know that the country was one of the three most mountainous in Europe, with everything from rolling hills to sharp peaks covering 80 percent of its land mass. Now, having completed my trip, I can definitely report that there were a lot of ups and downs! Often cycling in 35-degree heat, with gradients sometimes more than 11 percent, I would focus only on my slow rhythmic exhalations, and on the shadows we cast as we climbed, in single file.

We cycled about 260kms, roughly in a circle that began and ended in Athens. By "we" I refer to 16

able-bodied adventurers ranging in age from 34 to 74, but mostly in their 50s and 60s. Most were British and although generally older, this group was fit, with retirement seeming only to boost an already active lifestyle.

As one of the participants, 74-year-old Wendy Ward explained it, staying in shape is about having a healthy lifestyle and a positive mindset. "A lot of people think, 'I'm too old' at a certain number or age, rather than waiting to see what if any health issues arise."

Our trip was led by local guides Dimitris Stergiotis and Sotiris (or Soto) Tsoilis, along with our stalwart van driver, Yiannis Fronimopoulos. Although we had the option of getting in the van if we needed it, Dimitris said that people tend to use the van infrequently ever since e-bikes became an option. Three of the 16 participants were on e-bikes, with the rest on regular touring bikes.



This page (clockwise from top left): Cafés line a pretty street in Nafplio.

The famous Theater of Epidauros, built in the 4th Century BC.

Delicious picnic lunches were provided along the road.

Facing page (clockwise from top):

Aerial view of the Acropolis of Athens, with Odeon of Herodes Atticus in the foreground.

The group celebrates completion of a 264-km cycling trip.

As part of the tour, buffet-style breakfasts were included while, for lunches and snacks, we all paid a nominal 80 euros for the entire week to have the guides provide lunches that were mostly delicious picnics, with things like Greek salads, tuna, olives, bread, dolmadakia (stuffed grape leaves) and fruit. For dinner, Dimitris would select the restaurants and order for us, family style, so we could try everything from moussaka to tzatziki, fried zucchini and eggplant, jumbo shrimp, octopus and honey-drenched baklava or ice cream for dessert. The total cost for dinner never exceeded more than about 20 euros.

OUR ITINERARY

Day 1: The first day, we left our hotel in central Athens early to ride through the city with minimal traffic, and more quickly access one of the city centre's two official bike lanes. Despite a population of more than three million, there is little bike culture in Athens. Thirteen kms in, we boarded a ferry

from the port of Piraeus to travel about three hours across the Argo-Saronic Gulf to the small lush island of Poros, a popular weekend destination for Athenians. Once in Poros, we cycled around the coast, visiting various sites along the way, including the remnants of the Temple of Poseidon on the northern part of the island.

Day 2: We began the day with a walking tour of the town of Poros where Dimitris explained how Greece gained independence in 1821. Later, we stopped by the rock near the ancient village of Troizina, the birthplace of Theseus, where Dimitris told us the legend of this great Athenian hero who slayed the Minotaur.

The afternoon had much uphill cycling, given an unexpected road closure, but then a final welcome section of downhill en route to the ancient town of Epidauros.

Day 3: We left the Saronic coast behind for what would be a 50-km day. Along the way, we stopped at a 16th Century chapel, and later a small

museum of natural history. In the afternoon, after 13 kms of uphill, we visited the famous Theater of Epidauros. Built in the 4th Century BC, it can seat about 14,000 people, but the acoustics are so good that you can hear someone clap on stage from the very back row!

That evening, we stayed at the John & George Hotel, an unassuming family-run hotel that overlooks and offers a great view of the bay and a swimming pool in the laid-back and relatively untouristed beach town, Tolo.

Day 4: My favourite cycling day, we passed through the pretty city of Nafplio, which was the first capital of the modern or "newly born" Greece/Greek state after it was liberated from the Turks. While there, some of the group took the "999 steps" (by myth, but in reality, 857 stairs) for a spectacular view of the city and the Argolic Gulf from the Palamidi Fortress. Me? I decided to wander its slender cobblestone alleys, admiring

the neoclassical buildings, and stopping for a cappuccino off the main square. Soon after, we arrived at a pretty little covered picnic area where we swam while our picnic lunch was prepared. In the afternoon, we left the coast behind and headed to Mycenae. There we walked through the Lions Gate of the Bronze Age Citadel, built in the 13th Century BC and saw the tombs of Aegisthus, Clytemnestra and Agamemnon.

That night we stayed at the family-run Petite Planete, which famed author Haruki Murakami once visited. In the evening, a few of us got up to dance before enjoying a home-cooked dinner at a long outdoor table, the twinkling lights of Argos far in the distance.

Day 5: Our last day of cycling was also the longest. We rode 63 kms, stopping in the morning at a small unassuming taverna in a mountain passage where the Greeks, led by Theodoros Kolokotronis, fought in the famous Battle of Dervenakia during the Greek War of Independence. Later, we

stopped at the ancient stadium of Nemea before heading to Palivou Estate area for a tour and wine tasting. I decided to show restraint on my wine consumption, knowing we still had more than 40 kms ahead of us.

We then cycled, with beautiful views of the mountains, past vineyards, through towns, along quiet country roads, and then on a busy main road. Around 5:00 p.m., we walked our bikes across a small bridge over the Corinth Canal, which divides the Ionian and Aegean Seas, and pedalled to our final destination, a seaside hotel in the touristy beach town of Loutraki.

Final day: No cycling. We took a local bus about 1.5 hours to Athens, and then the metro to the Acropolis for a guided tour followed by a walking tour of the city centre before our closing dinner that night.

Reflecting on our trip, I can definitely say that, while there were physical ups and downs, it was definitely a peak experience! ■



Greek island hopping at its best

By Diana Ballon

With 227 inhabited islands to choose from, exploring the Greek isles is vast and varied. Are you looking for deserted beaches, a walkable town, a party scene, a foodie experience, stunning architecture, great hiking, spellbinding sunsets or a remote destination? The choices are endless, and there are likely no wrong turns. Here are three islands we loved.



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Hydra

As a non-driver and a former Montrealer the Saronic island of Hydra intrigued me for being car and even bike free but, yes, donkey filled (!), and for being the home of singer-songwriter, poet and novelist Leonard Cohen back in the sixties.

This small island in the Aegean Sea is located an hour or two by ferry from Athens. It's a short distance to travel to reach this magical, 10-mile-long island that has more than 300 churches, at least as many meandering cats, and narrow alleys where a walking culture means that you are bound to connect and make friends with other island dwellers.

The hub of activity takes place around the port, with the island rising on a slope like an amphitheatre that extends above the crystal blue Argo-Saronic Gulf. For a true escape, take a five-minute boat shuttle or about a half hour walk around the shore to reach the luxurious Mandraki Beach Resort, which boasts the only sandy beach on the island, in a quiet bay known for its shipbuilding in the 1800s. The resort both accommodates and incorporates history, with the original 18th Century cannons, dock platform and even a tiny chapel, and elegant suites that combine traditional architecture with modern design. Beachfront cabanas boast exposed stone walls, arched windows, marble floors, and high-peaked wood ceilings, each with their own enclosed pool, while their tower suite in the main building offers a panoramic view of the sea from its private terrace. Mandraki's Captain M Restaurant is similarly first rate, with a Mediterranean fusion, Greek-inspired menu with an international twist and popular dishes like their octopus carpaccio, cauliflower salad and chocolate sphere bomb.

Andros

I'm not sure why this [lush] green island in the northern part of the Cyclades archipelago has escaped the attention of the hordes of tourists that flock to nearby Mykonos. But escape it has. We came here almost by accident, lured by its proximity to Tinos, which we were also visiting, and by its inexpensive prices. Of its seven villages, we chose to base ourselves in Batsi because of its easy walking access to five beautiful beaches, amazing restaurants and beach-side tavernas, and the traditional white-washed houses with red roofs that create a pretty network through its streets. We also loved our suite at Paradise Design Apartments: it was amazingly inexpensive, comfortable and clean, with a view of the water from our terrace, and rental cars available on site.

Once on the island, we discovered that Andros has 230 kms of well-marked trails that has rendered it one of the leading quality destinations for walking in Europe. In 2010, the Andros Research Centre was created, in large part to revive the island's cultural heritage by bringing back its old walking routes, along with recording its oral history. As a result, people can now follow in the steps of its original inhabitants.

With the island's many valleys, streams, mountains and slopes, it is "like someone has squeezed the island and it's become folded with parts that are hidden," says Olga Karayiannis, the driving force behind the Andros Routes project. You can't really get a total feeling of the island without walking its many paths to explore the island's different characteristics, its rich biodiversity and its many rivers, streams and waterfalls, she explains. "It's like water is bursting everywhere." For hiking routes on the island, visit www.androsroutes.gr.

Tinos

With more than 60 villages and countless beaches, Tinos is the largest of the Cycladic islands, and well worth visiting for its great beauty, its stellar gastronomic scene, traditional architecture and natural beauty. But be forewarned, it's windy here! Although not just indigenous to Tinos, the Meltemi's fierce winds mean that you will need to hold onto your hat (or wear a chin strap!) and keep at least one hand on an open car door at all times.

But take these precautions, and don't let a strong breeze deter you. Part of the magic of the Tinos landscape is its dry stone-wall terraces that cross its steep-sloped terrain, its geometrically-designed dovecotes, some dating back to the 18th and 19th Centuries, with the breeding of pigeons; and traditional windmills that dot the landscape.

While four days didn't give us time to visit all its villages and beaches, I can vouch that a trip to the "marble village" of Pyrgos is not to be missed. Literally turn your camera in any direction and you can instantly capture the majesty of its sleek white marble, with ornamental designs carved into its lintels, onto stones underfoot, on church facades, and reflected in the birds and other items for purchase in its pretty boutiques, and on display at its Museum of Marble Craft.

For gastronomy, don't leave without eating at To Thalassaki, a waterside restaurant on the western part of the island considered one of the best here. . . And for local wine, visit Vaptistis Winery or T-OINOS Winery & Vineyards to sample Tinos' terroir.

IF YOU GO - Hydra is accessible from Athens by the port of Piraeus, while Tinos and Andros are part of the Cycladic island chain reachable by ferry from the port of Rafina. These two ports are close to an hour apart by taxi, so factor this in if you are moving from one to the next. Ferries can be pre-booked through ferryscanner.com and ferryhopper.com. If possible, avoid travelling in July and August when tourists and heat are at their maximum, in favour of late spring and fall.

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