

Halcyon days

Try visiting Greece when it's freezing, says **Bettany Hughes**



Summer is not eternal. I am irrationally irritated by those who cast the Mediterranean in a balmy, Augustan perma-glow. Think instead of Socrates standing with his bare feet, dreaming up solutions to the human problem while ice creeps along the shoreline; or Plutarch's reference to a distant land where the cold is so intense words freeze as they are spoken, and thaw in the spring. Just as Virgil prays for sunny winters in his *Georgics*, the winter months in this part of the world can have their own dangerously glittering beauty. Istanbul in the snow is a wonder. The extravagant pleasures on show in the Topkapi Palace Museum—the sultan's robes thickly lined with squirrel fur, mobile foot-braziers to keep out a cold that whips relentlessly off the Bosphorus—presage modern-day sultanic delights. Hot-oil massages in the Hotel Les Ottomans, roaring fires in the Kempinski's winter palace.

Perhaps this season is best experienced in the extremes: in the hearts of cities and deep in the countryside. One tip is to select those spots frequented by canny, local vis-

itors to avoid that sad, out of season dip. The unspoilt Cycladic island of Siphnos is a good bet. Over 85 per cent of Siphnian tourism is home grown—Hellenic old-timers who expect their holiday experiences to be authentic. The winter ferry from Athens takes six hours and is crammed with old ladies clutching caged canaries. Visit in winter or spring and you will find around

"The ancient pathways that used to connect cities, sanctuaries and temples in the classical and Byzantine worlds are being restored"

3000 islanders, as opposed to 40,000 holiday-makers in summer, so the experience can be wonderfully reminiscent of a Gerald Durrell novel. Every Saturday afternoon the men of the island still mount bikes, mopeds and donkeys to take terracotta pots of chickpea soup to the island's roaring communal ovens, white-hot with burning

brushwood and maquis herbs, to be roasted overnight. This is real fruit of the soil stuff, local chickpeas, thyme and onions, with rainwater as stock. Most households will offer up tumblers of what they call "sun wine" to wash the broth down—sun-roasted grapes (raisins to you and me) generating 16 per cent proof alcohol. Potent stuff; I would defy anyone to feel chilly after a couple of glasses. Votsaris, the only official viticulturist on the island, has some unofficial "friends and family" casks of sun wine in the back of the winery.

Just outside the Votsaris vineyard are lovingly renovated dry-stone walls and ancient paths. Proving that not all Greeks are tax-dodging profligates, Elliniki Etairia, an Athens-based NGO, is quietly working to save some of the most distinctive features of the Hellenic landscape and heritage. In an act of sheer brilliance they are restoring many of the ancient pathways that connected cities, sanctuaries and temples in the classical and Byzantine worlds. Too hot to comfortably attempt in August, October to March is the perfect time to strike out along these once-neglected tracks. Spick and span Siphnos was dubbed the "Switzerland of Greece" back in the 18th century; cheerful locals, like the wall-building, fiddle-playing Bairamis who celebrate their work by breaking into spontaneous rhyming couplets, are helping to ensure the island still deserves its epithet. ▶



The Peloponnese is worth exploring during the winter months, before it fills up with tourists

Another example of local renovation can be found on the Greek mainland, deep in the Peloponnese where the idyllic guesthouse Aldemar Epohes hides in one of Greece's few chestnut forests. Travelling here to visit the birthplace of Zeus, my family and I found ourselves in a bucolic heaven. In the surrounding, tiny village of Ambeliona there are no notes of modernity; just birdsong, children playing and church bells. Shaded

by fig trees and fed by spring water, a husband and wife team cooked us five-course, fresh-as-a-daisy meals. The village's resident (and extremely shy) Bouzouki player coloured the crisp afternoons with summer sound. We were the only visitors and were welcomed as long-lost relatives.

The phrase "halcyon days" is cast around willy-nilly. The name actually comes from a Greek legend: the two weeks

in winter when Aeolus, the god of the wind, holds back the storms so a female kingfisher (once his daughter, Alcyone) can nest safely at sea. If the Halcyon days of a Mediterranean winter, god-blessed, were good enough for sublime kingfishers they should certainly have something to offer us all.

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