

Little Venice's
seafront
terraces and
balconies look
out on to the
horizon

SHORT
BREAK

MYKONOS

Exploring a more sophisticated and restrained side of the Greek island, **Laurel Munshower** discovers that it has wider appeal than its reputation suggests

MENTION THE CYCLADES AND it conjures up images of turquoise waters surrounding breezy islands dotted with whitewashed structures with pretty blue shutters, of honeymoon hideaways and – in the case of Mykonos – of unhinged, hedonistic, don't-stop-until-the-sun-rises partying. The reputation of the wild child of the Aegean isn't unwarranted: Thumping bars populate the streets of the main town and the world's hottest international DJs take to the decks at Paradise Beach's Ibiza-esque mega-clubs each summer. But as it turns out, "the island of the winds" has another side, one for grown-ups looking for excellent regional cuisine, sophisticated stays, idyllic beaches and history – in less hectic environs.

From Athens, bypass another air trip for a sea journey. On the eastern side of the Attic Peninsula from Rafina Port, a two-and-a-half hour jaunt on a high-speed ferry takes passengers past islands like Andros and Tinos, providing a sense of just how riddled with little isles the region is. The ferry arrives directly in

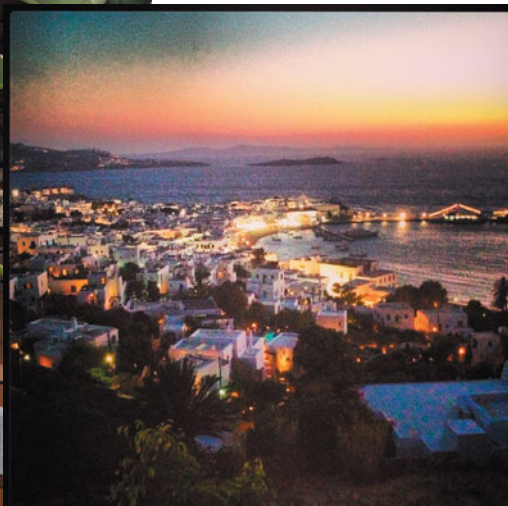
the Old Port at Mykonos Town – also called Chora – where white building façades and windmills serve as a welcome committee.

Having reopened in May after an extensive renovation, the hotel **Santa Marina** (doubles from AED 2,285; 0030-228-902 3220, santa-marina.gr) is in a secluded location clinging to the hills at the far end of laid-back Ornos, a 15-minute drive south of Mykonos Town. White and sandy-hued rooms with traditional wood-beamed ceilings open on to balconies with views over the property's traditional Cycladic architecture, across boat-filled Ornos Bay to neighbouring island Delos. With the luxury of a private beach, the resort offers a more peaceful experience than can be found at many of the other hotels, where public, often loud and cramped beaches are the only option for seaside lounging. Away from the hustle of the main town, and even set away from the rest of Ornos, it's easy to lose yourself in the tranquillity and forget that thousands visit this same island for its hectic late-night shenanigans.

That said, a visit to Mykonos isn't complete

without an evening in Chora's **Little Venice**. For all the night-time antics that unfold there, early evenings are a more low-key affair, with designer shopping through the labyrinth of narrow streets – **Soho-Soho** (sohoso.gr) carries boho labels like Halston Heritage and there's even a Louis Vuitton boutique. Beneath the windmills on the shore, **Sea Satin Market** (0030-228-902 4676) is a good spot to grab a table and watch intensely colourful sunsets, as well as taste regional *taverna* cuisine. The day's catch is on display to choose from and local dishes like *taramasalata* (white fish roe dip) and *loukoumades* (fried honey puffs) are served to a soundtrack of breaking waves and sunset applause. The night's usual madness doesn't really kick into gear until closer to midnight, so after dinner there's time to stop at one of the area's oldest lounges, **Caprice** (0030-228-902 3541), where the music may be a bit kitsch but the atmosphere is always joyful.

Despite being a small island, it isn't necessarily easy to get around Mykonos. The bus network frequents only the beaches within easy distance from the main town,



Clockwise from far left: Aegean views from Bayview Beach Restaurant & Bar; Chora comes alive as the sun goes down; Little Venice is made up of pristine white-and-blue lanes; the House of Dionysus in Delos



like Paradise, Platis Gialos and Paranga, and the taxis – which you must call for in advance and are unlikely to ever hail – number only around 30. There are water taxis to certain spots, but that still leaves much of the island hard to access unless you have your own transportation. The advantage, of course, is that there are several beaches on the eastern and northern shores that are virtually empty.

ATVs are a popular method of personal transportation, particularly with the bikini-clad crowd, but another option – one that comes with the opportunity to get familiar with the island's lesser known interior, at a slower pace – is to travel on horseback. **Horseland** (*rides from AED 325 per person; 0030-695-740 7875, horseland.gr*) is located in Maou, on the eastern side of the island, where rolling hills dotted with vineyards and walls of lush bamboo defending crops against the wind dominate the landscape. The riding centre is run by

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Fanis Rouvas, who worked with horses for a number of years in Northern Greece before making his way – with equines in tow – to Mykonos. His love for the animals is apparent in their friendly, well-trained demeanours, spotless grooming and the sheer number of baby animals frolicking about the property, from colts to kittens and even turkey chicks.

Rouvas leads riders on a number of excursions, to places like unspoilt Mersini Beach, and past St Anna Church and a castle in Moroergo. Heading out on one of the most popular rides, you'll follow a gentle lake trail lined with bamboo, which the horses nibble on at every opportunity, passing the occasional

home of one of the island's 9,000 residents. As the trail descends alongside the Ano Mera dam on the Maou Lagada River, the view opens up and **Fokos Beach** appears, looking better suited to Mykonos' much quieter neighbour, Naxos. Without the back-to-back sunbeds and umbrellas of the more touristy beaches, it's a welcome retreat for a peaceful afternoon. **Fokos Taverna** (0030-694-582 8561, *fokosmykonos.com*), the beach's only restaurant, is an unpretentious eatery serving Greek basics like *tzatziki* and grilled lamb chops.

If you've got the time, a trip to **Delos** (AED 90, *including return ferry and site entrance*) is not to be missed. The small, uninhabited island a few kilometres off the coast of Mykonos – about a 30-minute ferry ride away – is one of Greece's most important archaeological and sacred sites, due to its position as the ancient civilization's cultural centre and the birthplace of Apollo and Artemis. It's easy to spend a ▶

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Al fresco dining at Sea Satin Market. **Top right:** Rooms at Santa Marina feature views of Ornos Bay



Gentle inland rides lead to quiet beaches. **Top:** Discerning crowds favour the upscale scene at Nammos

day exploring the seemingly endless ruins of homes, theatres, extraordinary mosaics, *agoras* and – arguably the most well known ruin on the site – the Naxian Lion Terrace. A small museum exhibits excavated items that help round out the picture of what Delos life must have been like in its prime. Extensive as the site currently is, it is still under excavation.

When in Mykonos, you don't want to skip out entirely on the famed afternoon beach culture – but avoid the truly over-the-top rave- and frat-inspired scenes at Paradise and Super Paradise. **Psarou Beach**, a short water-taxi ride around the corner from Ornos Beach, is a swanky alternative. At **Nammos** (0030-228-902 2440, nammos.gr) visitors are welcome to lounge on the plush sunbeds for a mere AED 250 amid a crowd of jet-setters fresh off their yachts – many of which are moored conspicuously in the bay – lunching on lobster ravioli. The beach is genuinely scenic; partly in thanks to Nammos' palm-fringed landscaping and stylish décor, but it's the natural beauty of the cliffs shielding the small, sparkling bay from the island's strong gusts, even during the windiest months, that is the real treat.

As the afternoon temperatures climb in Psarou, so does the volume of the music, and by 4pm, what started as a civilised affair begins to venture into party territory. Stay on to see how the rich and famous get down, or grab the last water taxi back to Ornos for dinner at **Bayview Beach Restaurant and Bar** (0030-228-902 3220, bayview-mykonos.com). As the name suggests, it's situated just above the Santa Marina's beach looking over Ornos

Bay. With a contemporary feel, the long, narrow space affords each table a good view of the Aegean and its Technicolor sunsets. This season, the restaurant has introduced a sushi station, helmed by two dedicated sushi chefs crafting maki rolls and sashimi from the region's freshest fish – the popularity of sushi on Mykonos has practically made it an honorary local dish. Move on to a main of fillet of sea bass, which is light but flavourful with a simple sauce *vierge* that doesn't overpower the fresh taste of the fish. Paired with a smoked aubergine salad with roasted peppers, it's the ideal Asian-Mediterranean fusion meal to cap off a holiday on an island experienced in an unexpected way.

GETTING THERE Emirates (emirates.com), Etihad (etihad.com) and Qatar Airways (qatarairways.com) fly direct to Athens, from where you can take a 35-minute flight with Aegean Airlines (aegeanair.com) or a 2-hour 30-minute high-speed ferry with Seajets (seajets.gr) from Attica's Rafina Port to Mykonos **CNT**

PIT STOP: ATHENS

On your way to Mykonos, spend a day in Athens. Here, the stately **Hotel Grande Bretagne** (doubles from AED 1,350; 0030-210-333 0000, grandebretagne.com) on Syntagma Square provides guests with views of the city's most famous sights – the Acropolis, Lycabettus Hill, Parliament – from classically designed rooms draped in rich fabrics, with impeccable service that makes you feel as important as one of the visiting dignitaries who often use the hotel as a base. Just around the corner lies **attica** (0030-211-180 2571, atticadps.gr), a large department store with upmarket fashion and – for those who prefer wearable travel mementos – collections from local designers. Just opposite is the **Numismatic Museum** (tickets AED 15; 0030-210-364 3774, nma.gr), exhibiting an ancient collection of coins. The neo-classical building itself, formerly the home of Heinrich

Schliemann who excavated Mycanae, is worth the fee to get a feel of 19th-century aristocratic life. Behind the museum lie the pedestrianised streets of posh **Kolonaki**, populated with stylish cafés and luxe boutiques like Prada. From there, it's easy to make your way to **Athinas Street** to browse the markets and pick up local cheeses like Naxian spiced gruyère in **Varvakios Agora**, and pass through **Agia Irini Square's** happening coffee shops before landing at the tourist epicentre of **Plaka** at the base of the Acropolis. Next door to the Grande Bretagne in the neo-classical King George hotel, **Tudor Hall Restaurant** (0030-210-333 0265, tudorhall.gr) is a good bet for dinner – the lobster *giouvetsi* with *hilopites* pasta is an interesting take on the traditional Greek dish that is usually baked with lamb or chicken. For a nightcap, the **GB Roof Garden** (0030-210-333 0766, gbroofgarden.gr) draws a cosmopolitan crowd.



Hotel Grand Bretagne