



[EXPERIENCES]

RISING WITH THE SUN

Once a destination reserved for those in the know, Mykonos has developed wider appeal, attracting everyone from celebrities on superyachts to party people in their droves – what is it that makes the tiny Aegean isle so desirable?

4 HRS

Flight time
from London

26°C

Average temp
in July

15,000

Permanent
residents

ANOTHER MORNING, ANOTHER superyacht. Or at least that's how it feels when the latest dazzling white craft, boasting several decks and dangling various dinghies, heaves into view and weighs anchor in the middle of the sparkling turquoise sea not far from the beach on which I'm currently lying. I turn to my mate, Dan, and we speculate idly on whose it could be – Jay-Z and Beyoncé's perhaps, or maybe Mariah Carey's. We roll our eyes at these bandwagon-jumpers who are increasingly propelling the tiny (33sq m) island of Mykonos into the global holiday spotlight, safe in the knowledge that we >

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Shan Shihan/Getty

BRIGHT HORIZONS: With its white, sugar-cube buildings and pretty views, Mykonos Town is one of the island's biggest draws



> got here before them. Literally. When it comes to paradise – and indeed Paradise Beach, the hedonistic strip of sand we’re relaxing on – we’ve known about this little jewel of the Cyclades for a lot longer than they have.

Twenty-five years – that’s how long I’ve been coming here. And not because my parents kept dragging me there (it’s not, er, their kind of place) – no, Mykonos was a

Nowadays, it’s slightly easier to reach Mykonos – direct flights from London take around four hours. Once you’re there, getting about by bus or hire car is easy.

place Dan (my GBF) and I ‘discovered’ on our own. To him, a legendary Eden with a siren call to gay travellers; to me, a fun place to hang out, dance to Europop, scoff chicken

souvlaki, and drink colourful cocktails. Greece was the word, and Mykonos was the exclamation mark. A quarter of a century ago, there were no package holidays or **charter flights**; getting here involved a night flight to Athens, then a bleary-eyed, 6am ferry, taking eight hours to get to its destination. That’s dedication, right there. We’d disembark at the other end with scores of liberal-minded Europeans, greeted by a sea of eager B&B owners keen to rent us a basic room – a far cry from the dozens of sleek design and boutique hotels which cover the island now. So why did I fall in love with the place, and keep on coming back?

It doesn’t, after all, have the most dramatic beaches – there’s no dazzling white shoreline, like at Myrto in Kefalonia, or smugglers’ shipwreck, like on Navagio in Zakynthos. And it’s always been pricier to eat, drink and be merry here than on most other islands. The intricate, white-paved alleyways of its capital, Mykonos Town (known as Chora), are lined with cool designer stores, avant-garde art galleries, and eye-wateringly expensive jewellery shops. But if you knew where to look, you could have a great time without bankrupting



HOLY SHOW: [above] Sunrise over one of Mykonos Town’s numerous churches; [opposite] there’s plenty of outdoor restaurants serving super-fresh seafood

yourself – which was just as well, as Dan and I didn’t have that much money back then (still don’t, to be fair). The main draw, for me, was – and still is – the unfeasibly alluring Chora, with its sugar-cube-shaped buildings,

their chalk-white walls thrown into relief by bright blue doors and shutters, framed by colourful flowers. History has it that its impenetrable-seeming layout was due to the inhabitants, who wanted to make it difficult for any invaders, namely pirates, to find their way in to the little town’s centre, or indeed get back out. Mykonos has always been an island of sailors – centuries ago the island was on the trade route which connected Asia Minor, Europe, and Crete – and fishermen, vulnerable to these hijackers of the seas.

But thanks to them, I love nothing more than getting lost in the narrow, winding streets, where stores flogging D&G and Gucci duds rub shoulders with tiny, candlelit, Greek orthodox chapels; where you come out, unexpectedly, onto a small

square covered in bright pink bougainvillea, creeping over the awnings of a swathe of casual, informal tavernas; where along the back alleys, weathered, head-scarfed women sit on their front steps gossiping as they watch the world go by, and where skinny cats – so many cats – pose prettily for tourists in hope of a few scraps. In some ways, not much has changed since the island first attracted glamorous seafarers such as Brigitte Bardot, Grace Kelly, and, perhaps its then-most famous visitor, **Jacqueline Kennedy-Onassis**. In fact, Jackie O loved Mykonos so much she left a very important legacy – apart from the riotous gay nightclub by Chora’s seafront that now shares her name – in the shape of one of the island’s most iconic figures. His name is Petros – like

☎ (Church) Sino Images/Getty; (restaurant) ac productions/Getty; (lobster) Terra Images/Getty

Beyoncé, he needs no surname – and he is, er, a pelican. The original Petros was found, wounded, by a fisherman in 1958. After being nursed back to health, instead of flying off, he decided to stay. On his death, in 1984, Jackie O donated a new pelican to the island. Now there are, apparently, three of them, who make the most of their celebrity status by performing strutting walkabouts around the streets, particularly by the five windmills which perch on a rise just across from the very picturesque Little Venice.

This is where most people gather to watch the sunset – Mykonos’ equivalent of Ibiza’s Café del Mar, only with fewer glowsticked ravers gearing up to have it large. Bars like Caprice, Breeze and Veranda line the waterfront, rising up from the water, and



One of Jackie O’s favourite places to stay was the Mykonos Theoxenia, a smart, five-star boutique design hotel that’s still a popular choice on the island.

packed with smartly dressed sophisticates sipping on negronis and Aperol spritz. Mykonian nightlife, you see, is a tad more refined, even though a series of outdoor super-clubs have

sprung up over the past few years, borrowing from the Iberian and Miami aesthetic of billowing white drapes, soft leather sofas, and EDM DJs. Prime spots, if you’re that way inclined, include Cavo Paradiso, which rises behind Paradise Beach; Super Paradise Beach Club, which is found on the gay-friendly beach of the same name; or the slightly more mellow Scorpios, on Paraga. That ultimate >

A QUARTER OF A CENTURY AGO, THERE WERE NO CHARTER FLIGHTS TO MYKONOS - THE JOURNEY INVOLVED AN EIGHT-HOUR FERRY



BEACH FOR THE STARS: *Mykonos Bay Beach displaying perfectly why people love the island – crystal-clear sea, soft sand and sun loungers...*

> party girl, Lindsay Lohan, after launching her own club in Athens, has just opened one here, too: the imaginatively titled LOHAN Beach House Mykonos. Be afraid. Be very afraid.

I prefer sticking to the gay clubs – better music – but in my single days, the *only* place to go was the Scandanavian Bar, not far from the old port. I could never work out what was particularly Scandanavian about it, but that wasn't its main draw anyway. It was, and still is, for lack of a better word, a massive meat market. In-the-know revellers mill around outside, grasping mega sized bottles of Mythos, perhaps for some of that Scandanavian courage, before launching themselves upstairs to what swiftly becomes a very packed dancefloor. If you don't pull – highly unlikely – the best way to round off the night is to grab a couple of the best chicken gyros in town. Opinion is split between whether this is found at Jimmy's, but the smart money (not that this will cost you much) is on Leonidas' Snack Bar, a few minutes' walk away, where chewy, puffy pita breads are tossed onto the grill, smeared with tangy, garlicky tzatziki, filled with chargrilled chicken pieces then rolled up,

wrapped in greaseproof paper and handed over. It's unspeakably delicious; but then you don't have to spend much to have a good meal here. A plate of grilled octopus and a Greek salad at the likes of buzzy Niko's Taverna in town will set you back less than €20, and if you stock up on a spinach and feta-filled filo pie, or a sweet cream bun from Gioras, the oldest bakery on the island, you'll be golden.

Of course, it's even nicer to eat by the sea. Thankfully, like any self-respecting Greek island, Mykonos has dozens of beaches to choose from, each with its own unique character. Force of habit sees me returning regularly to Paradise, reached, like many of the beaches, by the island's surprisingly efficient and regular municipal bus service. These days, the coaches are a relatively modern fleet, equipped with sterling suspension, but I still feel nostalgic for the ancient bone-shudders, which caused slight gasps of fear as they jarringly negotiated the terribly narrow, hillside roads. Paradise has a campsite behind it, and a couple of

GETTING THERE

Both easyJet (easyjet.co.uk) and British Airways (ba.com) fly direct from London to Mykonos, starting from around £186 for a return flight.

Stay at the stylish, new Katikies five-star boutique hotel in Agios Ioannis; rooms (some of which have their own hot tub) start from around £300 per night, including breakfast. Book via katikies.com/katikiesmykonos

beach bars along its front, whose music gets louder the lower the sun sinks in the sky. Sun loungers can be hired for a few euros a day (though that sum tends to creep up every year; some beaches include a cocktail in the increasingly eye-watering rental fee).

Paradise allows nudity, and draws the beautiful, the bronzed and the beefed-up, while Super Paradise – reached by a small boat from its neighbour – is an out-and-proud gay beach. Agios Ioannis is famous for being the location of the film *Shirley Valentine*; tuck into fish and seafood at the simple and elegant Hippy Fish, where Shirley herself did some waitressing – although it was called the Sunset Taverna then. Former sleepy stretches of sand, like Platis Yialos and Ornos, are also becoming popular, spawning fashionable seafront eateries like Kostantis and Anios. But if it's celebrities you want to spot, head to Psarou, a smaller beach which shelters between these two; it's played host to the likes of Bella Hadid, Leonardo DiCaprio and Elizabeth Hurley, who chow down on lobster, or drink €50,000 bottles of Armand de Brignac champagne at Nammos. Personally, I prefer to avoid them, and visit out of season, in May, or September. But whenever I'm here, on a superyacht or not (OK, not), I know I'm in my very own patch of Greek heaven. ♦

FORMER SLEEPY STRETCHES OF SAND ARE NOW BECOMING POPULAR, SPAWNING FASHIONABLE SEAFRONT RESTAURANTS