

# UNDER THE SETTING SUN



From left:  
Tsitouras Collection;  
Above Blue Suites  
Right: Pedestrian  
path to Fira



Rose Dykins is mesmerised by the curious landscape and glorious skies of the volcanic Greek island

Set against the luminous pink sky, the black contoured surface of the volcano seems sinister, contrasting with the misty Cretan mountains far in the distance. Hotel terraces and villas surround us, the white-cubed properties coating the cliff top like icing.

You will have seen Santorini before – be it in an advert for a certain brand of yoghurt, or on a guidebook, usually a photo of one of its many blue-domed churches. Its distinctive volcanic landscape sets it apart from many other Greek islands – think dream-like stretches of sea where land has been melted away by eruptions, and red and black sandy beaches. It is part of the Cyclades, a group of islands at the heart of the Aegean archipelago that also includes Mykonos and Naxos.

Santorini used to be named Strongili, Greek for circular – now it is shaped like a crescent moon following an eruption 3,600 years ago, which reduced its area to 76 sq km. It was one of the largest volcanic explosions in history, and some say Santorini is the site behind the myth of the lost city of Atlantis.

Our vantage point is the pool terrace of the Tsitouras Collection, a five-star, family-run boutique hotel. An al fresco dinner is laid out for us beneath a white canopy that swells in the breeze – plump shrimp and caviar, and sumptuous squid ink tagliatelle with crawfish.

Staying here is a little like spending the night in a museum – part of the Aqua Vista Hotels group (aquavistahotels.com), the former 18th-century mansion's five idiosyncratic suites are served by butlers and decked out with pieces from Dimitris Tsitouras' art collection.

The hotel is located off a path to Fira, Santorini's capital, which has a small-town feel, with the right amount of laid-back bustle and walkways lined with classy independent jewellery and fashion stores, museums and well-appointed restaurants. We spend one leisurely morning window-shopping before embarking on a more action-packed afternoon.

Keen to explore, we opt for an exhilarating electric mountain bike tour (santoriniadventures.gr). Two strapping professional cyclists lead us down dusty vineyard paths, along cliff-side trails and through tight alleyways in villages that have remained the same for hundreds of years.

We visit places we could never have reached by car, including the cliffs near the village of Megalochori, which we are told have the best sunset views on the island. After two hours of pedalling, we return to Perivolos beach and hot-foot it across the scorching sand into the reviving Mediterranean sea.

The next day we move on to the Above Blue Suites, a few minutes' drive from Fira in the calm town of Imerovigli.

Another member of the Aqua Vista collection, its ten individually designed suites (and one villa) have igloo-like spa baths on their terraces. We breakfast out here in the morning, while in the evening, a sunset dinner for two on the pool terrace, with the open sea on one side and nobody around us, is unbelievably beautiful.

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This is a designated Year of Gastronomy in Santorini, which is known for its delicious tomatoes, *fava* (a purée of yellow split peas) and white wines, which have a slight mineral taste from the volcanic soil. After a lazy afternoon by the pool, we stroll to Anogi taverna (anogirestaurant.gr) and tuck into lamb shank in white leek sauce, baked in greaseproof paper so the juices run from the soft meat and transform the fluffy rice around it into risotto. We finish with a delectable orange pie.

On our last day, we take a cruise on a luxury sailboat, first stopping at the foot of the volcano to explore the black craggy monster before heading for the island's hot springs and jumping into the warm water, tinged golden by sulphur.

Just in time for sunset, we sail past Oia, at the island's north-eastern tip, and look up to see reams of tourists trying to nab the best spot for watching the sun go down. With uninterrupted views of the blazing sphere descending straight ahead of us, its fierce glow illuminating the white buildings to my right as we sail towards the horizon, I feel we've found the best vista yet.

■ [santorini-sea-excursions.com/en](http://santorini-sea-excursions.com/en)  
[santorinitransfers.gr](http://santorinitransfers.gr)