alternative island touring

visiting the greek islands off-the-beaten track















ZAKYNTHOS

Venetians called it "the Flower of the Orient" and modern travellers discover a spot of rare natural beauty and modern civilisation.

The most important marine park of Greece, a cedar forest, sea caves, breathtaking beaches, horseback riding by the sea waves are some of Zakynthos gifts. Discover traditional villages in vineyards and olive tree groves, poets and authors that marked Greek literature, sounds of mandolins and serenades.

Zakynthos invites travellers to explore it and discover its beautiful locations

Natural wealth

The study of rocks on the island indicates that the history of Zakynthos dates back to 700,000 years ago, in the Lower Pleistocene period, when considerable geological transformations were taking place on the whole planet. The discovery of the prehistoric settlement in Agios Nikolaos. Vassilikos, as well as the tools discovered at numerous sites on the island testify to the long human presence on Zakynthos.

A varied terrain creates the island's unique natural beauty. Low hills and luscious mountains characterize the eastern part of the island, where the fertile plains lie. In the northwest there are higher mountains, scarce vegetation and steep cliffs, that dive vertically into the sea and form impressive caves.

Flora

With its Mediterranean sunlight, frequent rainfalls and the good "housekeeping" of its residents, Zakynthos looks like a vast, well-preserved garden. In the east of the island, one finds mainly olive tree groves but also citrus, peach, plum, apricot and pine trees. numerous palm trees and the famous vineyards. Locals are particularly fond of bottlebrush (Callistemon spp) with its reddish flowers and the multi-coloured bougainvilleas which decorate many of the island's gardens.

Vegetation is different on the west side, on Mount Vrachion, where there is mostly bushy vegetation, such as bushy cypresses, lentisk (Pistacia lentiscus), kermes oak, phillyrea (Phillyrea latifolia) and, less frequently, myrtle, deciduous oak and pine trees.

Some native species are contained in island flora, such as peonies and crocuses, while there are 40 or more wild orchid species of special beauty.

The islands of the gulf, Keri and some parts of Vassilikos, are the only locations on the island where one finds typical Mediterranean maguis vegetation, lentisk (Pistacia lentiscus), kermes oak, Spanish broom (Spartium junceum), dog roses, bramble shrubs, etc.

At Keri, on sea rocks, there is the very important endemic species of Zakvnthos limonium, but also the modest caper (Capparis spinosa), kritamo (Crithmum maritimum) and thalassochorto (Salsola aegea).

The scenery is different on the sand dunes of Laganas and Kalamaki where there are some sand-loving species, such as galingale (Cyperus capitatus), Echinophora spinosa, Eryngium maritimum, Euphorbia paralias, Juncus acutus, Medicago marina and Pancratium maritimum.

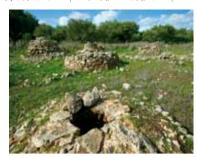
Fauna

Except for the famous sea turtle Caretta caretta, Zakynthos hosts one of the largest populations of the Mediterranean Monachus monachus seals in Greece; they nest in rocky caves along the island's western coasts

Due to its geographical location and rich flora, the island has numerous bird populations. It is, therefore, an ideal location for bird watching and attracts the interest of Greek and international ecotourists annually. Rock partridges (Alectoris graeca), Eleonora's falcons (Falco eleonorae), shags (Phalacrocorax aristotelis), Cretzschmar's Buntings (Emberiza caesia), Sardinian Warblers (Sylvia melanocephala) that are only 13cm in size, Subalpine Warblers (Sylvia cantillans) and booted eagles (Aguila pennata) frequently pass through the island and some lay their eggs here. Also, during the bird migration season, island skies teem with turtle doves (Streptopelia hypopyrrha), woodcocks (Scolopax), song thrushes (Turdus philomelos), Eur-







extra tips

Town of Zakynthos: pale coloured manor houses, Venetian arcades, loggias and a cobblestone road that leads to Bohali district at the Venetian Castle, where medieval Zakynthos lav. The Lions of Agios Markos, sleepless guardians at the castle gate welcome visitors. Excavations have brought to light a plethora of churches built between 11th and 18th c. as well as ruins from the Byzantine period and the English rule.

asian Hoopoes (Upupa epops) and wild swans (Cyanus). Alykes are the resting grounds for many herons, little egret (Egretta garzetta) and collared pratincoles (Glareola pratincola).

The rich fauna of the island is complemented by colourful butterflies. Clouded Yellow butterflies (Colias croceus), also known as Ionian butterflies, with yellow wings, the brownish Freyer Grayling butterflies (Neohipparchia fatua), but also Spotted Fritillary butterflies (Melitaea didyma) with their intense orangecoloured wings are a colourful note.

Zakynthos' Marine Park

Zakvnthos' Marine Park is unique in its kind in the entire Mediterranean Sea. and was created in 1999. It was the first Marine Park in Greece with its own management agency and it became a model for other areas in Greece. Its importance for the survival of the now famous but still threatened by extinction Caretta carretta sea turtle is great. In the Mediterranean and in Greece. in particular, there are also other sea turtle nesting beaches, such as in the western Peloponnese, in the gulf of Lakonia, on Crete, Cephalonia, Rhodes and elsewhere, but the bay of Laganas is the animals' largest and most important refuge. Egg-laying beaches are those of Laganas, Sekania, Daphni, Kalamaki, Gerakas and on the small islands of Marathonissi and Pelouzo, all located around Laganas Bay. In fact the park covers a sea area of 89.2km², land area of 14.2km², and a peripheral zone of 31.2km².

For this reason almost the entire bay is a protected area, which is divided in zones where different restrictions to human activity apply, depending on the time of year.

Once the eggs are laid, it will take 50 to 75 days and nights for the baby turtles to hatch and start running to the sea, orientated by light. This is why it is important that there should be few lights around the sand, so that baby turtles will not be disoriented. Those who make it to the sea and survive difficulties and marine predators will return to the same place where they hatched to lay their own eggs. The sex of the newly born turtle is determined by the temperature at which their eggs are incubated. Thus, more male turtles are born on Marathonissi, where temperatures are lower!

Turtles are reptiles and can reach up to 1.25m in length and 180k in weight; they have a brown-reddish shell and large head. The most interesting piece of information that we have about them is that the species appeared on the earth approximately 150 million years ago and has managed to survive until today. This alone is reason enough for us to protect it. Finally, it should be noted that Zakynthos' Marine Park attracts ecotourists from all over the world.

Strofades

The Strofades, otherwise known as Plo-

toi Nissoi (floating islands), is a group of small islands off the bay of Laganas. They belong to the National Zakynthos' Marine Park and are included in the Important Bird Area (IBA) list.

The largest island is Stamfani, with an area of 2.5km², and the second largest is Arpyia, a mere 1.5km².

About 200 flora species have been recorded on the Strofades; 35% of Stamfani is covered by a cedar forest, one of the largest in Western Greece in regard to area, tree size and natural propagation.

The entire group of islands is an important passage and resting stop for numerous migrating birds and, therefore, an ideal spot for bird-watching. Approximately 146 bird species have been recorded here!

Some of the birds that fly by the Strofades islands are the black and white spotted flycatchers (Muscicapa striata), nightingales (Luscinia megarhynchos), Cory's shearwaters (Calonectris diomedea), and turtledoves (Streptopelia capicola).

Water sports

A classic destination for Greek and international sailing enthusiasts alike, the island has six marinas to choose from, depending on wind direction during one's stay on Zakynthos.

Diving

An organised diving centre and numerous diving spots offer divers the oppor-





tunity to explore the beautiful sea bed around the island. Sea cave complexes. huge rocks and poseidonia meadows make diving here a unique experience.

Sea kayaking

It is the most beautiful way to enjoy the sea and the tiny islets around Zakynthos; it is also a unique opportunity to race a Monachus monachus seal. A visit to the Blue Caves will reward visitors with their rocky formations and incredible water colours creating a magical setting.

Windsurfing

There are suitable beaches and ideal winds for windsurfing both on the north and the south part of the island.

Small boat trips

There are trips from Zakynthos to small inaccessible beaches or tours around the small nearby islands. Infrastructure for such trips is particularly developed on the island.

From Porto Vromi cove vou can visit the famous *Navagio* (shipwreck) beach in 20 minutes, while for the Blue Caves the nearest departure point is that of Agios Nikolaos on the north east coast. A special trip is to Marathonissi, the sea turtles' egg laying spot.

Hiking

Besides sea activities, the island offers hiking, mountain biking as well as horseback riding options.

Discover the beauty of Zakynthos by choosing one of its many hiking trails;

the following are some indicative itineraries offered:

A very interesting itinerary on the north side is that leading from the traditional village of Ano Volimes to Faros. It is a 6.5km hike of medium difficulty, during which one encounters most of the Mediterranean fauna species of the island: this is why it is called the "botanic trail".

The classic mountainous hike on the west part of the island connects the villages of Kiliomenos and Loucha. It is easy; one starts at the church of Agios Nikolaos with its stone bell tower built in 1893, and walks towards Yperagathou Monastery, before walking through the vineyard plateau. Stone water wells are worth a stop before one continues towards Loucha.

A 1.5-hour hike starts at Keri wetland, continues through vineyards and olive groves to Keri village and then on to Faros, where, on a natural balcony, 200m above the sea, one can enjoy an enchanting sunset and look out to Mikri and Megali Myzithra, two enormous pyramid-shaped white rocks that rise from the sea.

On the east side of the bay of Laganas, starting at Argassi, one goes up towards Tourla peak of Mount Skopos at 492m, with a magnificent view over the bay. Shortly before the peak the trail goes past the 15th century Panagia Skopiotissa monastery and the ruins of the ancient Artemis temple.

Mountain biking

The green region of Votanikos, Keri,

and the foot of Mount Skopos are only some of the locations where bikers can enjoy unique routes. There are firms that hire equipment and organise biking escapes.

Horse riding

On Zakynthos one can go horse riding on the sandy beach or on the green hills and explore the island on horseback. Riding centres at Kalamaki and Gerakari give travellers the opportunity to get to know the magical world of horses.

Villages and hamlets

The hinterland of Zakvnthos has very beautiful villages and hamlets. Those you have not discovered while hiking are worth visiting by car!

Loucha is a traditional mountain village in the middle of the island, built deep in lush vegetation.

Gvri lies next to Loucha: it was built in the 15th century at an altitude of 550m; the panoramic view renders it one of the best observatory points of the island.

At Agios Leon you should visit the village church, the bell tower of which is the lower part of a windmill!

Kampi is another traditional hamlet surrounded by lush vegetation; it is located next to the Mycenaean cemetery of the island.

At Kiliomeno the Women's Agricultural Association "Melissiotisses" is worth visiting; visitors will find local products and freshly baked bread at their premises.

At Agalas one should visit Damianos







extra tips

A short urban hike of special cultural value that is worth taking, starts at the city of Zakynthos and goes to Akrotiri, on Strani Hill, where Dionyssios Solomos, the Greek national poet, sitting in the shade of a tree and overlooking Messolongi, was inspired and wrote the Greek national anthem. This is a green hill affording a wonderful view!

cave with the impressive stalactites and stalagmites and its two entrances that make it extraordinary.

On the east side, verdant Katastari is a starting point for the neighbouring Alykes.

To the north, Orthonies is built on the slope of Mount Vrachion, among vineyards and olive groves. In the neighbouring village of Ano Volimes, one of the most traditional hamlets of the island will impress visitors with handmade embroidered works, true artworks created by local women.

Churches and monasteries

Church architecture of Zakynthos, although deeply wounded by the catastrophic 1953 earthquake, stands out when compared to the architecture of the rest of the Ionian Islands. Byzantine as well as strong western influences in conjunction with local craftsmen have created stunning basilicas with high bell towers, fortified monasteries, as well as simple chapels.

At the church Agios Dionyssios, patron saint of Zakynthos, with a high bell tower, the relics of the saint are still preserved. The temple is a three-aisled basilica with a beautifully carved wooden iconostasis and icons by Doxaras.

The church of Agios Nikolaos of Molos, dating back from 1561, is a single aisle basilica and it is the only Venetian building that didn't collapse in the town after the 1953 earthquake.

At Lady of the Angels church dating to 1687, notice the interesting relief adornments on the exterior and the icons painted by Doxaras in the interior.

At Agios Georgios Filikon, a construction dating back to the 17th century, supporters were initiated into the Filiki Etairia (Association of Friends), a secret revolutionary organization, and took their vows of serving the cause of the Revolution and fighting the Turks. Theodoros Kolokotronis was initiated and joined the Association here.

The Monastery of Madona Anafonitria, at the village Skoulikado, is a beautiful church made of stone in the 15th century, built on a natural balcony with a view over the whole area. Agios Dionyssios led an ascetic life here for many years.

The Byzantine and Post-Byzantine icons in Agios Georgios of Gremon church built in 1535 AD are of special interest. Agios Gerassimos also led an ascetic life here, and later became the patron saint of Cephalonia. The amazing tower was built in 1561 to protect the monks from the pirates.

Faneromeni church, in Chorfa, was rebuilt exactly as it used to be before the earthquake; it is a typical example of Zakvnthos church architecture. Its carved wooden iconostasis is exquisite.

The monastery of Agios Ioannis Prodromos (St. John the Baptist), near Katastari village, built on an observation spot, survived the earthquake and maintains significant icons and unique icon stands made of carved wood.

In the monastery of Panagia Skopiotissa, at Vassilikos, one can admire its amazing frescos.

The impressive church of Agia Mavra at the village of Mahairado, with the Venetian bell tower, the sound of which is said to be the most melodic in Greece, has some amazing icons. The church was destroyed by fire on December 8, 2005 and it is being restored according to its original plan.

Panagia Keriotissa church, built at Keri, one of the most beautiful spots of the island, is famous for its architecture, its wooden carving works and its icons.

Yperagathou Monastery, a dependency of Mt. Sina Monastery, is built near Anafonitria village, next to a beautiful forest of pine and century old oak trees. It is a small monastery established in the 17th century and it is dedicated to Panagia.

Finally, Strofadon Monastery is of outstanding beauty and importance; it is dedicated to the Transfiguration of the Saviour or Panagia Panton Chara, due to the icon of Panagia with the same name found in the monastery. According to historical records, the monastery was established in the 13th century by Irini, daughter of Theodoros Laskaris: it was renovated in the 15th century by Ioannis Palaiologos VII. It is







one of the monasteries where Agios Dionyssios lived as a monk. Part of the monastery is built in a tower!

Museums

Zakynthos Byzantine Museum, on Solomou Square, presents the evolution of the Byzantine painting and the beginning of modern Greek painting. Among works exhibited are wooden carved and gold-plated iconostases, many portable icons and unique murals from churches damaged during the 1953 earthquake.

Visitors can see works by famous artists, such as Doxaras, Koutouzis, Tzanes, Kantounis and Damaskenos.

At Solomos and other Prominent Zakvnthians' Museum, on Agios Markos Square, the relics of two great poets are preserved, namely Dionyssios Solomos and Andreas Kalvos, as well as significant manuscripts, a rich collection of their portraits, furniture and photographic material. At the entrance of the Museum stands the kermes oak tree under which Dionyssios Solomos wrote the Greek National Anthem.

Grigorios Xenopoulos' Museum, in the historic Faneromeni district, hosts archives and personal belongings of the well known author and, of course, issues of the avant-garde children's magazine "Diaplassis ton Paidon", which he was the editor of.

The enormous natural wealth of the island is presented in the Natural History Museum, at Agia Marina. More than 1,500 specimens of the rich flora and fauna species of the island are on display. Vertzageio Museum, at Pigadakia village near Alvkes. Katastari, presents the cultural and agricultural history of a traditional village of the island. Among exhibits there are rare objects related to the agricultural life of the island, some of which date back to the 16th century, as well as tools and various pieces of agricultural equipment, household items, furniture and art works by local artists. The flour mill and the stone olive press are two of the outstanding exhibits

The Milaneio Maritime Museum at Tsilivi, presents a unique record of Greek shipping history, with 140 rare aguarelle works, objects from known ships and photographic material.

The Mansion of the Roma family, in the town of Zakvnthos has been linked with important moments in the history of the island and it is a unique sample of the houses which the aristocratic and wealthy families used to live in: as most of them were ruined by the 1953 earthquake. The mansion was built in the decade of 1660 by the Vice Consul of England in Zakynthos and during the period of the English Protection, 1814-1864, the house was used as the residence of the English Governor and it was known as 'Rezidentsa'.

Flavours

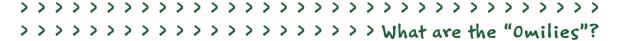
Zakvnthos cuisine echoes of Venetian influences; combined with local products it pleasantly surprises visitors. One should sample the saltsa or sartsa. which is meat cooked in a thick red sauce, the mostarda, which is sweet

mustard made of guince, the ladotyri which is oil cheese and Zakynthian gruvere cheese. There are also kanarinia. i.e. fresh vellow beans and homemade smoked ham prepared just before Easter, string beans, accompanied by aliada, a garlic potato mash dip, scented melon, small, tasty wild strawberries and water onions, also known as beloussiotika, which are big sweet white onions. Of course, visitors should taste the famous raisins of the island. also known as "black gold" which is a Protected Designation of Origin product known as "Zakynthos Raisin", the mantolato or nougat and the pasteli, which is made with sesame, almonds and honey here. Fytoura, a sweet made with semolina and sugar, and aromatic honey are also famous sweet flavours of the island. Don't forget to taste freshly baked bread from the bakeries of the island

Apart from the raisin grapes, there are other varieties for wine-making that are cultivated on the island: skiadopoulo, goustolidi, robola, areti for white wines, avgoustiatis, katsakoulias and skylopnichtis for red ones. Extraordinary names, unique varieties! Small hospitable wineries at Mahairado, Kallipodo and at the area of Kydoni, surrounded by vineyards are waiting to show travellers around the vinification tanks, the aging cellars and initiate them to the secrets of Zakynthian wine.

Festivals and celebrations

Zakynthos is an island with a great musical tradition. The first Greek Philhar-









monic Association was established here, in 1816. Mantolinates, i.e. mandolin bands, perform Zakynthian serenades and fill the island with sounds that combine Byzantine and Venetian influences and offer unique musical journeys in Greece. It is worth noting the Zakynthian type of church music, a type of Byzantine music chanted in the western quadraphonic style, and the arekia, a quadraphonic type of popular songs without any instrument accompaniment, which are still sung on the island today.

Choirs and philharmonic orchestras of Zakynthian music enthusiasts turn any island event into a unique celebration of music

During the Zakynthian Carnival a crier wanders around the island and announces the carnival schedule through towns: balls, parades, masquerades and performing groups improvise in the streets and squares. The events end with the "Burial of the Mask", a parody burial of the Carnavalos, the effigy of the king of the carnival. The carnival is not confined to the town, but travels to all island villages.

It is mainly during the Carnival period that the Zakynthian "Omilies" (Speeches) are performed in town and village streets and squares; it is a kind of popular theatre where fifteensyllable rhyming verses are recited in local accent and a long-drawn enunciation. "Omilies" appeared in the middle of 17th century, evolved along with other kinds of Zakynthian arts and used to entertain people in rural areas. The main influence that led to their appearance was Cretan literature and Italian Comedia dell'arte. Performers of "Omilies" are popular amateur actors. It is worth noting that these actors are always males, even for female roles and wear masks, similarly to ancient drama performances. Usually there is some form of elementary or no stage set and emphasis is placed on enunciation and movement: the content is almost always a satire of everyday life. Do not miss the opportunity to watch an "Omilia" performed by island drama groups, the Zakynthian daily events.

The Holy Week is celebrated in a unique way. The procession of the Epitaph of Agios Nikolaos Metropolis takes place at sunrise of Holy Friday and the Epitaphs on the island are not decorated with flowers, but with golden foil and velvet! The first Resurrection Mass, on Holy Saturday is celebrated with local housewives smashing ceramic pots.

On June 24, the feast of Ai-Yiannis Klidonas, people light bonfires, known as fougaries, and jump over them, for good luck.

On July 31, in Ammos district of the town, the local custom malliari takes place, where many Zakynthians dive into the sea at midnight, in order to find a grassy, hairy pebble that will bring them good luck for the rest of the year. The evening includes barcarolles and Zakynthian serenades.

Religious feasts and festivals are held all over the island throughout the year. On August 24, Zakynthos honours its patron saint, Agios Dionyssios with lengthy preparations that culminate in a glorious procession and fireworks.

Numerous cultural events are organized in the summer, such as concerts. drama performances, book and tra-

ditional	art	festivals;	all	this	bring	the
whole is	lan	d to life				

My Zakynthos experience

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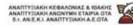
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