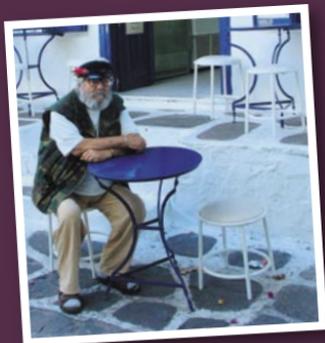


GOING PLACES #1

JOHN GOONEY

PHOTO: STEVE OHLHABER (DREAMSTIME.COM)

THE SUNSET ISLES OF GREECE



Travel. We Kiwis do it for all sorts of different reasons. To eyeball priceless treasures ... crawl over famous sites ... sample way-out cultures ... drink in stunning views ... swot-up ancient history. But there are some places where the best thing to do is find an empty chair, plonk yourself down, order a local coffee, and, well ... just SIT. Sit and watch. Sit and listen. Sit and feel the magic as the world goes by around you ...

If you're ever lucky enough to find yourself on either Santorini or Mykonos, sit is what you must do. Because these two small islands in the Aegean Sea can only really be enjoyed if you put your feet up. They're in no hurry, you see. They've been waiting out there for centuries, off the coastline of Greece. And they're drop-dead gorgeous.

The clear blue Aegean (pronounced ee-JEE-in) is one of the loveliest corners of the Mediterranean. And the rugged chain of rocks, to which Santorini and Mykonos belong, are strangely familiar. Sunbaked headlands, spectacular sunsets, cafés clinging to cliffs, potted geraniums, sugar-cube houses and blue-domed roofs – you'd swear you've been there before.

And in a sense, of course, you're right. At least one of these picture-postcard scenes has probably decorated the walls of your home.

Remember?

It's best to approach Santorini like we did, by sea. For two reasons. First, because you get to follow in some pretty famous footsteps – sailing through waters that were once crossed by the likes of Alexander the Great, Helen of Troy, the Crusaders en route to Jerusalem, and our very own Anzac soldiers on route to Gallipoli.

Second, because you get to see that the whitewashed villages of Santorini are actually perched on the rim of a massive volcano.

When it blew its top, some 3500 years ago, the eruption blew out the centre of the island. And your ship, like ours, will anchor in the middle of that vast deep-water crater.

The closer we got, one unforgettable Friday morning, the clearer we could see that what looked like a dusting of snow

along the cliff-tops was buildings. And those zig-zaggy lines down the almost-vertical rock-face were actually roads for buses and tracks for plodding donkeys.

Leaving our ship, we buzzed ashore in a bright orange tender, climbed aboard a coach, and zig-zagged up to the highest point on the island for a panoramic view of what's left of the volcano. On the way, we saw local farmers poking at the stony ground, encouraging their scrawny tomato plants and grapevines (the island's renowned for its red and white wines). And welcoming us at the top were some bright-red Anzac poppies.



The largest village (and Santorini's capital) is Fira: a charming jumble of cramped lanes, steps leading who-knows-where, and shops, houses, hotels, restaurants, swimming pools – all tumbling one-on-top-of-the-other over the cliff's edge.

We oohed and ahed, snapped some award-winning pix, and then just sat – dipping breads in olive oil and drinking something local and yummy – in a tiny open-air taverna that seemed to hang out over the water far below.

No kidding, it felt like we were on top of the world!



At the northern tip of the island, we found an even prettier village: Oia (pronounced EE-ya). Another painted patchwork of whites, blues, peaches and pinks – with arty-farty boutiques on every corner and views to die for.

Santorini, I'm warning you, is addictive. And it hurt to tear ourselves away at the end of the day – the women heading down to our ship in a funicular, while us blokes rode donkeys down the zig-zag track.

Two centimetres to the north on your average atlas-map lies another famous Greek Isle, basking in the sun. Mykonos is a just-as-charming mix of whiter-than-white houses, rainbow-coloured fishing boats, pokey galleries, jewellery displays, photographable churches, and yes, you guessed it – cafés!

We sat in one, under red bougainvilleas, and sipped espressos while kids played, a dog snored, and two old Greek mammas wandered past discussing their crochet patterns. (At least, that's what it looked like.)

An hour later we sat in another, around on the waterfront, and watched a pelican called Petros (the official

Mykonos mascot) pose for queued-up photographers.

Mykonos township is built in a natural amphitheatre, with narrow winding streets and alleys designed way back in the 18th century to confuse pirates. We saw no pirates the Friday we were there. But you don't need a map to explore the labyrinth – getting lost in Mykonos is part of the fun! And I struggled to think of a nicer way to spend a lazy afternoon ...

We wandered along that shoreline and found ourselves on a bit-peninsula known as Little Venice, where rows of very old, very colourful two-story Venetian houses teeter nervously above the breaking waves.





We climbed a nearby hill and got up-close-and-personal with five enormous whitewashed windmills. Some hundreds of years ago, the Mykonians ground their seed crops in these things, but today they serve as converted museums.

Down another cobbled lane in some other part of town, we sat on a wooden pew in the coolness of a quaint little chapel which was jammed in between a hotchpotch of homes and fashionable wee shops.

The sun was going down on Mykonos as our ship up-anchored that evening. And, standing hand-in-hand at the deck-rail, my wife and I shared a Shirley Valentine moment.

You'd have to be a hard-hearted, unromantic soul not to fall in love with this place, you really would ...

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