

ultravel

YOUR GUIDE TO HEAVEN ON EARTH

MIDDLE EAST EDITION AUTUMN 2012

GOING TO EXTREMES

TO CAPE HORN AND ONE OF EARTH'S
MOST DRAMATIC AND INHOSPITABLE
LANDSCAPES, PATAGONIA

INTO AFRICA
THE MOST
UNFORGETTABLE
SAFARI CAMPS
AND LODGES

THE SWEET SPOT
EXPLORING THE
RICH SEAS OF
EAST INDONESIA
BY SCHOONER

Off the beaten path

On the secluded, hard-to-get-to Greek village of Onar, there is no room service, no internet, no swimming pool and no spa treatments. Guests are welcome to swim with the eels in the rock pools, however.



TREASURE ISLAND

Marooned on a Greek island in the northern Cyclades, **Jonathan Gornall** learns a very valuable lesson in when to stop acquiring and start enjoying what you already have

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A sleepy place

Andros, the northernmost island of the Greek Cyclades, is less touristy than its neighbours. The main resort is Batsi, pictured here.

There is no escape from Onar. Don't get me wrong. Provided you can cope with the potentially traumatic disconnection from the wired world – the sudden, G-force-inducing deceleration from the speed of modern life to a pace that makes the Slow Cities movement look positively rocket-assisted – you won't want to escape.

After all, here in this unusual getaway on the underdeveloped east coast of the Greek Aegean island of Andros, the largest and most northerly of the Cyclades, is the escapist pastoral dream writ large.

Or, to be more precise, the escapist pastoral dream of its creator, Mateo "Makis" Pantzopoulos, writ small, in the shape of eight beautifully understated architect-designed villas, hewn from the stone, wood and slate of the surrounding landscape and nestled in camouflaged anonymity in an undiscovered Edenesque valley, through which a beautiful brook babbles on its way to one of the most secluded beaches in Europe.

It's just that Onar, a name derived from the Greek word *óneiro*, for dream, is so far off the beaten path, let alone the road, that finding it – and finding your way out of it – is something of a navigational nightmare.

And that, of course, is a large part of its charm.

Getting to the island itself is a breeze. Athens is less than five hours from Abu Dhabi and ferries leave the

nearby port of Rafina three times a day for the two-hour voyage to Gavrio on the west coast of Andros. From there, as the crow flies – or, rather, the eagle, which with luck you will spot soaring on the thermals during the journey over the Mesa Mandrha range – Onar is just 16 kilometres. But, with much of that on challenging unmade tracks through the mountains, even with one of Makis's team of locals at the wheel, the journey takes more than an hour.

Of course, deciding to hire a four-by-four and spend a day or two exploring the surrounding countryside was a dumb thing to do, crassly missing the entire point of Onar – to escape from the outside world and its cars, aircraft, mobile phones and internet connections.

Yet, like most people who come seeking this idyllic

sanctuary, nestling at the edge of a pristine beach on one of Greece's least discovered islands, I found myself facing the prospect of going cold turkey with apprehension. Here, it seems at first, there is absolutely nothing to do and the long, empty days ahead stretch out interminably.

That, I realise, is a sad commentary on (my) modern life, but it nevertheless drove me to plan ahead and hire a car for two days hence, by which time, I was certain, I would be climbing the walls of my delightfully understated, rustic-style villa.

At Onar, you can't summon room service, because there isn't any, and you can't surf the internet because, yes, there isn't any. There is also no swimming pool, communal or otherwise and, if you inquire after spa treatments, expect to be directed to the delightful rock pools at the rear of the property where, if you wish, you may swim with the eels.

However, after a day or so of decompression I had, to paraphrase Gershwin, discovered plenty of nothing to do, and nothing was plenty for me. Indeed, by the time the car arrived, delivered to the doorstep from Gavrio, I found myself tutting at the noise of the Jeep winding down the hillside track to Onar's gates.

The soundtrack to this place is sublime – an incessant hum of bees, birds and beautiful, iridescent-shelled flying beetles, going about their business among the orgy of wild and planted flowers that form the backdrop to Makis's laid-back world view – and to disturb it with the noise of machinery just feels wrong.

Disturb it I did, however. Eventually, bouncing in and out of every rut, the Jeep clawed its way up and out of the valley and along a series of snaking mountain roads to the island's sleepy seaside capital town of Hora.



LIKE MOST PEOPLE WHO COME SEEKING THIS IDYLIC
SANCTUARY, I FOUND MYSELF FACING THE PROSPECT
OF GOING COLD TURKEY WITH APPREHENSION

Stony silence One of the eight luxury villas in Onar, hewn from the stone, wood and slate of the surrounding landscape.



'IT IS MY
PARADISE,'
SAYS MAKIS,
THE OWNER.
'GOD WAS IN A GOOD
MOOD WHEN HE
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It had looked close, but it took a bone-shaking hour or so to reach it. Very nice it was, too, with a smattering of the de rigueur blue-and-white postcard architecture one expects in this part of the world, a couple of small (and closed) museums and none of the crowds and bars one finds in nearby destinations such as Mykonos.

But why had I bothered? Likewise, why did I then set out to explore some of the other deserted, idyllic bays and beaches that nibble at the entire length of Andros's east coast? I had the perfect beach within a few minutes' walk.

In struggling – and failing – to find my way to any of the others (and in the process risking death and nausea on countless winding and precipitous tracks, most of which led precisely nowhere), I learnt a useful life lesson about the value of knowing when to stop acquiring and start enjoying what you already have.



PHOTOS: MATEO PANTZOPULOS

And don't even think about exploring the slopes and valleys of the Mesa Mandhra – the frequently cloud-capped 1,000-metre-high range that cuts the island in two – without the excellent 1:50,000 scale SKAI-Terrain hikers' map of Andros.

With it, you will probably still get lost, but will at least live to tell the tale; without it, you will almost certainly perish and one of the last lessons you will learn is that navigating by the countless chapels, churches and monasteries that occupy every nook and cranny on the mountain is about as useful as navigating by the myriad goats and sheep that populate the landscape.

Seen from the track winding down the hillside, Onar, constructed around several organic allotments that provide all the fresh vegetables used in the kitchen, looks more like a commune than a high-end resort. And, in a way, it is. Meals can be taken on the terrace of your private villa but, unless you really are a Howard Hughes, the best way to experience this place is to gather with the other guests for breakfast, lunch and dinner under the shelter of the gigantic plane tree at the heart of the place.

The food is wholesome stuff: excellent Greek salads, of course, homegrown vegetables and locally caught fish and so on, presented not as a menu choice but produced by the two cooks as a fait accompli. But it is good and very welcome after long hours spent doing very little, as is the conversation around the table with the range of invariably interesting and often high-powered fellow guests who come and go:

"What did you guys do today?"

"Nothing; you?"

"Likewise."

"Excellent."

In the corner of the open, candlelit dining area, Mustafa, a large frog – a regular evening visitor, tolerated even by Vera, Onar's hunter-killer cat – sits listening and occasionally croaking in apparent agreement. Somewhere out in the darkness, Marjorie the donkey and her friend, a pony called Pony Peponi, are settling in for the night in an old shed they have colonised and made their own.

The meals come to punctuate the day in much the same way as they must do in prison, but here nobody is planning a break-out; Onar is the escape we have all been looking for, even if it takes some of us a few days to ease into it: eventually, the BlackBerry and iPhone smartphones stop appearing on the table at mealtimes.

Onar, as Makis likes to say, "forces you to relax". A man for whom the term raconteur might have been invented, Makis is himself often on hand, delivering a steady stream of fascinating, funny and occasional tall tales. Born on Andros, he quit Athens and his job in shipping to build Onar on the heavenly slice of real estate on which he used to play as a boy. Like most Greeks who live on Andros – a weekend retreat for a significant proportion of the nation's ship-owning families, who prefer that their slice of Cycladic heaven remains a tourist backwater – Makis firmly believes that less is more.

"I am happy to be here," he says. "It is my paradise. God was in a good mood when he made this place."

With an expressive sweep of his arms, he takes in the lush hill-

sides, the stands of trees that shade the stream and the intoxicatingly aromatic wild flowers and herbs that spring up, unchecked, everywhere.

"The more I touch, the less value this place has."

The locals certainly seem to agree; many of Onar's guests are Athenians who want to get away from the city for a few days. Others are foreigners from the more thoughtful end of the travel spectrum, seeking peace and isolation. Makis's infectious, gregarious personality is at the heart of Onar, though occasionally it can be a little startling. Late one night, I am yanked from a deep sleep by a loud hammering on the front door. Not, as I feared, cut-throats come to do me in, but Makis, come to insist I step outside to admire the total lunar eclipse. It is, it turns out, also a good time to admire the brilliant canopy of stars, undimmed by urban streetlights.

The eight houses, largely lost to view in the undergrowth of the landscape, delight in such names as Olive Tree, Honey (where he generally puts honeymooners), River and Forest. And Manhattan, so named partly because Makis once lived in New York and, at two storeys tall, it is Onar's skyscraper.

Onar is near nowhere, so its water comes from a well and its electricity from the powerline that runs to the nearby lighthouse, whose beam flashes across the ceiling of my seaward-facing bedroom.

And there really is plenty of "nothing" to do: strolling along the stream, swimming in its clear pools, sitting and watching the tadpoles and stripe-necked terrapins in the pond on the edge of the sand, following the water's course to the sea where minnows dart in the shallows and larger saltwater fish bask wistfully among the rocks in the outflow of fresh water.

I know; fish probably don't do wistful. But by the time you've followed this magical stream down through the Brigadoonish valley to the sea, pausing en route for an hour or so to read your book, or merely to watch the water trickling hypnotically over the time-shaped rocks, you, too, will almost certainly be considering taking up poetry.

And Brigadoon is not a far-fetched comparison, as the drive from west to east over the hills, swathed in bracken and carpets of purple heather, makes clear. "I have many guests from Scotland," says Makis, "and they say it is like the Highlands."

Only, plus sunshine and minus midges.

On the pristine, fine sandy beach itself, other than at weekends you are likely to find no one but the occasional fellow guest, and an informal etiquette that will keep them a satisfactory distance away from you. Virtually private, the small and sheltered east-facing bay – its glass-clear waters perfect for a hearty, sunrise-lit swim before breakfast – is overlooked only by a picturesque chapel perching on the rocks on one side, and by the lighthouse on the other.

At weekends, the "crowds" arrive – at least a dozen or so locals, a few braving the road by car and the others arriving from the sleepy capital town of Hora, a few bays over, on fishing boats so picturesque that resenting their presence would be churlish.

At the end of my stay, I was supposed to move on and spend a couple of days in Mykonos. In the event, a nationwide transport strike forced me to stay put at Onar. You've got to love those Greek protesters.

Welcome shade

Left, a bedroom in one of the villas in Onar. Right, a guest relaxes in a hammock on one of the villa's outdoor terraces.

ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE Etihad Airways flies direct to Athens daily from Abu Dhabi. In October, a return flight costs from Dh2,440. Ferries for Andros leave Rafina, one hour's drive from Athens, daily at 7.25am, 7.40am and 5.30pm. Tickets for the two-hour voyage, which can be bought at the harbour, cost €31 (Dh147) return

THE STAY Depending on season, a one-bed villa at Onar (www.onar-andros.gr) costs between €140 and €180 (Dh730-Dh940) per night, including breakfast. A two-bed ranges from €250 to €350 (Dh1,300-Dh1,800). Lunch or dinner costs about €15 (Dh72). Basic groceries for your villa kitchen can be ordered with a day's notice. Book through www.iEscape.co.uk (00 30 210 6251052 or 00 30 6932 563707) or contact Makis by email on info@onar-andros.gr