

escape

“HYDRA was entered as a pause in the MUSICAL SCORE of creation by an expert calligrapher”
American writer Henry Miller

GET OUT OF TOWN...



PICTURE istock

HYDRA GREECE

Getting Around

If you get tired of walking, donkeys are available for €10 (about \$15) for rides around Hydra and a taxi boat can take you to the nearby beaches of Kamini (€10) and Vlyhos (€20). Some boats are specifically designated for the beaches, costing €15 (\$22) return to take you to one of the furthest beaches from Hydra town, Bisti Bay (8km away).

Staying There

Hydra Homes Holiday rental houses:
hydrahomes.com/hydra_island_long_term_lets.aspx

More

King William Travel advise travellers to take out travel insurance, and carry extra cash, debit cards and credit cards to cover emergencies and any unexpected delays. Check the Australian Government's travel advisory service at smartraveller.gov.au



HYDRA HEALING

Nowhere in Greece is untouched by the economic crisis, but life on car-free Hydra continues much as it has for hundreds of years – donkeys included

words **sarah hender**

THE ancient Greek philosopher, Socrates once said “whatever you have is enough”.

The residents of Hydra, an island an hour and a half away from Athens by ferry, live by this philosophy, as I discovered on a recent solo pilgrimage. This was my second visit, and the words of the kindly woman who greeted us on our first were still fresh in my mind: “Do you think you will need two or three donkeys?”

Hydra is a car-free island with a resident population of 3000 that swells to three times that many at the height of the tourist season. The island's residents have

constantly rejected any commercial development that may change it from the kind of place it's been for 300 years.

“Hydra is an exceptional place,” says Hydra's harbour master Pantelis Lembessis, born in the town and immortalised as Pan of Pan's Bar in Tim Winton's bestselling novel *The Riders*. “It is the kind of place you come back to after a long time away and it will be exactly the same.”

Arriving late at night by ferry, in the tiny harbour, after a frenetic day I was struck by the silence of Hydra, broken only by the braying of donkeys, the occasional rooster getting in an early session and some caterwauling of the feline population.

Charmian Clift, a former Australian resident of Hydra, wrote about her time on the island: “The roosters are all mad here, nervous nocturnal birds of splendid plumage and no time sense.” All a bit unnerving for an urban dweller like me.

Wherever you are in Hydra, the natural world is never far away. Every morning that I would step outside the door of my little house and walk down the cobbled-stone laneways to the port there would be a group of the same five cats outside a neighbour's door waiting for their breakfast. Once in the port, I watched in wonder as I saw donkeys being loaded up with cases of bottled water, groceries,

garbage bags and the better part of a kitchen. At breakfast, a dog tied up on one of the fishing boats, would optimistically, if hopelessly, jump in the air every time a sea bird flew past. Later in the day, when the men would be drinking outside the local bars, I watched as a small girl took her fishing rod and sat on the harbour wall to fish, a black cat with a strong sense of its own survival, keeping her company.

There hasn't always been peace on this little island of serenity. On August 17, 2012, at the height of the tourist season, the Greek financial crisis came knocking on its doors, or more to the point, broke its doors down. Hydra is the least likely place for. »»»

escape

1 No cars, no scooters, just donkeys 2 The cobbled streets of Hydra 3 Cats live an undisturbed life on the island



PICTURES istock

scenes of civil unrest but, in 2012, the tax inspectors came to arrest the owner of the local fish tavern for an alleged failure to issue tax receipts.

The inspectors were forced to stay in the local police station until riot police could arrive on a navy ship to halt the violent outrage of the local community. As the fish tavern owner was arrested, residents threw stones, firecrackers and flares at the police station and even cut off the water and electricity supply. In the end riot police had to use tear gas to dispel the crowd. Tiny Hydra made worldwide news.

"It was a fiasco," says Nicolas Vlachos, a 35-year-old Hydriot and creperie owner. "There is a lot of black money in Greece – you can ask everyone. Many people don't pay their taxes – for all of us that do pay, we think that is bad. But we are talking perhaps €200 when €200 billion is not being paid by the big pharmaceutical companies. So the government tells all the TV channels around the world that it is taking action to break down the corruption. You would have to be an absolute idiot to not understand what that was all about – it was only for the TV."

The people of Hydra wouldn't stand for one of their own being victimised in this way but the financial crisis did not raise its ugly head while I was there. Hydra's residents were as welcoming as ever to its tourists.

While wandering the port on my first morning, a waiter called out, "Hey, where are you going?" When I told him I was going for a walk, he said, "Well, if it were me and I was going for a walk I'd want a coffee first". Yes, he wanted my business but what a charming way of getting it and get it he did. By the end of the week, I was being called by name "Hey Sarah, where are you going today?" After that a visit to the port to eat at a harbourside café was a must for my breakfast every morning.

A perfect way to get up close and personal with nature in Hydra is a walk up to the working monastery of Profitis Ilias which sits high above the town. It took me an hour and a half of uphill climbing on a path that winds through a beautiful pine forest surrounded by magnificent views.



As I was making my way down again, I turned around to look back up at the monastery and two of the resident monks gave me a big wave.

The kindness and warmth of a small community such as this one has many benefits as Tracy Gionis, of Hydra Homes, the manager of my rental home, explains. A British expat of 20 years, Tracy married an Hydriot man and lives in the town with their two children. She recalls her early days here, struggling to teach herself the language. Tracy was getting by but then an old man used to come to the shop she was working in every afternoon for a coffee at 4pm, quiet time. "Every day he would sit with me and whenever I couldn't understand he would draw a diagram and that's how I learnt my Greek!" she says.

The contrast between her island life on Hydra and life in a big city was never so stark as when Tracy returned to London and attempted to purchase a train ticket.

"I was expecting a guy in a ticket office but I was faced with a machine. I couldn't understand what buttons I had to press. It was so impersonal, stressful and everyone was rushing. Here the pace is very relaxed."

Did this experience make her wonder about whether she had made the right choice to live in Hydra?

"Sometimes I feel so out of this world, we have internet yes, but generally everyday living is more simple here. Every morning I wake up, I look out the window

at my view of the mountain, the blue skies, the sunshine, the birds, donkey noises, cockerel noises and no cars, nothing, just nothing but nature. And as soon as I walk out my front door someone says good morning to me, it may even be someone I don't know," Tracy reflects.

Although life here is similar to life on other Greek islands, Hydra is a particularly small community and it offers little in the way of nightlife for younger adults.

Hydra's lack of sandy beaches has meant the tourists it attracts are often either Athenians or foreign tourists who come purely for the qualities that set it apart from the rest of the islands. The people that visit here are all seeking the same things – an appreciation of nature, beautiful walks, swimming in clear blue waters, drinking ouzo at a seaside bar to watch the sun set and savouring a plate of grilled calamari or red mullet and boiled greens grown in the mountains.

I savoured my own plate of red mullet and boiled greens at a taverna, Xeri Elia Douskos, that has a serene courtyard in one of Hydra's backstreets. This was a favourite of Australian authors George Johnston and Charmian Clift and the Canadian musician Leonard Cohen during their time in Hydra in the 1960s.

Cohen even wrote about it in a poem: "They are still singing down at Douskos, sitting under the ancient pine tree, in the deep night of fixed and falling stars."



EAT

Breakfast of yoghurt and fruit, home-baked bread with honey and two Greek coffees at the Pirate Bar on the harbour-front will cost you €13 (about \$19). It will keep you going until lunchtime and after a walk up to the monastery of Profitis Ilias high above the harbour, you will need it.

At the taverna Xeri Elia Douskos, you can eat local specialities of eggplant imam (whole braised eggplant stuffed with tomatoes, onion and garlic) and whole grilled fresh red mullet drizzled with oil and lemon with boiled greens from Hydra's mountains. Price is about €25 (\$37) with a glass of house red.



Nicolas Vlachos knows why people love his island. "The tourists that come to Hydra come here because they've read about the beauty, that there are no cars and there is beautiful architecture. People who like the simple life," he says.

Since the financial crisis hit Greece, many wealthy Athenians are selling their holiday houses in Hydra and this has had an effect on weekend business.

Tracy is not too concerned if the financial crisis hits Hydra as hard as the mainland: "Let's say the worst came to the worst and the island was cut off from any kind of access to anything, perhaps a civil war breaks out. We have water because most of us have cisterns that gather rainwater, horta (wild greens), fish, calamari, fresh eggs from the chickens, goats, olive oil. There are things around that everybody can help each other with if we ever were to reach such extremes."

The ability to rely on nature's bounty in a land currently suffering 27 per cent unemployment must be of some comfort.

Perhaps it is fitting that, on leaving the island, I was met at my house by Socrates the cart man, the man responsible for kindly transporting my bag down to the port. As he joyfully exchanged morning greetings with the locals, I thought of his namesake's wise words about embracing the simple life. I decided this Socrates also knew the answers to life's big questions. The important ones, anyway. ●