

EXPECT THE WORLD

Virtuoso Traveler

JUNE/JULY 2013

SERENGETI OR YOSEMITE?

Wilderness trips
for two budgets

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the coolest hotel pools

ALL THINGS AQUA

11 water-focused
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a serious splash

BOUTIQUE *Cruising*

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ISLAND TIME

Which Caribbean
retreat is right for you?



Smooth sailing for Compagnie du Ponant's mega-yacht L'Austral.

Above, from left: The open seas with Windstar Cruises, harbor-view seating aboard L'Austral (top), in bloom on the Greek Isle of Patmos (bottom), and the Grecian village of Simi.

Boutique Is Beautiful

Super yachts take guests to the farther-flung ports of the Greek Isles — and beyond.

By Becca Hensley

"See,"

SAYS CAPTAIN JEAN-PHILIPPE LEMAIRE, AS HE HELPS ME

CLIMB UP A LADDER FROM A SWIM IN THE AZURE WAVES OF THE AEGEAN SEA. "THIS IS YOUR OWN PRIVATE YACHT." He's talking about *L'Austral*, the boutique cruise ship he helms. One of four mega-yachts from *Compagnie du Ponant*, this one is anchored somewhere off a tiny island called Nisiros, part of Greece's Dodecanese chain. While some of the fewer than 200 passengers have gone to explore Mandraki village or hiked with a guide to the island's storied volcano, the captain has given permission to turn a portion of the ocean into a private swimming hole. Roped off by lifeguards who stand sentry, the section of sea stretches as long as an Olympic pool — which seems apropos given we're sailing in the land of the Olympians. As guests return to the vessel, hot and tired from their shore excursions, the staff invites them to take a plunge off the ship's forward into the cool sea. Presiding over the fun is the captain himself — and a string of butlers bearing fluffy towels and cold drinks.

Spontaneity is part of the magic of a small-ship cruise. While Captain Lemaire says not every voyage provides a sea limpid enough for a group swim, he focuses on providing creative options for guests that may not be part of the written itinerary. And while our weeklong Greek Isles cruise still visits larger mainstays such as the fortress city of Rhodes, *L'Austral's* petite size (just 132 cabins) allows us to dock mainly at smaller, lesser-known locales. Early one morning, for example, we awaken at dawn to find Lilliputian Simi so close to our stateroom balconies, we could reach out and touch it. Instead, we step right off the vessel into a busy marketplace; wander cobblestoned streets amid red-roofed, custard-colored houses; and watch the light glitter tangerine on the harbor. Here, before breakfast, we buy handcrafted sandals, Greek herbs, leather purses, and dried fruit.



OLAF HANSEN/GETTY IMAGES/ALAMY



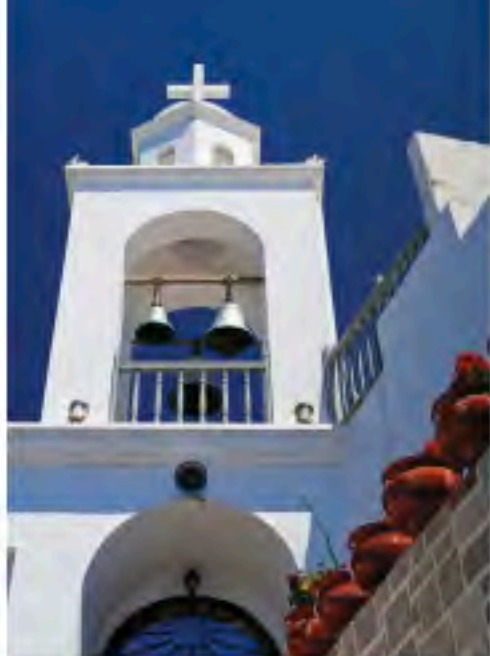
Clockwise from top left: Strolling Old Town in Rhodes, timeless views of Patmos, on board with *Compagnie du Ponant*, getting Greek in Patmos, and Rhodes' Kalissos Monastery.

W

HILE DOCKED NEAR NÍSIROS, I RISE EARLY TO EXPLORE THE VILLAGE OF MANDRAKI. A

cluster of white houses with cornflower-blue doors that flow up an olive tree-laden hill, the village quakes with a timeless quietude. Led by the aroma of lemons and garlic, I discover a little café that sits ensconced in a square. As if from a postcard, it has red-and-white-checked, cloth-covered tables, most occupied by villagers engrossed in conversation. In the square, little boys kick a soccer ball, old women hang laundry from communal lines, and fat, stray cats meander back and forth. The sun scorches, but a thick, briny wind blows in a bit of cool. The waiter brings a plate of Greek mezes — an assortment of appetizers that includes an eggplant dip, feta cheese and olives, dolmades, and flaky spanakopita, little triangles stuffed with spinach. They wash down well with a glass of soumada, the island's ubiquitous, almond-flavored beverage.

After lunch, I follow an undulating path to an archaeological museum, which, though small, has artifacts that rival some found in Athens, where our cruise began. At the ancient Monastery of Panagia Spiliari in the Castle of the Knights of Saint John, an old woman passes out prayer charms — some in the shape of the all-seeing eye. Only on the way back to catch the tender to the ship do I run into other tourists. It feels like I've had a Greek village all to myself.



From top: Blue skies back the bell tower at the Monastery of Panagia Spiliari, Grecian delights, and wonders never cease on Mandraki Harbor.

