

A GREEK Quandary

Crete, Kos or Corfu — which Greek island is the one for you?

BY PRACHI JOSHI

People swimming in the clear blue waters of Antipaxos Island, near Corfu

Choosing an island to holiday on in Greece is like choosing a beauty queen — a toughie because each is prettier than the last. Its 227 inhabited islands, dotting the Aegean Sea are a delicious combination of the sun and the surf. The sun is soothing, like a sincere hug, and the sea is cool and inviting, like a quick kiss. To complicate matters further, each of the island groups has its own allure, from the Italianate charm of the Ionian Islands to the whitewashed perfection of the Cyclades to the tropical greenery of the Sporades. Whether you're looking for pristine beaches or adventures, there's a Greek island just right for you. We help you find the perfect match.

CORFU

For the footloose and fancy-free

If you're looking for a luxe Greek vacation, Corfu, the second largest of the Ionian Islands, is an ideal destination. Hidden coves of turquoise waters, silver-green olive groves, emerald mountains and historic monuments — Corfu has natural and cultural attractions in spades. It's perfect for leisurely strolls and lazy picnics, and if you're up for it, pleasant hikes and adventure activities, too. Paleokastritsa is a popular beach resort on the northwest coast of Corfu. Apart from swimming in its peaceful coves, you can go waterskiing, scuba diving or rent canoes and boats to explore the many grottos that dot the area. Another fun way of exploring the island is to go on a horse trek through the foothills of Mount Pantokrator, the highest mountain on the island. The summit offers a panoramic view of Corfu, as well as Albania and even Italy on a clear day.

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• RETREAT

Corfu's old town is a UNESCO World Heritage Site, replete with 500-year old Venetian architecture as well as later-day neoclassical design. The old town was strongly fortified and is the only part of Greece that did not fall into the hands of the Ottomans. Some of the fortifications still stand today — the old and the new fortresses are Corfu's great attractions, built in different eras but all masterpieces of military architecture. The old town is also home to nearly 40 churches, one of which houses the Byzantine Museum, crammed with religious icons from the 15th to the 18th centuries. Corfu's Archaeological Museum reopened last year after a major revamp and is a must-visit. For a slightly offbeat experience, drop in at the Patounis Soap Factory, the last surviving factory on the island that makes the traditional Greek olive soap. It's a fifth-generation family-run business and is housed in an attractive 19th-century building.

Travel Desk: *Corfu's top retreat, The Rou Estate, is a former rural hamlet converted into a 16-villa complex, allowing you to experience life in a Corfiot village with all the modern luxuries. The tiered hillside estate has spectacular views of the Ionian Sea. All the villas have lilting Greek names and unique design elements, from rock gardens and plunge pools to private courtyards and even an olive grove. www.rouestate.com.*

Kos has several whitewashed buildings dotted across the island

KOS

For new lovers

No Greek island spells romance like Kos. The third largest in the Dodecanese chain of islands, Kos sits prettily in the Aegean Sea, fringed by golden beaches. It is one of the best sailing destinations in Greece — charter a luxury yacht from the marina or hop onto a catamaran and sail the impossibly blue waters of the Aegean.

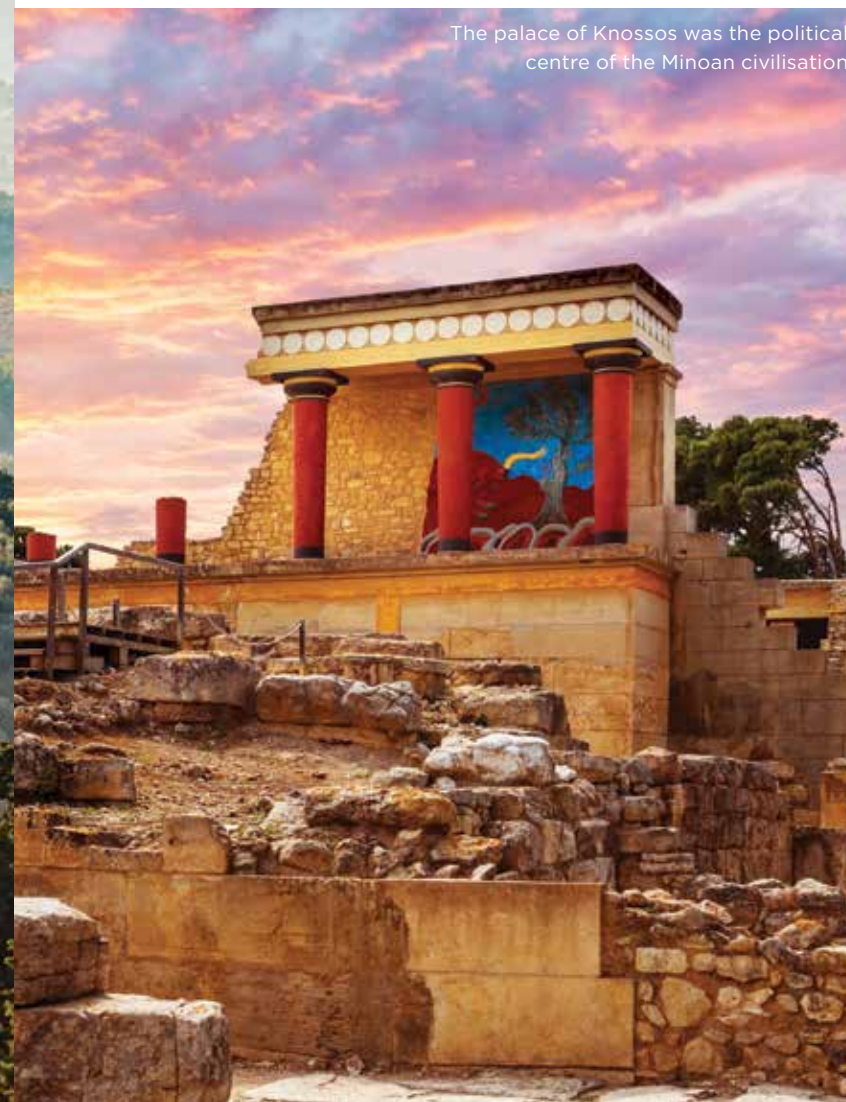
There is no dearth of beaches in Kos. Paradise Beach is popular thanks to its fine sand and crystalline waters. Marmari is equally beautiful and has a small port for private boats, so it's a perfect stop on a sailing itinerary. Both Polemi and Lambi beaches are excellent for sunbathing, while Tigaki is great for surfing and water sports. Kardamena Beach is party central, with several bars and clubs; it also hosts the summer festival of Alasarnia, which includes concerts, exhibitions, events, plays and also a nautical week. At the thermal springs of Agios Fokas, take a therapeutic dip in the sea-pool warmed by hot springs. Kos is bicycle-friendly and has a wide network of cycle paths and bike rentals, so it's easy to get around.

There are many historical treasures to discover on Kos, since it was inhabited as far back as in the Neolithic period. Millennia-old ruins are scattered casually all over the island and even in Kos Town. The medieval castle is a good place to start. There are Greek and Roman relics everywhere, from the ancient Hellenistic Gymnasium with 17 Doric columns to Casa Romana, a 3rd-century, 36-room Roman villa with exquisite mosaics, paintings and reliefs. Drop in at the Kos Archaeological Museum to see an impressive collection of ancient artefacts, especially the huge collection of Roman mosaics on display. Kos is said to be the birthplace of Hippocrates, the father of medicine. The Asclepeion (healing temple dedicated to the Greek god of medicine) where he supposedly trained is located 5 km outside Kos town.

Travel Desk: *Kos Imperial Thalasso is truly a water-lover's paradise, with six pools and a stunning beach at its doorstep. The beachfront Dream Villas come with private gardens, floor-to-ceiling glass doors, handmade furniture and elegant canopied beds. Or book the celeb favourite Royal Pavilion, a luxurious two-storey villa designed like a Mediterranean beach house, with a private pool and large sea-view garden. www.kosimperial.com.*



Vai beach in Crete features the largest natural palm forest in Europe



The palace of Knossos was the political centre of the Minoan civilisation

CRETE

For the adventurers

The largest and most populated of all Greek islands, Crete is like a small country in itself. With its varied terrain — from sandy beaches to the soaring Lefka Ori (White Mountains) — there's something for everyone. Mount Ida, the tallest in the White Mountains range, is perfect for trekking. Start at Nida Plateau and hike up to the Idaion Antron, a deep cave that is believed to be the birthplace of Zeus. In the White Mountains' National Park, you can trek through Samariá Gorge, which, at 16 km, is the longest canyon in Europe. Begin near Omalos and trek amid soaring cliffs and blooming wildflowers, occasionally spotting a kri-kri, an endangered wild goat unique to Crete. The trek ends at Agia Roumeli, a picturesque coastal village on the edge of the deep-blue Libyan Sea. If you want to explore a more offbeat route, the lush and heavily forested Richtis Gorge is perfect. Start from the village of Exo Mouliana and make your way along a 4km-long marked path, through wild forests and past sparkling waterfalls, to arrive at the secluded Richtis beach.

Elsewhere on the island, take a scenic cycle ride through the fruit orchards of Lasithi Plateau, or try snorkelling or stand-up paddling in the crystal clear waters of Loutraki. Hop into a kayak at Plaka and paddle all the way to the island of Spinalonga (officially called Kalydon), where you can explore the ruins of the mighty fortress that once stood there and then go swimming in the aquamarine shallows around it.

Apart from being a natural paradise, Crete also has several historical and cultural attractions to explore. The excavated Minoan towns and palace-complexes of Knossos, Phaistos and Agía Triáda are must-sees, as is the Heraklion Archaeological Museum. The old town of Chania, with its narrow cobbled streets flanked by Venetian and Ottoman townhouses, provides the perfect photo-op.

Travel Desk: *Close to both Spinalonga and Agios Nikolaos, Daios Cove Luxury Resort & Villas is perfectly located to get the most out of Crete. It sits in a natural amphitheatre overlooking a private beach, and all the suites and villas have a dazzling view of Vathi Bay. The resort's most exclusive villa, The Mansion, comes with two pools, a private spa, a dedicated concierge and a chef on request. www.daioscovecrete.com.*

A typical Greek platter

