

# Seductive Santorini

## Gem of the Cyclades

Story and photos by Genevieve Northup



The Cyclades are Greek islands in the Aegean Sea. Volcanic activity over thousands of years caused a collapse of land, leaving behind the caldera of Santorini (Thira), a semicircle of land rising almost 1,000 feet above the ocean basin. Clustered towns of sun-bleached buildings cascade over barren cliffs to create one of the most alluring destinations in the world, and the setting for our memorable Greek vacation.

### Towns

Eastern Santorini, where the airport is located, is beautiful and less hectic. Here you'll find beaches, budget shopping, restaurants, vineyards and fewer tourists.

The main draw is villages along the caldera of western Santorini. Vibrant blue hues dominate the landscape, from the ocean and cloudless sky to the painted roofs, gates and doors. Narrow walkways link businesses, homes and hotels, their small street-level facades hiding the labyrinthine patios and catwalks expanding hundreds of feet below.

Thira, or Fira, is the capital and biggest town, offering restaurants, shops, tour operators and museums. Less touristy than Thira, Oia is at the northern point of Santorini. We never left Oia because it had everything we wanted: dozens of dining choices, a tourism office and the best spots to watch the sunset. Between Oia and Thira are tiny Imerovigli and Firostefani.

### Accommodations

My husband and I agreed that lounging in a traditional cave house on the caldera was the only trip requirement. We had a pleasant stay in a studio apartment at Atlantida Villas, a 10-minute walk from Oia. The furnishings are beach shabby chic, less comfortable and luxurious than those at some of the newer resorts. But Atlantida has bigger balconies and a quieter location.

The accommodations in Thira, Oia, Imerovigli and Firostefani range from expensive to outrageous. Mid-range hotels have double rooms or studio apartments and caldera-facing terraces for \$90 to \$250 per night.

Compare prices and availability at Atlantida Villas, Kiferis Blue Studios, Santorini View, Nefeli Homes, Lava Suites & Lounge, Merovigliosso, Antithesis Hotel and Ellinon Thea Boutique Hotel.

For a serious splurge, book a suite with a patio and infinity pool, cave-enclosed hot tub or Jacuzzi. Daydream as you scroll

through the options of Santorini Secret, Kirini Suites & Spa, Dreams Luxury Suites, Iconic Santorini and Andronis Luxury Suites, where prices start at \$500 a night.

On a tight budget? Lodging in eastern Santorini starts at \$30 per night. You can reach the west's panoramic restaurants by taxi or bus.

### Cuisine

When traveling, we usually scour online recommendations because good food is a priority (seriously, we have more photos of food than anything else). In Santorini, we didn't plan. We peeked at the dishes in front of customers and checked for vacant seaside tables. We were pleased with these spots on the path between Atlantida Villas and the far end of Oia:

A few steps from Atlantida, Finikia's Place has seafood, Greek staples and a deck overlooking vineyards, homes and the Aegean. We ordered half of the extensive menu and drank generous pours of wine, so I'm a bit fuzzy on our favorites.

We stopped at Melenio Café for a cocktail and caldera views—until I walked by a case brimming with desserts. We shared *Ekmeke kataifi*, strings of syrup-soaked crispy dough buried under sweet custard, whipped cream and chopped pistachios.

What Kasteli Tavern lacks in views, it makes up for in simple Greek fare. Fish is grilled on the porch and promptly served, and the steaming *Moussaka* is worth the calories. *Moussaka* is similar to shepherd's pie or lasagna; ground meat, sliced vegetables, tomato ragout and creamy, cheesy béchamel sauce are baked as a casserole of OMG goodness.

The ocean was ours as we dined at the mas-





sive “chapel wood” table perched on a secluded veranda of the Andronis Luxury Suites. The elegant

French and Mediterranean cuisine was soon forgotten as we watched the daily transformation of Santorini. Oia’s buildings were scorched by the afternoon sun, shadowed at sunset, then illuminated by soft lighting. The blue-hued structures against the darkness created the illusion of a floating city.

We never ate at travel website picks, but some of them look amazing. Wherever you end up, stick to local specialties. *Tomatokeftedes* are fried patties of herbs and minced cherry tomatoes. The island is also known for small white eggplant, fava bean purée and the elusive *chloro*, a handmade goat cheese that is not mass produced.

### Activities

After sightseeing in Athens, we lazed on our balcony and meandered around Oia. If you’re worried about island fever, consider these activities:

**Boating:** See Santorini from sea level on a catamaran, yacht or speedboat tour. We joined a four-hour catamaran excursion that included snorkeling, refreshments and a spectacular sunset.

**Water sports:** Dive shops organize snorkeling and dive adventures to walls, reefs, shipwrecks and caverns. Enjoy the scenery while windsurfing, jet skiing, wakeboarding or paragliding.

**Wine Tastings:** Santorini’s wine-making history extends more than 3,000 years. Tour a winery and sample Vinsanto.

**Spas:** Relax during five-star service at a resort spa. Many are open to the public and rely on natural thermal springs.

**Hiking:** Journey across the volcanic

ridge from Thira to Oia, and climb to the fortress ruins at Skaros Rock, near Imerovigli.

**Mopeds:** Short on time? Mopeds are an exciting and efficient way to explore the island. Hang on tight, hug the hairpin curves and don’t look down!

### Reaching Santorini

Olympic Airways and Aegean Airlines fly to Santorini from major Greek airports. Beware: It’s a short 30-minute flight from Athens to Santorini, but we spent more on these tickets than on the international flight between Frankfurt and Athens.

Ferries from Greek port cities, including Piraeus, or other Greek islands are far less expensive but take much longer. For more on ferries, go to [www.visit-santorini.com/site/how\\_to\\_go.htm](http://www.visit-santorini.com/site/how_to_go.htm).

During peak season, Condor has direct flights to Santorini from Frankfurt, Düsseldorf and Stuttgart with a short stopover in Mykonos. German Wings charters non-stop flights from Cologne.

Every cruise line has itineraries that dock in Santorini, allowing you to explore by day and sail to your next destination overnight. To compare prices and schedules, visit [www.cruisecritic.com](http://www.cruisecritic.com). ■



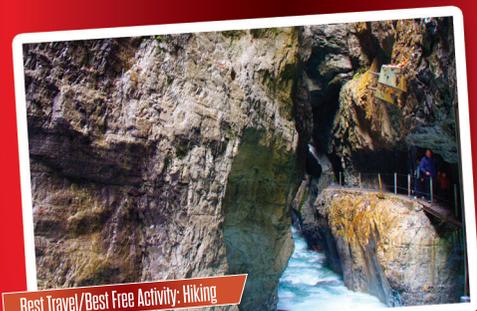
# CONGRATULATIONS



Best Travel/Best German Castle: Burg Eltz



Best Travel/German Day Trip: Rothenburg ob der Tauber



Best Travel/Best Free Activity: Hiking



Best Zoo: Tiergarten Nürnberg



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