



Escape from Reality

Aoibheann Mac Namara gets away from it all on the Greek island of Hydra and discovers delicious Greek cuisine, crystal clear waters and experiences a warm welcome from locals

This is my third trip to the island of Hydra, a Greek island two hours by boat from Athens. It is a small island with no cars - just donkeys and lots of cats. It is a perfect place for children where they can feel free. It is also ideal for writers and creative types where they only need to look around to find inspiration.

Hydra is an island that will never change; it holds something from the past and almost remains there. Life is simple and Hotel Bratsera is at the centre of that life, as all magical hotels are, extending not only into the community and cultural life of the space they exist in but often far beyond that.

Hotel Bratsera is one of those locations that makes you feel connected to a place. An old sponge factory architecturally and authentically reformed in the early 90's, it comprises of just a few rooms located around one of the island's few swimming pools. People float in and out of this tableau of unrefined interior chic. The food is simply prepared and the produce is local and fresh. It offers some of the best food on the island with service from people who welcome you back year after year. It almost needs no more explanation than this, only to know if you really want to go somewhere peaceful and pitch perfect, you know this place exists in the world and with little fuss.



Beyond Bratsera is the port town of Hydra. It is a calm and chic village but yet un-cosmopolitan at the same time; a place that keeps giving with its small quaint shops selling old Greek lace and artisan bespoke jewelry. It almost calls visitors to explore daily, as the village becomes a familiar ground of newfound friends and warm welcomes. It is amazing how familiar the space becomes and how warm the people are; after just a few days I have felt a real sense of belonging.

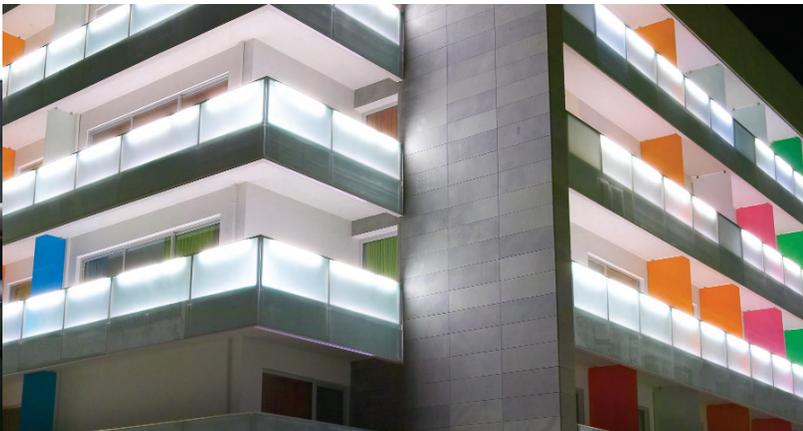
Boats depart regularly from the busy yet simple port on Hydra for the various non sandy beaches of Miramare, Nickolas, Kamini, Bisti and Vlychos among others, with each trip bringing with it a new adventure. These daily boat trips offer a magical exploration of the island to inquisitive visitors. Some beaches you can also access by foot and explore the olive groves and lemon trees en route. Inevitably, a simple taverna greets you at any one of these beach spots where the usual Greek offerings are available from Greek salad to tzatziki to mezze plates to souvlaki and stuffed vine leaves along with inexpensive Greek wine (which seems to be constantly flowing) and Ouzo, a Greek favourite. Lunch extends into dinner and dinner extends late into the night as the sun eventually descends and a welcome cool breeze arrives.

Hydra, where singer Leonard Cohen has a home and where countless artists and artistic and cultural types live and work, has then a cultural fabric that sits comfortably with the beauty of the place. This is an out post of the Athens art scene. Art spaces like

the Deste Foundation Project, which houses an annual exhibition in an old slaughterhouse, shows work of a challenging nature as befits a space of its dubious history. At the end of a series of challenging steps to the top of the town the intrepid visitor can find more interesting work in a show in the local primary school, curated this year by Dimitriou Antonitsis. Mixed in with all this are classical concerts and openings in the museum. This is art of a different genre. Then of course there is the Cine - the local cinema in a Cinema Paradiso sort of enchantment, which appears to the front as a simple shop front selling popcorn and drinks but inside is a courtyard with a wide screen, and above a sea of stars and the black night. Children's animation and old black and white films show nightly; a fantastic end to the long and full days in Hydra.

For places to eat there are countless and, over time, you find your own spots. Greek tavernas are consistent and menus don't differ too much. Marina Taverna on Vlychos beach is a significant cut above the standard taverna fare. Offering really exceptional food and with a menu that differs from the norm, it is well worth the boat trip while the beach itself and the rocky diving areas into the turquoise sea offer a wonderful base to observe the various activities over a long lunch.

One of my favourite eateries is the Pirate Bar, a big hit with the expat transient community and owned by a wonderfully effervescent Englishwoman named Wendy who prepares all the



food. It is an ideal spot for those on the hunt for some more familiar food, while for those in search of bubbles, the Pirate Bar offers delicious prosecco. An interesting crowd means there is also the opportunity to 'people watch' over a glass of wine and there is almost always a buzz about the place.

Visitors come to Hydra year after year and generation after generation and it is not hard to see why. Days merge here and you find yourself asking what day and even what week it is. Sitting and drinking Freddo cappuccinos and watching the amazing yachts sail into this timeless port it is easy to understand how time gets lost. Watching the young boys dive from the cliffs into the water as the sun goes down; seeing the Greek Orthodox priests scurry to and from the monastery on the mountain and to and from the churches on the port front; connected to the outside world only by the eagerly anticipated arrival of the daily international papers from London and beyond, you almost get the feeling that you are locked in time.

Once the hydrofoil ferry leaves and brings you back to the Athens port of Pirarus, the reality of the world hits. I generally stay in Fresh Hotel, which is located in the heart of one of central Athens' eclectic neighborhoods. Its' pantone colour chart brightens the surrounding buildings and it sits like a bastion of modern fresh Greece in an interesting yet decaying surrounding. The popular air lounge bar and restaurant on the top floor is the centre of that modern life. Offering views of the Acropolis,

modern is mixed with antiquity in a sublime juxtaposition.

Greece is experiencing one of the worst recessions it has ever known. There are people starving in Athens and a multi generational government of corruption has lead to a defunct social welfare system. The only industry worth talking about here is tourism and any spend from Irish holidaymakers is welcome. Greece is the most ancient of countries and despite its economic turbulence, the crystal clear waters on the Greek coastline along with the friendly Greek people will continue to welcome tourists and make them want to return year after year.

Hydra is a small rocky island in the Argosaronic Gulf, one of the most cosmopolitan islands in the Mediterranean Sea and one of the easiest of the Greek islands to get to from the Athens International airport. Aoibheann stayed at Hotel Bratsera on Hydra where a double standard room typically starts from €140 in low season and €160 in high season. For more information log onto www.bratserahotel.com

For more information on Fresh Hotel in Athens log onto www.freshhotelathens.com The hotel is currently offering special internet rates where a single room can cost €100.

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