

JN2 TRAVEL

A Hidden GEM

Sharon Feinstein savours the simplicity of daily life on the island of Folegandros

I visited to the Greek island of Folegandros because I was intrigued by the name (King Minos' son) and glittering white-cubed Anemi Hotel on the slopes above the small port. That's how most people get there, quite by chance. It only takes one visit to clinch it forever.

There are certain places that begin to exert a magical influence on the traveller's imagination and almost become legendary – Venice, Capri, Bali. Folegandros, small, enigmatic and beguiling, is becoming one of them, for me and so many others I spoke to.

Past those spa-loving swarms who flock to Santorini, the boat draws up at Karavostasi, where fishermen dry their octopus and fix nets.

Everything is licked clean by the sometimes scorching sun and fierce winds. Scrub, wild flowers, cacti and tamarisk trees cling to the rough terrain tamed with low-lying stone walls and slate terraces.

The modern design hotel, Anemi, is hewn out of this landscape, with an exquisitely large sea water swimming pool, deliciously comfortable rooms, young welcoming staff in flowing orange dresses, and a luscious breakfast without end beside the pool.

The mood is unpretentious, cool and relaxed, with sophisticated guests who aren't looking for chic and clichéd. This is the sophistication of simplicity; white-washed rooms with local photographs injecting a dash of colour into the 44 bungalow rooms.

Folegandros has around 650 inhabitants, a few thousand in summer. There is no bank and only one ATM. It's not long before the warm, open locals start to recognise and greet you like old friends: Yassou Sharon, can I help you, where will you eat tonight? People from small islands have a natural exuberance, especially the Greeks, who love to dance, eat and philosophise.

Chora, the exquisite medieval town, buzzes with vitality, as children dart about the maze of narrow streets, old men chat on rickety cafe chairs and diners watch the passeggiata. The absence of cars and bikes means everyone spreads out, dogs sit on the low white walls enjoying the balmy evening, ripe vegetables spill out their shops. Chora Jewels, where I snapped up an aquamarine ring, lights up the 15th century building and draws you in.

My days are filled with adventure. The island feels very soulful and fills your head with space, sounds and emotion.

Soft-spoken Spiros, carefree and handsome, from Sea U Dive Centre, took me on a blissful sea ride around the island in his inflatable boat, to the ancient Chrysospilia cave, cobalt blue

secluded bays and deserted beaches.

I hired a car from Tomaso and parked at the side of sweeping roads to meander along the stone-paved thyme-scented donkey tracks, to far-flung beaches such as Katergo and Agios Nikolaos – distant churches perched on clifftops – and ever more compelling views and sunsets. These beaches are also accessible by boat in high season, with blissfully deserted coves, apart from lizards, butterflies and the slap and suck of the sea.

Above Agali beach is Pasitheia, which quickly became one of my favourite tavernas, utterly peaceful on the clifftop. The food, delicious and imaginative, stands alongside my other family-

run choices, the rather exotic Chic in Chora, and fish specialist Zephirus. At Chic, I took to going into the kitchen to discuss my choices and flavours with the chef, fit, bright-eyed Demetris, who says his sparkle comes from his love of people and food.

The history of Folegandros is tinged with drama and sadness as well as survival, adding to its fascination and haunting quality. When the Jews and Greek hostages of Crete were put on a ship bound for the camps in 1944, it was torpedoed and sunk without trace just off this island.

And political prisoners were sent here to be cast out and isolated, so there are legacies of exile and suffering.

Most farms are scattered around Ano Meria in the north where lemon trees have their own stone houses to protect them from winter winds. The two village bakeries are fired with brushwood, giving the koulouria (sesame bread rings) and kalasouna (goat's cheese and onion pie) a lovely smoky aroma.

Patrick Leigh Fermor ascribed the profusion of blue-domed whitewashed churches – the most famous, Panagia, on the peaks of Chora – to a longing for saintly protection in this 'haunted' landscape. Then again, if you built a chapel, you were exempt from property taxes under the Ottoman Empire.

You don't need much to be happy when you're on Folegandros. It's all here for you. Why doesn't everyone live here and move into the wonderful Anemi hotel, I wondered, and posed this question to Demetris. "No, Sharon, you haven't experienced the winter when everything's closed, the people go, no boats come and the weather is fierce. But you must come back soon. We will wait for you."

And with that he went back to his big smile, bright eyes and flavoursome cooking.



Sharon's contacts...

For more information on the Anemi Hotel, visit www.anemihotels.com

To hire a car with Tomaso car rental, visit www.tomaso.gr

From top: A moonlit view overlooking the island of Folegandros; the island's port of Karavostasi; St Nikolaos beach. Inset: Sharon takes a walk