



This photo: Symi harbour. Visitors berth on the north side quay. Right, from the top: Alinda bay on Leros; the Ottoman influence in Kos town; Symi town is worth the climb; the grand fortifications around the old town of Rhodes.

A boat in the far corner of the European Med is an excellent base for exploring the islands of the Dodecanese. We experience the contrasting charms of Rhodes, Kos, Leros and Symi

TEXT & PHOTOS GARY BLAKE

The Med is blessed with countless outstanding cruising grounds, but few can match the natural dramas and splendid isolation of the Dodecanese, a crescent-shaped chain of eastern Greek islands that lie opposite the Asiatic Turkish coast. Like most of the Greek islands, these are the upper reaches of mountains that a geological age or two ago sat happily on land. We can thank the rising waters for creating a blessed corner of the boating firmament.

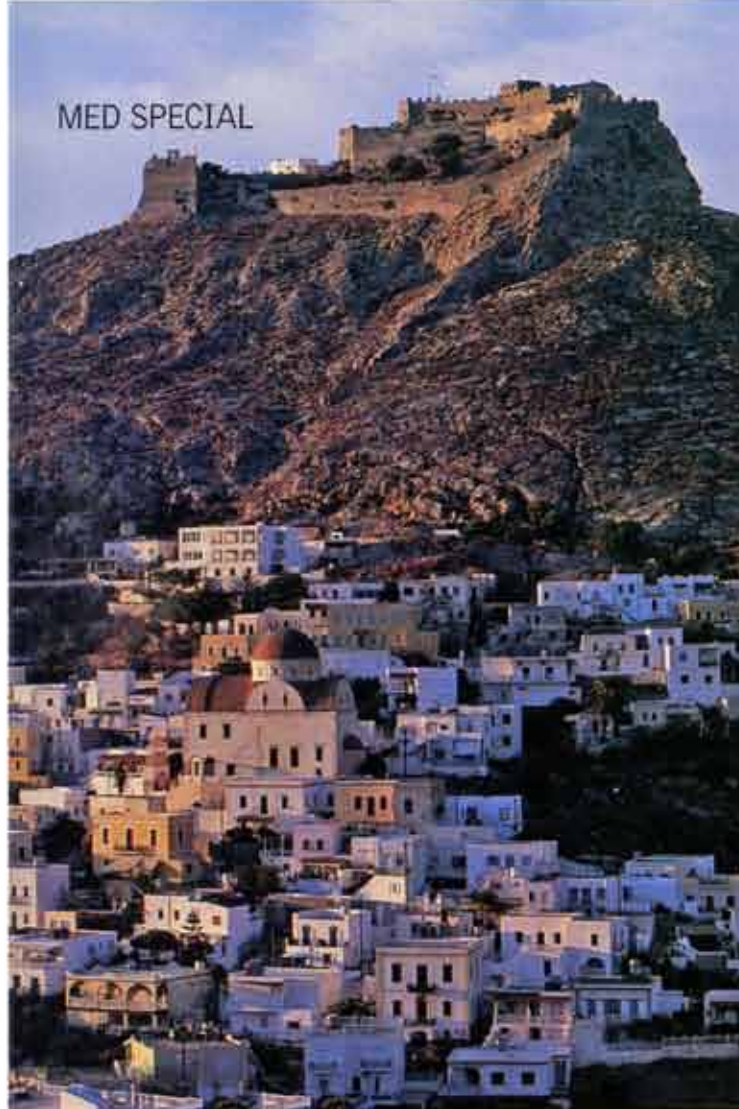
From a distance offshore the islands can appear somewhat sun-baked and barren, but there is a surprising abundance of vegetation, with several of the islands sporting natural springs. There are 32 islands in the group, with 14 inhabited, but its name is derived from *dodeka*, the Greek word for 12, and refers to first days of Ottoman rule in the 15th Century, when 12 of the islands were granted special privileges for having willingly submitted to their new overlords.

As this is the furthest group of islands from mainland Greece, and because it also contains the strategically and economically important Rhodes, the Dodecanese have had their share of turbulent history – Crusaders, Ottomans and Italians have been occupiers, and there were ferocious battles between the Germans and British during World War II. The islands were only finally included in the modern Greek state in 1948. The various occupiers have left their mark in towns and villages, and there are plenty of classical reminders of even earlier residents.

Perhaps the prime cruising time is the second half of September, when the prevailing wind – the north-westerly meltemi – loses much of its summer bite, and the temperature is more moderate than in the scorching months of June and July. And there's something for everyone here. The most developed islands of Kos and Rhodes have tourist beaches with white sand and bars galore, while off the beaten track are small islands with gorgeous bays that you can have to yourself. For this cruising guide, I'll be focusing on Leros, Kos, Symi and Rhodes.



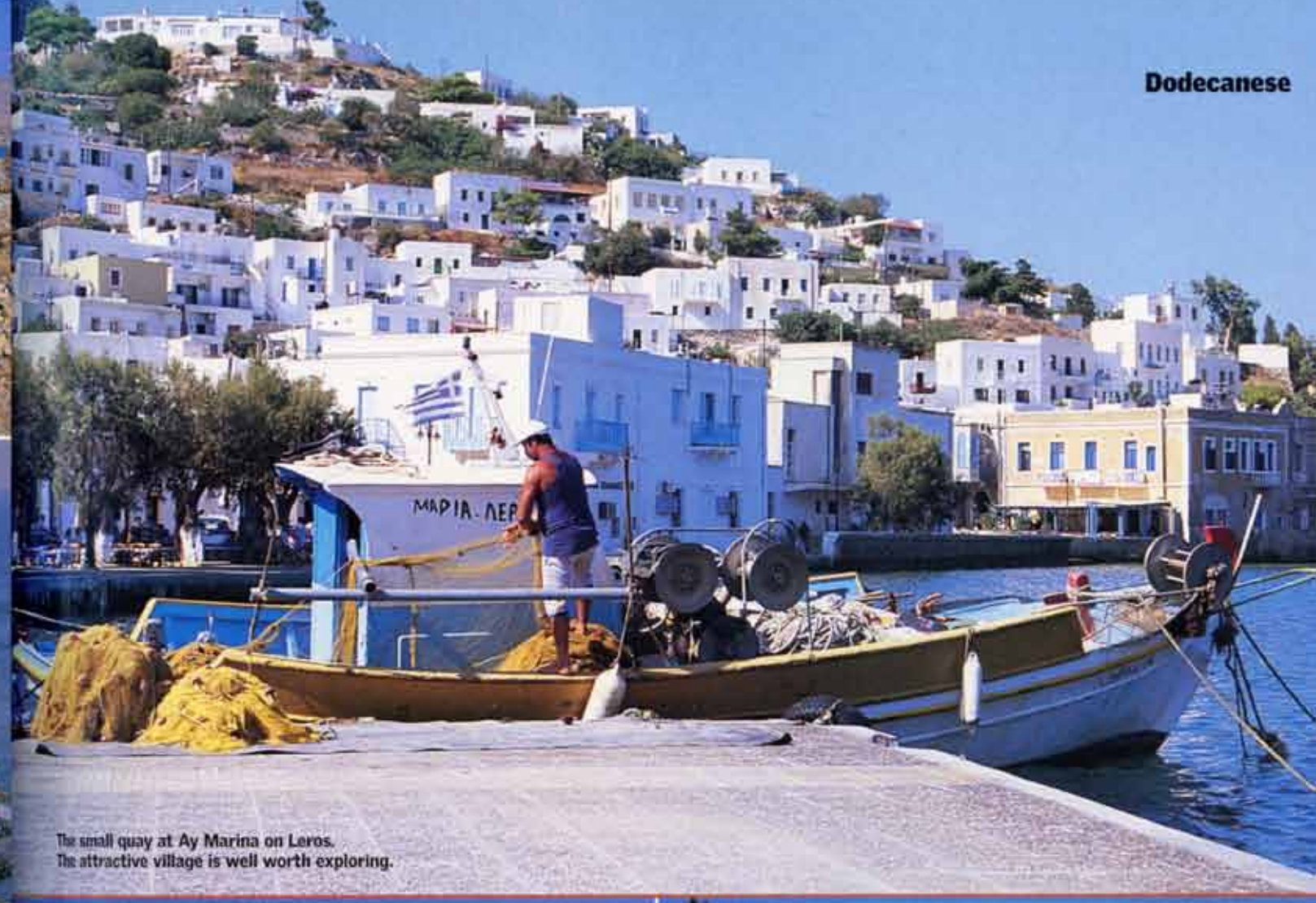
Four out of twelve



This photo: looking towards Ay Marina. Left: the stunning castle above Pandeli. Below: Pandeli (right) and Alinda's folk museum.



Leros



The small quay at Ay Marina on Leros. The attractive village is well worth exploring.

LEROS

The name of this island of 8,500 inhabitants means 'smooth', which is fitting, because of its relatively gentle mountains, made even more beautiful by plains forested with pine, eucalyptus, oak and olive trees.

Lakki is one of the largest natural harbours in the Med. Facilities for visitors in Lakki marina are good and the town itself is wonderfully relaxed. A night's stay costs €15 (approx £10.30) inc VAT for a 40ft (13m) boat. Provisions are available close by the marina, but a better shopping area is a 15-minute-walk up the hill in Plantos, the oldest settlement and capital of the island. The picturesque lanes of Plantos are worth a visit, and try the traditional coffee house, the Lorian Club, next to the town hall.

Below Plantos you can see Pandeli, with its small harbour and inviting *tavernas* off the beach. Above you are 500 steps to the mighty castle, which is over 1,000 years old and very well maintained. Pandeli is a lovely spot, where you berth on the fishing quay or anchor off the beach in good holding.

Ay Marina (not a marina, but a village), on the south side of Alinda bay, is a good place to stop – moor stern-to the short mole or the central pier. Water is available on the quay and fuel can be arranged. You'll find the island's largest market close by. The bay is deep, but in

northerlies it is best to head for Pandeli.

Following the coast road around the bay takes you to the site of the British war cemetery, the resting place for those who died in the 1943 battle of Leros.

A decent anchorage is available to the north in the fishing harbour of Partheni. Gourmes, on the west side of the island, is an open bay with some pleasant waterside restaurants. The food, indeed, will tempt any visitor to Leros. Local dishes to keep an eye out for are *koukouvides* (marinated fish with rosemary), and *pougakia* (sweets of stuffed almonds and honey). You can also sample *gafaves*, a tropical fruit found only on the island.

Kos

The fully equipped marina, a mile from Kos town and the old harbour, opened two years ago. A daily rate for a 40ft (13m) boat in August and September is €22.20 (approx £15.30) inc VAT, with a monthly charge at €389 (approx £270) inc VAT. You can reserve a berth on-line at www.kosmarina.gr. The harbour has berths next to the castle but it may be difficult to find one if you arrive during the afternoon rush hour. In strong northerlies or north-easterlies, it's impossible to enter the harbour, though there is good shelter inside at the quay, where you berth stern-to. Big boats can anchor south

of the entrance in settled weather, but keep an eye out for the hydrofoil ferries.

Kos is a well-developed tourist island, and while that shouldn't stop you visiting, remember that there will be plenty of day-trippers in high season. Kos town, however, is certainly not all fast food and discos. The tourist office between Kos marina and the Castle of the Knights. South of the castle are the cobbled streets of the old town and the ancient city ruins with their Roman mosaics. Also worth a visit is the 'Plane Tree of Hippocrates', where (it is said) the Ancient Greek doctor lectured his pupils 2,500 years ago. And head 4km west of town to find the Doric temple of Asklepios, built in 2BC, its marble columns set against a backdrop of verdant hills and cypress groves.

Inland there are more gems, including Pyli, a deserted Byzantine town perched precariously on a cliff edge, and Antimachia's Venetian castle. Kamari, on the south-west coast, is where the island's best beaches can be found. Eating out on the island is hit and miss, and as a general rule the restaurants lining the front are expensive and poor quality. Head for the back streets.

When the meltemi is bothersome, there is good shelter in Mastihari on the eastern coast, where you can moor against the quay. Kardamena, on the south-east coast, is the island's biggest resort, so be prepared if you

Kos is beach country, but boaters can enjoy the island too.



Hippocrates was here, said the tourist office.



Kos harbour (this photo) and town (right).



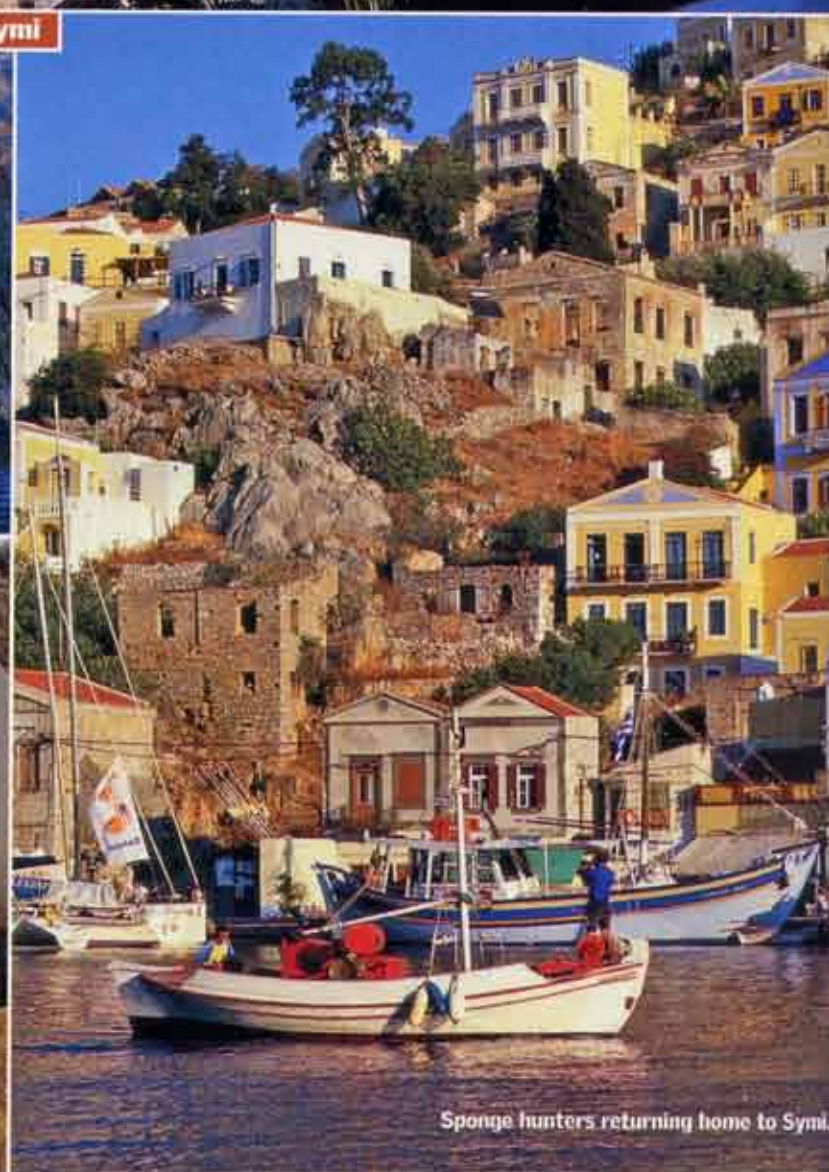
Leros: the name of this island of 8,500 inhabitants means 'smooth', which is fitting, because of its relatively gentle mountains, made even more beautiful by plains forested with pine, eucalyptus, oak and olive trees



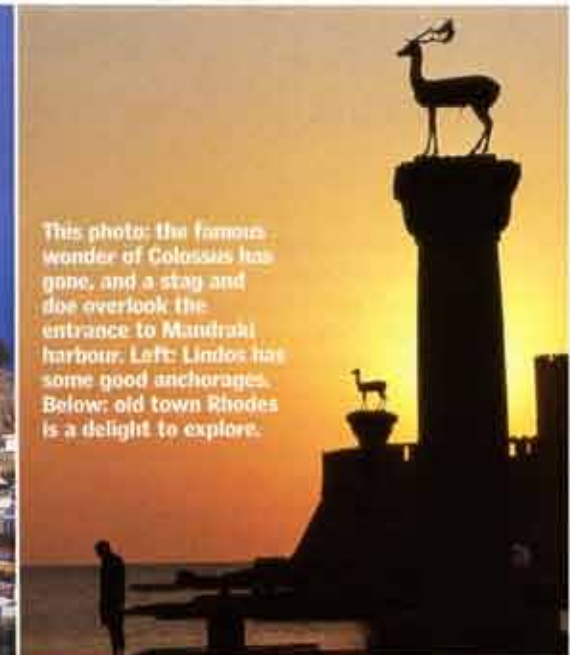
Symi harbour, which boasts a fine maritime heritage



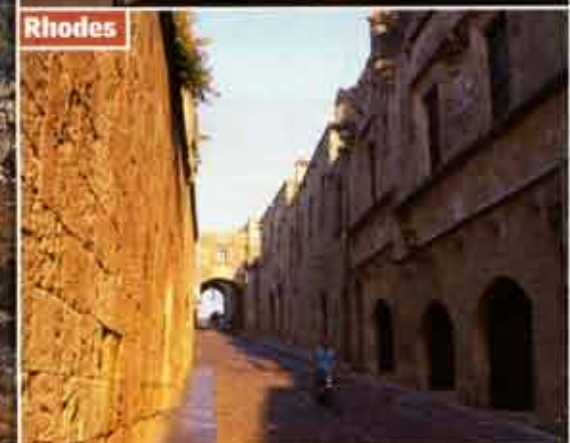
Symi



Sponge hunters returning home to Symi.



This photo: the famous wonder of Colossus has gone, and a stag and doe overlook the entrance to Mandraki harbour. Left: Lindos has some good anchorages. Below: old town Rhodes is a delight to explore.



Rhodes

decide to go stern-to on the pier running out from the beach: firstly, to check that it's not a local's berth; and secondly, to make sure you're not tired when you get there, because you're unlikely to get much sleep. There's water by the pier and fuel 200m away.

SYMI

This mountainous and arid island isn't suited to farming, so traditionally the inhabitants worked in the maritime industries – from boatbuilding to sponge diving – but nowadays tourism provides the most employment. At one time, 500 ships a year were launched here, and 22,500 lived here; these days, the population is about 2,300. Signs of previous wealth can be seen in the gracious mansions on the hills surrounding Symi town. The museum, next to the clock tower (conspicuous as you enter the harbour) charts Symi's seafaring past.

Berthing is confined to the north side of the harbour but you need to keep a sharp eye out for the ferries. The nightly rate for a 40-footer is around €8 (approx £5.50). You cannot make advance bookings for a berth, but once you're tied up, decent beaches are a short walk away. An attempt on the 375 marble steps and the chaos of little lanes to the upper part of town is recommended – but wait until the sting has gone out of the sun. The reward at the top is a

fine view and a cool breeze. You can stumble across some diverting watering holes in the back streets. The liveliest bars are off the south side of the quay – look out for the White House café and the Vapor bar.

Pethi, south of Symi, is a good anchorage, but mind the rock in the bay's entrance. Excursion boats from Symi make sure the popular beaches are full during the day, but in the evening they are very often all yours. Good anchorages are at Nimos island to the north, and Panormittis to the south. If you don't fancy going in too close to the sometimes rocky coast in your own boat, the fearless ferries from Symi will get you there. This is a good way of visiting some of the isolated monasteries overlooking the sea.

RHODES

The largest and most fertile island of the group is also its capital, and as it boasts an average of 300 days of sunshine a year, it's not surprising that it attracts holiday tourists. Rhodes old town, a World Heritage Site, is a walled medieval fortress built by the crusading Knights of St John, and is one of the best-preserved medieval fortifications in Greece. It can be seen as you approach the entrance to Mandraki harbour.

You can't reserve a berth in advance, and you'll need to call the port authority on Ch 12 when you arrive. You'll be directed to a spot on

the harbour wall, which you can take stern-to. There is good shelter, explaining why so many people winter here. A 300-berth marina is being built a couple of miles to the east.

The new market (Nea Agora) with its domed centrepiece is just in front of the marina, and is a popular meeting place for locals. Visitors will find plenty of cafés to investigate. Behind here is the old town, which you enter through one of the 11 huge arched stone gates that form part of the fortification. The Knights, who along with the rest of the Crusaders had to leave the Holy Land pretty sharpish after Turkish advances, made Rhodes their capital and fortified the region with around 30 castles. The Palace of the Grand Masters was the centre of their rule. Moated and protected by high walls, it was the last refuge for the population to shelter in. The Turks finally won the territory in the 1500s, and the Knights moved on to Malta.

The best time to explore these areas is early morning, when you'll find deserted squares and a labyrinth of alleyways. By midday it is crowded with tourists, and in the evening shoppers stroll through Sokratous, the main street in the Turkish quarter, which hosts some fine market stalls. The whole of the old town is a mesh of Byzantine, Turkish and Venetian architecture. The commercial centre of the new town is to the north and is easily explored on foot.

An attempt at the 375 marble steps and the chaos of little lanes to the upper part of Symi town is recommended – but wait until the sting has gone out of the sun. The reward at the top is a fine view and a cool breeze

Though Rhodes town is undoubtedly where you will head for, there are other attractions. Faliraki beach resort, just south of Rhodes, will be of interest if you have teenage crew. If our tabloid newspapers are to be believed, it is best witnessed in all its pomp and mayhem after midnight, or not at all, depending on your own levels of good taste. Ferakos, with its ruined citadel, is an imposing sight from afar and a pleasant stop for a swim before tackling Lindos.

Lindos has a sheltered bay with a safe anchorage, though by 11am in the summer this small town has taken delivery of coachloads of tourists. It is best visited early in the morning to avoid the crowds, or in early evening to see the sunset and the last of the light falling on the white buildings.

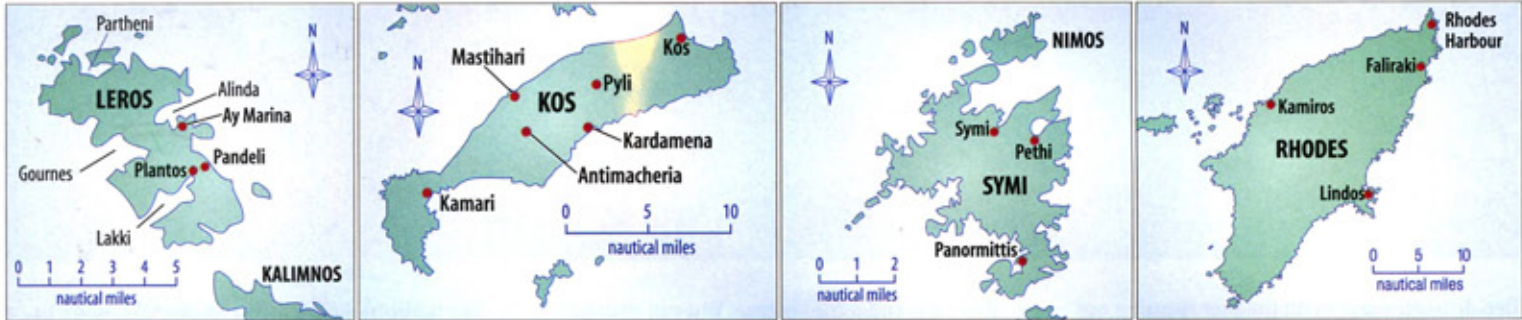


The Turkish quarter is off the tourist track and a good place to find interesting eateries.

In antiquity, Lindos was the main settlement on the island, and with its natural harbour and commanding position on high ground, it grew into a successful trade centre throughout the classical world. Its casbah of little alleyways and courtyards will keep your camera busy.

Kamiroi, on the west coast, is also worth a visit. The ancient ruins, only rediscovered a century ago, are spectacular, and nearby is the 'valley of the butterflies', where from June to September thousands of moths and butterflies come to breed. Well, that's what the biologists tell us, but visitors will usually see them clinging to the trees and rocks, looking delicate, pretty and dozy. However, they are an engaging sight, and the walks for visitors, over streams and past waterfalls, make this little Eden a must-see. **MBY**

DODECANESE NAVIGATOR



LEROS

Lakki marina – Tel: +30 (0)2247 026 010. Fax: +33 (0)2247 026 009. Website: www.lakki-marina.gr Email: agmar@12net.gr VHF Ch 11. Water at every berth; fuel can be delivered. Daily flights from Leros to Athens. Olympic Airways office in Plantos – Tel: +30 (0)2247 022 844. Daily ferry from Lakki to Rhodes and Piraeus. Hydrofoils and catamarans leave from Ay Marina to Platmos, Lipsi, Samos, Kos and Rhodes. There are a number of daily buses around the island. **Places to eat** Tavernas on Lakki marina and nearby. One of Leros's best is *Dimitri's* (Tel: +30 (0)2247 025 626) in Pandeli. In Ay Marina there are several good cafés around the market square. *Alinda's Finikas Taverna* (Tel: +30 (0)2247 022 695) offers 15 types of salads and 126 different *mezedes*.

KOS

Kos marina – Tel: +30 (0)2242 057 500. Email: info@kosmarina.gr Website: www.kosmarina.gr VHF Ch 77 callsign 'Kos Marina'. Pontoon berths with full facilities. Kos airport – Tel: +30 (0)2242 051 229. A taxi costs about €13 (approx £9), but if you're sharing make sure the driver doesn't charge each of you that! Ferries connect to all Dodecanese islands. Daily trips from Kos town to Bodrum. **Places to eat** *Nick the Fisherman* (Taverna Nickolas) (Tel: +30 (0)2242 023 098) on Averof, a short walk north-west of the harbour, offers a feast of fish. *Petrino* (Tel: +30 (0)2242 027 251), east of the Agora on Plateia Ioannou Theologou, is a stylish and upmarket restaurant in a stone mansion. It has a gorgeous outdoor garden, where royalty dine when they come to Kos.

SYMI

Port authority – Tel: +30 (0)2246 071 205. VHF Ch 12. Water and fuel at Symi town quay can be delivered by arrangement with the harbour attendant. Good shopping for provisions. Hiring a motorbike is a popular way of getting about. There is a cash machine on the harbour. Website: www.symi-island.com You could treat yourself to a luxury room in the Aliki Hotel (Tel: +30 (0)2246 071 665) on the north side of the harbour, where five rooms have balconies and stunning sea views. Daily ferry excursions to Rhodes and Turkey. **Places to eat** *Estiatorio Mythos* (Tel: +30 (0)2246 071 488). South of the quay near the taxi rank. Unpretentious but top-quality food. *O Meraklis Taverna* (Tel: +30 (0)2246 071 003), tucked away behind the Agios Ioannis bank in the Giasco area, serves good grills.

RHODES

Mandraki port authority– Tel/fax: +30 (0)2241 022 220. VHF Ch 12. Facilities in Mandraki are good. Most repairs are available and spares can be obtained within a few days from Piraeus. There is excellent shopping for provisions in the new town around the harbour and in the the new market. There is a main post office on Mandraki harbour and cash machines close by. Many boats winter afloat in Mandraki harbour, confirming it as safe haven, but reserving a place early is necessary. Contact: Nerus Boatyard, Odos Australis 19, Rhodos Dodecanese. Daily ferries to Piraeus via Crete or the northern Cyclades in the summer. **Places to eat** *Kosta* (Tel: +30 (0)2241 026 217), in the Turkish quarter of the old town, is a popular and good-value haunt. *Thomas & Charlotte's Taverna* (Tel: +30 (0)2241 073 557), west of the harbour in the new town area, offers some tasty Greek dishes, and is also good value. *Nisyros* (Tel: +30 (0)2241 031 741), in a leafy courtyard of the old town, has a wide selection of local dishes. *Princess* (Tel: +30 (0)2241 020 068), half a mile north-west of the harbour, is pricey but offers a range of Mediterranean dishes and is perfect for that romantic night out.

BOOKS AND PILOTS

Greek Waters Pilot Guide by Rod Heikell. Published by Imray at £35.00. An essential guide for planning a cruise in the region, packed with solid facts and sound advice. *Greek Islands*. Published by Lonely Planet at £11.99. *The Greek Islands*. Published by DK Eyewitness Travel Guides at £15.99.

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