

# Eastern promise

**Whisper it: the western Med is filling up to bursting point with expats and big boats. But 1,200 miles to the east there's a cruising ground so unspoilt that you'll see more goats than PWCs**

TEXT SUE GODDARD PHOTOS GARY BLAKE PHOTOMARINE

Presented with such an impressively diverse and dramatic cruising ground, even the most steadfast skipper, fond of cruising the faithful and familiar Mediterranean, could be forgiven for absconding to the teasing beauty and mysterious isolation of the Greek islands.

With well over 1,400 islands and 10,000 miles of coastline, the scope for exploration and escapism is immense. Rich in history and heritage, fauna and flora, nightlife and quiet life, the island to suit you is there somewhere, and cruising these waters will give you a refreshing sense of how the Western Med used to be – unfussy, unspoiled, relaxing and not at all busy.

The north-east Aegean islands mark the border between Greece and Turkey. They are less crowded than other island groups and safe anchorages are easier to find. Many of the bays and beaches are inaccessible except by sea. I visited three contrasting islands during my cruise: Samothraki, Limnos and Lesbos.

## SAMOTHRAKI

Samothraki is an awe-inspiring island, rich in history, and renowned for its mysterious gods and the evocative outline of Mount Saros. Remote and off the beaten track, it is neither modern nor cosmopolitan, but friendly, peaceful and secluded. Package tours don't reach this far-flung little island and trips here involve a convoluted ferry journey; cruising at the helm of your own boat will bring its recompense.

The island is dominated by the impressive form of Mount Saros. Its peak, Fengari, dwarfs the island at over 1,600m and, according to Homer's *The Iliad*, it was where Poseidon viewed the progress of the Trojan war. It became an important site in ancient times, its inhabitants conducting ceremonies that made the island sacred – its relative inaccessibility ensuring it remained shrouded in mystery.

The fishing village of Kamariotissa is the main port and an obvious base from which to

explore the island. On the approach you'll pass four white wind generators and, closer in, a tower on the north-west corner of the island when the village buildings come into view. The harbour, set in the shallow bay of Ak Akrotiri, has only recently been made secure and gives good holding in sand and shingle, though a strong south-westerly can make your stay uncomfortable. Mooring against the mole or quay is acceptable, but be prepared to make way for fishing boats.

The capital, Hora (also known as Samothraki), is a short (€4) taxi ride inland from the port and well worth a visit. Winding cobbled streets lead uphill past pretty stone-built, wisteria-strewn houses to give breathtaking views of the village and beyond; a real contemplation haven. It's also a good platform from which to wonder why every roof tile of every house is held down with rocks; a village clearly open to the elements and in need of a good roofer.







Previous pages: Myrina hatboat on Limnos - the view after the climb. This photo: the white church at Myrina.

FOOD AND DRINK

Greek food does not have the greatest of gourmet reputations. It is simply cooked and presented, and sometimes limited in choice. However, it is always fresh and appetising. Until recently food was served lukewarm, the Greeks believing that hot food is not particularly good for you (if you want your food hot, ask for it *zesto*). Eating out is a sociable and leisurely occasion and it is quite acceptable to occupy your table for most of the evening.

There are different types of eating establishments. *Tavernas* are the best known; informal, family-run places where you may be invited into the kitchen to point at what you want. *Estiatoria* are the more expensive conventional restaurants with printed menus translated into English. *Psistarias* specialise in grills and spit roasts, while *mezedopolia* and *ouzeri* serve hors d'oeuvres or *meze* for sharing, which includes *taramasalata*, *tzaziki*, *dolmades* (stuffed vine leaves), *kalamari* (fried squid) and other local delicacies.

Main dishes include *souvlaki* (skewered pork or beef), *moussaka* (Greek-style shepherd's pie), *pastitsio* (baked cheese-topped macaroni), *stifado* (meat stew with onions) and *yemista* (stuffed tomatoes or green peppers). Fish and seafood are also available.

The local drink is *ouzo* - Lesvos *ouzo* is purported to be the best in the country. Greece used to be famous for its wines but good wine is in scarce supply from the mainland. A few to try are Rose Boutari, Tsantali and Makedonikos. *Retsina* - a resinated wine - is an acquired taste with a trademark astringency.

Kamariotissa wakes up at night, turning into a pleasantly lively and bustling place. Numerous *tavernas* and bars line the main street, while locals sell their wares of freshly picked grapes and newly harvested melons off the back of their pick-ups. English menus were a bit of a rarity but sketching a prawn on my paper tablecloth meant I had a fighting chance of getting what I wanted. One's artistic skills aside, if language proves to be a barrier the waiter will invite you to the kitchen and ask you to point at your preferred dish.

The Greeks often eat when drinking and you might find that your drink comes with a small plate of appetisers. I found this out when I took respite from the scorching August sun at one of the harbour *tavernas*. I must have mumbled my request for just a glass of water and was instead given a generous shot of *ouzo* and *meze*. I sampled it all but stopped at the little morsel left on my plate. I thought it looked like a small goat testicle (my reasoning being that kid goats, *katsikaki*, are a popular dish on the island) though thinking back, it was most likely a butter bean.

The Sanctuary of the Great Gods, 6km north-east of Kamariotissa, is being excavated and restored, and is a must-see while you're here. The small museum houses a number of artefacts excavated from the site, though the Winged Victory of Samothrace, probably its best known relic, is only a plastercast. The original was

removed by the French in 1863 and is exhibited in the Louvre.

Unspoilt and tranquil with pockets of charming villages, Samothraki is a true nature lover's haven. Forests thick with vegetation, hot springs and waterfalls give it an exotic feel and make up an impressive landscape supporting the rich and varied wildlife, which includes migrating birds, butterflies, turtles, and the odd rambling tortoise. With less than 3,000 people living on the island, it retains a dormant, peaceful allure. Catch it if you can.

LIMNOS

South-west of Samothraki is the volcanic island of Limnos. Attracting relatively few tourists to its shores due to its remoteness and basic ferry schedules, it lies adrift in the middle of the North Aegean between Mount Athos and Asia Minor.

It is a traditional island - agriculture and fishing take precedence over tourism in a landscape scattered with villages, cattle, sheep farms and cornfields. Tourists, however, are encouraged by its fine beaches. The climate is very dry compared to the other Aegean islands and although it suffers from strong winds, it hardly ever rains - water is pumped from deep springs. There are no high peaks and the island is gently undulating with low-lying vegetation.

Limnos has been famous since antiquity for its vineyards that produce fine whites, rosé and

*retsina*. Its historic role is as an army base and it still maintains a large garrison. Since the 1960s there have been numerous disputes between the Greek and Turkish governments, Turkey wanting demilitarisation.

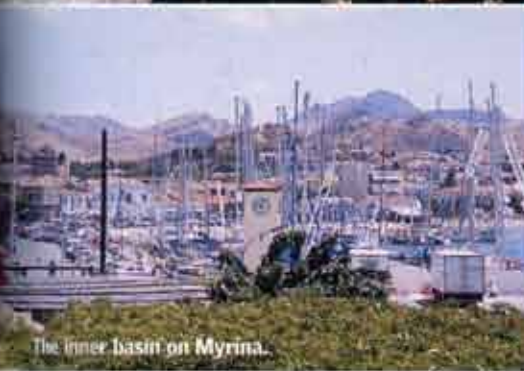
Myrina, the capital, is easy to spot on your approach, with the dominating castle and the white church on the outer breakwater. The castle divides the waterfront in two; the harbour is to the south near the commercial port, with *tavernas*, bars and a beach to the north.

The picturesque inner harbour is normally taken up with fishing boats but there is space and shelter for visitors on the outer quay. It's a fine base for exploring the excellent anchorages in the south, and facilities here are good with water and fuel readily available. Nearby you'll find banks, a chandlers, a post office and a laundrette. Kyda, the main thoroughfare, leads off into a myriad of little alleyways, and exploration reveals no shortage of *tavernas*, cafés and shops selling local produce.

Myrina's castle was built in the 1100s and is the largest fortress in the Aegean. It was once inhabited by the Turks and badly damaged by the Russian fleet in 1770 during a siege. Set on a steep, rocky peninsula, it is worth the slightly strenuous and stony climb to the top, though clearly not in flip-flops, obviously not in the midday sun, and definitely not without a bottle of water. However, if you do clamber up there you'll be treated to breathtaking views of the



Samothraki's Sanctuary of the Great Gods.



The inner basin on Myrina.

Set on a steep, rocky peninsula, Myrina's castle is worth the slightly strenuous and stony climb to the top, though clearly not in flip-flops, obviously not in the midday sun, and definitely not without a bottle of water. But if you do clamber up there you'll be rewarded with breathtaking views

Hora on Samothraki.



Myrina harbour.



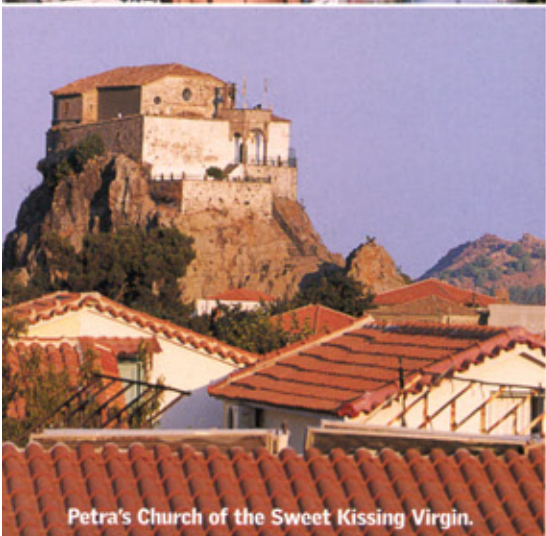
Boaters gather in Myrina.



The castle at Myrina on Limnos.







Petra's Church of the Sweet Kissing Virgin.



The view from the castle to Mithymna harbour.

The medieval castle stands impressively over the stone-built red-roofed houses set into the cliff. The cobbled streets converge into a small square and down to the harbour, where visiting boats moor against the outer quay



Houses beneath Mithymna castle cling to the Lesvos hillsides.

On the north side, Hephestia is notable as it was once the most important city on the island and takes its name from its protector, Hephaestus, the god of fire, who was banished to the island by Zeus. Built on a small and isolated peninsula, it survived over 2,000 years. Excavations have uncovered a sanctuary, cemetery and a temple dedicated to the god.

## LESVOS

Lesvos is one of the few Greek islands to hold on to its original architectural heritage. Its ancient history is visible everywhere, offering a wealth of galleries, museums and archaeological excavations to visit. The third-largest island in Greece, it is only a few miles from the Turkish coast and offers a good cruising destination with a number of sheltered natural harbours and isolated coves along its scenic coastline. The Gulf of Yera in the north and Gulf of Kalloni in the centre give the island its 'leaf like' shape and the temperate climate, natural springs and rivers help to maintain the island's lush appearance and support its 11 million olive trees.

The capital, Mytilini (also the name many Greeks use when referring to Lesvos), is built like an amphitheatre on top of the ruins of the old town and was once home to the famous Greek writers Sappho and Aesop. It has two harbours, north and south, linked by the main thoroughfare of Ermou. Passenger ferries dock at the southern harbour.

Visiting boats can moor in the inner harbour, alongside, stern or bows-to on the north or east side. There's good shelter, although mooring in the south-west corner will give respite from the strong southerlies. The large marina is set amidst a bustling town packed with shops, cafés, *tavernas* and flea markets. The labyrinth of lanes running off the main thoroughfare is worth getting acquainted with and you'll discover some of the many neoclassical mansions, mostly in need of repair. Its imposing castle, built in Byzantine times, is one of the largest preserved fortifications in Europe (open 8.30am-3pm).

## SAPPHIC ISLAND

Eresos, in western Lesvos, is said to be the birthplace of Sappho (around 630 BC), the female poet famous for speaking out for lesbian relationships. Married with one daughter, she wrote nine books of poems, chiefly marriage songs for the bride and groom at their wedding, love songs, and hymns to the gods. She lived in Mytilini where she founded a school that taught poetry and music. Her reputation was blackened by the supposedly lesbian relationships she had with some of her pupils – something which modern research has rejected. For nearly 1,000 years she was regarded as a goddess, Plato calling her his tenth muse. The legend is that she killed herself in true poetic style by jumping from the cliffs on the island of Levkas when she was spurned by her lover Phaon.

Everything is here for the visiting boater, from fuel tankers and hardware shops to cashpoints and a post office. There's a secondary commercial port and yacht harbour under construction with room for 200 boats.

We arrived during the Aegean Regatta in peak season so it was unusually busy, and even trying to get across the road proved a lengthy and nerve-jangling experience. It was a shock after the peace and tranquillity of the other islands but after a few days, I began to settle in to this lively harbour town. A posse of mangy hounds strut the streets and will befriend you given the slightest encouragement, following your every move. They clearly find the traffic fun and chase after the cars late into the evening, playing a bizarre game of dare.

The Lemon and Green Pepper (tel: +30 (0)2251 024 014) is a classy Italian restaurant on a corner of the harbour and stands out from the many eating establishments. The terrace offers great views of the harbour and the lively town beneath you. This idyllic setting was broken though by the wind, which came from nowhere and whipped up something of a mini hurricane, giving me a tousled look and stealing away some of my feta cheese. Alternatively, sit inside and order one of their mouthwatering steaks or enormous bowls of pasta.

Mithymna (also called Molyvos) on the north coast is the island's best-known resort and is also an artists' colony. Arriving by boat, you see a

medieval castle standing impressively over the stone-built red-roofed houses set into the cliff. The cobbled streets converge into a small square and down to the harbour, where the inner quay is filled with fishing boats, and the outer quay is for visitors. *Tavernas* line the quay and provide a picturesque spot for lunch, though some of these are pricey and pander to tourists: my eagerly awaited crab salad turned into a crabstick salad – not the same thing! The Panorama *taverna* up near the castle is a great spot for an outdoor lunch with wonderful views of Mithymna and Petra.

The staff at the port authority speak good English, and were friendly and helpful, offering to find us a taxi. My bag was fairly heavy and the taxi driver, while heaving the load into his boot, accidentally let off his fire-extinguisher with a frightening bang, covering us with a film of fine white dust, to the amusement of everyone else. Needless to say, the ride was free of charge.

Petra is a few miles south of Mithymna and is overlooked by Panagia Glykophilousa (Church of the Sweet Kissing Virgin). Built in 1747, it is perched on top of a rock 100ft (or 114 steps) above the ground. The village attracts the tourists in the summer, and the waterfront buzzes with restaurants and shops. There is a quayside on the north side of the bay but it is sufficiently far away from the main part of town to put you off staying there. It is relatively deserted apart from a few fishing boats.

The heart of the village is quieter and remains traditional and unspoilt. Narrow cobbled streets lead you to out-of-the-way *tavernas* and past villagers chatting on their doorsteps well into the evening. You might be lucky enough to find O'Rigas (tel: +30 (0)2253 041 405), a friendly family-run kitchen-type *taverna* and the oldest in Petra. Pick from the selection of the evening dishes on view in the kitchen, freshly made that day. Your choice will be warmed in the microwave, but served in an idyllic setting, washed down by a carafe of wine.

The hot springs in Eftalou (4km outside of Mithymna) are worth a trip. Set on a pebbly but secluded beach, the radioactive springs (housed in an igloo-type building) are recommended for their therapeutic and healing properties. There are changing facilities and lockers, and you'll be advised to alternate hot dips in the spring with nipple-firming plunges in the sea. It's open to the public from 0800-1400 and 1600-2000, and costs €3.50 for 45 minutes (tel: +30 (0)2253 071 245). It made me feel like a new woman, willing to sit astride my hired moped once more.

Plomari, Lesvos' second-largest town, is the centre of the island's *ouzo* industry and offers great hiking through its olive trails. It also has a good-sized harbour with numerous *tavernas* and shopping nearby. Sigri, at the western tip of Lesvos, has a pretty fishing port and a good beach. Not far from here is the Petrified Forest, dating back 15 million years. **MBY**



Inside the Church of the Sweet Kissing Virgin.



THREE ISLANDS NAVIGATOR



SAMOTHRAKI

For general information about the island, including details on ferry and bus timetables, log on to [www.samothraki.com](http://www.samothraki.com).  
Port Police/Port Authority – Tel: +30 (0)2251 041 305.  
Water, provisions and fuel deliverable.  
There is no airport but daily ferry connections with Alexandroupolis, and weekly crossings from Kavala, Limnos and Lesvos in the peak season.  
Ferry/hydrofoil tickets – kiosk opposite pier. Tel: +30 (0)2551 041 411/041 505. Fax: +30 (0)2551 041 363.  
Bus to Hora from Kamariotissa.  
Car and jeep hire from Niki Tours – Tel: +30 (0)2251 041 465.  
Taxis – Tel: +30 (0)2551 041733/041341/041077.

Accommodation

Hotel Electra is a spotless family-run hotel (young son speaks English). Ten-minute taxi ride from port. Grapevine-covered patio looks out on to well-tended gardens and fantastic views of Mount Saros from behind the hotel.  
Tel: +30 (0)2251 098 343.

Places to eat

Choice of *tavernas* along Kamariotissa's main street, serving fresh fish, roast wild goat and seafood.

Visit if you can

Sanctuary of the Great Gods. Free admission.  
Open 8.30am-8.30pm, Tue-Sun.  
The site's museum (tel: +30 (0)2551 041 474) charges a small fee and all exhibits have an English translation.  
Take the 45-minute walk along the Foniass river near Loutra. It'll lead you to the Vathres (rock pools) and 12m high waterfall.

KNOW YOUR WIND

*Meltemi* is the Greek and Turkish name for the etesian (*etesios* meaning annual) wind, which blows steadily from north and north-west across the Aegean, bringing cold continental air and clear skies in June, reaching full strength in July and August, and dying off at the beginning of October. In the northern Aegean the *meltemi* blows from the north-east, in the middle Aegean from the north, and in the southern Aegean from the north-west. It blows less strongly in the north and south than in the central regions. Caused by high pressure over the Balkans and south-east Europe, a *meltemi* can reach Force 7-8. They are often accompanied by a noticeable drop in humidity, better visibility and increased atmospheric pressure.



LIMNOS

Port Police/Port Authority – Tel: +30 (0)2254 022 225.  
Water on the quay, fuel deliverable.  
Get there by plane from Athens, Lesvos and Thessaloniki:  
Olympic Airways – Tel: +30 (0)2254 022 078.  
Reservations – Tel: +30 (0)210 9666 666.  
Website: [www.olympic-airways.gr](http://www.olympic-airways.gr)  
Tourist office – Tel: +30 (0)2254 026 020.  
By ferry from Piraeus, Rafina or Thessaloniki (high season).  
Ferry and hydrofoil tickets from Myrina Tourist & Travel Agency – Tel: +30 (0)2254 022 460.  
Email: [root@mirina.lim.forthnet.gr](mailto:root@mirina.lim.forthnet.gr)  
Myrina Rent-a-Car – Tel: +30 (0)2254 024 476 (on Kyda near the waterfront). Taxis – Tel: +30 (0)2254 023 033.

A place to eat

Taverna Glaros at the end of the quay serves wonderful seafood and fish with a harbourside view –  
Tel: +30 (0)2254 024 069.

Accommodation

Diamantidis Hotel – Tel: +30 (0)2254 022 397.  
A ten-minute walk inland from Myrina town on the main road, it is one of the island's best hotels.

Where am I?



**BOOKS! CHARTS! LOTS OF THEM!**  
To order all your maritime books and charts, call: +44 (0)23 8033 3051 or buy on line at: [www.ybw-books.com](http://www.ybw-books.com)



LESVOS

Mytilini Port Authority – Tel: +30 (0)2251 047 888.  
Port Police – Tel: +30 (0)2251 028 827.  
Fuel from BP harbour truck – Tel: +30 (0)2251 040 653 (call two days in advance). Water by arrangement with "the water man". Lift-outs in a yard north of the castle.  
Tourist office open 8.00am-2.30pm Sunday to Friday – Tel: +30 (0)2251 042 511.  
Car hire from Hertz – Tel: +30 (0)2251 042 576.  
Get there by plane from Athens and Limnos (Lesvos is referred to as Mytilini on airport schedules):  
Olympic Airways office – Tel: +30 (0)2251 028 659.  
Reservations – Tel: +30 (0)210 9666 666.  
Website: [www.olympic-airways.gr](http://www.olympic-airways.gr)  
Mithymna Port Authority – Tel: +30 (0)2253 071 307.  
Tourist Office – Tel: +30 (0)2251 042 511/042 513. Water is available on the quay with good shopping for provisions.

Locals in Mytilini

The Hotspot Bar (tel: +30 (0)2251 22200) on the east side of the harbour is a friendly spot with good music. It's a good place to be at sunset and for watching harbour goings-on, and it was on one of these coffee mornings that the friendly bar staff introduced me to Stelios Braxtos. A very handy man to know, he has plenty of local knowledge and can help with general on-board repairs. If he's not at Hotspot, he'll probably be on his boat *Vida* – "A sailing boat," he said, apologetically.

Milton, from Enjoy Moto Rental, will talk and entertain you for as long as your day allows, and his firm Enjoy Moto Rental (just behind the Hotspot Bar) will help you find a mean moped. Scootering around Lesvos, or indeed any unfamiliar island, is bit hair-raising as cars tailgate you and steep drops suddenly appear. Interestingly, the police like to see the driver wearing a crash helmet, while passengers are excused. But hiring a moped or car is a great way of seeing what the rest of an island has to offer.

BOOKS AND PILOTS

*Greek Waters Pilot Guide* by Rod Heikell. Published by Imray at £35. An essential guide for planning a cruise in the region, full of sound advice and solid facts. To order charts and publications from Imray telephone: +44 (0)1480 462 114. Website: [www.imray.com](http://www.imray.com)  
*Greek Islands* published by Lonely Planet at £11.99 – the perfect island-hopping companion.  
A useful aid is the Greek National Tourism Organisation – Tel: +44 (0)20 7495 9300. Email: [info@gnto.co.uk](mailto:info@gnto.co.uk)  
Website: [www.gnto.gr](http://www.gnto.gr)