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Greece's last island paradise?

The very isolation that has hindered Arkoi's growth has saved it from the fate of other, more popular Greek islands that have been spoiled by tourism.



By Cathryn Drake

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I first landed on Arkoi a few years ago by chance while seeking an escape from the August crowds on Samos, another Greek island in the eastern Aegean Sea. There happened to be a boat headed there one morning – a relatively infrequent occurrence, even in summer – so I jumped at the opportunity.

While Samos is teeming with commerce and pleasure seekers, the tranquil and bucolic Dodecanese gem (population: 35 people, 450 goats) calls to mind a mythical desert isle – a rugged landscape mantled by brush and wild olive trees stunted by the wind, hidden beaches shaded by tamarisk trees and a luminous teal sea. For me, it was an antidote to the hustle and noise of city life.

Yet one person's holiday paradise is another's home – with all the joys and complexities that come with it.

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I love my work, the animals and the land

While searching for the secluded Limnari Beach, I met Tasos Melianos on a road leading through his family's land, before taking the steep clamber down the island's rugged eastern slope to arrive at the sheltered cove. The 45-year-old shepherd has no desire to live elsewhere, although his partner left Arkoi because she could not bear the winters. Standing in the stark afternoon light on the island summit, he explained: "I love my work, the animals and the land."

As I took in the soaring panorama of a serene sea broken only by skerries surfacing like prehistoric creatures, I could understand why he stays. Days on Arkoi are marked by the melodic clanking of bells wafting down from the hills as the goatherds feed at the break of dawn and sundown. Shepherding is one of only three ways – along with fishing and tourism – residents survive economically on this tiny island of less than 7 sq km of land.



Arkoi resident Tasos Melianos has no desire to live elsewhere (Credit: Cathryn Drake)

While tourism is important to Arkoi's economy, it's limited to yachts docking for a few nights at the island's small marina in the sheltered Port Augusta, just off the public square, along with some 30

rooms available to rent. Historical sites of interest are a decaying Italian military prison built during Fascist rule under Mussolini, isolated in the arid no-man's-land of the northern half of the island, and the spectacular Votsi cave, about an hour's hike from the port, where islanders took refuge from the German bombardment in 1943.

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Seduced by my first visit, I returned to Arkoi this past October, as the last yachts of the season trickled by on their way to winter docks. I rented a room in a typical stone house overlooking the public square from Nikolas Kavouras, owner of [Taverna Nikolas](#), one of only three restaurants on the island, along with a couple of cafes. I had arrived just in time to taste a salad of seasonal wild greens topped with the shepherd's freshly made, soft *xynomizithra* cheese and plump capers picked in early spring on island cliffs by Kavouras' father and preserved in saltwater by his mother, Maria, who rules the kitchen.

As we chatted one afternoon on the taverna's rambling veranda, bathed in sunlight filtered through the bamboo awning, he offered me a local's perspective of life on the island: "Now it is beautiful and you have company, but when everything is closed and the wind starts blowing from the south and there are thunderstorms for one week and no boat, no doctors, no cigarettes, and the Internet and telephones go down, then we talk," said Kavouras, who now winters with his wife and kids in Poland.

Many families operate businesses during the tourist season but leave the island at summer's end mostly for more populated islands like neighbouring Patmos, a boat trip of about 30 minutes, where nearly all of Arkoi's inhabitants have relatives and there are more jobs and better educational facilities.



Arkoi's whitewashed schoolhouse has only one student (Credit: Cathryn Drake)

At the moment, Arkoi's whitewashed schoolhouse has only one student: 10-year-old Christos Kamposos, the youngest of five brothers. "Women come in the summer, but they don't want to stay here to live and raise families," said schoolteacher Maria Tsiatera. "I cannot believe that in 2019 there is no doctor or medicines in this place."

Arkoi's year-round population has dwindled by nearly half since 2001, and the only permanent residents under the age of 40 are the Kamposos brothers and their 20-year-old cousin, Maria Hatzí, who plans to move to the island of Leros once she weds her fisherman fiancé.

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This is like a land that belongs to another dimension

"This is like a land that belongs to another dimension," said Tsiatera. "Life here is so beautiful and pure – it's a good place to grow up, but how do you teach these kids to deal with the world outside of the island?"

Kamposos aspires to become a teacher but continuing his education beyond grade school means relocating to another island, something the family can hardly afford. As it stands, nobody who has been raised on Arkoi has ever completed high school.

“Kids don’t want to leave their families, so they quit school,” Kavouras explained. “I only finished primary school. I was always waiting for the lessons to finish for the day so I could go out in my boat and come back with 10 kilos of octopus.” The class went from 12 to six pupils while he was a young student.

Lack of opportunity has been a common theme for residents of Greek island communities for most of the last century. As the country’s economy recovered from the devastation of World War Two, once profitable activities such as mining and ceramics ceased or declined on the islands as industrial development became focused on the mainland. A large part of the country’s overall population was lost in the war, and many Greeks relocated to other countries as well as urban centres. Agriculture and fishing became less viable and attractive as professions with a rise in imports from the European Union and the emergence of tourism. Yet it is only since the 1960s that tourism has become a reliable, if seasonal, source of income.

“There is a serious demographic problem on the islands. We have societies that function only in summer as tourist destinations,” said Anna Mavroudi, president of the Federation of Cycladic Women’s Associations.

However, change is on the horizon. Since the **recent financial crisis** hit the country in 2010, causing widespread unemployment in its wake, a number of young Greeks have moved from urban areas to the islands to seek alternative modes of living.



Much of Arkoï’s tourism is limited to yachts docking for a few nights at its small marina (Credit: Cathryn Drake)

“Lots of people have gone back to live in their grandparents’ houses and are turning family-owned buildings into rentals, making honey and growing olives,” Mavroudi said. “Who wouldn’t want to live such a life? It’s paradise.”

When the company she worked for in Athens closed down, Athina Michalopoulou, who was born in the Peloponnese region of southern Greece, decided she had nothing to lose and landed in Arkoi, eventually opening Captain Stefanis, a welcoming cafe in an old stone building just off the ferry dock.

Mavroudi, who has moved to Kea, her own ancestral island, argues that more people would happily live on even the most isolated islands if provided with basic necessities such as health care, waste disposal, education and frequent transportation. Connectivity and communication with the rest of the world is particularly important, and effective use of technology can make a big difference for island communities. “Islands should be on the forefront of advancement in technology such as e-learning – these remote areas are where we need it most,” she added.

In an effort to change things, Tsiatera has arranged for English lessons via the internet and is lobbying the government to provide daily transport for kids to attend schools on Patmos, or on Lipsi, where she lives and returns to most weekends. “I think we will manage to get high school classes for Christos on Arkoi,” Tsiatera said. “The government is obliged to send teachers even for only one student. It is very simple: language, gym, math and physics.”

One night, while dining at the taverna **O Trypas** (The Hole), the island’s raucous nocturnal hangout, I asked Christos Melianos, an affable 65-year-old fisherman who grew up on Arkoi and has returned after raising a family on Lipsi, how island life had changed over the years. “We did not have water or electricity before, but life was better,” he said. “Now we are taxed the same as everyone in Athens but otherwise left to fend for ourselves living on a rock.”



On Arkoi, there is a strong sense of community (Credit: Cathryn Drake)

Yet there are benefits to being left alone. When Kavouras was a child, there were up to six police officers stationed on Arkoi, until the government decided there wasn't enough reason to support even one. "When the police were here, there were a lot of problems because people found reasons to complain: Why did your goat jump my fence and eat my grass? Let's go see what the police have to say," Kavouras said. "Since they left in 1982, everything is OK."

According to Angeliki Mitropoulou, a PhD candidate in island studies at the University of the Aegean, many academics and policymakers prefer to use the term *islandness* as an alternative to *insularity*, to emphasise the unique and often positive attributes of the distinct cultures of these physically isolated places. "The relationships between people living on islands do not follow the patterns of those in larger places, where there is anonymity and isolation," she said.

For many, including visitors like me, Arkoi's appeal lies precisely in its sense of remoteness and sheer lack of urgency to do much of anything. There are practically no motor vehicles on the island, with only a couple of roads to navigate. It took my dog and I at least an hour to hike the goat trails to the north side of the island for a swim in the crystalline water at the beach opposite the craggy Nisaki (literally "little island"), the only evidence of civilisation was an elegant wooden sailing yacht in the distance.

Most of all, on the island, there is a sense of community that is lacking in most urbanised places. Geographically cut off from the rest of the world, isolated by the sea and inclement weather, islanders

have to depend on one another and the resources at hand. When I was struck down with sunstroke the day after my trek, locals banded together to find remedies and send meals up to my room. Everyone knows everyone. In fact, the populace is like one big extended family, though it doesn't hurt that everyone is likely at least a distant cousin – people are identified by nicknames since so many share the same few surnames.

Everyone plays an essential role, or four. Take Lefteris “Katsavidis” (Screwdriver) Iliou, the island handyman, who has a fully equipped workshop with tools for every possible purpose, rents rooms, offers boat excursions and runs the electricity generator. As much as they talk about the difficulties of life here, it is apparent that the islanders have a sense of pride for the place.



The island of Arkoi is a tranquil and bucolic Dodecanese gem (Credit: Cathryn Drake)

My last morning on the island, as I sipped my coffee at the taverna and watched the day unfold on the public square, I noted how little had changed since my last visit a few years before. The island cats congregated around a boat just docked with fresh catch, waiting for their daily share while a fisherman carefully extracted an electric ray from the bright yellow nets and a couple of yachters looked on in fascination.

When the time came, Trypas (as Manolis Melianos, owner of the eponymous taverna, is called) threw my bag in his cargo trike and drove me to the dock to meet the ferry. The ship is the island's lifeline and its arrival is like a celebratory event, especially in winter when high seas prevent it from landing

regularly. People gathered to watch as sundry supplies were carried out and the girlfriend of one of the shepherds emerged for a weekend visit from Patmos.

Whether Arkoi develops to offer more opportunities for locals and sustains itself economically into the future remains to be seen. For now, though, it seems that the very isolation that has hindered its growth has saved it from the fate of other, more popular Greek islands that have been **spoiled by tourism**. And for many islanders, the benefits of living here far outweigh the hardships.

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