



An Island Apart

Karen Birch ventured across to Evia, Greece's
unknown island

Right A deserted stretch of beach



BIRCH & BOTSETOS



Top Churches nestle in clearings in the north
Right Home time for the goats in the south
Below Ag Ioannis Roussou
Top right Catching the sap
Below right Hillside hives

We were peering through the doorway of the Byzantine Church of Theotokou in Politika when our presence was noted. A little girl, spotting the camera in my hand, cried: "Look Pappou. The Church people."

The medieval building was a burned out shell. Plastic covered the window holes. A hinged metal gate firmly locked in place barred the entrance. Peering between the grills revealed nothing but a bare earth floor and a single wooden icon propped up against the rough stone wall. The acrid smell of smoke lingered.

Nearby an ancient square stone tower stood guard, a loose collection of boulders seemingly held together by the tangles of weeds that sprouted from between the stones. Starlings whirled around the roof in the fading evening light.

An elderly man clasping the hand of the young girl approached us respectfully. 'You are about the Church?' he enquired.

'No we are just visitors,' we replied.

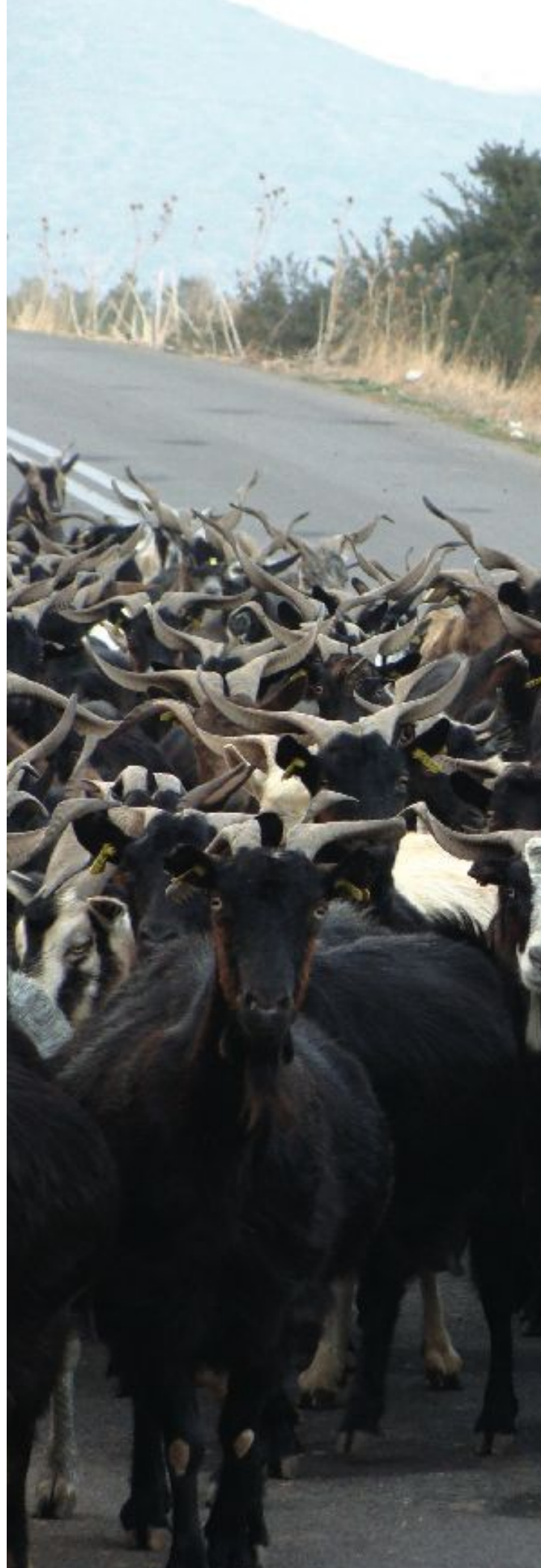
His face fell. The village had been waiting for months for officials to assess the damage to their church.

Recovering his manners, he introduced us to his niece, Kaliopé. Discovering that I was a journalist writing about the island for tourists he insisted we visit Prokopi.

The following day we followed his advice. The route through the north of the island climbs, bends and drops repeatedly following the geography of the ravines. Dense forests of pines and firs line the road. Occasional signposts at junctions hint at picturesque villages or monasteries hidden among the slopes.

We spot small black plastic bags fixed to the trunk of the trees collecting sap to make retsina. White, blue and yellow hives stand in clearings. The bees congregated in the hazy morning sun preparing for a busy day's work.

The church of Ag Ioannis Roussou (St John the Russian) sits in the centre of the village of Prokopi. Inside the atmosphere is thick with sorrow and incense. The faithful kiss the icons and shuffle toward the holy relic. The heavy silver casket has a glass lid and a black-clad girl sprays and rubs industriously to remove imprints of previous devotees. A delicate bundle of blackened bones rest at peace inside the box, with a gold mask covering the upper part of the Saint's face. A bony hand secures the folds of a gold trimmed blue robe.



“the hillsides are littered with ruined castles. Remnants of huge citadels built by the Byzantines, Franks and later the Venetians”



St John the Russian was a soldier in the Tsar's army. He was captured by the Turks and sold as a slave. Allowed a Christian burial by his owner, he was canonized after locals witnessed light shining from his grave

The casket accompanied the Greeks when they relocated from Cappadocia in the 1923 population exchange, and founded a new village on Evia.

Today, the villagers make a living from the visiting pilgrims. Shelves of pine honey, icons, mugs bearing transfers of the saint and plaster models of the church line the streets.

But the island is still relatively undiscovered by tourists. Most of the holidaymakers who do travel here head to the south of the island. Seasonal French tourists spend their holidays in and around Eretria, which boasts impressive ancient ruins, although the stretch of golden sand is probably the main draw.

Travelling down the island the rugged bleached grey hillsides are dotted with green shrubs and in some stretches blackened tree stumps bear witness to the small fires that broke out during the summer. Lake Distos, although it still appears on maps of the island, has almost disappeared.

At the narrowest part of the island, Styra sits on the western slopes of Mount Kiliosi. From here you can easily access both coasts – the more sheltered Evoikos Gulf on the west and the exposed Aegean Sea on the east.

The hillsides are littered with ruined castles. Remnants of huge citadels built by the Byzantines, Franks and later the Venetians.

Mount Ochi looms. The summit reaches 1,398 m above sea level. Its name is derived from the ancient word *oexo*, meaning to ride, and refers to the legendary coupling of Zeus and Hera on the summit of the mountain.

Rectangular stone lairs, known as dragon houses, are scattered on its heights. Once thought occupied by fire breathing beasts, the buildings are more likely to have had a religious significance. The most noteworthy on the slopes of Mount Ochi may have been a sanctuary to Hera and built to celebrate her sacred marriage to Zeus.

The town of Karystos at the southern tip of the island is noted for its green cipollino marble quarries, which provided the >>





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its tiny tavernas and coffee shops.

Mary Dallas works for UK owned property agency, Under the Sun. She has been living locally since 2002. She said: “This is a place where the cycle of life continues. Old fashioned Greece. Everything follows a pattern. The traditions are kept alive. Everything is tied to the church calendar.”

Despite the emphasis on tradition, new arrivals looking to set up home are welcomed to the village. Germans, Americans, British and Greeks all meet for morning coffee at Nea Styra, or for fresh fish at Tassoulas taverna on the harbour at Aghios Dimitrios.

Closer to the capital, people are buying up land in the fertile plains of Mitikas, and building their own homes. Striking new architect-designed buildings sit on plots of land surrounded by vines that glow rust coloured in the evening sun.

Andrew Blackler initially moved to the area to supervise the build of his own house. But today oversees numerous building projects his company, Evia Villas, has underway.

He has seen a marked increase in interest in the island from property investors, but believes the island is large enough to absorb the newcomers. “Without the suspension bridge the whole area would have been stifled. But the island is so huge that whoever comes in just gets lost.”

He chose the area believing it offered the perfect balance for an outdoors lifestyle. “Life here is as much about the mountains as it is about the beaches. You can get up and walk up the mountain before breakfast. You are just 3km from the sea for your afternoon swim and there are plenty of places to moor a boat. But its all still within easy reach of town and Athens for culture.”

The one desire that many of the new arrivals have in common is to find a retirement spot where they can absorb themselves in to the local community. So, while our arrival in Politika may not have heralded the long-awaited funds for the refurbishment of the church, we leave the island hoping the steady stream of new inhabitants will help regenerate communities and conserve the island’s heritage. Our thoughts are echoed by the Mayor of Styra. When asked what he thought about the influx of visitors from abroad, he replied: “We want our village to live.” ☰



Above left Views across the north of the island
Above right Catching lunch and drying washing in Aghios Dimitrios

stone for decorative masonry throughout Greece. Once referred to in Homer’s Iliad, the town is now a popular summer destination for Greek holidaymakers especially during the annual wine festival.

But, like the first inhabitants of Evia who arrived with the relics of their saint to begin a new life on this ancient island, more and more visitors from abroad are discovering the charms of a more permanent base on this ancient island.

Improved transport links have helped attract foreign investors, seeking a dream home in Greece and a more traditional way of life. While the narrow bridge which crosses the channel at Halkida was once its only connection with the mainland, an impressive modern suspension bridge has opened up the island. This, and the introduction of high-speed trains from Athens and the airport is encouraging second home buyers.

On Friday nights the capital Halkida is alive and buzzing. Weekenders fill the trendy waterfront cafes. Families stroll up and down the tree lined walkways, greeting friends.

And in the south of the island traditional farming villages are starting to attract property investors. Incomers are reinvigorating tiny hamlets like old Zarahes, where the ruins of old stone houses are being given new roofs and a second chance of life.

In Mesochoria, Styra and Zarakas, fantastic sea views are proving a draw for other buyers who want to live in a working village with



Essentials EVIA

GETTING THERE

Flights to Athens airport. The island is linked to the mainland via a road bridge.

Buses run regularly from the **Liosion Bus Station** in Athens (via Kato Patissia) to Halkida.

Rail links from **Larisis Station** to Halkida. Lines closed until early 2009. Work is underway on high-speed links from Athens. A direct link is being added from the airport

Ferry connections to the island. Rafina to Marmari. .Aghia Marina to Nea Styra. Oropos to

Eretria. Arkitsa to Edipsos. Agioskambos to Glyfa.

PROPERTY SEARCH

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