

SUMMER HOLIDAYS

CAST AWAY FOR KASTELLORIZO

by CONDÉ NAST TRAVELLER

16 May 2014



KASTELLORIZO, GREECE

An afterthought on the map of Greece, the far-flung island of Kastellorizo has carved out its own identity. Timothy O'Grady fulfils a 20-year ambition to go there and discovers a wild and sophisticated spot that has inspired Pink Floyd and become an escape for an arty crew. Photographs by Oliver Pilcher.

Marie Rivalant first saw Kastellorizo from a boat that was taking her from Kas on the Anatolian coast. She was 18 and on a summer



at it nevertheless - this small rocky form rising from the sea, called by some the last stop in Europe, just two miles off the southern Turkish coast but so far from the rest of Greece. On Greek maps it is usually placed in its own box.

Pictured: Kastellorizo harbour

CREDIT: OLIVER PILCHER



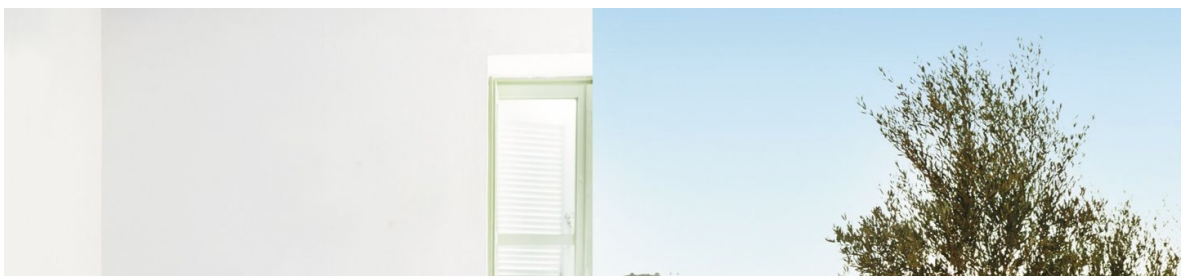
KAS IN KASTELLORIZO, GREECE

She got to the island another summer on a ferry ticket given away for free just to encourage people to visit it. She returned year after year, on one occasion pregnant, then with her three children, staying in a small guesthouse and swimming with them out of the harbour to a little beach that looked towards the white houses of Kas.

They ate feta and tomatoes and fish fresh from the sea and walked the goat tracks of Kastellorizo's hinterland. It seemed a natural life, an escape, an antidote to Paris, where by then she was working as an architect. Somehow it was made more precious by the difficulty of getting to it. You felt that you had earned the sensation it gave you.

Pictured: a view towards Kas

CREDIT: OLIVER PILCHER





WHERE TO STAY IN KASTELLORIZO, GREECE

In 2001 an islander who liked her family and was feeling old and frail offered her a long lease on a waterfront mansion being run as a small pensione called Mediterraneo. She thought of having it as a summer house but instead took the lease and left the running of it to the woman who had been in charge before. She kept coming back, putting icons and paintings and vibrant colours in the rooms, creating lounging areas and vantage points for views, turning the whole ground level into a single suite with grand stone arches, shuttered French doors opening to the bay and a blood-red bathroom.

She offered breakfasts of nuts and fruits and fresh bread and honey and yogurt on a long table under a canopy on a terrace looking towards the archipelago beyond. Guests kept returning, many of them Italians drawn at first by a famous war-time film also called *Mediterraneo* which was shot in the house next door, but later by the simple beauty and peace of the place. Life in Paris had grown stagnant for Marie, while the island called. Then she fell in love with Yórgos Lazarakis, who runs a harbour-front taverna, and married him. She designed a house for them on a high ridge between an old windmill and the knights' castle from which they can see sunrise and sunset and the two harbours. The place she had looked at with unexpected curiosity from the railing of a boat 30 years ago is now her home.

Pictured: a bedroom and terrace at Mediterraneo

CREDIT: OLIVER PILCHER



THE REMOTE GREEK ISLAND OF KASTELLORIZO

[Greek islands](#), in spite of a continuity of sea and landscape, language and culture, can be surprisingly distinct in character. An inhabitant of one can speak of those on the next as a Nebraskan might speak of a Mongolian. Kastellorizo, officially known as Megisti (or 'Biggest', being the largest island in the archipelago), takes its tone from its remoteness and also from a history of both bourgeois prosperity and violent calamity.

Its remoteness makes its existence as a part of Greece a prolonged act of defiance against the odds. Its prosperity came from its position on trade routes and a harbour said to be the best between Beirut and Piraeus. Ship owners grew rich. Fine houses were built. The supporting professions tended more towards clerks, tailors and merchants than goatherds or fishermen. Women wore mantillas, pillbox hats and furs. The land is unusually barren, even for Greece, and life is concentrated in the village, so that even now, with its miniscule population, it feels oddly urban. You don't see those bristled mountain men with knee-high boots and pistols in their waistbands that you do on Crete. The people of Kastellorizo wouldn't, for the most part, look out of place in Antwerp.

Pictured: the sitting room and exterior of Marie Rivalant's home

CREDIT: OLIVER PILCHER



THE HISTORY OF KASTELLORIZO, GREECE

The catastrophes were conquest, war and an earthquake in 1926. Little Kastellorizo was occupied by Venetians, Turks, French, Italians and English. German warplanes bombed it, and when Allied forces were leaving, an arsenal and a fuel tank went up, destroying half the houses. There was a mass evacuation to Palestine, and the later trip back home, fraught with drownings, illnesses and other miseries, could put you in mind of the devastating migrations of displaced American-Indian tribes.

A population of around 9,000 dropped to 200. Marie Rivalant's mother-in-law, one of 16 children, is the only one in her family still living on the island. A hillside once swarming with houses is now mainly pine scrub. Walks bring you past old bunkers and

Pictured: the harbour at Kastellorizo, with the cliff steps visible in the rockface

CREDIT: OLIVER PILCHER



+

KASTELLORIZO, GREECE

Even now, it is fragile. Gas and oil finds off Cyprus and geopolitics involving pipelines, exclusive economic zones, Israel, Turkey and the European Union have left the island's fate open to question. This is not to say that the mood is jittery. Visitors, yachts and contraband move with varying degrees of freedom between here and Kas. The pace is slow, even sleepy, just rising a few decibels in the evening when the lights come on and talk billows lightly upwards from the taverna tables.

Up the hill, though, is a sizeable military base. You don't go too long without seeing a Greek soldier. Turkish military jets occasionally make intimidating passes. I heard one myself, I think, lying in bed in the Mediterraneo suite. The earth shook and the sound was like a screaming buzz saw at your ear, followed by rolling thunder.

Pictured: a Kastellorizo villager

CREDIT: OLIVER PILCHER





WHEN TO GO TO KASTELLORIZO, GREECE

I'd long wanted to go to Kastellorizo. A New York publisher told me about it 20 years ago, then the poet Brian Patten. I trusted the tastes of both. I went, finally, for a week in mid-June, with the days bright and not too hot, the water stunningly clear and tranquil before the later summer African winds, multi-coloured fish and sea turtles drifting on the currents and the big houses all around the bay freshly painted in yellows, greens, blues and russet-red.

There is an instantly captivating drama that comes from sailing into the harbour, but one that produces more a sense of endearment than the awe you feel going through the caldera of Santorini. Everything is right there in front of you: churches, tavernas and houses, dignified, inviting and so far from everything else, with nothing garish or defensive in sight. It is pretty and private and so small that from a distance you feel you could hold it in your hands.

Pictured: a vintage motorbike in Kastellorizo village, and the interior of holiday rental Casa Marina

CREDIT: OLIVER PILCHER



PINK FLOYD IN KASTELLORIZO, GREECE



People come for the peace that somewhere so intimate and remote brings. That was the aim of an Italian psychotherapist in a room upstairs from mine. She read in the sun by the water's edge, swam a little, did some t'ai chi at dusk and dined slowly. That she then feels restored enough to face obdurate neuroses seems proven by the fact that she returns each year.

Australians come to see the land of their displaced forebears. Many others arrive on splendid yachts with high sails, stepping directly off their sterns into a taverna chair. Among them was Dave Gilmour of Pink Floyd, who wrote a Grammy-nominated song called 'Castellorizon' and put it on the album *On an Island*.

Pictured: the suite and a bedroom at Mediterraneo

CREDIT: OLIVER PILCHER



AGIOS GEORGIOS SWIMMING PLACE IN KASTELLORIZO

If people bestir themselves they take sea taxis to Agios Georgios, a swimming place with a taverna, or to Ro, where an old woman



You have to lie down in the boat to pass through, then you have the otherworldly experience of a dense and thrilling blueness in a



enough to touch. To swim there is how you'd imagine it would feel like to float in space.

Pictured: breakfast at Mediterraneo

CREDIT: OLIVER PILCHER



CHURCH OF AGIOS IN KASTELLORIZO, GREECE

The village might have felt constricting after a few days had I not begun to take long, early-evening walks, the first up 400 white-painted steps that rise, sometimes precipitously, up a cliff behind the village and leave you on a plateau with purple flowers, a couple of unexpected grain fields, goats both wild and with tinkling bells and an abandoned monastery (currently being restored). You feel suddenly delivered into the wild, and open and raw from the compactness and gentility of the village, with rising smells of herbs, caressing breezes and a gold light making the sea and distant islands seem more spirit than matter.

I'd heard of another walk out to the Church of Agios Stefanos, solitary on the northern headland. But before I finally found it, I took a wrong turn behind the Mediterraneo and came across a sculptor in bare feet and shorts with an Old Testament beard, squatting down and hammering at some large rocks embedded in a rise of land. His name was Alesio, he said; he lived in a tent and was sculpting his own homage to Homer, one rock for each book, for himself and anyone else who cared to look. He'd once sculpted in New Mexico too, he said. He began again to hammer. I couldn't recall ever having had such an encounter. I thought he wouldn't blend in so easily in Antwerp, but then I saw him walking into town one night with long strides, creased trousers and a silk shirt, like a boulevardier.

Pictured: Casa Marina, designed by Marie Rivalant

CREDIT: OLIVER PILCHER





THE HARBOUR OF KASTELLORIZO, GREECE

Before I left, I asked Marie Rivalant what it was about Kastellorizo that had taken her from Paris. 'It wasn't the buildings. The neoclassical doesn't appeal to me. Nor even the people, though I admire the piratical nature you find in some of them. There's my husband, of course, but if you ask me what drew me in the beginning, I would say it's due to the drama of being at the end of Europe, the amphitheatre of the harbour facing the balcony of the Turkish coast, the interplay of sea and light and land in the archipelago. It's very beautiful. After 30 years, it's still fresh, still exciting.'

Pictured: Villa Zoi, which visitors can rent, and squids hanging to dry

CREDIT: OLIVER PILCHER



HOTELS AND RESTAURANTS IN KASTELLORIZO, GREECE

WHERE TO STAY

The finest room for rent on Kastellorizo is the suite at [Mediterraneo](#) (+30 22 4604 9007; doubles from about £60). It's natural and spacious, with sculptures and a large drawing inspired by TS Eliot, and you can dive into the sea from your terrace.

The other less expensive rooms have a kind of citrus freshness to them. If you want to cater for yourself three-bedroom **Casa Marina** and two-bedroom **Villa Zoi** can be rented through the hotel (each costs about £205 per night).

Karnayo (+30 22 4604 9266; info@karnayo.gr; from about £35 per night) is a homely apartment with wooden floors in a restored townhouse back from the harbour.

WHERE TO EAT

Some of the island's fishermen own restaurants, and what they don't use of their catch themselves they sell to other chefs. I had delicate, fresh, lightly grilled swordfish and red snapper at **Lazarakis** (+30 22 4604 9370) by the bougainvillea at the centre of the harbour. It was brought to the table by Marie Rivalant's husband Yórgos.

The Olive Garden (+30 22 4604 9109), by the tourist office, has a peaceful atmosphere away from the harbour-front traffic.

The owner of **Old Time** (no phone) made a delicious octopus stew and was planning to roast a goat for 12 hours on the following Sunday, if one could be caught the day before.

GETTING THERE

[Thomas Cook](#) flies to Rhodes from several UK airports. Ferries run to Kastellorizo from Rhodes but schedules change seasonally.

Published in *Condé Nast Traveller* May 2014.

CREDIT: MARIKO JESSE

SUMMER HOLIDAYS BEACHES SPRING SUN GREEK ISLANDS

SHARE THIS ARTICLE



RECOMMENDED

ISLANDS

Island-hopping in the Philippines

ISLANDS

The best islands in the world



PLACES TO STAY

The South-East Asian islands on our radar this year

COMPETITIONS

Win a holiday to Montenegro

[Privacy policy and cookie statement](#)

[Code of Conduct](#)

[Terms & conditions](#)

[Classified](#)

[Careers](#)

[Contact](#)



