

# Stairway to (almost) heaven

Karen Reyment basks in the beauty of the Greek island of Santorini but finds appearances, occasionally, can be deceiving

I am awestruck. Majestic cliffs stretch skyward from the southern Aegean Sea as we sail into Santorini's caldera. The cliffs are streaked with Earth's coloured lines of time, exposed after volcanic eruptions around 1500BC, which sank the centre of the island and created the caldera, curved like a giant amphitheatre. We join the gaggle of tourists making their way from Athinios port (by way of bus, taxi or pre-arranged transfer), through a landscape so dry it may not have been quenched since the dawn of time, to townships of Fira, Imerovigli and Oia, which sit precariously atop cliffs on the world's most spectacular viewing platform.

Santorini's white-washed townships are blanketed in beauty. All are host to at least one of the postcard perfect churches, crowned with the much photographed blue cupola. Tiny Imerovigli sits between Fira and Oia and is home to Andromeda Villas, which are to be our home for four nights. The villas tumble down the cliff face, their stark white walls anchoring

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them to the land, a visually serene slice of heaven. But appearances can be deceiving even in this slice of paradise and, even after booking months ahead with a request for a water view, our two-bedroom suite comes minus the uninterrupted view of the caldera... not happy! Instead I spend my stay marinating in cigarette smoke from the bar that is too close to my suite for comfort, while repeated requests to the reception staff for help, a room change or even a bath plug are futile. Apparently these things are too minor to warrant

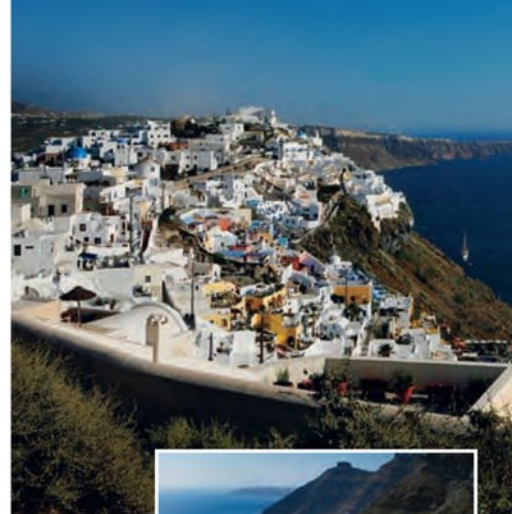
their attention. The Andromeda Villas are clean and, in the main, well-appointed, so perhaps we are unlucky to score a suite that sucks. Fortunately the outdoors more than make up for it and we spend a good deal of our time at the Villas drowning our sorrows by the pool, sipping the traditional Greek *frappe* (iced coffee), assisted expertly by much more friendly bar staff.

And there's plenty of walking to do. For example, the route along the volcano rim from Fira to Oia is accompanied by views of the Aegean that stretch as far as the eye can see. Or visit the museums displaying art, sculpture, inscriptions and pottery which date back thousands of years, or archaeological sites, or wineries, or the deckchair-lined red and black sand beaches, or venture further to the neighbouring Cyclades islands.

Oia is the highest town on Santorini, populated with local artisans, and it is reputedly the best place in the world to view sunset. Believe it! It pays to claim a vantage point early as it seems the entire population arrives to view the sun's descent, and Oia deservedly lives up to its reputation. At Oia's bus-stop an understated take-away shop serves the most delightful gyros, the Greek version of street food, consisting of fresh pita-bread stuffed full of meat, tomato, red onion, potato chips, and lashings of tzatziki – a belly full of happiness for only €2, that you would be foolish to miss.

The largest town and central hub for buses connecting the island's townships is Fira. Buses run on a very relaxed Greek timetable and are crammed full during summer months. Correct change for the fare will avoid a vigorous berating from the sometimes cranky drivers, but it's all part of the Santorini charm.

Fira bustles with tourists and has a blinding array of jewellery stores on Ypapantis, also known as Gold Street. Store owners lie in wait for cashed-up



tourists searching for all that glitters. The maze of cobbled pedestrian streets fills with interloping cruise-ship visitors by day; they are on tight shopping schedules before their departure and will take you down if you get in their way. Give way to these enthusiastic shoppers in the interests of self-preservation.

There are about 600 stairs which descend from Fira to the old port of Fira Skala, aromatically encrusted with donkey droppings, and there are three ways to tackle the journey: by cable-car; on foot; or on the famous Santorini donkeys. I suggest taking the downward journey on foot (presuming you have left the high-heels in the suitcase), but before you begin your pilgrimage, haggle the

price of your donkey ride back (I paid €12 for three people) so you won't be stranded at the bottom of the stairs. Six hundred stairs quickly lose appeal when you have to climb them, no matter how beautiful the view. Santorini is an island of challenging terrain making it uniquely picturesque but it's not for the step-phobic.

Terraced into Fira's cliff-face, plumb centre of the caldera, is Archipelagos Restaurant, built in 1860. It comes recommended by locals for quality, service and uninterrupted sunset views, so reservations in advance are essential. Crescent-shaped pies of local goat-cheese are drizzled with tresses of golden honey and sesame seeds, utter perfection. As are

Santorini's townships sit precariously atop cliffs and it's a long climb to the top if you take the stairs

the chubby pretzel-shaped pastries filled with minced pork and cumin, served with the familiar garlic-laced tzatziki. Local specialties of white eggplant, fava, capers and tomatoes are integrated into the menu providing a feast of locally-grown produce. Santorini's fertile volcanic soils produce the grapes used for wine-making and local varieties stand proud on the Archipelagos wine list, worthy of sampling.

It quickly becomes our daily ritual to sip Vinsanto dessert wine into the night as we say goodbye to each day in paradise while watching the sun's orange-orb fall into the sea.