

# AMORGOS POPULAR WITH TOURISTS

By Mansoor Ladha

She was just a 16-year-old high school student from the Greek island of Amorgos when she married a 25-year-old man from the same island. Like most young adventurous couples, Irene and Nicholas Giannakopoulos left their home for New Jersey, U.S. to start their new life. After doing odd jobs, they were able to start a small business renting rooms. “My father used to do that on the island so I had a good idea of what is involved,” Irene explained.

They were doing well in the U.S. but the urge to merge with their island home was too strong. They wanted to be with their friends, relatives and family. They returned to Amorgos in 1991 after 10 years in the U.S. While touring the island one day, they came across a mountain top with a splendid view. They bought the land to build their dream hotel in Amorgos, whose population today is 2,000.

They are proud owners of the only five-star family-owned hotel, Aegialis Hotel & Spa, overlooking the magnificent Bay of Aegiali. The hotel has 45 spacious rooms and 25 suites, including bridal and presidential suites — all with splendid views of the ocean — complimented by outdoor and indoor swimming pools and a pool bar. Guests are offered free and unlimited use of spa facilities, which includes sauna, hammam, Jacuzzi and fitness centre. Aegialis is built keeping in mind senior visitors, so the hotel is accessible everywhere, with an elevator to other areas. I had the privilege of attending an international conference attended by 100 delegates drawn from Greece, Italy, Spain, Turkey, Bulgaria, Serbia, Poland, Germany, Denmark, Sweden, Netherlands, Belgium, the UK, U.S., Canada, Australia.

Amorgos Island is one of the most charming islands of the Cyclades with two ports, Katapola and Aegialis, and is one of the most popular destinations in Greece during summer, swelling the island's population three times. The hotel plays its part in attracting tourists in summer and winter with particular interest for groups interested in yoga, hiking, painting, photography, cooking, culture etc. It provides

employment to local as well as employees from parts of Greece and beyond. Irene, who is a member of the Municipal Council and active in women's organization, has been aggressively promoting the island, which has outstanding natural beauty and numerous traditional and religious symbols appealing greatly to the tourists. It has inspired many of the world-famous artists like the French filmmaker Luc Besson who shot some scenes for his movie Big Blue in the clear blue waters of the island.

Amorgos, with its unique atmosphere that captivates all visitors, is inhabited by Greek Orthodox residents. The impressive monastery of Panagia Hozoviotissa is the symbol of the island, sitting on the side of a 300-metre cliff. It is visited by thousands of pilgrims throughout the year. Some of us on the trip were not brave enough to venture on 300 steps to reach the top of the monastery, but those who did praised the splendid architecture and view from the top.

The whole island resembles a paradise with whitewashed houses, splendid beaches with clear waters and imposing mountain backdrops. This wonderful island, famous for its picturesque architecture and secluded beaches, offers total privacy. Tourists can go to Amorgos either directly from Santorini and Mykonos islands or from Athens. We flew into Athens from London and went straight to the port to catch the Blue Star Ferry.

The huge modern and comfortable ferry, resembling an ocean liner, has restaurants and lounges. It left Athens at 5:30 p.m. and arrived in Amorgos at 1:30 a.m. We were advised to take a cabin instead of a seat usually found in a bus. Our cabin had two comfortable single beds and a private washroom, ensuring a pleasant journey despite the occasional rough sea. Other passengers had to satisfy themselves with whatever resting space they could get in an overcrowded ferry.

Amorgos has several tiny villages scattered all over the island but the capital is Chora, a medieval mountain village 400 metres above the sea surrounded by windmills. A walk in Chora and the other villages of Amorgos



© Ladha photo

PHOTOS BY MANSOOR LADHA

Amorgos is paradise for water enthusiasts and wealthy Athens residents who frequent the island.

portrays a typical Greek village with its narrow winding alleys, whitewashed houses, charming squares and a lot of beautiful churches. Tourists also have a choice of nice and cozy taverns, cafes and shops.

I met one of the outsiders who has made Amorgos their home. A former resident of London, England, Alison Womack and her husband visited the island on holidays and decided to live there. Although her husband is deceased, she has continued to live a comfortable life for the last nine years. This former Londoner is attracted by the island's nature and different lifestyle, “away from the rat race.”

“We would have liked to go to Africa and settle but decided against it due to the political instability,” she said. When asked how she passes her time, Alison said she “lets the day flow,” adding that she reads a lot, goes out with friends, uses the internet and watches TV.

Life in Amorgos is made more interesting by local residents who organize gatherings and festivals. Alison also likes to buy fresh vegetables and fish brought in by fishermen every day. She, however, hopes that her status doesn't change with Britain



© Ladha photo

A nun welcomes and answers questions from visitors in Amorgos.

leaving the European Union. “I think it would be fine to stay and I won't be thrown out or told to leave because I feel I am contributing something by paying taxes.”

Greece is dotted with islands which provide the main characteristic of Greece's morphology and an integral part of the country's culture and tradition.

Greece has 6,000 islands and islets scattered in the Aegean and Ionian Seas, of which only 227 islands are inhabited — a truly unique phenomenon for the European continent.

It is believed that the Greek Archipelago takes up 7,500 km of the country's total 16,000 km coastline, offering a highly diversified landscape with

beaches stretching over many kilometers, sheltered bays and coves, sandy beaches with sand-dunes, pebble beaches, coastal caves with steep rocks and dark colored sand typical of volcanic soil and coastal wetlands.

Despite the economic hardships and downturn that Greece has undergone in the last few years, this is one lucky country that will overcome the slump due to its natural beauty, hospitable people, good climate and tourism potential.

Mansoor Ladha is a Calgary-based journalist, travel writer and author of “A Portrait in Pluralism: Aga Khan's Shia Ismaili Muslims.” His new book, “Memoirs of a Muhindi,” is scheduled to be published in 2017.



Irene Giannakopoulos, (in black), owner of Aegialis Hotel & Spa, helps in decorating appetizers for her hotel guests.



© Ladha photo

Young dancers in traditional Greek attire entertain lunch time tourists.