

## An explosive attraction

By Paul Miles

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Nowhere could be more perfect than the breathtaking island of Santorini to fall in love," says the blurb on the back of a slushy romance novel. Spouting purple prose seems to be a side effect of visiting this Cycladic island with its spectacular volcanic landscape. A massive eruption some 3,500 years ago resulted in a crescent of craggy cliffs soaring to 300m above sea-level. Small, romantic, characterful hotels, some of them former homes, perch on the precipice with views across the sea-filled crater. A million-and-a-half tourists visit each year.

More than half of the visitors are cruise ship passengers who find its "idyllic shores" almost vertical. To reach the island capital of Fira, they must either climb hundreds of steps, be hassled by men with donkeys offering rides, or take the chair-lift.

As many as nine cruise ships visit daily. Earlier this year, one, the Sea Diamond, gashed open its side and sank in the caldera. All 1,500 passengers were rescued, except for two whose disappearance is still a mystery. When I visited in May, little boats were skimming rainbow slicks from the surface but none of the beach resorts has been affected.

Within the caldera, the sea is clean enough for hundreds of tourists to bathe during boat trips to the bleak, uninhabited island of Nea Kameni - the "new" active volcano that has been thrusting from the depths since the 1500BC eruption. It has a lunar-like landscape and is surrounded by warm, sulphurous springs bubbling into the sea.

Local tourism entrepreneur Loukas Pelekanos took my friend and me on a boat tour of Santorini and Nea Kameni. While the latter is a sombre study in monochrome, the cliffs of Santorini are an exquisite palette of colours - pinks, yellows, greens and reds. They are a sample of Earth's mineral stores spilled out in successive volcanic explosions over millennia.

We anchored in a deserted bay of Nea Kameni. While we swam, Loukas went fishing. He came back, not with fish, but a bag full of sea urchins and limpets he had prised from the rocks. We ate some of the limpets raw and then, while we squirmed, he performed his party-piece: popping a whole sea urchin in his mouth and crunching it up, spines and all.

But Loukas's diet isn't always so unusual. When he drove us back to our hotel in his car, he stopped to pick some greenery. "This is to feed my rabbits," he said. "I give them wild thyme for flavour."

We passed fields of tomatoes and vines that thrive on the volcanic soil. The tomatoes are sweet as is the best wine - such as vinsanto, made from assyrtiko grapes. The growing vines are woven into a basket shape, with the grapes inside, to protect them from the winds.

One winery, Santos, produces a wine they call Ageri, or "light wind". The wine is only passable but its label makes it sound like a character from another romance, *The Santorini Bride*. "Ageri embraces the freshness of the Cycladic summer winds . . . Wild and soft, likeable and nervous, made from the most aromatic varieties of the island, it includes all that is 'gone with the wind'."

One evening we drank and ate at a simple, breezy taverna called Aeolos. Here the house wine is unlabelled, rough-and-ready, made by a local farmer but the food is fresh and delicious, using local ingredients and oil from the owner's mainland olive grove.

We stayed nearby at a new property. Astarte Suites is a friendly, family-run nine-room hotel in the little-developed, windy south of the island near Akrotiri. From here, there are superb views to the village-topped cliffs.

In Fira, Imerovigli and the northernmost town of Ia, the caldera-view hotels on the cliff-side overlook one another. Astarte Suites, however, is in the middle of so-far-undeveloped countryside, surrounded by flowers. Location and the friendly staff are Astarte Suites' best attributes.

Owner Vasilias Moschotis explains that the area where they have built their hotel is called Alali. "It means 'no speak' because you look at the caldera and are speechless," she tells us with the help of the effervescent receptionist, Mina.

I learn more Greek. The word for volcano is ifestio, after Hephaestus, Greek god of blacksmiths. Every few decades, he shakes the earth as he bangs away in his smithy. In 1956 a large earthquake destroyed much of Santorini.

Not content with the god's rather mediocre performance of late, tourism authorities create an eruption each mid-summer by burning tyres and fireworks on the uninhabited outcrop of Nea Kameni. George Moschotis, manager of Astarte Suites, thinks they should go further and illuminate the volcano-island every night.

"There's nothing to see when it's dark. It's just black rock," he says. But with so many summer visitors, there should be enough "blazing passion" to light the night sky anyway.

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