THE ISLAND THAT STAYED WILD

There are no stag or hen dos, no airport, and the marina isn't lined with superyachts.

In late season, half the ferry routes stop running entirely. But that's exactly why Katy Dartford wanted to visit.



I reached Alonissos the slow way: by ferry, skimming across the Sporades from Skiathos, leaving behind the beach clubs and runway-short hops that funnel most travellers through the Aegean. After two hours I docked at the island's working port, Patitiri, and it was immediately clear that this was not your usual party island.

What it does have, however, is space: secluded coves, ancient trade routes, a pirate legacy, and a town flattened by an earthquake and rebuilt piece by piece. And stretching out to the north, one of the Mediterranean's most important marine sanctuaries.

So, naturally, my first day began on the water.

A BOAT TRIP AND A GLIMPSE INTO THE MARINE PARK

From Patitiri harbour, I joined a day trip on a boat with Captain Pakis, who has spent decades navigating these waters. His trips skirt the edges of the National Marine Park of Alonissos and the Northern Sporades, Greece's first marine park, established in 1992, and the largest protected marine area in Europe.

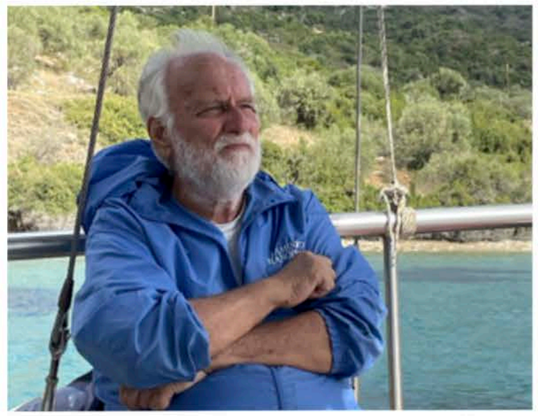
As we pulled away from the quay, Pakis pointed out islands and coves ahead of us, naming places that don't even make it onto the tourist maps. Some beaches are only accessible by boat, while others have been left deliberately untouched. On deck, he told us myths of how they came to be.

"Two giants were quarrelling on Mount Pelion," he said. "They began sporadically throwing rocks, and those rocks became the islands of the Sporades."

The engine settled into a steady rhythm as we chugged past uninhabited islands and sheer limestone coastlines. I began to doze off when Pakis pointed out a low, imposing island on the horizon; Piperi, the heart of the marine park, Zone A. It's completely off-limits to the public. Only researchers get in.

It's one of the most important breeding sites for Monachus Monachus, the Mediterranean monk seal, one of the world's rarest marine mammals. Cameras installed in the sea caves now record seal births. There are around 55 seals in the park, and eight new pups are born every year. We didn't spot any seals that day as sightings are rare, but their presence shaped everything around us. Boats must slow right down as they pass certain areas, anchoring is banned in sensitive zones, and fishing is tightly regulated.

Captain Pakis dropped anchor in a sheltered turquoise bay in Agios Petros on Kyra Panagia island. Behind us, the hillside was dense with scrub and pine, with glimpses of white rock breaking through. The only sound was people slipping into the sea and the rolling and scratching of pebbles as the gentle tide dragged them in and out.



SAINTS AT THE WATER'S EDGE

Later in the day, the boat edged closer to land again, this time on the opposite side of the island beneath a rocky cliff. Above us sat the Monastery of Kyra Panagia, a 16th-century post-Byzantine structure dedicated to the Virgin Mary and only reachable by sea. Kyra Panagia, the priest told us as he welcomed us into the courtyard shade, means Holy Lady.



Father Dimitrios explained that the island has been tied to the monastery of Mount Athos for over a thousand years, by a contract that has never been broken. Father Athanasios, founder of the Great Lavra monastery on Mount Athos, bought the island from two monk brothers for 70 gold pieces. The contract, written on goat skin and signed by three witnesses, still exists. "This island, nobody can sell it," Father Dimitrios said. "Always it will be connected with our monastery of Mount Athos."



Before we left he showed us the courtyard floor, an elaborate mosaic of coloured pebbles, purples, browns and blacks, laid by a single monk in the early 1900s. The monk, Leonios, had sealed a note inside the wall behind the cross. When restorers opened it decades later, they found his message still there: *My dear reader, my name is Leonios. Whoever finds this, please pray for me. And God will pay you for your work.*

As we cruised back to Patitiri, passing the rusting hull of the Kalamaki — an old supply barge beached on the shore of the island of Peristera, I could make sense of the setting. The same features that once lured in pirates now protect the seals.





BENEATH THE SURFACE: THE PERISTERA SHIPWRECK

Somewhere beneath the waterline we'd just been crossing was the most remarkable site of the island.

Just off Peristera, about 28 metres beneath the surface, lies a merchant ship from the 5th-century BC. It is one of the biggest yet found from that era. Dimitris Mavrikis, a local fisherman, stumbled upon it back in 1985, and his son, Kostas, remembers the moment vividly.

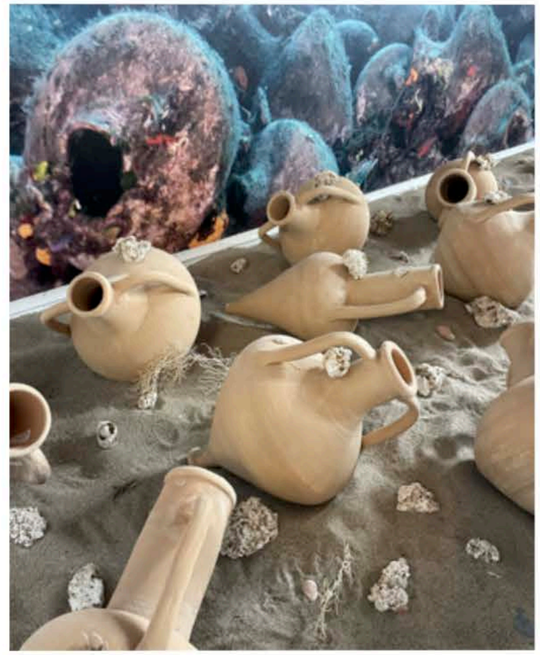
"My father told me to come with him to see something," he told me when I met him at his museum later. "When I was down there, I saw the wreck. I was so shocked by the size of it. It was a point for all my life, this day. I never forgot it."

Over the years, Kostas and his father declared ten other wrecks in these waters. None came close to this one. "The biggest in Greece, and the biggest in the world," he said. "A first-class wreck, there is nothing anywhere near as good as that." He paused. "I feel the wreck as my big brother."

The ship was huge for its time, around 25 metres long and carrying over 3,500 wine amphorae from ancient Mende in Chalkidiki and Peparethos, now Skopelos.

To load them, the crew used a simple technique: a plank of wood with holes, one amphora per hole, keeping the cargo locked in place. When the ship went down, whether from bad weather, pirates or fire, the wood rotted, but the amphorae stayed exactly where they'd been stacked, mapping the ghost of the ship that once carried them across nearly 300 square metres of seabed. It never made it to the Pontic coast.

The site is now officially Greece's first underwater museum.



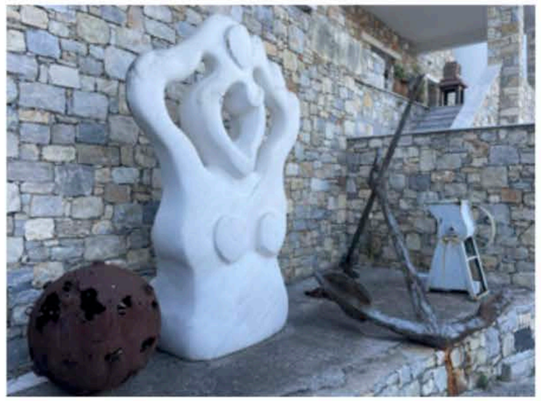
Anyone who's got a diving certification can visit during the summer months under proper supervision. If not, there's a 3D virtual dive in the old town of Hora, a chance to explore the wreck in digital form if you don't want to get in the water.

I didn't get a chance to dive Peristera itself, but instead went for a reef dive with Alonissos Sea Colours at a nearby spot. We descended a gentle wall to about 18 metres, a moray eel watching us from a crevice, sea urchins spiking out of the rock, and orange sponge flaring in the torchlight. And there, half-swallowed by the seabed, an amphora, neck and lip still intact, encrusted grey, as if it had just rolled off the cargo and never moved.

Even a short time in the water was enough to understand why this place deserves to be protected.









A MUSEUM BUILT FROM WHAT OTHERS THREW AWAY

Kostas showed me around his museum in Patitiri. The Alonissos Museum, or 'pirate museum', is crammed full of objects from the island's maritime past.

"Most of them I found in the rubbish," he told me. "After a while, people saw we were doing serious work, and they started bringing me stuff. My wife said: Please take it out of the house, we can't fit in anymore."

The pirates' room covers everything: how they cooked, what guns they carried, what they stole, what coins they used, and what clothes they wore. Coins turned up from the Ottoman, Arabic and even Portuguese empires.

"Every coin was welcomed," Kostas said. "If it were silver or gold, it would be more welcome. You could buy with Arab coins or Portuguese coins, whatever was available."

Kostas has also written several books about the island. One, The Escape, tells the story of locals who hid and saved 2,500 New Zealanders, Australians and British soldiers during the Second World War. He's hoping it makes it onto film one day.

PIRATES, EARTHQUAKES, AND A HILLTOP VILLAGE

The pirate legacy becomes apparent as you climb the hill to Hora and look around. Also known as the old town of Palia Alonissos, it sits at about 200 metres above sea level, its streets winding round a medieval fortress called the Castro.

In 1538, Barbarossa came through. "Barbarossa was from Lesvos — he was a Greek," Kostas told me. "But he was in Islam when he was growing up. The sultan made him admiral. And he made sure to destroy anything that was still under Venetian control. He even went and killed all the dogs in Alonissos. So the island, for 100 years, was not inhabited."

People from Evia and the surrounding islands drifted back slowly, Kostas told me, making a small population again. The village's defensive layout still reflects that history. On the northern edge, the Castro clings to the cliff. Elsewhere, the outer walls of houses once doubled as fortifications, because the pirates were never far away. "The blue cave up in the north," Kostas said, "that was Andreas' cave, a very famous pirate hiding. A really big cave, you can only go by boat. He was waiting for his victims."

Hora remained the capital until 1965, when an earthquake knocked it all down. For two whole years, residents lived in tents before being shifted to Patitiri, and Hora was left largely abandoned.

Eventually, people came back - first artists, then mainland Greeks and finally foreign residents who restored houses and opened small cafés. I spent a morning just wandering through its cobblestone streets, chapels, and shaded courtyards, stopping to scan the views out to Skopelos and the outer islands of the marine park.

Each year in August, the Feast of the Assumption brings the village square to life with food, music and dancing. In some years, there's a reenactment of a traditional Alonissos wedding, along with old farming practices like threshing and winnowing.





WINE BEFORE BEACHES

Long before tourism, Alonissos was known for wine. After a swim in the secluded, rocky bay of Tsoukalia on the northwest coast, I noticed a sign explaining that the remains of a large farmstead and amphora workshop were found here. Excavations have shown kilns, storage areas, pottery fragments - a major production site. Finds have turned up as far away as Pella, Alexandria and the Black Sea ports, proving how far Alonissos's wine once travelled.

BEACHES, FOOD AND STAYING PUT

Not all of Alonissos's appeal is archaeological. Beyond Hora, the island grows wilder. The north and west coasts are goat tracks, olive groves and pine forests tumbling into the sea. No mega-resorts, no beach clubs, just pebbled coves and the occasional family taverna.

I swam at Leftos Gialos, one of the island's better-known beaches but still quiet by Greek standards, with clear water, pine trees reaching down to white pebbles, and an ancient olive grove behind. Megalos Mourtias, on the west coast below Hora, offered another calm swim, the only beach on the island you can walk down to from the old village.

At Kokkinokastro, the cliffs glow rust-red in the late sun, the sea deep blue below. This is the site of ancient Ikos, the island's original settlement, which is now mostly underwater. Palaeolithic tools have been found nearby, the oldest signs of human life in the Aegean.

Steni Vala, a peaceful harbour on the east coast, is a favourite with sailors and lined with simple fish tavernas. And in nearby Kalamakia, at Maina restaurant, I watched as the owner pulled a lobster from the tank, tossed it in a pot and returned about half an hour later with a pan of lobster pasta big enough for five. No DJs, no deckchairs, just curious cats and waves lapping at the quay.

Another day, I had lunch at Leftos Gialos, keen to try the famous Alonissos tuna, considered a Greek delicacy for its high omega-3 levels and low mercury content. Back in Patitiri, Exantas Gastrobar offered a contrast: inventive meze and craft cocktails with a view of the fishing boats. It was near enough for me to walk back to the Hotel Yaris in Votsi, where I was staying, just far enough from the port to feel calm, with its modern, sea-view balconies.

AN ISLAND THAT HOLDS ITS GROUND

Before leaving, I hiked part of the trail above Gerakas, through pine forests to the secluded chapel of Agioi Anargyroi. The view sweeps over the northeast coast. From here, I imagine how many ships once passed through these waters, how many lives played out among these rocks and ruins.

Alonissos isn't your typical white-washed Greek postcard scene, but if you want wild seas, an interesting history and evenings that just fade into the stars, then it delivers. Alonissos, for me, still feels like a place you actually arrive at, not one you just rush through.













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