

Notes on visiting Ikaria

The Island

Ikaria is an island in the Eastern Aegean, close to Samos. Aligned on an East-West axis, it is about 39 km long and 9 km across at its widest. It has a spine of mountains about 950 m (about 3000 ft) high, which is closer to the southern side of the island. (The highest is Mt. Atheras at 3400 ft.) That means the whole of the southern side is

backed by the very steep mountainside, while the northern side has deep gorges cutting into the mountain. They are fantastically picturesque, but do mean that the roads are very convoluted as they go in and out of the gorges. From the airport to Evdilos



is 16 km away as the crow flies, but in practice it is a 47 km drive, including a climb over a 604 m hill, taking 45 minutes on average.

Because of the mountain, from which water runs readily, Ikaria is a very green island never short of water even in the hottest summer.

Ikaria is close to the coast of Turkey and, when the weather is right, we can see its coast clearly. Usually we can then also see the island of Chios to the north. From the south side of the island our closest neighbour, Samos, is always visible as are the outlying islands of Fourni.



The Ikarian spirit

Ikaria is an old-fashioned Greek community. The pace of life is slow and gentle. We still have the old-fashioned adherence to family and friends and xenophilia – literally, love of strangers, i.e. hospitality. Ikaria has been identified as a Blue Zone: one of the areas in the world that has a significantly higher than average longevity. This is all put down to diet, community, hard work and siestas! (Don't count on doing anything significant in the afternoon – everyone is napping! See <http://www.bluezones.com/ikaria>.)

Ikaria does not cater for the typical beer-swilling holiday maker. Manners and behaviour tolerated on tourist islands such as Mykonos and Zakinthos will not be thought much of here.

Ikaria has very little crime. In a place where everyone knows everybody else, it is difficult to get away with anything serious.

Old-fashioned or not we do have modern communications – telephones, mobile phones and broadband internet. So you don't have to worry about keeping in contact with your Facebook chums. Many homes, hotels and apartments have air conditioning for the summer months.

Food and drink on Ikaria

Ikaria serves Greek food and the range may be limited depending on what the shops have in that day. Salads and vegetable dishes are plentiful. Meat tends to be beef, pork or chicken. Lamb and turkey sometimes appear and the usual meat at Panigiria is goat. Most of the vegetables are locally grown and while they don't make a big thing of it are, in effect, organically grown. So, you will find tomatoes of a non-EU-standard size with blemishes on. So what... they taste good! All sorts of local wild produce can be found on the table. You will find dishes flavoured with maratho, a common herb found growing wild, and various spinach-like dishes referred to horta, also collected from hedgerows and roadsides.

You will not find Italian, Indian or Chinese restaurants, so stock up on your chilli quotient before you arrive. Things are changing slowly and foreign influences are making small inroads.



As far as wine is concerned, keep an open mind. The local wine might be described as an acquired taste; although for many visitors it doesn't take much of an acquaintance. It's not to be compared to the wines you have back home. Most people who have a piece of land with vines on it will produce their own wine, so different restaurants, different houses will have differently tasting wine depending on the mix of grapes they happen to have planted – and, I guess, the skill of the winemaker. You won't find sulphur dioxide or any other additives in it at all.

There is also a drink called tsipouro. It's a water-white clear spirit distilled from the left over grape residues after the wine has been removed. Distilling is, in principle, illegal in Greece but that doesn't stop you going to the appropriate shop and buying the necessary equipment. As with the wine, it's variable in taste depending upon who made it. It can also be very strong, so treat with respect. The nearest foreign equivalent is the Italian grappa.

When to come and what to do

Easter is a special time in Greece. The Greeks make more of Easter than they do of Christmas. Be aware that, normally, the Greek Easter does not coincide with the English Easter. However, due to a particular coincidence of astronomical events they coincide in 2010 and 2011. On Good Friday all the churches carry the Epitafios, decorated with flowers, around the village (or maybe just the church, depending upon the local topography).



On Easter Saturday there is the Easter service starting at, perhaps, 10 pm and climaxing at the moment of midnight with the cry of 'Christos Anesti' from the priest, followed by a scramble to light your candle from the priest's candle. If you can get it home still lit, it signals good luck. On the Sunday there will, of course, be a



massive Easter dinner with family and friends. At Easter, the weather will be warm with a good chance of a sunny day and dinner al fresco.

Spring on Ikaria is fantastic. The weather has warmed up with blue skies and little chance of rain. The wild flowers are out and the hillsides covered in yellow broom giving a heady aroma to the air. This is a good time for walking – the

weather is good, but not yet too hot to walk during the daytime. The island hasn't dried out yet and the rivers still run down the gorges.

July and August you are very unlikely to see any sort of weather except blue skies and sun. So it's hot – very hot sometimes and for some people unbearable. This is when most of the tourists come – Greeks, Italians and Germans mainly. Greeks themselves holiday in August and many of the visitors will be Greeks who live on the mainland of Greece or in far-flung places like America, Canada and Australia, and who return to their family roots for the summer.

The island has many fantastic beaches, the most obvious being close to the village of Armenistis, where there is a large concentration of hotels and apartments to let. Not surprisingly, those beaches are very crowded in the summer.

Summer is the time that the dance clubs open, catering for the visitors and the youth of Ikaria. Summer is also the Panigiri season! A Panigiri is a village party tied to the

Saint's Day relevant to the village church. A large number of tables with long benches will be set up in the village square; a space being left for the band and dancing. There will also be a kitchen preparing simple food: bread, wine, salad and meat – usually goat, sometimes boiled, sometimes roasted – and, of course, local wine and soft drinks. People arrive at around 9 pm, buy their food and wine, claim a table for friends and family and sit down to eat. By the time most of the tables are occupied and people have largely finished eating, the band will have arrived and be playing. Eventually, the band will play the 'kariotico' – the Ikarian dance – and the floor will be immediately flooded with people, old and young, to start the evening's dancing. The dancing will continue until there is no one left to dance; 3 am, 4 am, 7 am? The Panigiria are a fund raising events for local good works so, even if you are a stranger, buying a little food and wine is appreciated even if you are only really interested in the music or dancing.



September is quieter – most of the visiting Greeks have returned to their homes, but the weather is still glorious. And there are still one or two Panigiria to come. It's a good time to be walking, although you may decide to start early in the morning to avoid the hottest part of the day. The island will feel dry. Most river beds will be dry.



As we come to late autumn the island begins to shut down. Many Ikarians return to their alternative homes in Athens. Many of the seasonal restaurants and other shops close down for winter. The weather begins to be cooler and the winds increase – a time to batten down the hatches and make sure that your patio furniture is tied down or hidden away for the winter. Temperatures will still be warmer than the UK, of course, but definitely not sunbathing warm. Snow and ice are not unknown on Ikaria, but not expected. Winter 2008-9 we saw a sprinkling of snow on the mountain but none below.

Winter is a very sociable time. In Greece, people make more of name-days than birthdays. For, example on the 6th January all men named Foti will celebrate their name-day. Some of them will keep open-house, providing a table full of food and wine, and people will go round and visit each their friends called Foti, taking a small gift. During the summer people still celebrate name-days of course but, because they may be busy working and because there might be a Panigiri on the same day, keeping open-house is not as frequent.

Travelling to Ikaria

You can only get to Ikaria by air from Athens (A 45 minute flight by Athens Airways at the time of writing) or by sea from Pireas (Hellenic Seaways, 6 ½ to 8 hours depending upon the route). Air is quicker, but there is a 60 minute drive over the mountain to where we are near Evidilos. The boats come directly to Evidilos.

It's easy enough to fly from the London airports to Athens (direct by BA, Olympic Air, Aegean and EasyJet or indirectly via other European cities by Lufthansa and KLM). Flights from Manchester are more difficult although EasyJet are, at the moment, flying three times a week.

The big problem is getting a flight to arrive in Athens at a time that allows you to travel on to Ikaria the same day. If you are intending to fly Athens to Ikaria there are few options for overnight accommodation. The Sofitel is very convenient – a quick stroll across the road from the Arrivals hall – but it is expensive. There are other, lower cost, hotels a few miles away but you have to take into account the cost of taxis. Going down to a hotel in Athens is possible, but again you have to take travel into the city into account. If you book early enough, Sofitel sometimes have special deals available.

If you intend to take the boat you need to allow time to get to Pireas – buses, trains and taxis (in increasing order of expense) are the options. There are reasonably priced hotels in Pireas close to the harbour.



We can't give you detailed travel information here because the schedules change from time to time, especially between winter and summer times. If you let us know when you intend to visit, we can make suggestions and advise you on any future changes to schedules we are aware of. We can also suggest hotels.

All modes of transport can be booked online, although you will have to pick up boat tickets at the ticket kiosk on the quay before you board. Be aware that air and boat tickets to Ikaria are at a premium around Easter, August (especially the last few days) and election times (when lots of people dash back to their island to vote). The advice is 'book early' – tickets are cheaper then in any case.

What not to expect on Ikaria

Food: Ikaria is Greek, so expect all the idiosyncrasies of traditional Greece. When you order a meal, don't expect the dishes to arrive in the order you ordered them. The Greek way is to put all the dishes on the table at the same time and then let all the guests sit down and dig in. Of course, that means that by the time you get to try a particular dish, it might well be cold. So don't expect Greek food to be piping hot.

Nevertheless, exposure to tourists is changing habits – but Ikaria takes change, like everything else, slowly.

Drink: Don't expect wine to compare to Chateau Anything. There are some, expensive, Greek and Ikarian wines available in an 'international' style, but the local wine is just that. Wine made by local people.

Credit Cards: Ikaria is, in essence, a cash economy. Apart from Euronics (a chain white-goods store) and possibly the car-hire companies, I don't know of any shops, restaurants, bars, garages or ticket offices that will accept credit or debit cards. You will need euros! We do have cash machines though. My personal experience is that cash via the cash machine using your debit card, is at a better exchange rate than that offered by the Banks or Exchange bureaus.

Road: Don't expect tarmac on all the roads, or kerbs, or white lines. Even the main surfaced roads, may be in a poor state of repair. The smaller mountain roads may not be surfaced at all. Most roads on Ikaria are narrow with many sharp bends so, if you are driving, take it easy, half-expect on-coming traffic to be cutting the bends and don't worry about the 4th and 5th gears on the car; you won't need them!



Finally... Like much of Greece, most Ikarian plumbing is small bore and often connected to a septic tank. If you put toilet paper down you may cause a blockage – not a friendly thing to do to your hosts. If there is a bin beside the loo – put paper in that. It's not as bad as it sounds. They are emptied on a daily basis and on Ikaria rubbish is collected daily – not whenever the council feels like it, as in the UK.

A final word of warning...

If you intend to visit the island, beware! You could fall in love with it!

Gordon Gilmore

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