

RHAPSODY IN BLUE

The Grace Santorini boutique hotel adds an extra-special touch to a stay on a unique island

by Christopher Silvester – consultant editor for Spear's



BEFORE YOU EVEN leave home for a stay at the Grace Santorini, you get a taste of the hotel's meticulous attention to detail and customer care: you receive a 'bespoke' form on which you can select various preferences in advance. For example, you can choose from three reed diffusers for your room or three different types of shower gel and shampoo. The pillow menu allows you to choose from seven different types of pillow filling, from duck down and feathers to

natural rubber flakes and lavender.

The level of service continues when you arrive at Santorini Thira Airport as a guest of the hotel, as a concierge company representative welcomes you at the foot of the aircraft stairs and takes you on a fast track to the terminal and through immigration and baggage reclaim.

After a 15-minute drive to the village square of Imerovigli, hotel staff escort you down the winding cobbled path that skirts the cliffs. This is your

While the donkeys do the heavy lifting, visitors to Santorini can enjoy its famous sunsets and views of the Caldera and surrounding islands

first chance to take in the view of the collapsed crater – the Caldera – that is now a giant three-sided lagoon, 12 x 7 km in area.

This 21-room boutique hotel was developed in 2008, with a 400 sq m additional residence, 'The Villa', added in 2012. The hotel was redesigned in 2016 by Christina Logothetis (whose family own the Grace hotels) and Staci Perkins-Surla. The interiors are white with brushed concrete floors, Aegean walnut fixtures, Greek marble in the bathrooms, handmade Greek sofas, and features in turquoise, aubergine and navy. The rooms at the Grace are not vast, but each has its own small terrace with a view of the Caldera and an individual mini-pool.

My room was immediately below the bar and above the jagged-edged infinity pool, which overlooks the similarly jagged-edged terrace of the Santoro restaurant, where executive chef Spyros Agious offers his modern take on Greek cuisine.

At breakfast on the restaurant terrace, I was able to gaze across the

Caldera, fascinated by a couple of cruise ships moored hundreds of feet below and by the sight of a few keen hikers ascending to the top of Skaros Rock, which accommodates a fortress at its summit and a medieval village clinging to its sides. Such is the depth of the Caldera (400m) that there is only one mooring secure enough for a cruise ship to stay overnight, and it must be a large ship, so most come and go during a single day.

CRATER COMFORTS

On my first day, the Grace had organised a photographic tour of the Caldera by boat. Photographer Tryfon Georgopoulos accompanied us on the cabin cruiser and took plenty of photos of the scenery along with members of my party disporting themselves. Dinner in the evening was at Selene in the village of Pyrgos – a restaurant with a splendidly imaginative menu, though I was a little taken aback by the description 'rooster balls' for miniature eggs in one of the dishes.

At Pyrgos, the highest village on the island and its capital until the 1800s, you can climb through the village to the Venetian castle at the top of the hill and then take refreshments in the café in the square outside, where you can enjoy a smoothie or a coffee while gazing out across the island and listening to light jazz vocals.

It's enough to put you in the mood for Santorini wine, made from Assyrtiko grapes. It is fresh and acidic and displays great minerality. Because of insufficient rainfall, the deep-rooted vines have to be coiled in baskets on the ground rather than grown on trellises, so as to retain moisture. The volcanic soil prohibits the use of machinery, so grapes are hand-picked and transported by donkey.

The Venetsanos winery, above the port of Athinios, was the island's first industrial winery. Sitting 300m up atop the cliffs, it was built in the 1940s and relied on gravity to process the wine and send it down to waiting ships.

The excavation at ancient Akrotiri has borrowed the name of a nearby modern village. We have no idea what this ancient civilisation was called, only that it was a Minoan Bronze Age



“The pillow menu allows you to choose from seven different types of pillow filling”

settlement which was destroyed by a volcanic eruption around 1627 BC and submerged in volcanic ash. It was excavated by archaeologist Spyridon Marinatos from 1967 onwards and was found to have paved streets, two-storey dwellings, and lavatories.

As depicted in frescoes preserved by the volcanic ash, its women wore make up and jewellery, while its menfolk fished and used galleys to cross the Aegean. The excavated habitations are fascinating to view from the gangways and are protected by a bioclimatic roof that makes a visit on a sweltering summer's day perfectly tolerable.

Another place worth visiting is the 13th-century Venetian tower at La Ponta. Owned by jazz saxophonist Yannis Pantazis and his Greek-American wife Argy, it houses a museum of ancient Greek musical instruments, which Pantazis makes himself using traditional materials of skin, wood and reeds. He is a captivating raconteur, though my female companions couldn't help bursting into giggles at some of his flights of fancy.

Our final day was spent in Oia. The approach to this village along a marble street arcade of tourist shops is not encouraging, but then it begins to hug the cliffside and becomes more interesting. At night Oia's bars compete to play the loudest dance music in a cacophonous symphony, but during the day it is peaceful and calm. A highlight is a visit to Atlantis Books, a shop founded by young expats in 2004 which carries modern classic fiction and non-fiction in various languages and organises an annual literary festival. It also publishes an excellent map of the island.

We descended to the fishermen's village of Ammoudi for lunch at Katina, a traditional tavern with freshly caught squid drying in the sun.

Santorini is a wonderfully peaceful contrast to Mykonos, where the Grace has a sister hotel. The streets have no names and there are hardly any traffic lights on the island – and the Caldera is one of the most breathtaking views on our lonely planet. 📍

