



## The Rhodes less travelled



**Mick Hume**  
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Beyond Faliraki and the Old Town you'll find quiet villages, stunning beaches and Byzantine churches

For most visitors to Greece's "sunshine isle", it seems that all roads lead to Rhodes Old Town. Unless they are seeking the earthier delights of Faliraki, most head for the good hotels clustered around the northwest coast, near the capital and the airport. And there they tend to stay. Away from this hotspot the tourist trail is largely the single main road that takes coach trippers halfway down the east coast to the historic white town of Lindos, to climb its famous acropolis on foot or donkey, before boarding the hotel bus back.

But there are many more things under the sun for a family holiday on Rhodes. A small island that has been colonised and fought over for thousands of years — and that has welcomed friendlier visitors for centuries — has few stones left unturned. But we find plenty of interesting places where we can swim, sunbathe and explore just off the well-beaten track.

Of course, no tourist should miss Rhodes Old Town, shaped by conquerors from the Romans to the Crusaders, the Ottoman Turks and the Italian Fascists. The narrow streets have the feel of old Jerusalem, and the Street of the Knights, where the Knights Hospitaller grouped in inns according to which tongue they spoke, is remarkable. The Inn of the Tongue of England is around the corner, opposite the knights' former hospital, now the treasure chest museum of ancient Rhodes. Unlike the others, it is now a tourist shop, which probably says something, though three lions are

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**Small whitewashed chapel by coast in Lindos, Rhodes, Greece** Paul Miles/Axiom

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still carved into its stonework.

Nor should you visit Rhodes without puffing up the acropolis at Lindos, even if the donkeys have gone home for the day — as they had when we arrived, perhaps in solidarity with the transport strikes elsewhere in Greece. But it's worth leaving your climb until after the coaches have gone as the site will be crowd-free.

But why stop there? Take almost any quick turn off that main Rhodes Town-Lindos route, or go a little farther south or west, and you will find a Rhodes less travelled, with more to the island than meets the coach driver's eye.

Since neither Virginia, my wife, nor daughters Stella, 13, and Isabel, 11, wants to be stuck in the big hotel complexes, we choose a villa and hire car. We stay in the comfortable three-bedroom Villa Apollo on the east-coast hillside above Kalathos, with a pool and a sea view towards the illuminated ruins of the knights' castle at Feraklos, the first on the island (1306) and the last to fall to the Turks in the 1520s.

From here a car — preferably with four-wheel drive — will get you anywhere on the island. On the east coast you can find beaches such as the golden Agathi, the sea clear and shallow enough for even a duff swimmer (me) to snorkel with the kids among shoals of translucent fish.

Go south of Lindos and there are empty crescent-shaped little bays of shingle or sand, before you cross landscape not unlike the North York Moors — except with sunshine and cicadas — to the southernmost point at Cape Prasonissi, where the Med and the Aegean seas meet and the tumult in sea and air makes it a windsurfers' paradise. A spectator sport for us, but worth the trip.

Go around to the west coast and you will find yet another Rhodes, with miles of wild, empty windswept beaches. This looks more like the Greek sand that I spent a summer sleeping on as a student 30 years ago.

Much of this coast is protected, so there is no development. Strictly a bring-your-own-bottle affair, even if you want to drink only water. Camping is also banned, but we did see tents where the more adventurous (or cheapskate) were kipping undisturbed.

Turn away from either coast, into the mountains that form the island's spine, and you'll find a Rhodes of green valleys and quiet villages. It's a travel agent's cliché to describe any holiday destination as a "land of contrasts". Where isn't? But on a compact island such as Rhodes, you can experience the contrasts within a few miles.

There is an irony in the appeal of the mountains. The pull of the tourism industry on the coasts has emptied many inland villages of their working populations, leaving behind mostly elderly people and children. This very quietude makes the villages attractive. We sit alone under a nut tree outside a taverna in the middle of Laerna while an old woman sorts the wheat from the chaff by hand and the chef, somewhat incongruously, uses a hairdryer as bellows to grill the ubiquitous souvlaki and village sausage.

The villages and the hills also hold some of the more hidden holy and historical sites, such as the monasteries. We aren't allowed into



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the oldest one, at Thari, because my shorts are too brief and the Greek Orthodox priest/policeman at the gate judges Virginia's knee-length dress "a little short".

So we don trousers for a visit to the little 11th-century Byzantine church just inland from Kiotari, with its beautiful crumbling frescoes dominated by a giant St Michael, looking like a teenage girl, with a huge sword in one hand and the Baby Jesus in the other. Then we drive up the mountain to explore the crumbling castle above the village which, like other forts away from the crowds of Lindos, we have to ourselves, with the goats.

Which brings us to the all-important question of food (those goats make excellent chops). "Just remember," a friend warned me before we left, "Greek food is to food what Greek dancing is to dancing." But most of the food and wine is much better than that. When you walk into a seafront taverna under a washing line festooned with drying octopus, it has much the same effect as entering a Spanish bar where hams hang from the rafters: you know that you are getting the real deal.


Look and ask, and you can enjoy local dishes far removed from tourist fare (although there's always chicken souvlaki if the children don't want to experiment). We are grateful for the little book *Walk and Eat Rhodes*, by Brian and Eileen Anderson. The eating part anyway — it is far too hot for walking. It guides us to a top seafood restaurant in Stegna (with the octopus on the line), and one in Psinthos that we reach by following a stream through clouds of tiger-moth butterflies. And on our last evening, on the way to the airport, it leads us to a great restaurant in the dreaded town of Faliraki.

Actually Faliraki looks fine: "Like Blackpool, only with more life," says Virginia, the Blackpool veteran. If you drive right through the town you come to an outdoor restaurant on a wooded hillside next to a monastery-turned-church, where we eat surrounded by wild peacocks looking for scraps like the cats at the seafront tavernas. And not a bouzouki in earshot.

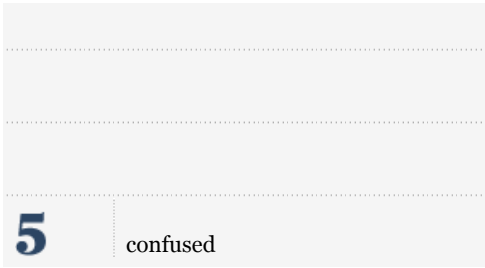
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([eajet.com](http://eajet.com)) flies to Rhodes. Holiday Autos (0871 4725229, [holidayautos.co.uk](http://holidayautos.co.uk)) rents cars from £82 a week.

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