



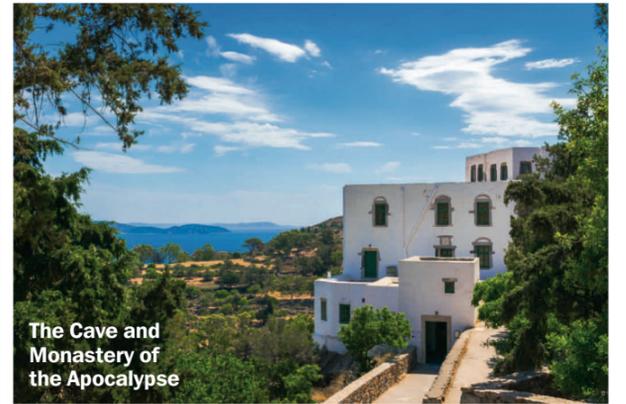
The spectacular monastery Panagia Hozoviotissa



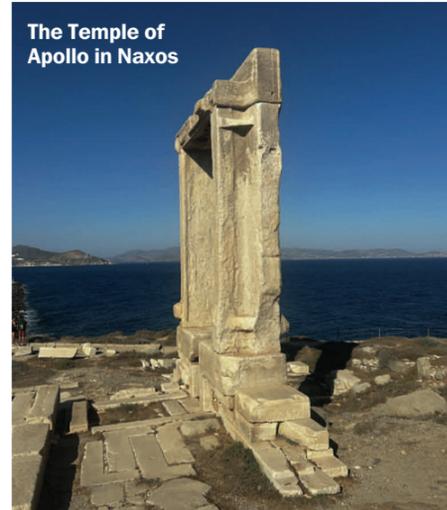
Dusk on deck



Arriving in Patmos



The Cave and Monastery of the Apocalypse



The Temple of Apollo in Naxos



The Sea Cloud II

A Splash Of WINTER SUN

For some warmth amidst these colder days, Sophie McVinnie sails off on a week-long tour of ravishing Greek islands

It's a muggy day in Athens. After a transfer bus takes us from the capital to Piraeus Port, we get off in one sweaty heap. But the weight of the merciless climate lifts when a magnificent vessel floods into view – the beautiful *Sea Cloud II*. Over the next week, we'll voyage the Aegean Sea round four glorious Greek islands – Patmos, Amorgos, Naxos and Syros – on this enchanting tall ship.

As we step on board, we're greeted by a flurry of smiling crew members who hand us moist towelettes to wipe our beaded brows. Inside, long, carpeted

hallways beckon guests down corridors and up grand staircases toward each of the 47 passenger cabins. "Cabin", however, seems too rustic a word to convey the glamour of these suites. The décor is largely gold with framed pictures and mirrors on the walls, and the bathroom, wrapped in exquisite marble, takes your breath away.

Upstairs on deck, the captain and his crew gather all guests for a "sail-away champagne" to mark the start of *Sea Cloud II's* journey towards its first stop, Patmos. A delicious Greek buffet is served for dinner, and a welcome sea

breeze cools the formerly stifling temperatures. By dusk, across the opaque blue waves lapping gently by the bow, the edge of the sky is dipped in warm orange light from the setting sun.

After some adventurous sailing, we reach Patmos by our third day. It's a quiet island drenched in fervent sunlight, sometimes visited by celebrities with an itch to escape their hectic lives. On our day ashore, we visit the UNESCO World Heritage monastery of St. John and the Cave of the Apocalypse, where the former Greek Orthodox figure allegedly wrote the Book of Revelation. Afterwards,

along with a quick stop by the historic houses in Chora, we head to Kambos Beach club to let off some steam.

The evening brings a delectable four-course meal in the main restaurant in the belly of the ship. Choices include crispy crab cake or mushroom cappuccino for starters, surf and turf or broiled lobster for main (with vegetarian options including vegetable piccata) and some tasty baked Alaska for dessert.

Over the next few days, our voyage takes us to the quaint island of Amorgos and the largest island in the Greek Cyclades, Naxos. On the former, we meander down gorgeous pathways and across beautiful clifftops, beyond which you can spy the deep blue sea for miles.

Fuchsia climbs up rows of gleaming white walls – as is traditional for buildings in Greece – and charming little jewellers, crafters and coffee shops dot the island's main promenade. The cherry on top is

our climb up towards the 1,000-year-old monastery, Panagia Hozoviotissa, which perches atop a cliff.

Although Naxos brings a completely different atmosphere – being contrastingly flooded with tourists – it makes for another fascinating visit. The Temple of Apollo stands unfinished since the 6th century BC, making it one of Naxos' most recognisable emblems.

Back on board, we're treated to a delightful night of lilting piano pieces played by the ship's resident musician, Tom. Stargazing is a must aboard the *Sea Cloud II* at night, particularly when the top deck is empty. So, together with some new friends, I lie on a sunbed to take in the sublime view above – a brooding sky peppered with shining stars. It's hard to believe when a shooting star suddenly cuts through this stunning display, but I squeeze my eyes shut and make a wish just in time.

By the time we reach Syros, we've had a magical week. We've had cocktail workshops in the ship's lounge, lectures about the islands by a dedicated staff member, and a rare opportunity to climb the mast (although it's not something I'm keen for). Syros is the most opulent of the islands we've visited, with a certain air of elegance to it that the others didn't match. The centre has rows of designer shops and expensive cafes with plenty of colour on the buildings to give it strong character.

As we each disembark *Sea Cloud II*, it feels like I've just been in *Mamma Mia*. I've had the time of my life sailing the Aegean and, who knows, maybe next time I'll be back to catch a ride to Kalokairi!

To book a trip with Sea Cloud cruises, visit seacloud.com/en. Both short and long-haul trips are available.

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