

Santorini

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Belonging to the state of Greece, named Cyclades; **Strongilli** (the ancient Greek name of this island, given because of its round shape) or **Kallisti**, (name used during the classical period, meaning the most beautiful) or **Thira** (the official name of this island) or **Santorini** (name that was given to this island during the Italian occupation, after a small Catholic chapel dedicated to Santa Irene), is for sure one of the most extraordinary, fascinating and breathtaking islands of the Aegean Sea.

The island of Santorini is unique all over the world and the reason for that is its (still active!!!) **volcano** and the *Geological* morphology that the crescent shaped island has adopted after its **massive eruption** the year **1650 BC** approximately, that changed the form of this island and it's... destiny. The white washed towns are built at the very top of the mountain and the houses, which from a distance look like snow, seem as if they are gripped on the side of the colorful cliff (rising 1100 ft), having their verandas almost hanging into the **caldera**. The view from the top is not only breathtaking but it is also one of the few places in Europe from where one can see the sun setting straight into the sea.

Santorini, which actually is not one island but five!, is located at the south end of the Aegean Sea, exactly above the point where the continental plates between Europe, Asia and Africa meet; and it covers an area of 96 sq. klm. Santorini has a population of 10.000 people, spread out in 13 villages; but during the summer the population increases dramatically and actually from April until October every year, the island hosts over 2.000.000 guests.

The island has an international airport and 2 very small harbors; the **Old Harbor**, in which only very small boats can dock... while the bigger boats have to throw their anchor and basically... 'float around' in the very deep caldera and **Athinios**; which is the newest harbor of the island, very small as well, but in which small boats as well as the ferries and the big liners can stop only for a few minutes, just to load and unload people and vehicles.

The new harbor, Athinios, has a street which cars and busses use in order to arrive at the top... literally climbing up the cliff. For the ones arriving at the old harbor, wishing to visit the living quarters, things are a little different and the choices are many. One can get to the top by... a) using the Santorinean way of transportation, which has two long ears, a sad smile and a stubborn temper... the donkeys! b) One can walk up... advisable for the very fit and energetic since there are more than 600 steps (and mind you ... you will be using the same path the donkeys use, with all surprises included!) or c) taking the cable car (teleferik) which can very safely take to the top, 36 guests every two minutes in its 6 cabins.

History

The island has prehistoric findings in an area called Thirasia, as well as evidence from the bronze period. The opening of the Suez Canal, in which they used thousands of tons of the pumice stones from Santorini; (since pumice is an excellent material for under water construction), brought to light the brilliant ancient civilization of Santorini. The island was inhabited as early as 3000 BC by a very sophisticated group of people, with their civilization being a combination between Cycladic and Minoan, up until the year 1650 BC, approximately, when the massive eruption of the volcano caused the island to explode into the air and then collapse and sink into the Aegean Sea. This massive eruption not only changed dramatically the form of the

island but also, due to the tsunamis that followed, the destiny of the surrounding areas changed as well. The eruption was so strong that the once big, round and flat island, exploded into the air. Volcanic material dating back to this eruption has been found into the glaciers in Greenland!!! The climate of the whole area changed and the sky, it is said, was black for two weeks. What remained of the once round island is a crescent shape piece of land, **Thira** and 2 smaller ones, **Thirasia** and **Aspronisi**. Today Santorini is a complex of 5 islands, the 3 mentioned above and 2 more black, lava islands that derived from the bottom of the crater between the years 1573 and 1725 AD and are named Palaiá Kameni & Nea Kameni.

The most important ancient sight of Santorini is **Akrotiri**, an ancient village, which was found, buried under the volcanic ash, the lava and the pumice stones, the year 1967. Akrotiri is located at the southwest tip of the island and it is something like a prehistoric version of Pompeii, although it is much different. This prehistoric village was inhabited by a very sophisticated group of people, with extremely advanced civilization for the era, since these people were living in two and three storied houses, with paved streets and squares, with shops and workshops, with hot and cold water systems, a central drainage system and flush toilets!!! All houses were decorated with exquisite frescoes depicting delightful flowers and plants, birds, goats, monkeys, ships, beautiful ladies in everyday life etc. All of these wonderful frescoes are in display in the archaeological museums of Athens and Santorini. Also hundreds of jars and utensils have been found in the ground floors of the apartments proving that the ground floors were used for storage area. This very distinguished civilization vanished over night!!! Around the year 1650BC making many people believe that Santorini could have been the lost Atlantis that has been described by Plato in his books.

The eruption of the great volcano was not only catastrophic for the island of Santorini, but also for the nearby islands, since the explosion as well as the earthquakes that followed caused huge tidal waves (tsunami), estimated to have been over 300 feet high. According to some theory, these tidal waves emerged with tremendous speed towards the island Crete, destroying the palace of Knossos and extensively damaging the north coast of the island, causing the end of the Minoan civilization.

Points of interest.

The village **Fira**, which is the capital and is located in the center of the crescent shaped island, is adorable. It is full with very attractive whitewashed houses, winding narrow streets, arcades and a quarter where the Catholic nobility once dwelt. The view from the top is stunning and the best place for one to be during the sunset is sitting in one of the lounge chairs on the balcony of one of the hundred bars that are hanging over the cliff, enjoying a glass of local wine.

Products of Santorini.

The number one product of Santorini is wine. Santorini is very windy and very dry. It does not have any water resources at all! (the locals have to import their drinking water and most of them collect the rain water in cisterns underneath their homes for washing purposes)... but... the volcanic soil is very fertile, therefore whatever grows on it is very good quality. Their biggest problem was the irrigation, but the farmers have invented a unique way of harvesting, they try to keep the plant (vine) as close to the ground as possible, so what they do is that they twist and braid the plant, giving it the form and shape of a basket and in a way protect it from the strong winds. They also do not have 'spare' water to irrigate the plant, so they place pumice stones inside and around the baskets; during the night the humidity reaches almost 80%, the pumice like a sponge absorbs the humidity which is released during the day to the plant, irrigating it. So basically the grapes grow without any water at all, from the humidity!!! The flavor of the wine produced this way, is remarkable, with top class a sweet red wine named **vinsanto**, and a white one called **nihteri** (squeezed and bottled during the night).

Other products of Santorini are: hard skin cherry tomatoes used for tomato paste, fava beans, barley, pistachio nuts and small white skin eggplants.