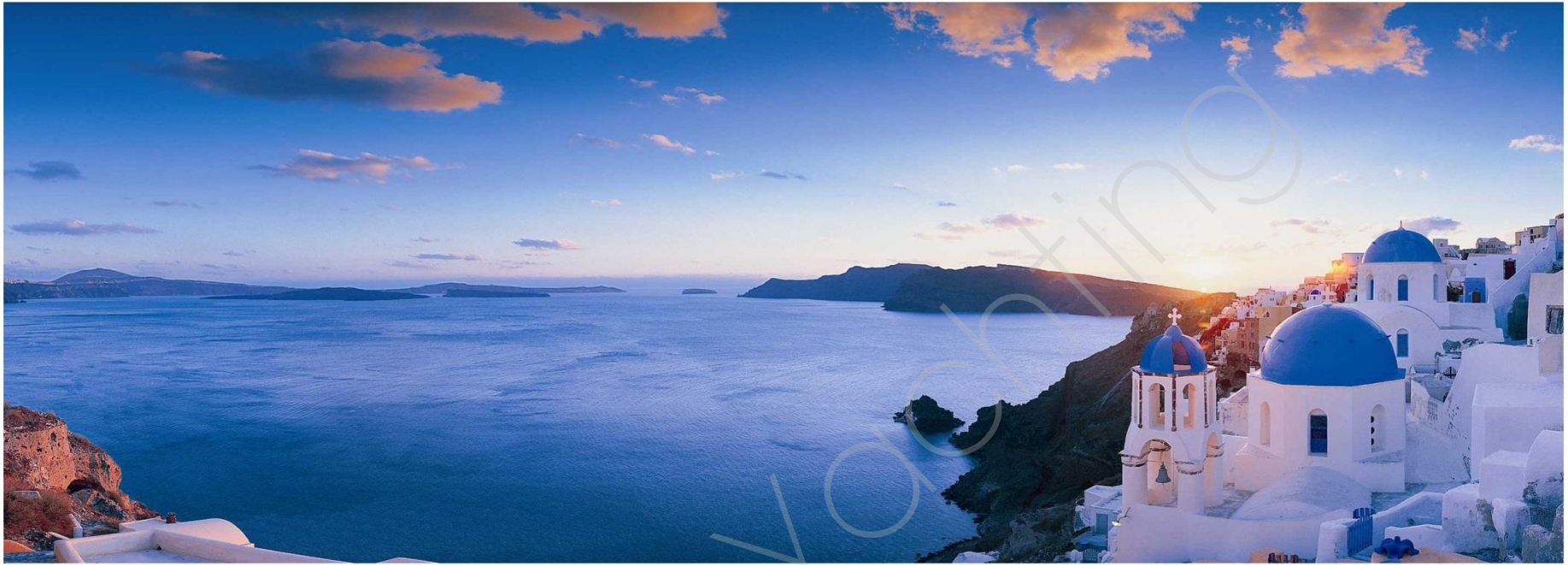


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SANTORINI

itinerary





Santorini island

Santorini may well have conquered a corner of your imagination before you've even set eyes on it. With multicoloured cliffs soaring over 300m from a sea-drowned caldera, it rests in the middle of the indigo Aegean, looking like a giant slab of layered cake. The island spoons the vast crater left by one of the biggest volcanic eruptions in history. Smaller islands curl around the fragmented western edge of the caldera, but it is the main island of Thira that will take your breath away with its snow drift of white Cycladic houses lining the cliff tops and, in places, spilling like icy cornices down the terraced rock. When the sun sets, the reflection on the buildings and the glow of the orange and red in the cliffs can be truly spectacular.

Santorini is no secret and draws crowds for most of the year, yet it wears its tourism well and its offerings make it worth the bustle. The island's intrigue reaches deep into the past, with the fascinating Minoan site of Akrotiri and the gorgeous traditional hilltop village of Oia. It also glides effortlessly into the future with accomplished artists, excellent wineries, a unique brewery, and some of the Cyclades finest dining experiences. The sandy, multicoloured beaches are simply the icing on the cake.



Fira

Santorini's main town of Fira is a vibrant, bustling place, its caldera edge layered with hotels, cave apartments, infinity pools and swish restaurants, all backed by a warren of narrow streets full of shops and even more bars and restaurants. A multitude of fellow admirers cannot diminish the impact of Fira's stupendous landscape. Views over the multicoloured cliffs are breathtaking, and at night the caldera edge is a frozen cascade of lights.



Museum of Prehistoric Thira & Archaeological Museum

On the southern edge of Fira, this museum houses extraordinary finds excavated from Akrotiri and is all the more impressive when you realise just how old they are. Most impressive is the glowing gold ibex figurine, dating from the 17th century BC and in amazingly mint condition. Also look for fossilised olive tree leaves from within the caldera from 60,000 BC.

Near the cable-car station, this museum houses impressive finds from Akrotiri and Ancient Thira, along with some Cycladic figurines, and beautiful Hellenistic and Roman sculptures. The content is strong, however the museum itself is in need of a little TLC.



Oia

Perched on the northern tip of the island, the village of Oia (ee-ah) reflects the renaissance of Santorini after the devastating earthquake of 1956. Restoration work has whipped up beauty and you will struggle to find a more stunning Cyclades village. Built on a steep slope of the caldera, many of its dwellings nestle in niches hewn into the volcanic rock. A magical way to reach the village is along a cliff edge walkway that rambles north from Fira through a series of linked settlements. If you travel by road, you'll pass through sage green slopes splattered with wildflowers, rich red- and coffee-coloured earth and views of blue, blue sea.

Not surprisingly, Oia draws enormous crowds and overcrowding is the price it pays for its good looks. Try to visit in the morning or spend the night here; afternoons and evenings often bring busloads from the cruise ships moored in the bay.



Thirasia & Volcanic Islets

Unspoilt Thirasia (population 268) was separated from Santorini by an eruption in 236 BC. The cliff-top hora (main town), Manolas, has tavernas and domatia. It's an attractive place, noticeably more relaxed and reflective than Fira could ever be.

The unpopulated islets of Palia Kameni and Nea Kameni are still volcanically active and can be visited on various boat excursions from Fira Skala and Athinios.



Ancient Thira

First settled by the Dorians in the 9th century BC, Ancient Thira consists of Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine ruins and is an atmospheric and rewarding site to visit. The ruins include temples, houses with mosaics, an agora (market), a theatre and a gymnasium. There are splendid views from the site.

From March to October Ancient Thira Tours runs a bus every hour from 9am until 2pm, except on Monday, from Kamari to the site. If driving, take the surfaced but narrow, winding road from Kamari for just over 1km. From Perissa, on the other side of the mountain, a hot hike up a dusty path on sometimes rocky, difficult ground takes a bit over an hour to the site.



Ancient Akrotiri

In 1967, excavations began at the site of Akrotiri. What they uncovered was phenomenal: an ancient Minoan city buried deep beneath volcanic ash from the catastrophic eruption of 1613 BC. Today, the site retains a strong sense of place and reverent awe. Housed within a cool, protective structure, wooden walkways allow you to pass through various parts of the city.

Peek inside three-storey buildings that survived, and see roads, drainage systems and stashes of pottery. The vibe of excitement still courses through the site, with continued excavations and discoveries.



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