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Summer 2007: Cephalonia, Greece

Cephalonia resident Mary Gold is your guide to the highlights of the island that is the star of those enticing Greek travel posters



Captain Corelli may have long since strummed the strings of his mandolin but the love affair with the Ionian Island he made his own is getting more powerful by the year.

Cephalonia is the largest of the seven-island Ionian group and undoubtedly the best, but then I'm biased. We looked at 13 destinations before building a villa here and we've never regretted it. Cephalonia was slow to bite the tourism apple and as a result, the islanders learnt a lot from other people's mistakes.

Development is heavily restricted and low key - there are no buildings above three storeys, no hotels closer than 100 metres to the shore and none of those ribbon developments of discos and eating places aimed at the British. There is no crime, no unemployment and only one traffic light. There is also no Club 18-30, which has signed the death warrant for other resorts.

It's also surprisingly uncommercialised, and we soon noticed that Cephalonians take a lot of pride in their homeland with tasteful buildings, balconies dripping with bougainvillea, and lovely mosaic pavements in the capital, Argostoli, which are sprayed clean every morning.

You can't even chop down trees. After the Second World War a photographer was dispatched to fly low over the island to record every tree and the planning department keeps a close eye on the builders.

Only 32,000 people live on Cephalonia but with Lefkas to the north and Zakynthos to the south the island is firmly on a tourist trail and grows each year as more accommodation becomes available and big tour operators move in. Despite the annual influx of visitors, mainly Italians, the island is so big that you can still find quiet corners. Vast tracts of forest cloak the rugged limestone landscape, with ten peaks topping 5,000 feet.

The response to the film of Captain Corelli's Mandolin, which was made here was a good yardstick of the Cephalonian mindset. On some islands the film would have taken over, but there is only one small restaurant near Sami called Captain Corelli's, and that's where the actors and film crew used to eat.

The film was good for Cephalonia. Although the critics panned it, it was a showcase for the island's scenery and boosted tourist numbers. In the novel by Louis de Bernieres, the captain escapes the

Nazis by boat from a little place called Spartia, a charming village by the sea, built in higgledy-piggledy fashion to confuse pirates, and coincidentally, the place where we ended up building our house, Villa Athina. Spartia also has good eating places, the outdoor restaurant at Panas Bungalows and the Liakas Taverna. Mention my name and they'll throw you out. Only joking.

But first things first. [CV Travel](#) offers a selection of smart villas with pools on Cephalonia and be sure to book a car otherwise you'll miss out on seeing the best of the place. Try www.hertz.co.uk or www.europcar.co.uk. And then criss-cross the island, admiring white-capped mountains, dense green pine forests, olive groves, underground lakes and those lovely beaches on Greek travel posters.

The island is much too big to enjoy properly in anything under a week but there are certain places on the must-see list and the capital, Argostoli, is one of them. It's a busy market town and port with streets lined with mulberry trees. There aren't many historic buildings here because they all fell down in the earthquake of 1953 but it's a nice town nevertheless. Head for Cephalonia's oldest restaurant, the family-run Kalafatis at the water's edge, which is packed at lunchtime and deservedly so. Bag a seat overlooking the gulf of Argostoli, order a moussaka, a Cephalonian meat pie or a large plate of their delicious meze and then feed the fish with the bread provided for the purpose. If you're lucky you'll see a very large turtle swimming past, a lovely creature reputed to be 50 years old.

New this year on the waterfront is the Haagen Dazs ice cream parlour. Even those who don't go in for a calorie-laden chocolate chip cornet can be seen lurking cheekily outside in searing temperatures taking advantage of the icy water sprays they use to keep the place cool.

If a spot of light shopping beckons then head for Argostoli's pedestrianised shopping street, which runs parallel with the seafront, where you can buy good clothes, Kefalonian honey and gold jewellery. Stop for a coffee outside the Bell Tower and afterwards pop in to the [art gallery](#) and studio of English artist Peter Hemming, who went to Cephalonia in 2001 and fell in love with the place. His vibrant canvases of island scenes and characters are very good indeed, not expensive, and his current exhibition runs until the end of October.

Further along Lithostroto, the bright young things head for the Metropolis Café for a cold glass of wine and a dish of nibbles, then if you're still on the culture trail, the Kosmetatos Foundation, towards the main square, has a splendid collection of Edward Lear prints of Kefalonia during the British and French rule of the early 19th century.

Or pop into the Korgialenio Folklore museum where you can see traditional clothes and embroidery as well as many pre-earthquake photographs of the island.

From Argostoli, you could hop in the car for the pleasant drive south. Look out for the imposing St George's Castle, to your left and if you're in need of sustenance drive inland to the marvelous Il Kastro restaurant, run by an Englishwoman and her Greek husband. The views from the terrace are spectacular.

Then it's down to Lourdas Beach where there are good water sports, boats for hire and an excellent hotel right on the beach, the [Ionian Sun](#). If you want to head further south then aim for Skala, a pretty family resort with a good selection of smart villas (CV Travel again) and an excellent restaurant, The Blue Sea, where you can enjoy dinner while the kids play in the sand.

If it's Cephalonia's rich Venetian history you're after (the kind of thing that bewitched Lord Byron and Edward Lear, who both spent a lot of time on Cephalonia), then hit the road north for the spectacular drive from Argostoli to Fiskardo. The road is good, but you'll need to concentrate along the

breathtaking series of hairpin bends, with high rocks and herds of goats to the right, a steep drop to turquoise waters on the left.

Break your journey at Myrtos beach, a glorious crescent of white sand, except when you get down there it's actually stones which are murderous on the feet. Myrtos is one of the top ten beaches in the world but that means to look at. It's also very dangerous for swimming because of a perilous undercurrent. Every time we visit the red flag is flying, so save that swim for your next stop at the gorgeous little village of Assos, built on an isthmus to keep out invaders (those pirates again). Assos was heavily rebuilt after the earthquake by the residents of Paris (in a rare act of French generosity). The tiny harbour has several good restaurants and after lunch you can swim off the beach where the sea is clear and the snorkelling marvellous, but wear plastic shoes against the pebbles.

Then it's a short hop to Fiskardo, a pretty horseshoe-shaped harbour edged with Venetian buildings in ice-cream colours. At the furthest corner of the harbour is a beautiful but derelict Venetian house for sale. Must be a bargain surely? Er no. when I inquired two years ago they were asking a million pounds for it. Loads of restaurants again but Tasia's, right on the front is popular because the lady who owns it has a cookery programme on Greek TV.

If you want to stay in Fiskardo and are feeling flush, try the relatively new [Emelisse Art Hotel](#), a chic boutique hotel decorated in minimalist style and with amazing views of the Ionian. Worryingly, I couldn't find a section entitled "tariff".

Heavy winter rains make Cephalonia one of the greenest and lushest of islands despite the rocky landscape and the vineyards here produce some of the best wine in Greece. Tuck into a bottle of Robola at Tasia's and sit quietly in Fiskardo for a couple of hours. You might even see Steven Spielberg's yacht moored here, with Madonna sunbathing on the poop deck. They are regular visitors, and who can blame them?

THE EXPERTS' VIEW - what to see, do/where to eat, sleep, club

Christina at [iTRAVELiSHOP](#): Where to stay: Most of the accommodation in Cephalonia tends to be big, blocky and uninspiring, so choose carefully. [Five Star Greece](#) is like a little black book of exclusive properties, has a very smart villa on the island's south coast which has four bedroom suites, a pool and a lovely secluded beach below it. It also comes with maid service. As the owners of the villa hate publicity, the name of the villa is only given out by request. If you'd rather be in a hotel, [The Emelisse](#) is the chicest in town. Located in the stylish little village of Fiskardo, the hotel has amazing views of the Ionian Sea, and the look is streamlined, with teak furniture and all the latest techie gadgets. In room toiletries from cult Greek favourite brand [Korres](#) are another bonus.

Beaches: Myrtos Beach is a must. Yes, yes we know this is the beach that was featured in Captain Corelli's Mandolin but it really is worth a visit. You'll find blindingly white sand and pebbles, pine groves and deep turquoise seas set against the backdrop of cliffs.

Where to eat: Fiskardo is the most stylish village on Cephalonia. This is where you'll find all the yachties and gin palaces docked. Try Tassia on the waterfront, which is run by Greece's version of Delia Smith, Tassia Dendrinou (00 30 26740 41205)

Simon at [TRAVEL INTELLIGENCE](#) also recommends [The Emelisse](#): It is a wonderful example of the chic Greek hotel revival. It's contemporary, elegant and simple, with earthy tones and natural materials.

Michael at URBAN JUNKIES is another fan of The Hotel Emelisse. It is the island's, and one of the country's, finest hotels (though perhaps not the most typically Greek) - exquisite views over turquoise seas, unyielding luxury in super-cool rooms, smartly-cushioned loungers flanking the pool, and a path down to a smooth belt of rock where you can swim into a cave. Our reviewer Tom Bell called it "the rarest of places, one that fulfils every detail of the dream".

Favourite beach: The beautiful, enclosed, pebbly crescent of Andisamos beach, just south of Sami, which (perhaps because it lacks the sand of other beaches) has no hotels, few visitors and only a simple drinks shack in summer. It featured in the Captain Corelli film for the landing scenes.

Favourite walk: From the (somewhat touristy) seaside village of Assos up to the inland hamlet of Drapanitika along the old mulepath - about two hours if you go one way and taxi back, or four hours if you walk there and back. Lovely views over the castle-crowned headland of Assos, and of course a rewarding plunge into the sea at the end.