

SAVOURING SYMI

Words by Karyn Noble & Illustrations by Maya Beus

Dispatches from a Greek island.

“A day is not long enough,” chastises

Yannis as he greets me with a hearty handshake. I knew he was right the moment I clapped eyes on Symi from the ferry, although I'd had a clue before then. I've been to several Greek islands and it's extremely rare for born-and-bred locals on one island to betray their feelings for another. “Oh, Symi,” sighed the Rhodes taverna owner at lunch the day prior when he learnt of my plans, clutching a tea towel to his heart like he was reminiscing about a tale of unrequited love and not a mere 50-minute trip for him from Kolona Harbour.

Almost all visitors to Symi arrive by boat, whether you're Giorgio Armani in a super-yacht, a frequent European sojourner staying for a week in the low season, or a day-tripper arriving via ferry in summer from Rhodes. I was one of the latter, sort of. In mid-October I hit the sweet spot of still finding regular Symi ferries running, yet missing the crowds and the peak summer heat (it can reach a sweltering 45°C here).

I jostle for space by the boat's railing, enchanted as what looks like a painted toy town on a rocky outpost drifts into view. My eye is drawn to the pastel Italianate amphitheatre framing the main harbour of Gialos, and a quaint stone clocktower from 1881 by the dock, inspired by London's Elizabeth Tower. In its shadow I see Yannis, a Symi local and keen photographer, who was here to give me a guided tour.

We settle at a cafe with Greek frappés and, while soaking up the tiny island's atmosphere (the total area is just

over 58 square kilometres), discuss the extraordinary architecture of the elegant two-storey mansions that line the steep hills before us. Over our second coffee, Yannis starts sketching house designs in my notebook and I learn of the island's many influences, starting as part of the Roman Empire, then the Byzantine, before the Knights of St John invaded in 1309 and Symi became a particularly prosperous hub as a Dodecanese trading port, until the invention of steam-powered shipping spoilt the party centuries later. “Italy, Germany, Britain,” Yannis waves his hands back and forth, reflecting the island's change in ownership across both World Wars. The fact that Symi has only been part of Greece since 1948 explains the mishmash of styles - and why it feels like a fantasy island.

I get twitchy to explore, not used to Yannis' unhurried way of life (though I'm amused that he seems hellbent on repeatedly promising me “gin tonic”), and we take our chat towards the main village, passing several shops trading in wicker baskets full of natural sea sponges. It's not something I'm used to seeing as a ubiquitous souvenir but it's particular to Symi and partly responsible for the fancy housing - Symi was already a sponge-diving epicentre when it fell to the Ottomans in 1522 and enjoyed much richness and renown in the centuries that followed. By way of affirmation, there's a sculpture of a legendary sea sponge diver at Gialos Harbour, Stathis Hatzis (1878-1936). His claim to fame? Holding his breath for 3 minutes and 58 seconds while diving to a depth of 88 metres to recover a lost anchor.





“Gin tonic? Or here you should try something special from Symi?” I assure Yannis that I’m not yet ready for gin tonic at 11 a.m. and obligingly follow him past wild prickly pear trees into a bakery. Like many Greek islands, Symi is known for its gastronomy, centred around healthy ingredients and Mediterranean flavours. Residents often live into their nineties here, and seafood plays a dominant role in diets, notably in the famed Symi shrimp (*simiako garidaki*), which I’d heard rumours about weeks before arriving. What they lack in size they apparently more than make up for in flavour, eaten whole, shells and all. Yannis assures me that Symi shrimp awaits us at lunch and hands me a spinach pie, which I nibble at as we dodge Vespas and an endless parade of cats through the narrow, bougainvillea-lined streets, where even the meat market looks like a film set facade, with its pale-lemon exterior, pastel-green shutters and ornate grey tiling on the floor.

Some deeply tanned fishers are bringing in their catch as we approach Pantelis, our lunch venue, and I ask Yannis to find out what’s in their blue nets. The men chat for a bit in Greek, seemingly about more than just fish, and my suspicions prove correct when Yannis explains that one of them, Phillipi, has something to tell me. “I am kangaroo, too,” says Phillipi in broken English. “Born in Sydney, Australia, Maroubra Junction. Kangaroo too.” I take a few photos of my new mate, ‘Aussie Phil’, and his catch, but once Yannis tells him where we’re heading for lunch we are quickly ushered away, Phillipi refusing to keep us from our Symi shrimp.

We take a shady outdoor table at Pantelis, where I again decline a gin tonic in favour of something traditionally Greek. “Then it must be *ouzo*,” nods Yannis and an elegant green-labelled bottle and a bowl of ice appears forthwith. It’s from

Barbayanni Distillery on the island of Lesbos, a few hours’ north of Symi, and of the five ouzos it produces, Yannis has selected the mildest for me: Barbayanni Green Ouzo. *Only* 42 percent alcohol. How kind. But this is a drink that feels 100 percent right to me in Greece, where it’s served in tall narrow glasses as a classic aperitif. I add a little water, as is the custom, to watch the spirit turn milky, then the ice cubes, and sigh as the first platter of many is brought to the table, in the usual, seemingly endless Greek fashion.

“
Every morsel is
scrumptious, a flawless
coming together
of wonderful local
ingredients and a chef’s
accomplished touch.”

I sit transfixed before a parade of Greek salads, whole tuna, the best fresh anchovies and *dolmades* I’ve ever eaten, a fish I’ve not tried before called *menola*, two types of creamy *taramasalata*, crispy courgette fritters, whitebait fritters, prawns and mussels with rice, and warm octopus with truffle oil, ginger and mango. Every morsel is scrumptious, a flawless coming together of wonderful local ingredients and a chef’s accomplished touch. Pantelis Kalliaros has had his eponymous restaurant here for over a decade but, importantly, he understands Symi. He was born here and knows exactly where to tap the island for its best produce - including meat and eggs from his own farm.

I’d almost forgotten about the famous Symi shrimp until the plate of bright orange crustaceans arrives, adorned simply with a wedge of lemon and encircled in scattered parsley. I’ve often hesitated when it came to eating the heads of prawns before, but this is an entirely different situation. It’s more like eating a soft-shell crab: only slightly crispy, mostly soft and unlike any shrimp I’ve ever tasted. And I realise - knowing I’ll all too soon have to catch the ferry back to Rhodes, that they perfectly encapsulate the charms of Symi: tiny, sweet, unique. And totally addictive.

