

**NICK TREND**

Foreign holidays are back! Here's how to make the most of your travels

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**VIVA ESPANA!**

Twenty reasons why we can't wait to get back to Spain

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**THE HISTORY MAN**

Simon Schama reveals the highs and lows of his travelling life

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# Travel on Sunday



KATIKIES HOTEL - STEPHANE FRANCESCONI/WORLDBET

## Santorini resets for summer

As one of the first to return to this glorious Greek island, Rachel Howard discovers that its long-lost go-slow charm has been restored

**P**IGLETS FOR SALE". Scribbled in Greek, the sign pinned outside the shop struck an unexpected note on Santorini, where most signs, neatly painted in English and sometimes Chinese, point you in the direction of a "very nice sunset" [sic] or the "best volcano view". Apart from the pet shop (which also sells

fishing, hunting and boating equipment) and a handful of supermarkets, takeaway souvlaki stalls and coffee joints, almost every shop and restaurant on the island was shuttered last week.

On June 13 - two days before Greece's borders partially reopened after almost three months - Kyriakos Mitsotakis, the prime

minister, staged a press conference against the flattering backdrop of Santorini's world-famous sunset to announce that Greece was "open for business". When I arrived a couple of days later, there was little evidence to back this up. With all international flights grounded until July 1, and only three domestic flights a day from Athens, Santorini's half-

finished airport was deserted. In the island capital, Fira, every jewellery shop on "Gold Street" was closed. Almost every hotel was still in hibernation. Without the usual armada of catamarans and barrage of cruise ships, the submerged caldera looked naked,

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## COVER STORY



**SEEING RED**  
A sea of dried tomatoes in the village of Oia in Santorini

→ CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

its navel of solidified black lava smouldering with even greater intensity. A single white sailboat inched across this expanse of silvery blue – a spectacle that was mine, all mine, as the only guest at The Vasilicos, a seven-suite hotel poised on a cliff edge.

“We were a socially distant hotel long before social distancing,” said Artemis, the hotel’s upbeat sommelier, gesturing towards the huge terracotta terraces, screened by giant geraniums and volcanic boulders that glistened in the sunshine.

On cue, a squabble of seagulls performed a slow-motion dance routine, gliding in concentric circles, before landing on one of the whitewashed roofs in single file, then swooping off one at a time. I could have sworn they were two metres apart.

Sheltered below the 200-year-old monastery of Saint Nicholas, The Vasilicos is situated at a safe remove from Imerovigli, a white tumble of interlocking roofs and balconies, domes and chimneys. A quiet study in good taste, the hotel’s tiered suites are expansive in comparison to most *ypostakia*, the humble cave houses burrowed into Santorini’s challenging landscape.

Once the summer house of a charismatic art collector who fell for Santorini in the 1980s, The Vasilicos still feels like a home; not least because of the endearing staff, who walk the tricky tightrope between obliging and familiar with finesse. This combination of peaceful seclusion and genuine warmth felt just right at this

precarious moment for travel. The complete absence of tourists on an island that has become wholly reliant on tourism felt both wonderful and surreal. The Instagram pin-up of the Greek islands, Santorini welcomed more than two million visitors in 2019.

That’s a lot of people for a small island with a population of around 15,000 – and a huge strain on the island’s fragile infrastructure and ecosystem. This year, nobody knows how many tourists will turn up. Anecdotal evidence suggests that around one third of hotels on Santorini will open this season. The rapacious hoteliers with multiple properties intend to open only one, rewarding the lucky guests able to make the trip with upgrades. Although cancellations outweigh reservations, most small hotel owners are gamely soldiering on to



**MEN OF THE CLOTH**  
Greek Orthodox priests in the capital, Fira

## ESSENTIALS

## GETTING THERE

Greece is included on the list of countries from which UK visitors can return without the need to quarantine; this applies from July 10. Direct flights to Greece resume on July 15. Aegean Airlines ([aegeanair.com](http://aegeanair.com)) flies several times a day to Santorini. Information: [discovergreece.com/cyclades/santorini](http://discovergreece.com/cyclades/santorini)

## WHERE TO STAY

Of the seven suites at The Vasilicos ([thevasilicos.com](http://thevasilicos.com)), the most intimate is Efta, a romantic nook on the rim of the caldera; if you want to make a grand gesture, book the Belvedere for its huge terrace. Don’t miss the tour de force, a five-course degustation menu available for just two tables at a time (including non-guests, if you ask nicely). For something self-contained, try Vora ([voravillas.com](http://voravillas.com)), three ultra-exclusive villas dangling over the precipice, or Cycladica ([cycladica.com](http://cycladica.com)), a cluster of beautifully restored cave houses in Oia, owned by a family of architects who have worked hard to preserve the village’s architectural heritage.

## WHERE TO EAT

As Santorini’s wines have grown in stature, local wineries have developed increasingly sophisticated tasting rooms. Vassaltis Vineyards ([vassaltis.com](http://vassaltis.com)) has the most exciting food and wine pairings, while Venetsanos ([venetsanoswinery.com](http://venetsanoswinery.com)) has sensational views. The wine list at Oia Vineyard ([oiavineyard.gr/en](http://oiavineyard.gr/en)) ticks off the island’s greatest hits, served with Cycladic meze and heaps of charm in a courtyard and roof terrace hidden in Oia’s backstreets. Aktaion ([aktaionsantorini.com](http://aktaionsantorini.com)) in Firostefani has been serving white aubergine rolls with feta and mint since 1922; here, the caldera views come without the sky-high prices. Overlooking the fishing harbour of Vlichada, To Psaraki ([topsarakigr](http://topsarakigr)) is the quintessential seaside taverna; order the smoked eel and lentil salad and swordfish skewers. Pentozali, a Cretan kafeneion in Mesaria village, serves a few delicious dishes under the eucalyptus trees, such as lemony greens and beef ragout with spaghetti.



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avoid laying off loyal staff. Both business owners and seasonal workers are nervous about the possibility of tourists importing Covid-19 to an island that bypassed the pandemic thanks to an early and draconian nationwide lockdown. The Greek government’s U-turn over its initial policy to test all incoming travellers for Covid-19 – opting for random spot tests instead – is a high-risk strategy, especially for more isolated islands than Santorini, which have limited healthcare facilities and transport links.

Right now, though, Santorini feels like the safest, most beautiful place in the world. There are no sunbeds on the black pebble beaches; only a few families picnicking on meatballs and watermelon under wonky parasols. In Oia, the usual crush of people, filtering the sunset through their phone screens, has vanished. There are no Asian couples posing for faux wedding shoots, no blonde influencers straddling whitewashed walls in hot pants. I seemed to be the sole resident of Imerovigli, apart from a shadowy figure listening to a tiny transistor radio behind the lace curtain of a tiny house cloaked in bougainvillea.

“It’s an incredible privilege to see Santorini like this – I’ve never experienced anything like it in my lifetime,” said Yannis Bellonias, as we surveyed the empty fishbowl of the caldera from Vora, three high-impact villas carved into a cliff face. Slender, soft-spoken and faintly rakish, Bellonias is a major player in Santorini’s tourism industry. His family opened one of the island’s first travel agencies in the early 1980s. What started as a seasonal sideline mushroomed into a business empire including hotels, luxury villas, and rental cars. It’s the kind of success story that has played out in many local households, fast-tracked by the influx of cruise ships, day trippers, and Chinese tourists during the past decade.

Today, the few locals who are not directly involved in the tourism industry depend on it indirectly – from construction workers to taxi drivers and farmers. Even the high-school physics teacher, Thanos Papagiannopoulos, moonlights as a walking tour guide during the summer. After stints on the wildly remote islands of Amorgos and Sikinos, Papagiannopoulos moved to Santorini five years ago. He wasn’t prepared for the high prices, heavy traffic, or lack of affordable housing, but he has tapped into the underlying magic that no amount of unregulated construction and careless consumerism can diminish: the comfort of rituals, tight-knit communities, and rural traditions that run as deep as the volcanic fissures in the crater’s abyss.

If you book a tour with Santorini Walking Tours, Papagiannopoulos will share unimaginable secrets with you: chapels suspended in the perforated cliffs, hot springs bubbling up through the lava, a zigzagging path to a rocky



**SQUIDS IN**  
It’s still possible to eat cheaply in Santorini

outcrop from which you can dive into the caldera.

Papagiannopoulos lives in the dust-coloured *kastelli* (fortified castle) of Emborio, a medieval village marooned above the (now empty) fray of Perissa beach. Churches almost outnumber the houses. There is only a smattering of Airbnb rentals amid the pressed plaster cottages, but the quaint village has become a favourite backdrop for wedding photographers.

“Only one bride and groom have come by all month and they were Greek,” Georgia Zampeli confided, as we chatted over homemade baklava in her living room, surrounded by a dazzling tableau of religious iconography, family photos, and dolls in hand-sewn outfits. A local who has lived here all her life, Zampeli still works as a seamstress in her seventies. Pin-sharp, with

shining eyes and a cloud of white hair, she was embroidering sequins on to a velvet altarpiece, destined for a church festival. Her husband sat behind her, a quiet but comforting presence.

Their house sits at the entrance to Emborio. Zampeli has a habit of plying passers-by with homemade biscuits. Once, she was making a batch of tomato fritters when two foreign women peered into her porch, tempted by the aromas. Zampeli offered them a taste. Suddenly, 30 people were clamouring around her front door. “I didn’t realise it was a tour group. When I came back inside, the whole tray was gone,” Zampeli said.

This kind of spontaneous generosity is what the Greek hospitality industry was built on. “Now, people want gold, not god,” Zampeli said matter-of-factly.

Long before the lure of the tourist dollar, Santorini’s most successful exports – cherry tomatoes, wine, and pumice stone quarried from the teetering cliffs – brought great wealth to the island’s landowners and shipowners. A terrible earthquake in 1956, which destroyed hundreds of homes and caused dozens of casualties, signalled a sharp decline in the island’s fortunes. Tourism kick-started Santorini’s economy again in the 1970s; it has since altered the landscape almost beyond recognition. From Emborio, you could once see a sea of red tomatoes as far as the shore. Now it is a sea of white houses.

The value of land has put enormous pressure on the island’s acclaimed wine industry: the price of grapes has shot up fivefold in recent years. “Planting low-yield vines hardly makes financial sense when you could sell a plot of



**SHIP SHAPE** Boats docked in the harbour with cliff-top Oia village as a backdrop

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**STEPPING OUT**  
Descending from Oia town, main; Katikies hotel, below



**THERE BY A WHISKER**  
Cats play on a staircase in the shade

different things. But this year, visitors will experience the island's raw beauty unadulterated.

The red and black beaches will be gloriously free of sunbeds and jet skis. You won't get stuck behind a snarl of coaches, have to jump out of your taxi and run down the hairpin bends to Athinios port, trailing luggage, so you don't miss your ferry. You won't have to grapple with selfie sticks to watch the sunset from Oia, or anywhere else. There will be no need to make restaurant reservations weeks in advance. The local winemakers, chefs, shop and hotel owners will have time to chat. They might even offer you some piping hot tomato fritters, too.

It might be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. Or perhaps this shift to more meaningful and thoughtful travel experiences will become part of the new normal.



land for €200,000 [£181,000] for someone to build a hotel," said Yannis Valambous, founder of one of Santorini's wineries, Vassaltis Vineyards.

"Teachers, doctors and waiters can't find an affordable place to live, but hotel owners are making a fortune. Why not build housing for their staff instead of another hotel? Why not subsidise vineyards and sell the grapes to the wineries at a reasonable price? It's time to tone down the excesses and start investing in infrastructure that's important to locals and will create a better experience for the people who come here." As the prime minister's press conference proved, the photo opportunity and the reality of Santorini are two

## FIVE MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCES ON SANTORINI

### WANDER THROUGH AN ANCIENT CITY

Surprisingly few visitors to Santorini bother to visit the extraordinary archaeological site of Akrotiri, a Bronze Age city buried under ash by a devastating volcanic eruption around 1625BC. Without the whistle-stop tour groups disgorged from cruise ships, it's an even more poignant experience to wander among the dusty streets and houses full of ghosts. To fully appreciate the scale and significance of Akrotiri, you need a good guide, such as Eugenia Papadopoulou (santoriniguide.gr). Afterwards, visit the Museum of Prehistoric Thera (santorini.gr-santorini.com/museums/prehistoric-museum.htm), in the island capital Fira, to admire some of the Minoan frescoes that adorned Akrotiri's houses, as well as ceramics, jewellery and objects of exquisite artistry.

### BLAZE YOUR OWN TRAIL

First impressions suggest there's not an empty plot of land left in Santorini's arid hills and craggy perimeter. Strike out on

foot and you'll discover thriving farms, medieval chapels, abandoned villages, and a deeper connection with the austere, intense landscape. The most famous hike is the three-hour trail from Fira to Oia, which slithers along the perilous edge of the caldera. The two-hour trek from the charming village of Pyrgos to Ancient Thera offers equally giddy views, with a prize at the finish line: spectacular ruins suspended in the sky. Santorini Walking Tours (santorini-walkingtours.com) specialises in private and small group hikes.

### SEE THE ISLAND FROM THE WATER

Thousands of years of history are etched into Santorini's multicoloured cliffs. The frosting of white pumice marks the Minoan explosion that created the sunken caldera; black boulders studded in the red magma represent volleys of molten lava that shot out of the volcano. This geological marvel is even more impressive from sea level. Now is the time to take a sunset cruise around the



**ON THE RIGHT PATH**  
The monastery of Profitis Ilias, above; cherry tomatoes with feta cheese and capers, left; and the ibex statue at the Museum of Prehistoric Thera, below

caldera, without the customary cruise ships and catamarans cluttering the horizon. If you're up for adventure, catch your own lunch on a fishing trip with Georagos Fishing Tours (santorini-fishing-tours.com). The traditional wooden vessel is skippered by the enterprising Anthi, a young woman whose family have been fishing for generations.

### TAKE A POTTED HISTORY TOUR

Fifty-odd years ago, there were nine tomato-canning factories on Santorini. Tourism has squeezed most of the juice out of the island's sweetest crop: the cherry tomatoes that ripen by absorbing morning dew from porous pumice stones. The Nomikos tomato canning plant in

Vlychada was state-of-the-art when it was built in 1945; recently converted into an industrial museum, the Santorini Arts Factory (santorini-artsfactory.gr/en-museum) is an intriguing relic of this agricultural heritage. A couple of warehouses also contain a contemporary art gallery and design shop.

### DISCOVER SANTORINI'S FORGOTTEN LITTLE SISTER

It's a 10-minute boat ride from Ammoudi to the tiny island of Thirasia, but it's like travelling back decades to a time before mass tourism. Day trippers occasionally flood the tiny harbour to eat at one of the seaside tavernas. Very few of them hike up the jagged staircase to the village of Manolas, which is charming in its lack of pretension and gentification.

Fewer still venture as far as Potamos, a hamlet slotted in a canyon, or into the terraced hills speckled with deserted cave houses. Be warned, Thirasia's handful of tavernas are mediocre. Save your appetite for a late lunch of grilled fish and tomato fritters at Dimitris taverna (dimitris-ammoudi-restaurant.com) when you disembark at Ammoudi.

# At long last, there is light at the end of the tunnel

## HERITAGE RAIL

Across Britain, steam engines are gearing up for the summer, says **Daniel Puddicombe**

As the country eases its way out of lockdown, many of Britain's celebrated heritage and steam railway lines have announced dates for the first journeys of the summer. They have had to make modifications, adapting to the changed times with face masks and social distancing. There will be tighter booking conditions – gone for the time being are the rover tickets, allowing you to hop from train to train throughout the day as you please. Instead, in come limited, pre-booked round trips. Compartment carriages will be more in evidence than the more common open versions. On-board dining will be more modest.

But the UK's trains are slowly gearing up to get back on track. Here are six great journeys to whet the appetite. All aboard! (Though, of course, not all at the same time...)

### ENGLISH BEAUTY SAPHOS TRAINS

The Crewe-based mainline charter company operates long-distance day trips with steam; the first post-lockdown trip involves its flagship locomotive, No.70000 Britannia, at the head of the train running along the Settle-Carlisle line – arguably the most scenic in Britain – which takes in the stunning Ribbleshead Viaduct. The "Brit" will also have its work cut out climbing up the "Long Drag" to Ais Gill, the highest railway summit in England.

Seating capacity has been cut by 40 per cent in order to adhere to social-distancing regulations, with plastic screens installed between seats. The dining levels have not changed, with meals still being prepared in a kitchen car and silver-served. However, all staff will be required to wear PPE.

☐ Saphos Trains resumes charter trips from July 15. From £95; saphostrains.com



**FOLLOW THAT RIVER...**  
A stop on the Severn Valley Railway

train", The Jacobite, linking Fort William and Mallaig, runs along the stunning West Highland Line, crossing the iconic Glenfinnan Viaduct. In summer, two trains a day run. West Coast Railways says it will board passengers in a staggered formation, and the overall seating capacity has been halved to aid social distancing.

☐ The Jacobite resumes daily from July 17; return fare from £43; westcoastrailways.co.uk

### SUSSEX STYLE BLUEBELL RAILWAY

Celebrating its 60th anniversary in August, the oldest preserved railway in the UK offers views of the Ashdown Forest and will operate trains between its southern terminus of Sheffield Park and Kingscote; East Grinstead station will remain closed. Three or four dining trains a day are also planned – these will start and finish at either Sheffield Park or Horsted Keynes. On the dining services, food will not be silver-served; meals will be pre-boxed and collected from the station platforms before boarding.

☐ The railway aims to reopen from Aug 7. For prices see bluebell-railway.com



**HAPPY RETURNS**  
The Bluebell Railway turns 60 in August

### NORTHERN MAJESTY RAIL CHARTER SERVICES

Another variation on the stunning Settle-Carlisle line comes with the launch this summer of a new thrice-daily charter service connecting Skipton with Appleby and including the Ribbleshead Viaduct, to run for eight weeks.

It is only the second regularly timetabled charter train in the UK. The trains will be formed of four BR Mk3 First Class carriages, hauled by vintage Class 47 locomotives. The service is aimed not at enthusiasts but families looking for a nice day out. Optional onward excursions to the Lake District, England's highest market town – Alston – and the South Tynedale Steam Railway are expected to be offered from Appleby.

☐ From July 20. Return fares from £29 per person, or £99 for a family of four; railcharterservices.co.uk

### SCOTTISH SPLENDOUR THE JACOBITE

Better known as the "Harry Potter

### MIDLANDS MAGIC SEVERN VALLEY RAILWAY

The SVR will operate along the whole length of its line, which hugs the River Severn with ample opportunities to take in the view. Two trains are planned to start out of its Kidderminster headquarters and one out of Bridgnorth at the northern end of the line, although passengers will be able to alight at Highly (which is roughly halfway along the line) and have the option of visiting the engine house museum.

☐ Reopening Aug 1. Compartments, which can seat up to six people, cost £75; svr.co.uk

### COTSWOLDS CLASS GLOUCESTERSHIRE AND WARWICKSHIRE RAILWAY

The volunteer-run organisation is operating round trips out of its base at Toddington along the 14-mile line, which offers views of the rolling Cotswold Hills. Unlike the other lines and companies mentioned here, face masks are unlikely to be obligatory when passengers are seated in their compartments. An open carriage will also be offered for single travellers.

☐ Reopening Aug 15. Compartments £25 per person for a minimum of two people, with a £10 surcharge for additional passengers; gwsr.com



**TAKE THE HIGH ROAD** The Jacobite crosses the Glenfinnan Viaduct, Scotland