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Luxury travel



Xinara village and Mount Exomvourgo

Low-key luxe on the island of Tinos

It's a peaceful alternative to nearby Mykonos — and has a stylish new place to stay. Louise Roddon checks in

Think of the Cyclades and what springs to mind? A cosmopolitan archipelago of beautiful islands with tamarisk-backed beaches and pretty whitewashed villages? All that is true, yet in the case of glitzy Mykonos or cruise-magnet Santorini, these are islands that are often overcrowded and overpriced.

Well, I have stumbled on a pastoral paradise that has somehow managed to remain off-radar — and no, it's not a tiny outcrop with a couple of gorgeous villas. I'm talking about the Cyclades' third largest island, wildly beautiful, fertile and rambling, where a strong food-and-wine scene and a smattering of smart tavernas mix with pitch-perfect beaches.

Its name is Tinos. And what is particularly baffling is that here is a place just 15 minutes by high-speed ferry from Mykonos. Somehow Tinos has managed to escape mass tourism; I'll return to the reasons for this later. First, however, let me take you from its port to the centre of the island: to the hamlet of Xinara.

Tinos has never been noted for luxury accommodation. Sure, there are pleasantly simple apartments to rent among its 50-odd villages, but in the heart of this hamlet is an amazing new place to stay, Xinara House, set beneath a dramatic volcanic plug called Mount Exomvourgo.

This former bishop's residence, built in the 18th century, has been exquisitely restored by its owners, the English designers Susan and Peter Marston. And it's the perfect place if you see luxury as an opportunity to switch off in gorgeous surroundings, tune in to unadulterated night skies and soak up utter silence.

Here is a glamorous yet homely space for gatherings of friends and families. With five bedrooms and an adjoining self-contained blacksmith's apartment, it would be easy to have a house party for 13, yet still find room to breathe.

The look is Soho Farmhouse stripped of the chatter of strangers and transported to a dinky Greek hamlet. Mix in original artwork — Dan Hillier, Andy Warhol, Gilbert & George posters and a Rachel Whiteread sofa — and set these against a startling palette of lime green and turquoise, powder blue and turmeric yellow.

There are quirky touches that save Xinara House from looking too *Elle Decor*-staged: little alcoves filled with tarnished icons, local baskets and a wall hung with willow-pattern serving dishes. It is these touches, alongside wildflower displays, fluffy blankets and old embroidered sheets, that give the house a strong sense of home — albeit an elegant home.

Equally appealing are the outside spaces — the front terrace with its traditional island pebble-pattern paving; the old marble fanlights with carved reliefs of boats and plants. And, at the back of the house, there is a series of rising garden terraces where almond and walnut trees mix with flowerbeds, cacti and fruit trees.

It is on one of these that I find myself snoozing one warm spring afternoon, beneath a Biro-blue sky, where falcons circle the summit of Mount Exomvourgo. Goats bleat from impossibly precarious perches and, when I close my eyes, I hear birdsong and the tick of insects zooming in and out of wildflowers. My nose prickles to the pungent smells of wild thyme and jasmine and it is all so gorgeous, so unutterably peaceful that I feel as if I've



Blacksmith's villa at Xinara House

slipped the moorings of the modern world and fallen into a classical bucolic idyll.

This sense of time-slippage is true of much of Tinos. We find countless unspoiled villages and deserted beaches, hallmarked by silence and sand, not loud music or highly priced loungers.

Part of the reason Tinos has been saved from mass development is its religious heritage. The Greek Orthodox church owns swathes of land here and has a say on how many bars can be developed. Panayia Evangelistria, a church above the island capital of Chora, is famous as a place of pilgrimage, having been built on the spot where an icon considered to have healing powers was found in 1822.

Thousands of pilgrims flock to the island year-round, particularly during the

biggest religious festivals in March and August, so it is to this important site that we head one morning to see what all the fuss is about. We take one of the island's newly renovated donkey trails, enjoying a pleasing yomp past meadows peppered with wild daisies and puffy yellow ferula, alongside hedgerows bristling with poppies as flimsy as silk, and banks of wild gorse.

Tinos's fertile interior unfolds: humpy green slopes wrinkled with stone terracing; granite windmills and exquisite Venetian stone dovescotes — a reminder of an old island delicacy, pigeon marinated in oil and vinegar.

Eventually we reach the church and its monastery, a big and blowsy neo-classical building stuffed with jewelled votives,



PETER MARSTON



Need to know

flickering candles and silver icons. Outside, its marble steps are draped with a grubby red carpet for those pilgrims who journey here on their knees from the port, simply to kiss the icon. The surrounding shops bear testimony to their dedication: no buckets and spades or cheap sunglasses are displayed here, just bundles of long spindly candles propped against open doorways.

Catholicism (a remnant of Venetian rule) is also prominent on the island. Chapels, churches and spindly bell towers are dotted among those pleated fertile hills and 50 or so villages, but before exploring these, our minds are set on Tinos's beaches.

Ten minutes north from Xinara House we discover an empty arc of cliff-hugged blond sand at Kolimbithra, where we gaze

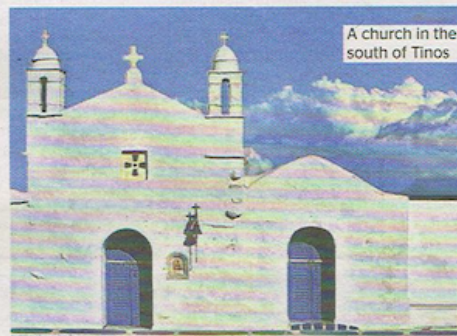
Louise Roddon was a guest of Xinara House (xinarahouse.com), which has seven nights in the house and Blacksmith's apartment (sleeping up to 13), from €2,044 in low season, €9,282 in high season. For Xinara House on its own (sleeping up to 10), the price is from €1,365 in low season, €7,140 in high season. Easyjet flies to Mykonos from Gatwick from £210.47. A return super-speed ferry to Tinos from Mykonos costs about €16



A reception room at Xinara House



A terrace at Xinara House



A church in the south of Tinos

on to ridiculously clear bottle-green waters and long for the sea to be warm enough for a quick dip.

There seems to be a beach to suit all tastes: at Livada, massive breakers smack against the encircling rocks; at the stretch beneath Kardiani village, palapa shades line a calm strip of sand; and as we travel up zigzagging roads to this cliff-perched village, tiny empty coves appear in the nibbled coastline and mesmerising sea views over to the island of Syros are glimpsed through poker-straight cypresses.

We stop eventually in Kardiani's small square and find a village as appealing as anything you would find on Mykonos or Santorini, yet devoid of suffocating crowds. Geraniums spill from cobalt-blue windowsills, narrow alleys end in lime-washed steps and cats snooze beneath plane trees. There's not a soul about, save the odd black-clad old woman and the distant sound of donkey hooves clapping over marbled lanes.

That same appealing emptiness is found in Volax, a place whose surrounding fields look as if the gods have rained down colossal boulders in a fit of bad temper. Even the tiny houses carry an organic misshapen look, with various theories surrounding the appearance of these giant smooth rocks, from meteor showers to volcanic eruption. Vineyards and fields of wild artichokes encircle Volax and among its narrow lanes is a cottage industry of basket weavers working from darkened front rooms.

There's an altogether livelier scene in Pyrgos, a sizeable village in the heart of the island's marble-quarrying district. Tinos's mottled marble grew in fame in the 19th century (some was even used to build the Louvre and Buckingham Palace), and at the entrance to the village we find a

marble-clad bus shelter that looks more elegant renaissance portico than practical public shade.

And goodness, Pyrgos is a pretty place, with boutiques selling decent silver jewellery and clothes you would want to buy — and, inevitably, a museum devoted to all things marble. However, feeling more sybaritic than cerebral, we head instead to a tree-dappled huddle of bars and tavernas and feast on fennel fritters and artichokes stuffed with capers, accompanied by the local award-winning Nissos beer.

Tinos's food scene is so special that you must bear with me if I detail its delights. There is justification in doing so, for the island's younger generation is wisely flagging up home-grown produce that zings with flavour.

There's an annual Tinos Food Paths festival in May that promotes individual villages' prized specialties: cheeses sealed in gourds to mature; herb-crusted, air-dried louza pork; spicy Tifian sausage and, inevitably, those enormous artichokes — frittered or marinated, served in salads or softened into stews.

Pre-phyllloxera organic wines are also finding favour here. The Paris-born producer Jérôme Binda uses foot-stomping methods and natural yeasts to help to create his highly drinkable Domaine de Kalathas range — take my tip and buy a case, or order a bottle over a lazy dinner in one of the island's better tavernas.

Tinos does rough and ready too, and in the most charming way, as we find on an evening in Mirsini, a drowsy little hilltop village with far-reaching views over the valley and mountains.

At its heart is Tereza's grocery store — you know the type of place: plastic dolls and board games sit next to rows of tinned vegetables and every cleaning fluid imaginable. Yet Tereza's is also a taverna,

so we sit one night beneath a display of dishwasher tablets, gorging ourselves silly on earthy beetroot salads, feta drenched in honey, cabbage stuffed with pork, and spicy cow's cheese.

It's all home-grown and home-produced, the epitome of comfort food, and no main dish costs more than €12 (£10). And Tereza, with her booming voice, is a gem, happy to serve the hungry until two or three in the morning. You would be hard pressed to find such authenticity in Mykonos or Santorini.

Yet Tinos is beginning to attract outside attention — thankfully in a restrained way. A plan to build an airport was quashed, the islanders voting to save precious agricultural land rather than waste it on a runway. Even so, there is pleasure to be found in the smattering of tavernas that have sprung up. A new restaurant, Marathia, in Agios Fokas, just south of Chora, has a cool exposed-stone and bamboo-clad vibe. And Thalassaki, a taverna in Isteria Bay, has gained such kudos with the moneyed of Mykonos that there is even a helipad next to it.

When we fetch up one lunchtime, the reason for Thalassaki's popularity becomes all too evident, for here is a simple taverna set on the water's edge — so close to the sea, in fact, that waves regularly lap at your feet. As lovely as the setting proves (and the seafood is exquisite: marinated anchovies and smoked herring mousse; flavoursome octopus; tender salted cod), it is a shock to see so many po-faced diners sitting in silence, dutifully mindful of their expensive monochrome leisurewear.

Tinos has already worked its magic on us. In only a few days we have become accustomed to smiles, to the exchange of "Kalimera" and the impromptu hug from a total stranger. Long may that authenticity last.