

As Development Alters Greek Islands' Nature and Culture, Locals Push Back

As a proliferation of pools threatens some water supplies and housing costs skyrocket, people of the Cycladic islands say the Aegean islands' character is being lost to real-estate homogenization.



Image 1: The Livadi port in Serifos, Greece. Credit: Maria Mavropoulou for The New York Times



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Reporting from Athens

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With a deluge of foreign visitors fueling seemingly nonstop development on once pristine Greek islands, local residents and officials are beginning to fight back, moving to curb a wave of construction that has started to cause water shortages and is altering the islands' unique cultural identity.

Tourism is crucial in Greece, accounting for a fifth of the country's economic output, and communities on many islands depend on it. But critics say the development has

spiraled out of control in some areas, particularly on islands like Mykonos and Paros, where large-scale hotel complexes have mushroomed in recent years.

Teachers and other professionals in those and other Cycladic islands, a popular cluster in the Aegean Sea, have struggled to find affordable housing amid an influx of visitors and home buyers, fueling [growing protests by locals](#) over the repercussions of rampant tourism.

The islands, at the forefront of Greece's tourism boom, are facing increasingly urgent calls to preserve their natural and cultural heritage.

The number of foreign arrivals to Greece broke another record in 2023, with 30.9 million in the first 10 months of the year, according to the Bank of Greece — an increase of 17 percent over the previous year and surpassing prepandemic tourism levels.



Image 2: Tourists waiting to board a ferry at the port of Piraeus, Greece, in September 2023. The number of foreign arrivals to Greece broke another record in 2023, with 30 million in the first 10 months of the year, according to the Bank of Greece. Credit: Marco Arguello for The New York Times

To meet such demand, 461 new hotels opened on Greece's southern Aegean islands from 2020 to 2023, according to data from the Hellenic Chamber of Hotels compiled by the Athens-based Research Institute for Tourism. Of those, 126 were opened last year, according to the institute.

The proliferation of swimming pools has put a serious strain on water supply on Cycladic islands like Sifnos and Tinos, and the aggressive expansion of seaside bars over pristine beaches on many islands has generated a backlash from locals.

Conservationists and architects are also leading a push to preserve the character of the Cyclades, which they say is at risk of being obliterated amid a real estate-driven homogenization of vacation destinations.



Image 3: The map of Greece shows the Cycladic Islands, highlighting Mykonos, Paros, Serifos, Sifnos, Syros and Tinos. By The New York Times

The Athens-based Museum of Cycladic Art, which showcases the unique marble figurines that were produced on those islands in antiquity and influenced the course of Western art, is working with local authorities and associations to the same end.

Greece's tourism minister, Olga Kefalogianni, pledged recently that untrammelled growth would no longer go unchecked.

"We have a clear vision and goal for the sustainability of destinations and of our tourism product," she said last month at a conference in Athens. She said that going forward, there would be a greater emphasis on protecting the natural environment and cultural identity of individual destinations, with legislation being drafted to support that effort.

Those pressing for change are not convinced.



Image 4: Crowds gathering for the sunset in August 2022 in the Little Venice of Mykonos, Greece. Credit: Maria Mavropoulou for The New York Times

“It’s very easy to talk about sustainable development, but all they actually do is approve new investments,” said Ioannis Spilanis, a former general secretary for island policy at Greece’s shipping ministry and now head of the Aegean Sustainable Tourism Observatory.

Mr. Spilanis, a native of Serifos, was one of several experts who addressed a November conference on Mykonos about how tourism has “radically changed” the Cyclades. The event was organized by local authorities who recently appealed to a top Greek court over a project for a five-star hotel complex and a marina for superyachts. (The court allowed the development but curtailed the marina’s size.)

Nikos Chrysogelos, a former member of the European Parliament with the Ecologist Greens party who has launched a Cyclades-wide sustainability initiative, said developers were overlooking the singular features of the Cyclades and treating them like city suburbs.

“You used to see farm buildings, dry stone walls — there was a harmony to the landscape,” said Mr. Chrysogelos, a Sifnos native. “Now you see roads, hotel complexes, high walls. It could be Dubai or Athens.”

Nikos Belios, a secondary school principal and the head of the local farmers’ and beekeepers’ cooperative, said Sifnos had experienced an influx of investors “from all over the planet, building colossal structures, like fortresses, with huge walls” to cater to wealthy tourists.

“They arrive, they load up their Cayennes or Jeeps or Hummers, and they lock themselves away,” he said of the tourists. “They have no interest in Sifnos — it’s a dot on the map for them.”



Image 5: Cali Mykonos opened in July 2022. Credit: Maria Mavropoulou for The New York Times

Last year, Maria Nadali, the mayor of Sifnos, urged the Greek government to put the brakes on “dizzying” tourist development — including banning the construction of further private swimming pools and “cave houses” built into mountain slopes, a trend that she said was altering the island’s “morphology and unique architectural physiognomy.”

The Museum of Cycladic Art has also become involved, trying to help islanders protect the islands’ [natural environment and heritage](#). The museum is holding programs on eight islands, with topics including preserving the ancient marble quarries of Paros — the source of many Cycladic antiquities — and documenting and promoting traditional water management practices on Andros.

“We’re trying to help them protect their heritage,” said Cassandra Marinopoulou, the museum’s chief executive officer and president, citing as key threats increased tourism, the abandonment of local traditions and the effects of climate change.

The initiative also aims to support cultural tourism on the islands, with digital walking tours and the promotion of local gastronomy, said Ms. Marinopoulou, whose family is from Andros.



Image 6: Taverna Teraza in Myrsini village, Tinos, Greece. Credit: Maria Mavropoulou for The New York Times

Taverna Teraza in Myrsini village, Tinos, Greece. Credit: Maria Mavropoulou for The New York Times

“We don’t want the Cycladic food to disappear because the younger generations sell the family taverna and it becomes a sushi bar,” she said. “What a visitor wants is authenticity. They don’t want to see something they’ve seen in Ibiza — that’s not authentic.”

Amid the glut of five-star hotels, some businesses are seeking to promote “slow travel” as an alternative model that supports local communities rather than sidelining them.

One of those, the [travel startup Boundless Life](#), exposes foreign visitors to local culture with pottery workshops, textile factory visits and Greek lessons. “When choosing new Boundless locations, we’re very keen on identifying cultural gems and protecting them,” said Elodie Ferchaud, a founder of the travel startup, which has brought scores of foreign families to Syros for three-month stays.

But many natives of the Cycladic islands say that a full overhaul of Greece’s tourism model is needed.

“We need to find a way to survive,” Mr. Spilanis said. “Destroying the very assets you’re sitting on is not the way.”



Image 7: Santorini is one of the Cycladic islands. Credit: Maria Mavropoulou for The New York Times

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