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THE SUNDAY TIMES

Travel

Make a splash



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Travel Greece

Crescent-shaped cookies thickly dusted with icing sugar and studded with toasted almonds crumble onto our plates at the Chrisanthidis cake shop (chrisanthidis.gr). Called kourabiedes, they are usually eaten at Christmas, but here in the city of Kavala, in northern Greece, they are enjoyed year-round. Derived from kurabiye, the Turkish word for cookie, the name is a reminder of centuries of Ottoman Empire rule, which lasted here until 1912.

"Where?" my friends had said, when I told them where we were heading. Like me, they're more used to holidaying on the Greek islands or the popular peninsulas of the mainland. But Kavala? Blank looks.

Relatively unknown to British tourists, this part of Eastern Macedonia and Thrace is a magnet for visitors from the Balkans, lured by gorgeous beaches, rich history and impressive archaeological remains (it is two and a half hours' drive south from the Bulgarian border).

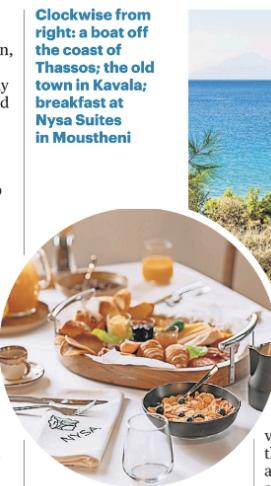
But there is another reason that they keep coming back: the food. For centuries Byzantines, Ottomans, Jews, merchants, refugees and intellectuals mingled and prospered here, resulting in some pretty interesting cuisine – deeply flavoured tahini, mussel-studded pilafs, salt-cured fish and sticky "spoon sweets" – typically, whole green figs, walnuts and cherries suspended in a thick, aromatic syrup and served on a spoon.

Panagia, the old town, is the jewel of Kavala. Once a centre for tobacco production, the neighbourhood is home to street after street of smartly renovated, wooden-balconied houses, with decorative tobacco warehouses spreading out from its base. From the huge Byzantine fortress that stands at the top of the hill in Panagia, there are views to Thassos, the most northerly island in the Aegean Sea, and down to the city's ancient aqueduct and bustling harbour, where twice-weekly cruise ships vie for space with sea-battered boats ready to offload their catches.

An Orthodox priest chants the evening prayers at the Ottoman-built, 16th-century St Nicholas Church, originally a mosque, while at nearby Eleftherias Square restaurants lure customers with tantalising aromas of grilled meat. But after watching fishermen untangling their nets, we're up for a fish feast at Savvas, a renowned taverna in Sfageia, the smaller harbour, where we find the most tender octopus and grilled John Dory (main courses from £9; [instagram.com/savvas seafood](https://www.instagram.com/savvas seafood)).

Our comfortable bed for two nights is at the well-run Lucy Hotel, a dazzling, white-painted high-rise on the edge of the city with views over the Aegean (B&B doubles from £142; lucyhotel.gr). It's a ten-minute cab ride from the action, but it's on a beach with crystal waters and on the way to the wine region 25 miles to the west, on the slopes of Mount Pangaion.

Clockwise from right: a boat off the coast of Thassos; the old town in Kavala; breakfast at Nysa Suites in Moustheni



organic vineyards and state-of-the-art winery, we take a tour then try eight of its 13 wines, including one, Biblinos, thrillingly made from a yet unidentified grape variety believed to date from thousands of years ago (tours and tastings free, but book ahead; bibliachora.gr).

We also stop by the family-owned tahini producer Florou in the picturesque village of Mesoropi, watching as sesame seeds are raked onto cooling trays, having been roasted in the wood-fired oven, later to be ground on a century-old granite millstone (instagram.com/tahiniflorou).

Then we continue along the quiet road to the charming village of Moustheni, where an impressive lunch awaits. Three years ago the chef Athanasios Kondylis and his wife, Tavitha, made the bold decision to take their restaurant in a more creative direction, renaming it Bostani Gastronomy. "For many miles in either direction it's only traditional tavernas, so we decided to offer something a bit different," Athanasios says.

Cue the spinach pie salad – freshly picked baby spinach leaves layered with crispy handmade sheets of filo pastry and topped with a feta, dill and mint-enriched yoghurt. It works, as does

the rest, including the loukoumades, mini doughnuts usually sweetened with a sugar syrup but here flavoured with a local sheep's cheese (main courses from £12; [instagram.com/bostani_gastronomy](https://www.instagram.com/bostani_gastronomy)).

We decide to stay in Moustheni overnight, at the stylish Nysa Suites, where the owner will serve a light supper if requested; her chicken soup with lemon, rice and dill sets us up nicely for our hike the next day (B&B doubles from £155; nysasuites.gr).

"There will be lots of wild strawberries growing here next month," promises our mountain guide, Michalis Markou, who cuts away from the main Mesoropi Trail to share foraging tips and show us a hidden pool that is believed to have healing properties. It would take about seven hours to complete the trail, but we walk just a small section as we have a ferry to catch (two-hour guided walks from £43pp; fb.com/symvolon). Sitting six nautical miles

from the mainland is Thassos. With its pine trees, olive groves, mountains and sleepy villages, it offers a tranquil island experience, and has archaeological sites galore.

It also has a reputation for its food. In Limenas, the island's largest town, on its north coast, the Lost Sheep restaurant's innovative take on traditional dishes has been devised by the executive chef Yannis Marinopoulos. Housed in the boutique A for Art hotel, a boldly decorated former tobacco warehouse, the restaurant is a huge draw.

"I'm inspired by tradition," says the island-born chef, who takes local ingredients to new heights – including a salad that involves a tomato coulis, tomato crackers, feta cheese mousse and olive mousse (main courses from £14, B&B doubles from £70; aforarthotel.gr).

Talking of olive, we discover that Thassos has its own, highly coveted black

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This secret corner of northern Greece should be better known for its vibrant food, rich history and uncrowded beaches, says Fiona Sims

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Thassos's olive groves and sleepy villages make it a tranquil island



Beyond the Greek salad

Travel Greece

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 variety called *throuba*. In hot pursuit we drive up the slopes of lushly wooded Mount Ipsario to Panagia, the island's former capital, with its crumbling Macedonian-style mansions, handful of cafés and tavernas and the century-old Sofirelis olive oil.

"*Throuba* olives are rich in polyphenols," Irene Symeonidou says as she shows us around. The firm, wrinkly black olive has a unique bittersweet flavour and makes sensational oil – a couple of large tins return with us to the car (sotirelisoliveoil.gr).

Several jars of intense pine-and-thyme-scented honey from Koutlis, a little further up the mountain, also join us (koutlithoney.com).

Distracted by the island's 56 beaches, we are too late to get a table for dinner at Alexandra Elegance, our swanky hotel on the southern shores of the island, near the village of Limenaria (all-inclusive suites from £195; alexandraelegance.gr). However, we are given a voucher to eat at Oasis, a restaurant five minutes' walk across the beach.

It's a good move as the taverna is turning out something special, with creative dishes such as black



squid ink taramosalata and the baked smoked cheese *Vermion* with sweet pumpkin jam and black sesame (mains from £19; fb.com/oasisbeachbarandgastro). But in the end, it's the pull of the traditional taverna that is strongest, and Thassos has plenty of good ones. On local advice we drive 15 minutes into the hills to Theologos, which is one of the oldest, prettiest villages on the island – with watermills and waterfalls – and which has made spit-roasted lamb and goat a speciality. At the latrou restaurant, after some exquisite stuffed courgette flowers, there is herb-scented lamb, falling off the bone, and whole green fig spoon sweets,

Homes in Panagia, on the island of Thassos

washed down with strong coffee and the grape spirit known as *tsipouro* (mains from £8; fb.com/taverniatrou).

I now understand why the region is so popular with visitors from the Balkans. But its great food, stunning beaches and impressive archaeological sites make it deserving of an even wider audience. And my once sceptical friends agree.

Fiona Sims was a guest of Discover Greece (discovergreece.com) and Hertz car hire (hertz.com). Fly to Kavala

More under-the-radar Greek destinations

ASTYPALEA

This butterfly-shaped island in the Dodecanese group is an hour's flight from Athens and has whitewashed villages, a Venetian castle, traditional windmills and idyllic beaches. Chora, the island's capital, is perched on a clifftop overlooking the Aegean Sea and is a pretty jumble of cobbled alleyways, quiet tavernas, sugar-cube houses and blue-domed churches. The family-owned Maltezana Beach Hotel, steps from a sandy beach on the east of the island, has 42 rooms surrounded by gardens. There is a freshwater pool and a handful of restaurants within walking distance. Chora is a 15-minute drive away.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,159pp, including flights and transfers (tui.co.uk)

KALAMATA

Swerve Athens and opt for this overlooked city on the Peloponnesian peninsula, on the south coast of mainland Greece. Famed for its olive oil, Kalamata has a blue-flag

beach, a buzzy waterfront and a charming terracotta-roofed old town crowned by a medieval castle. There are easy day trips to the Unesco-listed city of Messene, founded in 369BC, and to Sparta. The smart Grecotel Filoxenia Kalamata, on the outskirts of the city and next to a pebble beach, is a ten-minute drive.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,107pp, including flights and transfers (sunvil.co.uk)

METSOVO

A two-hour drive west of Thessaloniki, the unspoilt town of Metsovo has snow-capped mountains, wildflower meadows and sightings of brown bears, wolves and golden eagles. There is skiing and snowboarding in winter, and horse-riding and truffle-hunting in summer. The luxurious five-star Grand Forest Metsovo is on a private mountaintop estate in the black pine forest near the town. Its 62 suites have a swish chalet feel and

overlook the gardens or mountains. The spa has a hammam and outdoor pool with mountain views.

Details B&B doubles from £240 (grand-forest.gr). Fly to Thessaloniki

SERIFOS

One of the least-visited Greek islands, Serifos has more than 70 beaches and is a two-hour ferry ride south of Athens. Livadi, its main port, has a cluster of laid-back tavernas and a golden sandy beach, while Chora, the mountaintop capital, is a three-mile hike uphill (or quick bus trip) from here; the town has great views, whitewashed chapels and a 15th-century castle. Niovi Studios is a family-run B&B on the hillside just above Livadi beach and has eight comfortable rooms, most with sea views. There are several tavernas within walking distance.

Details Seven nights' B&B from £1,036pp, including flights (sunvil.co.uk)

Siobhan Grogan