

Travel | Jenny Woolf walks among the flowers and reckons Aphrodite couldn't have been more beautiful than Kythera

Blooming lovely on goddess of love's island



■ The undiscovered island of Kythera is quiet and tranquil

Two islands claim to be the birthplace of Aphrodite, the ancient Greek goddess of love. One claimant is Cyprus, the other is the island of Kythera, in Greece.

My money is on Kythera, because there is something changeable, almost temperamental about this little known island – it seems to suit those unreliable Greek goddesses.

It is a small, immensely varied island which is often covered in a gauzy veil of cloud which drifts over from the neighbouring Dark Mani in the Peloponnese.

Its high winds can flare up surprisingly quickly, making ferry crossings so hard that travellers are sometimes recommended to come by plane instead.

Certainly, when we moved in, the wind was blowing so wildly that the trees whipped around in a dance that might have inspired Stravinsky, while clouds flew across the sky.

Every so often, they cleared enough to let sunset's bright orange flood through our windows, making the name of our holiday accommodation seem strangely appropriate. It's called Xenonas Fos Ke Choros – the "Guesthouse of Light and Dance".

And, incidentally, this guesthouse is not the kind of place you usually find on a

remote island. It was built by a Dutch couple called Albert and Anita, who emigrated here from the Netherlands a few years ago.

Based on a pared down version of traditional island architecture, it is minimalist, with glossy poured concrete showers and sinks, driftwood mirrors and neutral colours: more what you might find in the pages of *Grand Designs* than at the end of a convenient donkey track from the neighbouring village.

Beautiful

We arrived in late spring, and Aphrodite couldn't have worn more beautiful layers than Kythera did.

The donkey track, the surrounding fields; in fact every patch of countryside glittered with an astonishing variety of wild flowers of all shades, sizes and colours, growing so thickly in some places that it was hard to believe they hadn't been deliberately planted.

Where the fields ended, a dense maquis began, and in the distance, there were forests and the sea.

We'd come in the hopes of walking and were glad to find that the island tracks were well signposted.

Our favourite of several good walks nearby was one which led to the ruined town of Paleochora, (literally "old



■ Walks off the beaten track are the order of the day

town"). It was cloudy when we set off down a lane so lonely that it had blue irises growing down the middle.

The lane soon became a rough and narrow path zig-zagging across steep hillsides, into valleys and across a shallow river grown over with huge reeds.

Soon the clouds cleared, the sky became deep blue, and we still hadn't seen a soul.

Finally, the ruin of Paleochora gleamed in the dis-

tance, with its castle, many chapels and houses perched at the meeting of two deep canyons in the precipitous Kako Langadi gorge.

In its silence and bright afternoon sunshine, Paleochora was a strange, steep and slightly alarming place to scramble around, with only birds and butterflies for company.

In Byzantine times it was the island's capital, well fortified and far from the pirate-infested seas. Despite



■ Flowers are everywhere

this, the Turkish privateer Barbarossa discovered it in 1537, destroyed its buildings and sold its inhabitants as slaves. It was never rebuilt.

In contrast to the climb to Paleochora, the 28 watermills of Milopotamos we saw next day had to be followed along hillside culverts, past waterfalls, and through tangles of undergrowth.

Inhabited

Only one of the mills is inhabited, and when we reached it via a narrow pathway, it was closed up – but its garden was carefully tended. So we wandered among its exotic flowers and trees as if through a magic landscape, without a soul in sight or earshot.

We weren't brave enough to complete the route, which seems to require some climbing skills, but those who have done it talk of beautiful pools where you can bathe, and a pristine beach at the end.

For all its peacefulness now, Kythera's history is mostly a tale of hardship, and many of the population emigrated to Australia, abandoning swathes of the island to ruin. There's a small tourist area by some

lovely beaches on the east coast, with clean, friendly little bars and restaurants, and the main town, Hora, has a few shops selling souvenirs and a splendid Byzantine castle with views down to the little resort of Kapsali. We would have liked more time to explore, but there wasn't enough.

On our last day, though, we did get the chance to visit the market at Potamos.

It is small, but it seems as if almost everyone gathers to sit around, chat, drink coffee or buy lettuces from their neighbours' gardens or honey from their neighbours' bees.

Kythera so far has avoided the over-development that blights so many tourist spots. In the five days we were there, we'd barely started to know it, and to me it seemed as fragile, beautiful and, yet, as tough as a wild flower.

It has managed, miraculously, to avoid the noisy bars, over-developed roads and big hotels that frequent similar continental isles. So I hope the gods will smile on it and on its visitors in the future. And no doubt they will, if Aphrodite has anything to do with it.

The Details

■ More information and photos of the island of Kythera on www.greeka.com.

■ Ryanair and Easyjet fly London-Athens, and there's a daily flight to the island with

olympicair.com for 80 euros.

■ Guesthouse Xenonas Fos Ke Choros can be booked on agreekisland.com. Apartments and studios from 55 to 130 euros per night, depending on season.