

Travel

Longevity Island





A 98-year-old man and his wife on Ikaria Island, Greece

LOCATED IN THE NORTH-EASTERN AEGEAN SEA, ABOUT AN HOUR'S FLIGHT FROM ATHENS, IKARIA QUICKLY CAPTURED THE ATTENTION OF BOTH RESEARCHERS AND JOURNALISTS EAGER TO UNCOVER THE SECRETS BEHIND IKARIA'S GROWING REPUTATION AS THE ISLAND OF LONGEVITY.

Words: **PAULA HAGIEFREMIDIS** Images: **GETTY, THINKSTOCK**

A single main road takes our exit from the airport toward a curling ascent along the south coast. The unfolding scenery is a feast for the senses – just don't look down. Steep terrain plunges to meet azure blue waters that hug rocky cliffs, revealing isolated beachside coves. Delicate hints of wild thyme, sage and oregano perfume the air. Dotted the horizon, the neighbouring Fourni islands huddle in close proximity to one another with dominating Samos island set back in the distance.

It's a far cry from the tourist havens of Santorini and Ios and that overblown postcard image of Greece. But, with its wild beauty, spectacular coastline and a sizable population of people approaching 100 years of age, Ikaria has much to boast about. When author Dan Buettner travelled there in 2004 with a team from National Geographic, as well as some of the world's leading

longevity researchers, they discovered “the climate, therapeutic thermal springs and landscape made the residents of this isolated Aegean island four times more likely to reach 90 years of age than Americans”. The island was declared to be one of five ‘Blue Zones’ – geographical locations around the world where people lived longer. The others are in Costa Rica, Italy, the US and Japan. Buettner's subsequent book, *The Blue Zones*, was a *New York Times* bestseller, and revealed the characteristics (nine of them) that linked these populations together. These include tangible traits such as a plant-based diet, incidental exercise and ceasing to eat even though you are only ‘80 per cent full’, as well as less tangible ones such as knowing your purpose, finding the right social circles and putting your loved ones first. But I'm not here to live out pages from a book; I'm here to see it for myself.



Tea made with fliskouni, a native wild mint



A rainbow and a fishing boat along the coast of Ikaria



OLHA AFANASIEVA



Meat prepared for a traditional Easter meal in an Ikarian village

GINLUCACELIA/ATLANTIC GEOGRAPHIC/GETTY IMAGES



Life on Ikaria

THE FOOD

It is a 20-minute drive from the airport to the main town of Agios Kirykos, Ikaria's capital. We arrive for a late afternoon lunch tucked behind the town's labyrinth-like backstreets, under the shaded canopy of bougainvillea. The unhurried staff at the taverna eventually take our order – Ikaria moves at a steady pace, without a sense of urgency.

The Mediterranean style of eating has come to claim superiority over the average Western diet, and I can see why. Our table quickly fills with plates of blanched wild greens, oven-baked giant beans and the traditional vegetarian dish of soufiko – slow-cooked seasonal vegetables. A main plate of roasted goat completes the meal.

The Ikarian diet, in particular, has been closely linked to the population's higher life expectancy. Predominantly plant based, Ikarians consume a diet rich in wholegrains, beans, olive oil and vegetables. Meat is

eaten sparingly, and a glass of home-made wine will always accompany the meal. Studies conducted by Dr Christina Chrysohoou, a cardiologist at the University of Athens Medical School, observed the food habits on other Greek islands with lower life expectancy, comparing the difference. "The Ikarian's drink a lot of herb tea and small quantities of coffee; daily calorie consumption is not high," Dr Chrysohoou says. "Ikaria is still an isolated island, without tourists, which means that – especially in the villages in the north, where the highest longevity rates have been recorded – life is largely unaffected by the Westernised way of living."

The most commonly consumed herb teas include native plants such as wild marjoram, sage, rosemary and a type of wild mint known as fliskouni. Packed with vitamins and antioxidants, the health effects of these locally grown herbs have been part of the Ikarian diet for centuries. Dr Ilias Leriades, a local physician,

says, "People here think they're drinking a comfortable beverage, but they all double as medicine." Honey is also considered an elixir here. "They have types of honey here you won't see anywhere else in the world," Dr Leriades says. "They use it for everything from treating wounds to curing hangovers or for treating influenza. Old people here will start the day with a spoonful of honey. They take it like medicine."

THE PEOPLE

At lunch, we find ourselves chatting with the locals' neighbouring table: a middle-aged couple, both blessed with dewy olive skin. They are the picture of good health, aside from the intermittent puffs from a tobacco pipe. Having left the equally impressive Ionian island of Ithaca, they stumbled upon Ikaria through a chance introduction by a good friend. What was supposed to be a short-term visit resulted in a lengthy 30-year stay and they have since then called



GIANLUCA COLLA/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC/GETTY IMAGES



IOANNIS DRIMILIS



An elderly woman outside her home on Ikaria Island

GIANLUCA COLLA/NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC/GETTY IMAGES

Ikaria home. They help us make a list of must-see places on the island – Greeks possess an inherent social nature and Ikarians are no exception. As our conversation wraps up, our new friends are already inviting us to their home for coffee, leaving us with phone numbers in the chance we may require further guidance during our stay. A gesture – that I came to discover occurs repeatedly throughout the course of our visit here and is at the heart of what is recognised as Greek hospitality – or in their terms, *philoxenia*.

Prioritising social connections and family relations is customary for Ikarians, a custom that has its roots in a long history of invasion. The population fled from the vulnerable coastline, heading to the centre of the island to create a protected and isolated community, which grew to be rich in tradition and family values,

revealing yet another key component characterising the island’s make-up of how to live a longer life.

COMMUNITY AND FAITH

As Greek Orthodox Christian followers, faith is firmly built into the Ikarian’s mindset. Frequent church attendance and periods of fasting support Buettner’s findings that members of a faith-based community have a greater likelihood of increased life expectancy. Church proceedings on the weekend are always announced with the heavy sound of bell chimes that ring early morning. Patrons pour into the narrow opening of the church’s doors and the customary ritual takes place with the scent of drifting incense filling the air.

If religious visits are of interest, Ikaria has a number of impressive monasteries, including the Byzantine

monastery of Theoskepasti on the north coast. Firmly wedged between two giant slabs of granite, it is nestled high in the mountains beside the nearby village of Pigi, and its walls are covered in frescoes that date from 1686.

DOWN TIME

Afternoon resting time is an indulgence that those of us caught up on the hamster-wheel system of Western society can only dream about. Here, along with most other parts of Greece, it is a practice interwoven into day-to-day life. Businesses close for lunch and re-open late in the afternoon just as the heat of the day rolls off the ground and climbs the soaring mountains. These few crucial hours of rest, undertaken daily, have been proven through research to reduce heart disease mortality by 35 per cent.

Many Ikarians also frequently visit the local hot springs. Some of the best on the island are located in the seaside village of Therma, on the island’s eastern coast. After a steep descent off the main road, the city’s narrow streets lead us to a small open bay, the centre of the village’s hot springs. The hollow mouth of a dug-out cave, the opening of a natural hammam, lies at the south end of the beach while a few metres at the opposite end is the Asklepios Bathhouse – named after the mythical god, protector of medicine and health. A statue in his honour guards the front steps to the bathhouse’s entrance. The hot spring waters are particularly known to be therapeutic to those suffering chronic conditions such as arthritis and rheumatism.

LOVE

With significant lower rates of illnesses and the least likely to suffer from depression or dementia, Ikarians are also known to have an abundantly active sex life. Dr Chrysohou’s studies revealed that 80 per cent of men between the ages of 65 and 100 were still having sex. “We found that most males between 65 and 88 reported sexual activity, but after the age of 90, very few continued to have sex,” Dr Chrysohou says.



Evdilos village

Things to do

COOK

Cooking classes with popular chef American-Ikarian Diane Kochilas are held at her home in the summer months of June and July. Easily accessible from beachside accommodations in Amenistis on the northern coast, the classes are a great way to complement your stay. Kochilas provides hands-on classes demonstrating the techniques of Greek cooking, and cheese, olive oil and wine tasting with local producers is included. There are daily and week-long classes to choose from. For details and bookings visit dianekochilas.com

SHOP

The hillside village of Christos Raches provides a popular base for hikers and is the creative hub of crafty artisans. Ceramic studios, local producers and a women's co-op line the path of the village's main entrance. The work produced in the women's co-

op showcases an impressive variety of locally made food products. Established in 2009 by a group of 11 enthusiastic women eager to promote the islands quality produce, the co-op is a true labour of love. Committed to keeping the history of past generations alive, recipes have been carefully put together and recreated to make up the assortment of teas, liqueur tonics, sweets and compotes that line the inside walls of the shops shelves.

CELEBRATE

For true Ikarian culture, attending at least one of the islands famous *panigiria* is a must. These festive celebrations commemorating patron saints commence late in the afternoon and conclude well into the following morning. As Ikaria is the birthplace of Dionysos – god of wine – the festivities are sure to lend themselves to his honour. For a full list of festivals, visit ikariancentre.com/panigiri

EXPLORE

Ancient ruins and archeological museums are spread across both sides of the island to satisfy the interest of those keen to peruse historical facts. If you're willing to take the 30-kilometre drive to the portside town of Evdilos, on the north coast of the island, be prepared for the hairpin turns that come along with it. I will say, though, the landscape is rewardingly beautiful: sloping green mountains reveal balding rocky tops and sporadic bursts of pink wildflowers flank the ridge. Evdilos is Ikaria's second port and a laidback town that thrives during peak season. This side of the coast evens up a fine balance of activities with the choice of scenic attractions and leisure pursuits. Three kilometres west of Evdilos is the hidden valley of Kambos, a picturesque village with modest ancient ruins found to be the remnants of a Byzantine castle. A secluded pebbled beach is accessed through a winding path off the main road, near the village centre. Travelling further west is the tiny village of Nas. Its name originated from the Greek word *naos*, meaning temple, and it is home to the ruins of a still beautiful temple of the goddess Artemis. 

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