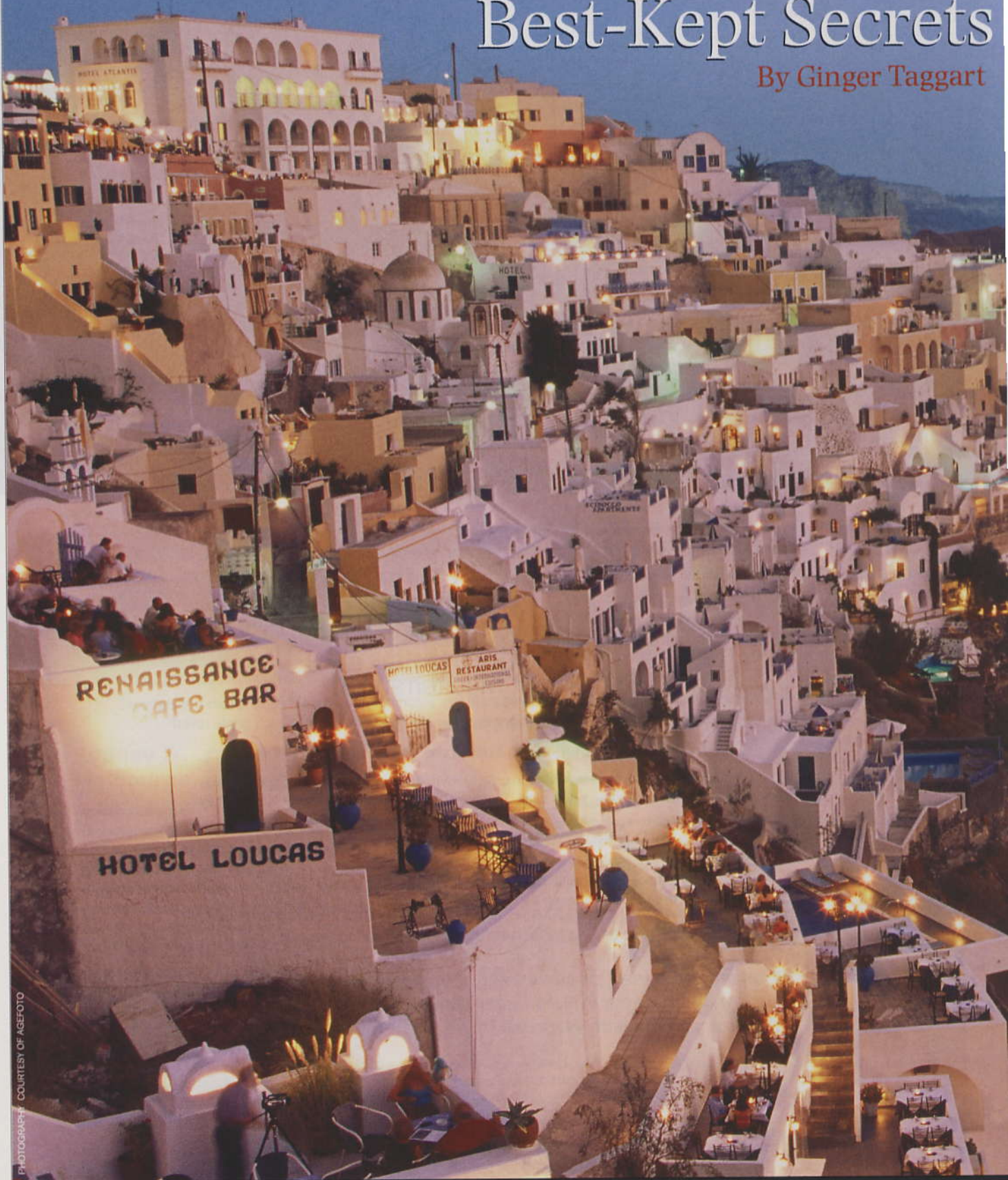


# Greece's

## Best-Kept Secrets

By Ginger Taggart



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## Discover the islands of Folegandros, Sifnos, and Delos before the tourists do.

**I**t's strange to feel as if you are coming home when you arrive in a place for the first time. But this is exactly how I felt when I moved to Greece in 2003 and spent six months exploring the fiercely held local secrets of this amazing tourism playground.

I have tried for many years, unsuccessfully, to decipher the rationale behind the hypnotic spell of relaxation and happiness that seeped into me in Greece. Perhaps it was the beauty of cobalt waters reflecting snow-white houses

wrapped in the warming afternoon sun. Or the echoes of history from Socrates, Plato, and the first origins of democracy that provide the whispering call. Somehow, I think it has more to do with an unseen rhythm of life that captures the hearts of travelers who roam its lands.

With more than 2,000 islands, Greece presents both paradise and perplexity for travelers trying to choose an itinerary. Luckily, your Carlson Wagonlit Travel expert can offer insight to help you plan your dream vacation.

Many of Carlson Wagonlit Travel's preferred travel suppliers offer a wide sampling of Greek destinations. For example, on board the *Splendour of the Seas*, Royal Caribbean Cruise Lines offers travelers a seven-night Greek Isles cruise with stops in both Mykonos and Rhodes. And Trafalgar

Tours offers a nine-day Best of Greece package that visits such classic sites as Olympia, Delphi, and Meteora. You can also consider extending such itineraries to discover

some of Greece's lesser-known islands—today's best-kept secrets that are sure to become

tomorrow's tourism favorites.

Santorini provides spectacular beauty and romance, but don't forget to leave time to explore some of Greece's lesser-known treasures.

## Deciphering the Greek Islands

**For vibrant nightlife, visit Mykonos.** Known for its sandy beaches, cosmopolitan ambiance, and pictorial scenery, Mykonos is also home to a sizzling nightlife scene. Don't miss watching the sunset from one of the bars in Little Venice.

**For ancient wonders, go to Rhodes.** This popular island features a well-preserved medieval city and the original harbor site of the Colossus of Rhodes, one of the wonders of the ancient world.

**For romance, go to Santorini.** Reputed as the lost island of Atlantis, Santorini is a jagged, horseshoe-shaped island with plunging charcoal cliffs, volcanic sand beaches, and world-famous sunsets that have made this island a magnet for honeymooners and photographers.

**For amazing beaches, try Corfu, Kefallonia, or Lefkada.** These islands are often proclaimed for their white beaches, green mountains, aqua waters, and distinctive Venetian architecture.

To see these and other Greek islands, consider Holland America Line's 10-day Roman Empire Cruise, which visits Corfu, Santorini, and Katakolon (near Olympia) along with other exciting ports of call.

### Folegandros: The Island of Peace

For many people, Greece's most powerful appeal is found in its nearly secret islands. My hands-down favorite is the rugged beauty of Folegandros. Approximately two and a half hours by ferry from Santorini—the tourism centerpiece of Greece—the little island of Folegandros claims one of the best-preserved medieval villages in all of Europe, stunning views, and a traditional island charm.

It was on this self-proclaimed "Island of Peace" that I discovered the relaxed rhythm of Greece. There is a magic that permeates the air here. It is

rugged. It is beautiful. It is raw and real.

Imagine visiting an island where you meet as many locals as tourists,

where people dine on delicacies in open-air restaurants crowned by vibrant bougainvilleas. You can wander without worry through the interlocking medieval squares in the village of Chora and climb to the Panaghia (Church of the Virgin Mary), a hilltop church with spectacular, top-of-the-world sunset views. The most challenging part of your day may be to determine the real horizon



PHOTOGRAPH BY GINGER TAGGART

**Folegandros** is home to one of the best-preserved medieval villages in all of Europe.

line—where do the sapphire blue waters end and the brilliant skies actually begin? Crown your evening by treating yourself to a nightcap in the cozy wine bar To Kellari, built into the crumbling walls of a medieval fortress.

Folegandros is an island that tourism has mostly forgotten, although that may not be the case for long. For now, the island has no banks, one bus (all voyages

cost one euro), and one bus driver. Yet its spectacular views and genuineness offer an intoxicating romance that makes you fall in love with its relaxed rhythm of life.

**Delos**, which the early Greeks considered to be a sacred place, has well-preserved ancient ruins.

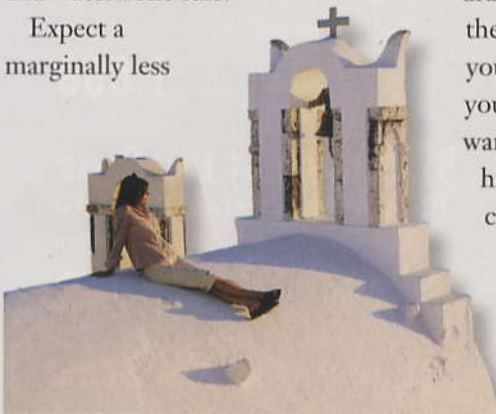


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## Sifnos: A Simpler Way of Life

Another of my favorite lesser-known treasures is the island of Sifnos. Located in the western Cyclades chain, Sifnos brings to life postcard images of Greece: white-washed, cubic buildings with brightly painted blue or red doors, flowering balconies, and hillside olive groves descending to turquoise waters. Narrow stone alleys lead visitors between town squares, restaurants, and waterfront bars.

Expect a marginally less



hospitable welcome in Sifnos, if only because locals hope to fiercely guard their island secret. However, this destination mixes romantic and vibrant nightlife with a relaxed, calming pace. While tourism already has befriended the island, it is still a place that retains the charm of a bygone era. Amazingly, when I visited, drinks at the popular cliff-side sunset bar Cavos were still on the honor system (just tell the

bartender what you drank at the end of the evening). And you can spend your days wandering the arid hills to the 365 churches that dot the island—one for every day of the year.

## Delos: Greek History 101

For a glimpse into Greece's archaeological history, don't miss the island of Delos, a 20-minute ferry ride away from Mykonos. Delos is truly an open-air museum, with history dating back to the island's first inhabitants in the 3rd millennium B.C. Considered the birthplace of Apollo, the island was both an important spiritual sanctuary and later a thriving Roman port—filled with splendid buildings and monuments, many of which are still intact. Devoid of hotels and only accessible during daylight hours, the island offers a fleeting glimpse into the grandeur at the height of Greek



Sifnos offers travelers postcard-perfect images of Greece.

civilization. Don't miss the Archaeological Museum, the famous Terrace of the Lions and the amazingly well-preserved Temple of Isis.

Although I have traveled to a multitude of "must-see" tourism destinations and trekked six continents, there is not another destination that has haunted me like Greece. So whichever islands you choose to discover, may your memories forever pleasantly haunt you like mine. □

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