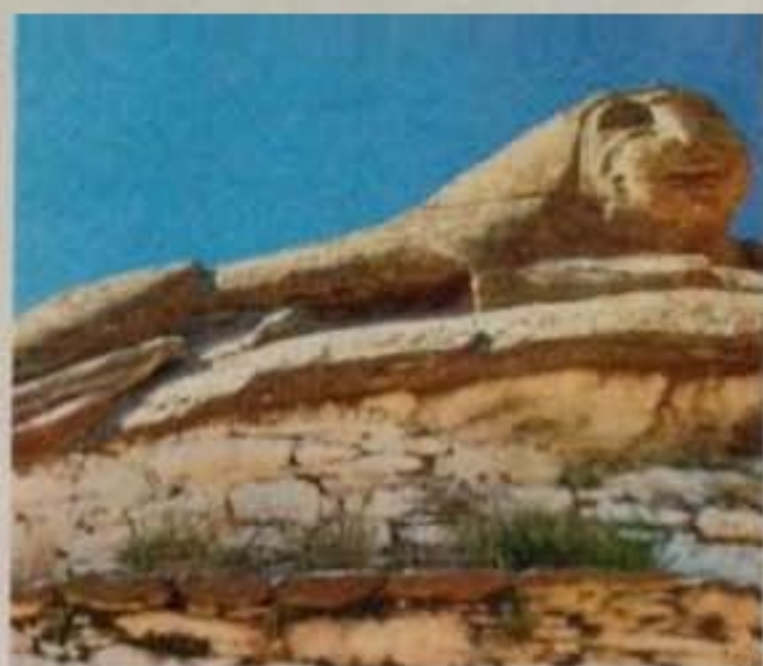
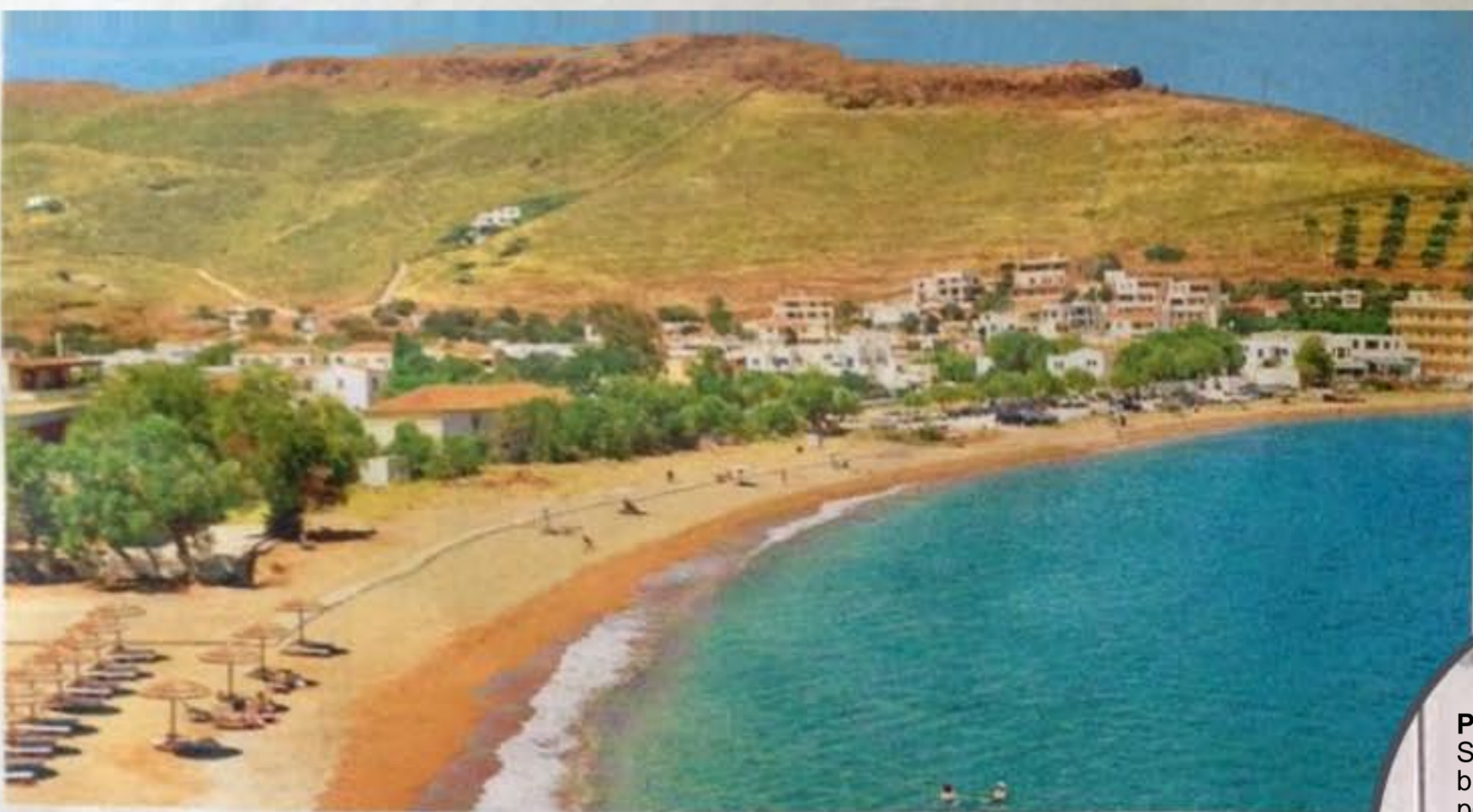


SECRET SEASIDE

Kea, Greece

The island of Kea is popular with Athenians seeking a civilised weekend break. But it is well worth spending longer than that, says Adam Ruck



Stonecutting: The Lion of Kea, near Ioulis, is one of the oldest sculptures in Greece and the town's cheerful mascot

Now that Athens has moved its airport away from the city and Piraeus, there's all the more reason to take the back-door route to the islands. A morning flight, a short taxi ride to Lavrio and there will be time to look for Pyron's signature on the temple at Cape Sounion before catching the evening boat to Kea, with onward connections to the western Cyclades or Syros, hub of Aegean ferry schedules.

There is only one bus in this fine place for an island-hopping tour. Kea is such a restorative and peaceful place, you may not make it past first bus.

As the ferry manoeuvres in the narrow entrance to Kea's one-horse port, Korissia, you won't see a crowd of room-touts on the quay, or a flotilla of tourist boats backing their beach excursions with Zorba the Greek. This is not the style of an island which crowded out one – or clearly provided – the Greek tourism boom and is largely ignored by island travellers because it has no connections with Piraeus.

Kea draws on a civilised clientele of Athenian weekenders and second-home owners in retreat from the city.

Instead of suggestive T-shirts, peppy suits and other items of mass-produced "Greek art" trash, Korissia's shops sell useful things – colourful sarings, masks and stovetops, furniture for the villa. Salads are not generically "Greek" but made specific by a wild herb or local



Local colour: Agios Nikolaos Bay, above, and, left, the harbour at Korissia, Kea's peaceful port

cheese. Keas drink less, ease than the more refined tavernas, distilled from local grapes, olives, and the wood remains is an asset to the island's palate and its vineyards. "You will have to go to the supermarket for that," says the waiter, receding slightly.

Kea's regulars come to eat well and relax, on the beach and in their low-slung villas, which are made of rust-coloured local stone and set into the steep hillsides so

DID YOU KNOW?

The island's biggest attraction is the first ancient sword in a hospital and was in the sea of Kea on November 21, 1916.

are not to stand out. There are few fancy hotels, and fewer ugly block buildings. Rather than build new roads to remote beaches, the Keas have restored ancient mule tracks and waymarked them

for hikers. There is a postmodern Greek island. On foot is the best way to see it, starting from the capital, Ioulis, a beautiful example of the typical Cycladic hill village, with its splash of white houses and

staircase streets steeply clustered beneath the hilltop defensive position of "kastros".

The houses of Ioulis are more substantial than the usual Greek cube, with pitched roofs of clay tiles, because Kea has always been a prosperous and self-sufficient island. Its well-watered high valleys are green and thick with almond groves and oak trees as well as vineyards, vegetable gardens and livestock. From the farming village of Kato Mertia a

path leads steeply down to the sea. Fragments of cobblestone and pottery, standing of this powerful state, a sacred site to riviera and Aegina. "A narrow road, but I would not swap it for Babylon," wrote the lyric poet Pindar. Once the home of 1,500 people, it has been empty for 1,000 years and remains that way.

Scrambling among the ruins of various Doric temples and the newly excavated tiers of Karthea's theatre a few weeks ago, I saw two hikers and two local ladies who were scrubbing and whitewashing the chapel at the end of the beach in preparation for a festival.

After the archaeology, the sea calls. Bathing is a continuation of sightseeing at Karthea, and this is the only bay on the island where scuba is forbidden. Lost divers carry off a trident of the head of Apollo. Snorkelling is permitted though, and in miraculously clear water there are plenty of fish to look at, among the building blocks of the old harbour.

A less strenuous walk, no more than a few minutes across the hillside from Ioulis, leads to Kea's cheerful mascot, a recumbent lion. He seems to have a smile on his face, as well he might, in this peaceful spot where he has rested undisturbed for no one knows how long; 2,500 years, at least.

Porto Kea Suites, Korissia

Stylish low-rise cluster of buildings near the beach, with a pool, manicured lawns, large air-conditioned rooms with balcony or terrace, room service, beach bar, dive centre (Tel: 22880 22870), portokea-suites.com from £85/night for a suite, b&b for two sharing

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Kea Villas, Ioulis

High-quality development of neo-Cycladic one, two and three-bedroom villas at the top of Ioulis, with communal pool and spectacular views. A great base for exploring the island, and the village, on foot (69722 43330; keavillas.gr; from £100/night for a one-bedroom villa)

WHERE TO EAT

Aristo's, Voukari • A waterside fish/seafood

THE INSIDE TRACK

Kea does not have a long stretch of golden sandy coastline to compare with the best of Mykonos, Naxos and Crete, but there are scores of small coves all around the island, as remote as you like: accessible by bus, Tarmac, rough road, hiking trail, or only by boat. Watersports and taverna at Kouroudoros; shade, sand and good tavernas at Otzias and Posseis (which also has a good carpenter), archaeology at Karthea. Check the wind direction before you make a plan for the day, and work out where will be most sheltered. Otzias and Korissia are not ideal when the mitemy gets up. Contact Kostas of the Red Tractor Farm near Korissia (22880 21346) for a beach excursion in Soutiana, a beautiful home-made old-time wooden sailing boat. For assisted hikes, go to the café on the square at Kato Mertia and ask for Nikos, who has donkeys. If you speak Greek, ring him up (6764 69413). Walk on the way down to the sea, ride the donkey back up.

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Calypso Hotel ★★★★★

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