



# ‘Greece will always have the capacity to surprise’

In his new television series, *Simon Reeve* ventures beyond the headlines to find a country full of optimism and beauty

I’ve been fortunate in my career as a presenter to travel to some of the more remote parts of the world – so at first glance, to make a programme that focuses on Greece might seem an odd decision. In many ways Greece is a known concept – the tourist industry has introduced millions of us to the country. We love the weather, the islands, the way of life.

But now is an important time in Greece’s history. We know it has an ancient past – but its geographic position, not just at the edge of Europe, but at the crossroads of East and West, means it can be an exotic – even extreme – part of our continent. Of course, its location also dictates that, as well as living through uncertain financial times, Greece is currently at the forefront of the migration crisis. It seemed an apposite time to explore it on camera.

We filmed on Lesbos – which, sitting so near to Turkey, is one of the islands that has faced this situation directly. Seeing the flow of refugees

in person was terribly affecting.

It is a much more complex issue than people realise. It was incredibly moving to meet families who have come all that way – and realise that you are them and they are you; that it’s an accident of birth that I’m a bloke from England and they are people fleeing war or poverty. But collectively, with such a big group, it’s a trickier story. We talked

to people on Lesbos who depended on tourism for their income, and you could feel their fear.

Yet one thing I have realised since I began these TV journeys is just how welcoming and warm the world is. I wouldn’t be put off visiting anywhere – certainly not Greece. The Greeks obviously need tourists to keep travelling, because they are key to many islands’ livelihoods. So if you love Greece and the Greeks, it is completely understandable to show solidarity by continuing to go there. You are not going to be confronted by desperate scenes unless you seek them on the islands closest to Turkey.

It’s up to you.

And there is a lot of Greece to see without having to venture near the headlines. It is a country with an endless capacity to surprise. We also spent time on Crete, where I went paragliding in what was effectively a flying tricycle. An interesting idea. I suffer from mild vertigo, and I’m not mad about climbing ladders – but, for some reason, going up in a little cart, with a parachute above, touching the clouds, felt perfectly all right. The view was extraordinary – I could look down and see the beaches, but also the vast interior. It was a great way of gaining something of an understanding of what is an incredible island.

The Cretans are an extraordinary, feisty people. My highlight of the trip may well have been

the evening I spent with a group of shepherds, eating barbecued lamb under the night sky, and



hearing  
their

optimism about the future. They, and many Greeks, accept that things are difficult now. But these are people who have survived for thousands of years, so they feel that they will be fine; that they will overcome their latest problems.

You could do worse on Planet Earth than be born Greek. It is a magnificent place with good food, a wonderful climate and a close sense of community. It was my wife, Anya, who introduced me to the country. She has been going since she was a teenager – to an island called Symi, just north of Rhodes. We go there fairly regularly, once every two years. Arriving on the ferry is a thrill. You come into this glorious harbour, framed by neoclassical buildings. There is a local rule that states that all the buildings have to be neoclassical. It looks incredible: the finest harbour in Greece, maybe the Mediterranean.

Symi is something of a secret. But then, there are huge swathes of Greece that tourists do not visit. Epirus, in the mountainous north, for example – where you find these colossal forested peaks, which look like the Canadian Rockies in the sunshine. Here, we stumbled across the Vikos Gorge – one of the deepest gorges on the planet by some calculations. It is not as wide as the Grand Canyon, but its compactness helps to exaggerate its contours. You look down to a river some 1,600ft below, trickling between enormous limestone cliffs. It is surely one of the most dramatic geographical sights in Europe – but we didn't see any other visitors. It was just me and the TV team. I walked to the edge, and was able to bellow a loud "Hello!" that echoed as if we were in a forgotten, long-lost land. Yet there we were, in a country at the edge of Europe – a few hours across the Mediterranean.

*Interview by Chris Leadbeater*

**Essentials**

● **Olympic Holidays (020 8492 6868; olympic holidays.com)**

**offers hotel breaks on the islands and the mainland.**

● **Sunvil (020 8568 4499; sunvil.co.uk) covers the country from Athens to Zakynthos.**

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● **Thomson (020 3451 2688; thomson.co.uk) goes to Kefalonia, Mykonos and Corfu.**

● **Ramblers Worldwide (01707 331133; ramblers holidays.co.uk) can organise walking jaunts to places as varied as Epirus, the Peloponnese and Lesbos.**

● **Martin Randall Travel (020 8742 3355; martinrandall.com) has a 10-day "Minoan Crete" archaeology tour slated for**

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● **For more, see visitgreece.gr.**

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**You could do worse on this Earth than be born Greek**



*Greece with  
Simon Reeve* will  
run in two parts  
on BBC Two  
– beginning on  
Sunday, February  
7 at 8pm



Symi's harbour, above, is framed by beautiful neoclassical buildings



## FIVE WONDERFUL GREEK BEACHES

### Voidokilia (Messinia)

The western flank of the Peloponnese is gradually appearing on the tourist map thanks to the holiday enclave of the "Costa Navarino". Voidokilia Beach, near Pylos, is the area's postcard moment – a perfect horseshoe of sand where waves roll to land in parallel curls.

### Petani (Kefalonia)

Kefalonia boasts the feted Myrtos Beach, but its jewel may be Petani – a blur of sand on the west coast of the Paliki peninsula, reached via a winding road so steep that mountain goats might balk at it. The rewards at the bottom are Blue Flag waters and soft sunsets.

### Karavostasi (Epirus)

North-westerly Epirus is still unknown to many tourists. It shouldn't be – not least because Karavostasi Beach, 15 miles north west of the little town of Parga, is a slice of Hellenic heaven, its half-mile



You need a boat to get to Lalaria's rock arch, above; Voidokilia beach, below, is a perfect horseshoe of sand

of golden powder caught between two forested headlands.

### Kamari (Santorini)

Many visitors fly to Santorini for the cliffs and panoramas of the west coast. But wander to the east, where the craggiest of the Cyclades

slopes down to the sea, and you find Kamari – whose grey, ashen sand is a reminder that the island was once a giant volcano.

### Lalaria (Skiathos)

Little Skiathos is blessed with beaches – but you need to be in an adventurous mood to lie on Lalaria. Fixed to the north coast of the island, with a rock arch, it cannot be reached by road. You need a boat, or a pair of hiking boots. *CL*