

Greece

Discover Ithaca's golden bays and ancient legends

A walking holiday on the tiny island of Ithaca takes Tom Chesshyre to the mythical palace of Odysseus



Do not climb high mountains in northern Ithaca in the heat of the midday sun if you are unsure where you are going, do not have enough water and are hung over from drinking Mythos beers in the taverns of the lovely fishing village of Frikes the evening before.

Do not do this. It's not a good idea. My brother and I can vouch for that. Everything had seemed so simple when we set out at 10am from the hamlet of Lachos after a breakfast of fresh bread, local honey and coffee. We were not perhaps feeling 100 per cent, but we had the best map of Ithaca you could buy (from a little bookshop by the harbour in Vathy, the capital) and something approaching a spring in our steps.

We ascended the steep twisting road to Exogi, a sleepy picturesque village with a whitewashed church. We climbed a path winding through pine trees marked by a green dotted line on our map and found the peak of Mount Doureha (519m), with its marvellous views of Afales Bay. We traversed a ridge passing ruins of ancient greystone windmills. We drank most of our water by a deserted monastery.

Then we scrambled down a hill, still following the green line on the map — confusingly marked by blobs of faded blue paint on rocks in the arid shrubland — and got thoroughly lost in a pine forest. It took six hours to get back, red-faced and gasping for water; we had expected to be away for three at most.

“The smell of herbs fills the air and little blue butterflies flicker here and there

On the legendary home island of Odysseus (or Ulysses) we had experienced our own mini odyssey.

Not many people make it to Ithaca. The island is too small and hilly for flights — 14 miles from north to south and 4 miles across at its widest — so there is no airport. People generally fly to neighbouring Kefalonia and stay there in nice villas and swanky hotels by its famed sweeps of gorgeous soft golden sand.

To reach Ithaca you must catch an hour-long ferry or a water taxi that takes 20 minutes. There is then the option of staying in the north or the south of the island; the latter is where the bulk of Ithaca's 3,000-strong population and its tourist trade are to be found, centred mainly on Vathy.

We are staying in the far north, where about 1,000 people reside, on a multi-generational holiday: parents, nieces and nephews (eight in all) together in a charming old stone villa with a garden featuring an ancient almond tree and an infinity pool. The terrace faces a valley in which goats with bells on their necks clank by at dawn and dusk. At sunset mellow beams spread across a mountain covered in pines; the only other structure we can see is a little chapel clinging to its higher reaches. It is a wonderfully peaceful place.

It is also the perfect base for a walking holiday that brings to life the story of a figure from antiquity who may (or may not) be this island's most famous former resident. Odysseus, as described by Homer in his epic poem, leaves his wife, Penelope, on an unidentified island to fight in the Trojan War in the 13th or 12th century BC; no one is certain of the exact date. He takes part in the faraway conflict, but is caught up in a series of misadventures as he attempts to return, including run-ins with witch doctors, cannibals, six-headed monsters, Sirens (maidens who sing to lure sailors to shipwreck) and the legendary lotus-eaters, with their stupor-inducing lotus plants.

Odysseus is away for ten years before he makes it back to the unidentified island, which is described by Homer, 300 years after Odysseus died. “There are no tracks, nor grasslands,” he writes. “It is a rocky



severe island, unsuited for horses, but not so wretched, despite its small size. It is good for goats.”

Well, there is certainly no shortage of those in northern Ithaca — and in the company of Ester van Zuylen, a Dutch guide who offers Odysseus-themed walks in this part of Ithaca, other clues that point towards the island being the home of Odysseus are soon revealed.

Ester is tall, wearing shades, cargo trousers



The village of Frikes. Right: the whitewashed church in Exogi. Below: The Almond Tree villa in Lachos

and walking boots. She is holding secateurs (to cut back the foliage on the ancient hill path we are about to take). And she is standing in the shade of olive trees by a statue of Odysseus in the little square in Stavros, the main town in the north. “Did he really come from Ithaca?” she asks, after giving a rundown on the legend's life. “No one knows for sure if he even existed. I like to think he existed, though.”

With that we make our way, passing the pretty mustard-coloured church and a corner bar where expressionless old-timers in black regard our progress. We reach the ancient path heading north out of the village, during which time Ester has told us that she came to Ithaca a dozen years ago and fell in love with the island. She had not read the *Odyssey* until then, but has “not stopped reading” the poem since. She has, she admits, become infatuated with the ancient tale.

The stone path leads steeply upwards, surrounded by billowing olive trees, wild pear trees, thistles and myrtle bushes. The smell of herbs fills the air and little blue butterflies flicker here and there. The secateurs are soon put to use and we walk along the 400-year-old paving slabs, reaching a bend with a spring to one side. It is believed that Homer, himself semi-legendary, may have come to Ithaca to cure his poor eye-

sight, and this spring was said to have been beneficial to vision, according to Ester.

The plot thickens regarding the location of the ruins we are about to visit, just up the hill. Odysseus's palace on the unidentified island was said to be in a high place surrounded by springs, Ester explains — and these Mycenaean ruins are in the only place on Ithaca that fits the bill. Great boulders are slotted upon one another, with steps leading down the hill in this wild, isolated spot.

The site was claimed by archaeologists (in 2010) to be Odysseus's palace after relics were found that connected to the legend. “Of course, people say that it's all made up, but I don't care,” says Ester, surveying the scene and telling us how the hero supposedly returned to this mountainside, slaughtered his rivals (who had been courting Penelope) and re-established his rule.

You don't often get stories such as this on a holiday stroll.

The tale of Odysseus seems to hang in the air in northern Ithaca, and the handful of tacky tourist shops in Frikes and Kioni are not shy about cashing in on the legend; plenty of tea towels, key rings, mugs and postcards are themed on the ancient poem. In Frikes — such a fabulously quiet place (apart from when the

occasional tourist boat drops by with streams of holidaymakers or a sailing flotilla arrives) — the Odysseus restaurant soon becomes our favourite place to eat.

Skinny ginger cats pace beneath the simple wooden tables on a water's edge terrace. Mafioso-like priests with prodigious bellies and *Blues Brothers* shades

exchange tales. A group of elderly local women breaks into a joyful song about unrequited love (Panos, the waiter, translates for us). We eat delicious red mullet with boiled potatoes, salads of feta cheese, onions and olives, slices of flatbread, and pots of garlicky tzatziki.

After the meal Sakis, the bread delivery man, pulls up in his white van and winks in our direction (you soon get to know the local characters in northern Ithaca). Then Sue, a Brit who runs the only local taxi firm, stops by and tells us about her wedding to Dimokritos at the church on the hill in Exogi. Sue and Sakis seem to be everywhere at all times; we begin to wonder if they have doubles.

The walk from Frikes to Kioni is along a winding coastal road with beautiful pebbly sand beaches and a superyacht moored in a bay. Celebrities and the super-rich love Ithaca because it usually offers so much privacy: Steven Spielberg, Tom Hanks, Madonna, Roman Abramovich and the king of Spain have been spotted in recent times (not long after the controversial demise of BHS, an angry Philip Green was caught on camera by TV reporters in Vathy).

Kioni, at the dead-end of the long twisting lane, slopes down a hill to a beach lined

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Kefalonia

Many ancient tracks criss-cross Kefalonia, Ithaca's bigger neighbouring island, which is a popular spot for walking breaks. Base yourself at the Fig Tree villa, sleeping up to ten, and it's roughly a 25-minute hike from the front door to the picturesque harbour village of Fiscardo or to beaches (01479 812721, scottwilliams.co.uk). Like Ithaca, Kefalonia — made famous by Louis de Bernières's novel *Captain Corelli's Mandolin* — is hilly and suited to strong walkers. A week's stay at the stylish villa costs from £3,000.

Serifos, Sifnos and Milos

The walking specialist Intravel has a series of breaks in Greece, many of them with self-guided itineraries — and its ten-day break to Serifos, Sifnos and Milos in the Cyclades looks especially enticing (01653 617002, intravel.co.uk). Fly to Athens and catch a ferry to Serifos, where two walks taking in monasteries, tiny villages and castles have been arranged. Then ferries are organised to go to the other islands, where further routes have been planned. The breaks, staying at simple hotels, cost from £770pp; return British Airways flights to Athens cost from £105 extra.

Sifnos and Milos

Ramblers Walking Holidays has two-week half-board breaks to Sifnos and Milos from £1,599pp, with flights from Heathrow to Athens, and back from Milos, local guides and dinners in tavernas



included (01707 331133, ramblersholidays.co.uk). Sifnos has a marvellous network of cobbled footpaths, while the dramatic volcanic landscape is the setting for the guided hikes on Milos. An excursion to the small island of Kimolos is also available to see its unusual mushroom-shaped rock formations.

Mount Olympus

Trek to the summit of Mount Olympus (2,919m) on a great new eight-day guided trip organised by KE Adventure Travel (01768 773966, keadventure.com). Along the way you hike along ancient trails, visit the monasteries at Megalo and Varlaam, and traverse the foothills of Meteora. The price is from £945pp, including flights from Gatwick to Thessaloniki, and all meals. Three nights are spent in mountain huts, two in guest houses and two in hotels. The maximum group size is ten.

Need to know

Tom Chesshyre was a guest of Scott Williams (scottwilliams.co.uk) and the Greek National Tourist Office (visitgreece.gr). Scott Williams has a seven-night stay at the Almond Tree villa in Lachos, near Frikes, from €3,000 a week, based on eight sharing (€375pp), including maid service. Book transfers and water taxis from Ithaca Travel Services (ithacatravelservices.com); a one-way transfer is from €250. Or take the 40-minute ferry from Kefalonia (€4pp). AGS has car hire from €180 a week (agscars.com). Guided tours to “Odysseus's Palace” with Ester van Zuylen (00 30 6944 990458, islandwalks.com) cost €15pp