

Mysterious land of many contrasts

Discovering the varied influences that has shaped the Rhodes of today, its mythical folklore, hidden gems, beautiful views and a Belisha beacon oddity during a walking holiday

I expected lots of things of Rhodes, but I never expected to find a Venetian palace with a Belisha beacon outside it. Still, there was the beacon flashing cheerfully outside the palace's pointy windows.

The palace made sense to me, because I knew Rhodes was under Italian occupation in the 1930s and Mussolini had left some intriguing architecture behind. As for the beacon, though – that was a mystery.

In fact, most outside influences on Rhodes have come from the Ottoman Empire, which owned the island for many centuries.

The Old Town citadel is a miraculously preserved Turkish fortified town (now a UNESCO World Heritage site); its huge castle walls sheltering a whole city that resembles a corner of old Istanbul, complete with mosques and little shops.

Now, though carefully preserved, it was beautiful, but a bit dull, lacking the usual cheerful Middle Eastern hubbub of merchants trying to sell you sheep heads and spices, flatbreads and perfumes and coffee. And those disused mosques did look a little strange backed by Greek flags.

So I headed for the Old Town's workaday back streets and found myself at last away from Venice, Belisha beacons and Turks and in honest-to-goodness Greece, with pebbled courtyards and bushy-bearded priests taking coffee with their parishioners.

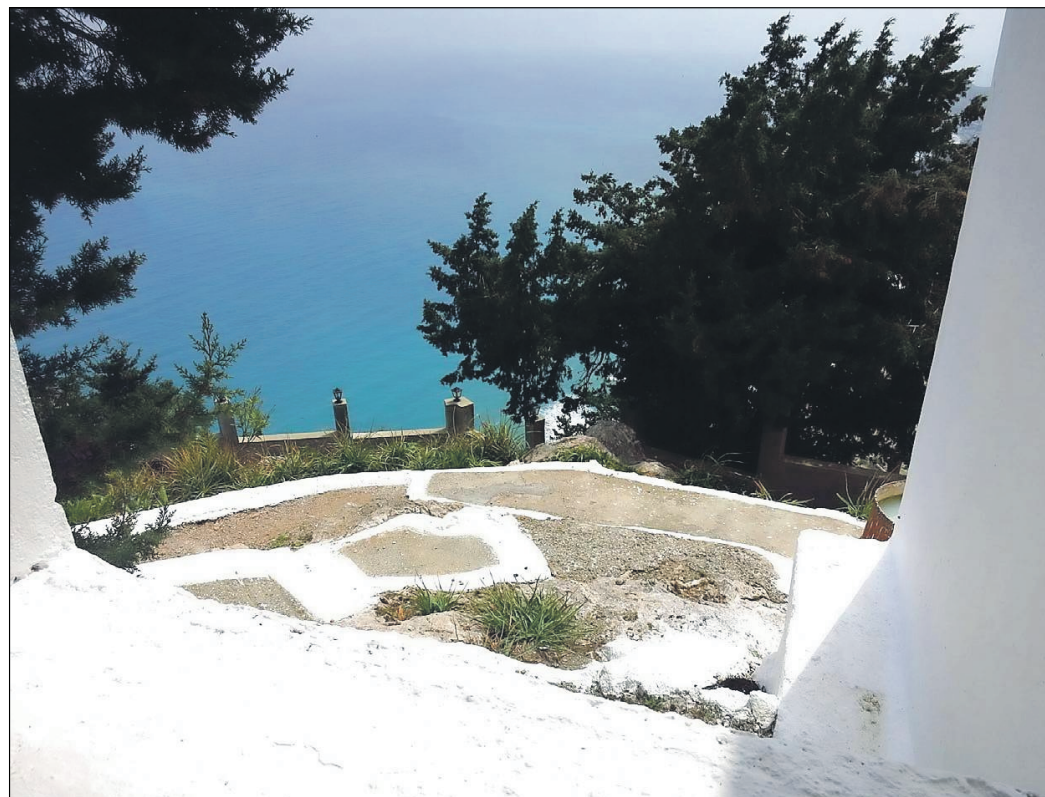
Picturesque

I'd been desperate for some sunshine after the bad English winter and had impulsively booked a week on the internet with an outfit called Walking Rhodes.

I knew nothing about it, so it was good to discover that Phil and Richard, the English guides, were not only great company, but obviously knew and enjoyed many paths and mountain tracks on the island.

The first day saw them taking us steeply uphill to the curious collection of buildings at Profitis Elias, to the north of the island. Buried in a forest of oaks and pines, these buildings date from the Italian occupation too.

Some are ruined, and there's an eerie poignancy about their

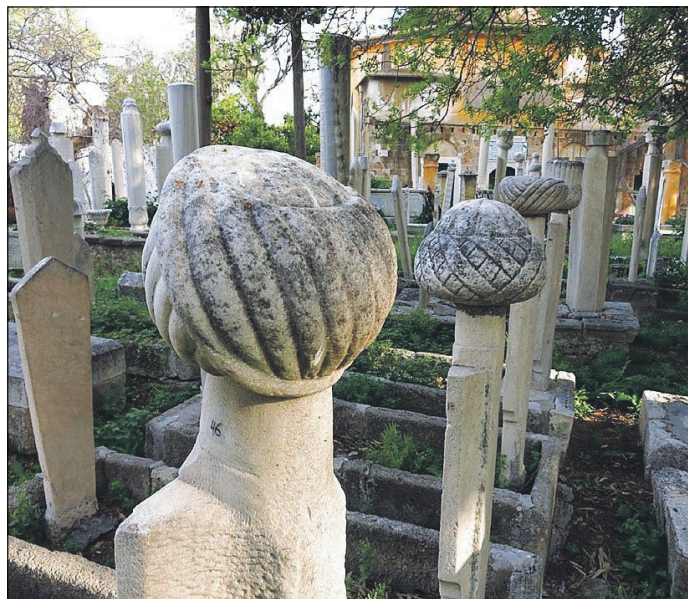


■ A view of the sea from the chapel of Tsambika, near Lindos

elegant rooms full of graffiti and crumbling balconies with romantic views to the distant sea.

One, a hotel called the Elaphos, has been restored by the local villagers to full operation. It is very successful but once again, its style – definitely Alpine – certainly didn't shout "Greece!"

We investigated a few other curious old buildings in the undergrowth as we made our way down a startlingly steep wooded hillside. Richard and Phil were thrilled to see that a wildly splashing river had appeared after the wet winter and was now hurling itself precipitously downhill in a most picturesque way.



■ Turbaned headstones in the Turkish graveyard in Rhodes Town

I was more concerned to keep my footing and not to end up tumbling down alongside the river, but I made it back in one piece, and next day I was ready to visit the chapel of Tsambika, near Lindos.

This shrine stands at the top of 300 steps on a pine-forested hill with huge views out to sea.

Built after the mystical appearance of a candle-lit icon on the nearby hillside, it is a favourite with women who yearn for children, and I was told that some still climb the steps on their knees

to pray there.

Tsambika is well on the tourist trail, but we were out of season, so the only other people around were a monk and a family with two children. They shared their food with us in hospitable Greek fashion and we all sat in the spotless whitewashed courtyard, with sea and mountains spreading away to the distance.

A bee buzzed, the monk held his beads and then the little girl's mother took her into the shady chapel. The saints peered on from

“The saints peered on as she anointed the child with crosses of oil and I realised that the little girl was a Tsambika – named after the mystery which had helped her mother to conceive her

their gold and silver icons as she anointed the child with crosses of oil on her hands and face and I realised that the little girl was a Tsambika – named after the mystery which had helped her mother to conceive her.

Next day was another contrast as we tackled the small and exposed mountain of Akrimitis. The tearing wind at its summit was both fierce and exhilarating, with the sun glaring off the white stone and the bright blue sea dotted with flying foam reaching to both horizons. Away from the wind was a long and flowery valley full of many-coloured anemones.

Invitation

After a walk through meadows we arrived at an old chapel where a group of local people invited us to join them for souvlaki round a bonfire. This fortified us for the last few kilometres into the small village of Monolithos. “Single Rock” in Greek, Monolithos was a fitting end to the day to admire a monastery perched upon its gigantic rock in the sea, silhouetted against the setting sun.

That evening, in Rhodes Town, we explored the abandoned Turkish cemetery with its headstones adorned with fezzes and turbans. We walked around the harbour with its windmills and wild cats and admired some more quirky buildings, including a charming yacht club decorated with starfish and anchors and an outdoor fish market.

We ended up for supper at George and Maria's little café in Odos Gamarantou, with old-school Rebetika music blaring from the radio, and while we waited for our moussaka, I surfed the net to discover how that very British Belisha beacon had ended up so far from home.

But I had no success at all. And I still don't know. Strange to think that in all of Rhodes' complicated history, a humble Belisha beacon puzzles me most of all.

■ For information about Walking Rhodes, visit www.walking-rhodes.com.



■ Spring flowers on Mount Akrimitis