

GIVE ME SHELTER

Picasso had the South of France, Warhol had Midtown Manhattan: now a pioneering Greek photographer is bringing an artistic impulse to his ivory-tower retreat in the Dodecanese

By Hazel Lubbock. Photographs by Montse Garriga Grau

Artists who visit Sterna leave work they have created here. *Opposite, from left:* steps lead through castle walls to Sterna; the cool, airy living room



STEAM SEEPS FROM GAPS IN SPECKLED STONES. Neon-yellow sulphur shatters in the sunlight. A dusting of lemon sherbet and rose sugar powders the peaks. The crater floor dares you to set foot on weak spots in its warm, crackly surface. It's difficult to resist. The temptation proved too much for Red Bull's Trial-X motorbike rider Julien Dupont, who tore across it, carving up the rock as if it were snow, making a half-pipe of the 100ft-deep cavity earlier this year.

But there's more to Nisyros than its volcano. Art is erupting in Greece. In Athens, new exhibition spaces and studios are opening in the face of austerity, and the trend for artist residencies is spreading to the islands. 'Greeks are more willing

to see things,' says photographer Greg Haji Joannides. I'm staying with him in Emporios, a hilltop village overlooking the caldera. 'This was supposed to be my house,' he confesses. 'Fortunately I hijacked my own plan.' Now it is the centre of an ambitious art project. This summer he invited six artists, one by one, to the house to live and work, to take inspiration from the island – and leave something behind. A month-long exhibition, curated by Xenia Kalpaktoglou, co-director of the Athens Biennale, was then held at Loutra. Only one of Loutra's three 19th-century thermal baths is still in use (the healing power of the water was noted as early as 65bc). The other two are crumbling fortresses for stray cats – and the setting for the exhibition. ►

WAY OF LIFE

Clockwise: the view across Mandraki to the island of Stroggili; ancient fireplace at Sterna; the house's roof terrace, and the master bedroom



CREATIVITY FLOWS THROUGH THE OPEN-PLAN SPACE; WHITEWASHED VOLCANIC-STONE WALLS ARE THEIR OWN BLANK CANVAS FOR NATURAL DISCOLOURATION, AND THE HOUSE IS FILLED WITH SCULPTURES BY RESIDENT ARTISTS



➤ Greg's neighbours call him The Madonna in the Tower. The tower, Sterna, is known all over the island for its striking design and concept. The Greek architect Giorgos Tsironis restored the two-bedroom 17th-century house using traditional materials and with historical documentation as a guide. There is nothing quite like it on Nisyros. Creativity flows through the open-plan space; whitewashed volcanic-stone walls are their own blank canvas for natural discolouration, and the house is filled with sculptures by Sterna's resident artists. Outside is the cistern for which Sterna is named, and which Greg describes as a metaphor for the ideas held within. Floating steps lead up to a rooftop with giant cushions for lazy days in the sunshine. Guests (a whole yoga class once) climb up there for the island's best view: over the caldera, to Kos and Bodrum in the north, the Datça peninsula and Symi to the east, and Tilos to the south. When the artists aren't here, anyone can rent it.

Sterna rises from the ruins of medieval Pantoniki, the Castle of the Knights, destroyed in a 1933 earthquake. It's hard to tell what's what. The whole village is built on layers of lava, ash and pumice; there's even a cave that's used as a natural sauna. Houses have been built in and around the castle, on top of each other, and in a jumble along the hill, but only 25 or so are still lived in. The rest deteriorate, eventually becoming part of the landscape, among the purple thistles, wild flowers and fig trees.

Despite the numerous deserted spaces, property on the island is not cheap. Artists are drawn here by something else. Nisyros harbours secrets. There are the blue-domed churches with elaborate frescoes typical of most Greek islands, but there are also monasteries buried in caves, and ancient sites blanketed by ash, yet to be unearthed. And so much folklore there's an entire museum dedicated to it. The best-known story is the creation of the island itself, depicted in mosaics and pottery

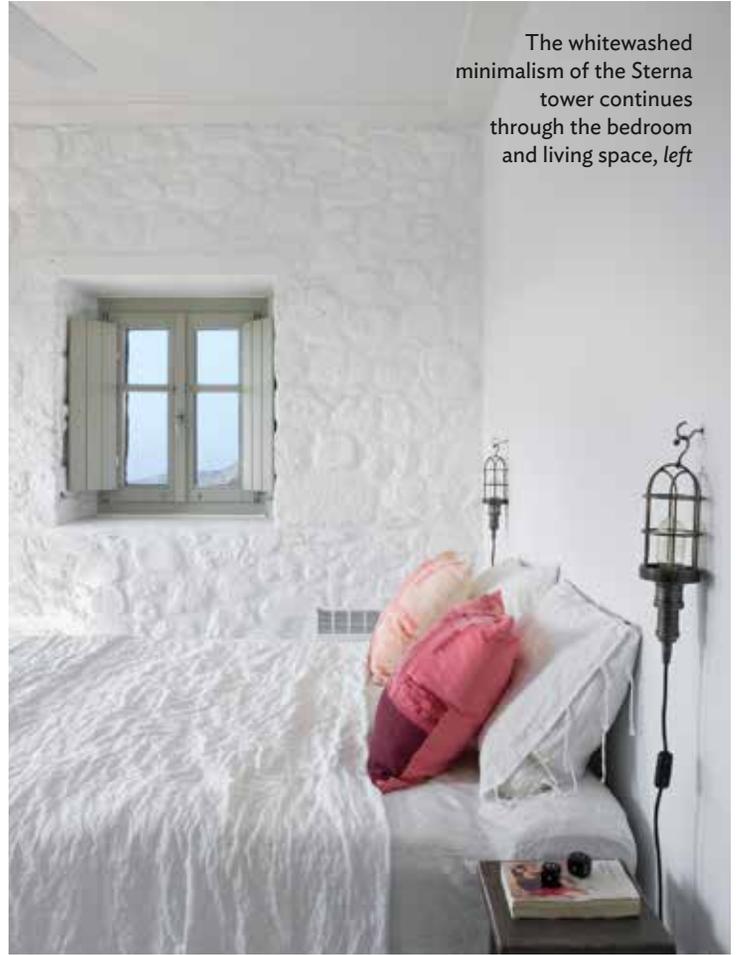
scattered around the world. During the battle between the gods and the giants, Poseidon chased the giant Polybotes down to the Dodecanese. With his trident, he chipped off a chunk of Kos and hurled it at the running giant, pinning him to the sea floor. His deep, rumbling groans were the only part of him to escape.

The philosopher Strabo described the mythology of Nisyros in his geographical accounts of Greece, and made note of its stone (pumice is still mined on the nearby islet of Gyali) and wine. The only drink made here now is a bitter liquid marzipan called *soumada*, pressed from the island's once abundant almonds. Nisyrians still farm furiously on terraces cut into the volcano's conical slopes, producing their own specialities such as an almond, garlic and potato paste, which goes well with *pitta*, a light falafel made from chickpeas. Local artisan Yiorgis and his sister make the most divine cheese by hand, boiling milk over a fire and skimming from the top. The result looks like clotted cream; eaten fresh from the stove, it tastes like melted ricotta.

It takes three days to make homemade *psilokoulouro* (literally, thin biscuits). Before the financial crisis, Maria Diakomihali used to sell hers. Now only her neighbours and, from this summer, guests on an agritourism programme she has launched, are lucky enough to taste her cooking. She teaches them how to bake *halouvas*, a dense cake made with almonds, semolina, olive oil, cinnamon sticks, soda and raki, as well as Nisyrian recipes using ingredients grown on the island.

One evening I have dinner with the mayor at the Apiria taverna in Emporios. 'Lots of Nisyrians left for the USA in the 1950s and 1960s,' he tells me. 'I went to New York to study chemical engineering, and I became a professor at Columbia. But I came back.' Nisyros has such a hold on its people that the mayor has had cameras installed in the monastery in Mandraki so that emigrants can be part of the services and festivities. ➤

WAY OF LIFE



The whitewashed minimalism of the Sterna tower continues through the bedroom and living space, left

THE ISLANDERS KNOW HOW TO PARTY: AT THE OPENING OF A NEW KAFENIO, THE DJ SWITCHES FROM THE BLACK KEYS TO GREEK MUSIC AT 4AM

► Nisyrians know how to party, too: at the opening of a new *kafenio*, To Aposperi, in the village, the DJ switches from The Black Keys to Greek music at 4am. It's owned by a friend of Greg's, an architect who, like him, has been coming to Nisyros since she was a child. 'Aposperi means "I spent some time with some friends in the afternoon"'. I found the word in a Nisyrian dictionary,' the owner Kallia Psikou tells me. Her parents are here too, her father effortlessly throwing together plates of local sausage with tomato and feta, and the lightest, freshest tzatziki I've ever tasted. Behind the bar, Michelangelo, a graphic designer, mixes Mojitos. It could almost be the cool new place to be in Athens, and it seems as though the whole island has turned up.

Greg and his friends laugh that they are on Mykonos, that they are going to Hermès and Chanel. The joke is easy to get. Taverna signs are hand painted and the fruit market closes at 3pm. Octopus tentacles hang out to dry on the seafront. The closest you get to any recognisable brands is the one boutique that recently opened in Mandraki. Loles Kores has none of the mass-produced evil-eye magnets and chipped china you see elsewhere. It's stocked exclusively with products made in Greece by artists. There are old chests of drawers and battered brass lamps alongside £150 pinafore dresses and traditional items restyled by up-and-coming designers: woven-rag carpets made into tote bags; a scarf with the same graphic seafood print as the paper used to wrap fish at the market;

workers' field bags reimagined as rucksacks; earthy ceramics that could have been thrown from the volcano itself.

Across the square at the taverna I encounter an Austrian couple who have been coming to the island twice a year for 15 years, and are now mapping its hiking routes for a book. Walking really is the most rewarding way to get around. Though wild thyme bushes are a formidable opponent on the somewhat terrifying scramble to Pachia Ammos, along a narrow path worn into the mountain. Its volcanic sand is like the centre of a freshly baked double chocolate brownie, too hot to walk on barefoot. In summer, artists and professors known as 'free campers' stay on the otherwise empty beach for weeks or even months at a time.

Sometimes abandoned places become beautiful, and sometimes the most beautiful places become abandoned. In the harbour village of Avlaki, crazy 10ft-high lava sculptures with holes like a natural sponge divide the beach. Thick waves attempt to wash coal-black pebbles. Fallen rocks protect the turquoise water in front of the ruined thermal baths to the west. A Nisyrian kicks off his fins and packs his haul of fish. Another, a painter now living in New York, dives down in search of moray eels and lobster. No one else seems to know about this place. I swim around to find the sweet spots where bath-warm water bubbles up from below. There's no escaping this nutty little island's energy. 

A one-week stay at Sterna (sleeping four) costs from £1,525 through Hip Away Villas (www.hipawayvillas.com). For more information, visit www.visitgreece.gr