

1 SANTORINI – ISLAND OF EXOTIC AND WILD BEAUTY

Santorini is one of the most interesting and strangest islands in the world. Nowhere else, so comparatively close together, can such a variety of beautiful and attractive scenes be found. It is visited by innumerable tourists not only every summer but all the year round. They travel there to admire the extraordinary landscapes that have been created by its volcano and by its earthquakes.

At first you land at Phira (there is another port at Athinios) and will be welcomed by the smiling faces of muleteers, holding in their hands long stocks, or mule/goads. They will take you up to Phira, with you riding on the backs of tame mules and relatively placid donkeys. These animals are accustomed to the steep, winding stoneroad which climbs up about 600 steps from the port to the town. While you are riding up, your guide will be walking at your side, safely leading you up the stairway to the town. These men with their cheerful, sunburnt faces and weather-beaten faces are polite and friendly – and always smiling so that you'll soon become friends with them. They will often shout, saying something like *Delaxo de* (keep off) or *Devano de* (go up) or *Napsou na* (stop) as they try to keep their mules or donkeys off the rocks at the sides of the stairway and away from the edge with its sheer fall to the sea below. When you get to Phira your guide will bend his leg making a 'stool' so that you can step onto it, then onto the ground as he did when you first climbed up on the mule's back.

If you land at Athinios port, a taxi or bus will take you direct to

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Phira, but the way to the town is not as picturesque as riding on a mule's or donkey's back from which you can admire the wonderful views below and around you.

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Phira, which is the capital of the island, is arguably the most beautiful and the most interesting site in Santorini; it is grandly situated at the edge of precipitous cliffs, composed of masses of multicoloured rocks, and overlooks the volcano and the smaller islands, which appear strangely isolated, like fairy-tale islands in the distance. In the north you can see the ruins of a castle, built in the Middle Ages, which was once the home of Roman nobles. From this unapproachable rock the castle could be defended against all enemies. The island westwards along the coast is wild looking, roughly shaped, and lonely. You might think for a moment that you had arrived in an exotic – even uninhabited – place. If you travel to Santorini by ship, it is quite a magical sight to approach the island at night and see the far-off lights of the town of Phira on the skyline, like diamonds sparkling in the darkness. The lights of the town and starlight merge in a kind of continuity in space so that it is almost impossible to distinguish the dark wild rocks of the island and the houses on the top of the cliffs. One could be forgiven for thinking the island inhabited by fairies, or even strange denizens of the underworld. It is as if you have arrived on a new and unwelcome planet as you see the massive and forbidding shapes of rocks all around you; and, in the middle, the volcano, sleeping quietly on the dark blue sea.

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At dawn the scene changes abruptly. A sunny, beautiful, picturesque island stretches out before you, the sea tranquil and calm, with scarcely a hint of the terrible wounds caused by the volcano's eruptions thousands of years before.