

FIRST PERSON

What travel taught me about aging well

I visited Greece's Blue Zone to learn the secrets of longevity. Instead, I overcame a secret fear

SUZANNE MORPHET
SPECIAL TO THE STAR

"You'll be fine," says my husband, kissing me goodbye at the airport in Athens. We've just finished a 10-day cruise through Greece's Cyclades. Next, he's heading to Scotland to golf, while I will explore the Mediterranean on my own for a couple more weeks, starting with the relatively remote island of Ikaria.

The destination is one of the world's famous five Blue Zones — places where the locals are believed to have exceptionally long, healthy lives — and I'm curious to learn its secrets of aging well. But now that it's time to go, I'm uneasy. Despite my job as a writer focused on outdoor adventure, I rarely travel by myself.

I've snorkelled in Antarctica, paddled whitewater rivers in the Northwest Territories and climbed the Dolomites. I've gone scuba diving in Fiji, canyoning in Madeira and paragliding in Mexico. But never alone.

The thought of driving narrow mountain roads in Greece, where "it's all Greek to me," is downright scary. What's more, I'm profoundly hard of hearing, making me feel more vulnerable. I once slept through a fire alarm in a hotel and learned the next morning that everyone else had evacuated the building.

Yet the irony of writing about adventure but being too scared to travel by myself is laughable. I would need to flex a different kind of muscle for this trip.

Ikaria is largely undeveloped and less touristed than many Greek islands. Landing at the small airport, I pick up my rental car from a guy

SEE GREECE, T10



SUZANNE MORPHET

The village of Therma attracts tourists for its hot springs but remains uncrowded.

Roadán, courtesy of Norwegian Cruise Lines

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Driving adds to the adventure

GREECE FROM T8

named Mario and head to my first stop, the village of Therma. The spa town is known for its hot springs, which are free of charge, so you can soak in them whenever you want.

Later, while swimming at the beach, I strike up a conversation with a Greek-Canadian woman on holiday with her sister. “You’re driving here on your own?” she asks, somewhat incredulously. “I was born in Greece, but wouldn’t do that.”

Oddly enough, her admiration boosts my confidence. The next morning, I point my tiny Hyundai uphill and follow a winding road along Ikaria’s south shore, gaining elevation and sea views with each hairpin turn. When I stall the car — it’s a manual — on one particularly tight corner with an edge that drops off precipitously, I back up ever so carefully and give it more gas.

A few hours later, the road narrows and becomes a construction site, lined with piles of gravel. No one’s working, and I haven’t seen another vehicle for hours. I phone Mario. “Keep going,” he tells me. “Should be fine.”

Hmm, I’ve heard that before.

After another hour, I finally reach Karimalis Winery, where I’ve booked a four-night stay at one of the restored stone houses. George and Eleni Karimalis, the owners of the organic vineyards and farm, follow the traditional Ikarian lifestyle and share its Blue Zone secrets with guests, serving breakfasts made entirely of their own produce, alongside lightly cooked, largely vegetar-



SUZANNE MORPHET PHOTOS

Learning to make phyllo pastry from scratch at Karimalis Winery.

ian dinners.

Truthfully, I was already familiar with the plant-based diets of people in the Blue Zones, and their fondness for physical labour, afternoon naps and socializing. So I don’t really learn anything new here — other than how easy it is to make phyllo pastry from scratch. Yet during my stay, I grasp something far more important: Living a long life is only appealing if there’s no fear holding me back.

And between driving the daunting roads on my own and easily be-friending some of the other guests, my fear of travelling alone has disappeared. I enjoy a solitary walk every morning before breakfast but hang out most of the time with

three others, including Tom, a soon-to-be-retiree from Australia.

We visit the ruins of the ancient temple of Artemis at Nas, swim in turquoise water at near-empty beaches and, most memorably, attend a *panagiria*, a festival held to honour a local saint. There we join locals under leafy hardwood trees and feast on roasted goat meat, fried potatoes and Greek salad, washed down with Ikaria’s legendary Pramnian wine.

On my last morning at Karimalis Winery, Tom hugs me goodbye and tells me to be careful driving back to Therma, where I’ll spend my final night.

I can’t help but grin. “I’ll be fine,” I assure him.



The terrace of the 16th-century building where guests stay at Karimalis Winery.



Ikaria is a mountainous island, and driving here can be challenging.





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