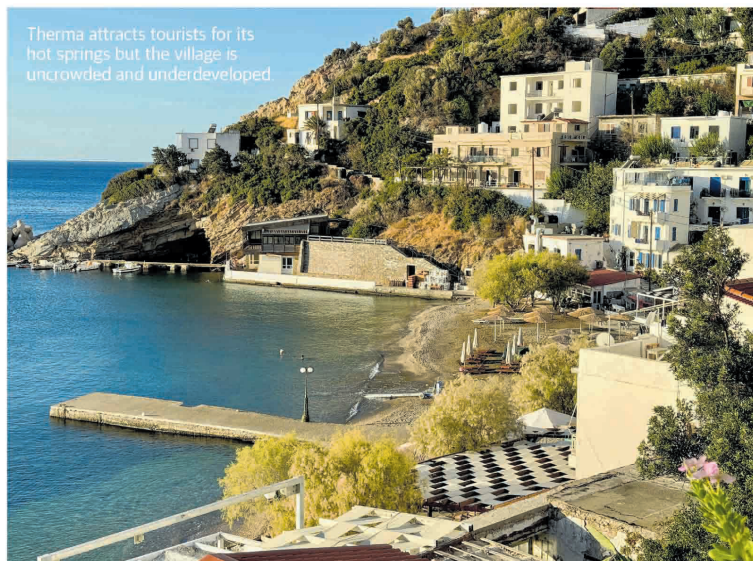


GREEK SOJOURN



Therma attracts tourists for its hot springs but the village is uncrowded and underdeveloped

Island's age-old secrets revealed

SUZANNE MORPHET enjoys a 16th-century estate in one of the famed "blue zones".

You're going to Ikaria?" asked the man behind reception at my hotel on the Greek island of Paros. For two days he had expressed no interest of any kind when I walked past. Now, he looked at me incredulously.

"I had the best holiday of my life there 10 years ago," he explained, breaking into a big smile. "The nature, the food." His eyes turned dreamy. "I camped by a beach." Then, wistfully, "You probably can't do that anymore."

I don't care about camping, but after a 10-day cruise through the heavily touristed Cyclades with family and friends, I'm looking forward to exploring the relatively remote Ikaria (pronounced "ik-a-REE-a") on my own. This man has banished any doubt.

Ikaria is one of five "blue zones" — places in the world where



Eleni holds a photo of five generations of women in her family. Taken about 20 years ago, she's in the white blouse in the centre.

people have lived exceptionally long, healthy lives. I've been curious since reading about them in National Geographic magazine a couple of decades ago. Last year's Netflix documentary *Live To 100: Secrets Of The Blue Zones* only piqued my interest.

Picking up my rental car from the small airport in Ikaria, I head first for the village of Therma. Tucked into a steep canyon on the ocean's edge, it reminds me of Italy's Amalfi coast, but there's little traffic. Therma has been famous for its hot springs since Roman times.

At one end of the beach, geothermally heated water bubbles up from the ground and people gather to soak, free of charge. It's delightfully natural.

Early the next morning, I point my tiny Hyundai uphill and follow a winding road along the island's south shore, gaining elevation and stunning sea views with each hairpin turn.

Carrying on through wild oak and pine forests, 1000m mountains rise around me. Within sight of the north coast, I reach Karimalis Winery and Farmhouse, my destination.

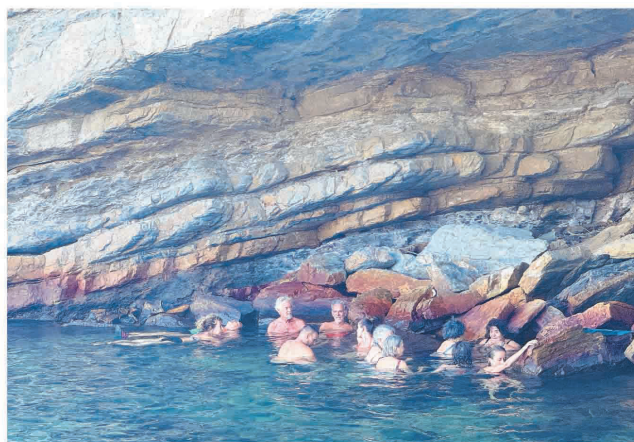
Family patriarch George



George Karimalis pulls grape skins apart.



Eleni Karimalis shows off a savoury filo tart filled with vegetables.



People enjoy the hot springs in Therma. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet

Karimalis is pulling apart a compressed pile of grape skins with his fingers when I arrive. He'll dry them in the sun, he explains, then store them to feed to his herd of goats in the winter.

Behind him is a centuries-old granite grape press — no longer used — and hanging rather incongruously beside him is a modern punching bag.

"We are martial artists so we need to exercise," he says matter-of-factly.

"This comes from the ancient Greece. They had amazing martial arts."

George grew up in Athens but spent his childhood summers on this estate that's been in his family since the 16th century.

In 1999 he gave up his job in the corporate world and moved to the island with wife Eleni and their four children to start a winery and share their traditional lifestyle.

Inside the large kitchen, a black-and-white photo shows five

generations of Eleni's family. Her grandmother lived to 100, her mother to 95.

The 20-year-old daughter in the photo, Theodosia, is now 41 and prepares breakfast for guests.

"Eat like a monkey," Theodosia tells me the next morning as I fork sliced watermelon on to my plate.

"The pits of watermelon are a superfood, and monkeys will pick them out and eat them first."

Life on the farm revolves around food, and plants are the stars, as in all blue zones. One day, more than a dozen of us gather for a cooking class as Eleni sets out bowls of vegetables and herbs, all grown here.

As a child, she recalls opening the door of her grandmother's house



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Above, the festival in the Ikarian village of Monokampi is held annually in September to honour Saint Sophia. The party begins in the early afternoon and goes all night. Below, Eleni Karimalis holds up filo pastry to show how thin it needs to be rolled. Pictures: Suzanne Morphet



Above, people learn to make filo pastry at a cooking class at Karimalis Winery & Farmhouse. Below, the north coast of Ikaria with its winding roads and mountains.



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and smelling many herbs. “Rosemary, sage, mountain tea, mint, basil, thyme, savory, and oregano, of course.

“This is one of the secrets, I know,” she says.

Eleni is going to share a few more, including how to make filo pastry — not exactly a secret to longevity, but something I’m keen to learn.

“Back and forth, back and forth,” she instructs, fingers flying over a long rolling pin. “You don’t press.”

Soon, the dough is so thin that when she holds it up to the light, we can see her hand through it.

“My grandma would take the leftover dough, put it in boiling water and make pasta,” she adds, peppering her conversation with such bits of wisdom.

Sitting under a grape arbour a few hours later, we enjoy the savoury filo tart, fresh pasta, whole-grain sourdough bread and a dish of pureed split peas called fava.

George pours fruity Akissare, a rosé his oldest daughter makes from three grape varieties fermented with wild yeast.

A scoop of yoghurt with grape molasses makes a sweet sugar-free dessert.

Few Ikarians eat like this anymore, George concedes — maybe only 20 per cent of the

island’s population of 8400. “People,” he shrugs, “they go to Athens, they get introduced to something they find tasty. They want these products.”

Yet most Ikarians still practice another tenet of ageing well — keeping socially active.

One afternoon, I drive to the village of Monokampi with a near-retiree from Sydney and a couple of 50-something Kiwis from Auckland — people I’ve met on the farm. It’s the feast of Saint Sophia, one of many panagiria held each year on the island.

Men in aprons serve chunks of roasted goat meat and liver, fried potatoes and salad.

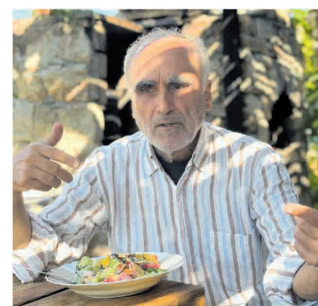
Our tray heaped with food, wine and beer, we join dozens of others at long tables under a canopy of trees.

Soon, five men with stringed instruments and a drum start to play and people get up to dance.

One small circle becomes two, then three, people’s arms entwined, their feet in step with the lively music.

They will continue dancing, eating and drinking non-stop until the wee hours of the next morning.

Happily, the secrets of the blue



George Karimalis eats breakfast with guests every morning and discusses the traditional diet and way of life on Ikaria.

zones are no longer secret, but the fact Ikaria has avoided the over-tourism that plagues other islands is something you may want to keep to yourself.

fact file

- Aegean Airlines flies from Athens to Ikaria in 55 minutes.
- Karimalis Winery & Farmhouse offers guests accommodation in restored stone houses. Breakfast is included. Dinners, cooking classes and wine tours can be purchased. ikarianwine.gr/en



A guest room in a 500-year old stone building at Karimalis Winery & Farmhouse.