

Riches of a simple life

A Greek home with a view over 10 islands, and a walking-holiday business, has given one couple the life they always dreamed of, says **Gilly Cameron Cooper**



£94,500: restored character village house with a walled garden featuring fruit trees and sea views. For more details, email realestate@naxosisland.com



12 rooms, six loos — the couple's villa even came with an established vineyard

NAXOS, the biggest island in the Cyclades, offers a taste of Greece as it used to be. But whenever I brought up the subject of actually buying a house on the Greek island we live on for much of the year, my husband, Robin, would reply: "If we didn't have the business to run, living here would drive me nuts."

Robin's passion is rowing — on the Thames. Difficult, then, for him in the Cyclades, a sprinkling of islands in the southern Aegean, where we base our walking-holidays business. We leave London after Robin's last boat race at the end of March and return in November. The Walking Plus programme runs in spring and autumn, so we can nip back to the UK for July and August.

Our choice of Naxos was practical. We needed plenty of potential walks to attract the punters — landscapes of drama and beauty, steeped with culture and tradition. Naxos came up with the goods. It is little bigger than the Isle of Wight — with extraordinary contrasts, from barren granite tors and marble mountains to rich farmland cultivated for 6,000 years, and deep-cleft valleys with secret streams and pools. Everything is infused with mythology. It's the best of Greece past and present.

"Yes, but won't you have done the island in a couple of years?" a friend asked us. Unlikely: there are enough



The beach at the town of Apollona on Naxos

ancient mule-tracks and wild places to keep us going for decades, and a host of other islands nearby — Santorini, Mykonos, Amorgos — to be explored.

For the first four years, we rented a tiny house in an olive grove for £240 a month. One week we helped the landlord harvest his olives, resting beneath silvered leaves to share tomatoes, coarse village bread and sharp local cheese. Manolis, from the local taverna, distilled *raki* in a backyard furnace, slaughtered a pig and invited us to the feast. Robin was hooked on rural life — and ready to buy into it.

Multiple estate agents armed with property details do not exist on Naxos. We scoured the island and interrogated village elders, sipping coffee in local

cafés. Island architects-cum-building contractors showed us tracts of land with astounding views — but no planning permission. The shell of a traditional village house appealed for its thick stone walls. We were tempted by the walk-in ease of new-build villas, so close to the sea that washing dries salt-stiff on the line. But anything within our budget was too small.

We found "the house" ourselves. Twelve rooms, six entrance doors, six loos, showers and two-hob kitchenettes for £145,000 — the price of a tiny new-build villa or a modern two-bedroom apartment in Naxos Town. Beds, tables — and rotavator included. Yakovos, the seller, built the single-storey block as studio-apartments 20 years ago. It was

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£760,000: a luxury villa designed by a top Greek architect for himself, with polished granite floors, four bedrooms plus two independent studio-apartments, double garage, 39ft by 15ft swimming pool and a large, sheltered patio with bar. Set in an acre of mature terraced garden with great all-round coastal views. The fortified Venetian castle of Naxos Town is five minutes' drive away. For more details, email real-estate@naxosisland.com.



£362,000: a three-storey, 15th century Venetian country manor, three miles from the sea and Naxos Town, in an acre of land, with a new roof, windows, floors, plumbing and electricity. It has an entrance hall, dining and living rooms, store room and two bedrooms. For more details, email realestate@naxosisland.com.



£145,000: a compact two-bedroom villa in the characteristic neo-Cycladic style of island architect (and deputy mayor) Yannis Pomonis, finished to a high standard. Set in a quarter-acre, it is a five-minute walk from a long, sandy beach and protected headland. You can buy houses like this off-plan and adjust the interior layout within the architect's footprint. For more, email real-estate@naxosisland.com.



£94,500 (above): a well-restored village house with great character. A shaded terrace overlooks rooftops to coastal plain and neighbouring island of Paros. Thick walls and roof insulation make it suitable for year-round living. The property has a sitting room, kitchen, small double bedroom with separate shower and loo, and store room. A tiny but luxuriant walled garden has orange, lemon and fig trees.

For more details, email real-estate@naxosisland.com.

£69,000 (below): renovation could turn the top half of this neo-classical village house into an elegant maisonette. It is in the centre of Halki, an interesting and attractive village, within a broad vale of olive groves ringed by marble mountains. It has a sitting room, with big windows and balcony, and a bedroom. There is no kitchen or bathroom, but three little rooms and possibilities for a mezzanine.

For more details, email gillycc@easynet.co.uk.





Atlas Photography

more than we had bargained for, but even the locals (as they eyed up the 2,000-litre vineyard) agreed it was a bargain.

What sold it for us was the view from the avenue-like terrace over a broad band of sea and island. Back windows frame the maquis-covered hills. The sun rises behind, and the giant globe of a full moon is low enough for a cow to jump over. Fifteen minutes' walk across farmland to the coast are two perfect deserted beaches. There are olive trees, pomegranates and pears, and lemon trees. I plant potatoes, spinach and

'Our income has plummeted but we feel like millionaires as we watch the sun set'



Gilly and Robin found Naxos was the ideal place for their walking-holiday business

white Santorini aubergines and watch them shoot up in the sunshine.

The building looks like the bottom tier of a wedding cake. But with the help of our interior-designer daughter and a local architect, it will become our own modern Greek-style villa. The estimated cost of reconstruction is £100,000, and the eventual total outlay will be £250,000 for a three-en-suite-bedroom, two-office villa with open-plan kitchen/dining/living room.

The walking business (UK taxed) pays for life in Greece and I freelance as an author and editor; a small pension has matured and lodgers cover the costs of our London home. Our income has plummeted from the heyday of our professional careers, but we feel like millionaires as we identify 10 islands and watch the sunset over the nearest.

What to buy

"In the past three years, the English and the Greeks have led the field in property-buying," says Yannis Pomonis, architect and deputy mayor. Trends depend on whom you talk to. Pomonis says a 13 per cent rise in a year is due to an increase in the cost of materials, not in real-estate

values. Estate agent Riet Rowland estimates there has been an increase of about 30 per cent in the past five years on properties within five minutes' or less walking distance from the sea. Kari Papoutsis of Nautica Real-Estate quotes an annual rise of 15 to 25 per cent, depending on proximity to the sea and/or view. Stricter planning controls and reluctance by farmers to sell their land should protect the island's natural environment but limit the range of new-build property.

All warn against buying land without planning permission, especially if there's a chapel or historical site nearby; it could take years of negotiation with the authorities to acquire. Also beware of multiple ownership when a property has been handed down through generations. It is vital to have plans checked by an architect-surveyor and to have a Greek lawyer with good English.

Websites

- www.walkingplus.co.uk
- Riet Rowland at realestate@naxosisland.com
- www.naxos-realestate.gr
- www.nautica-re.com

The lowdown

NAXOS is the largest island in the Cyclades — a cluster of islands, a couple of dozen of which are inhabited — sprinkled over the Aegean Sea north of Crete and south-east of Athens. Most local administrative matters, from planning to refuse collection, go through the town hall. The population of 20,000 is concentrated in Naxos Town with scattered villages, with populations of about 300.

Shopping and services: Naxos Town has a hospital, essential services, shops, supermarkets, roadside peddlers selling produce at one euro a kilo, interior-design

showrooms and fashion boutiques. There is a great choice of agricultural and domestic hardware stores. Greek state schools on the island go to secondary level; after that, students go to university in Athens.

Weather: Every July and August, Athenian Greeks head for their island holiday homes for relief from the city heat. Winters can be wet and cold, average daily winter sunlight hours are double that of UK.

Getting there: There is no international airport, the 35-minute domestic flight to and from Athens runs most days throughout the year and high-speed ferries take three-and-a-half hours from Piraeus.

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