

Greeceed Lightning

Zante, Venice of the east. The perfect Hellenic experience – or another Greek island with potholes in the pavement? Sarah Clark decides...

The rep told me it hadn't rained on Zante in July, for nine years. So why was I staring out of the window onto a sodden balcony, for the third day running? I'd been getting used to the searing heat until it was spoiled by torrential rain and the most spectacular thunderstorms I've ever seen. Not to mention the earthquake. Well, maybe just a tremor, but it's the principle...

Zante, southernmost of the six Ionian islands, is a compelling mix of beauty and commercialism, not yet cursed by extreme tourism. I stayed in Argassi, a family friendly resort on the east of the island.

Argassi is a curious place where busy roads are flanked with hotels, restaurants and shops selling everything from milk to tacky plastic turtles, all called 'Sainsburys' or 'Tesco's'. The main island road runs through Argassi, and the majority of hotels reside along here, or on the steep, scenic hillside. Like many Greek islands, road maintenance is not a priority, and it's advisable not to let natural curiosity for your new surroundings take your mind off watching where you are walking. I did just that and my foot still hurts.

Gregarious bar owners and restaurateurs are always keen to entice you in for a meal or drink. So much so that after a while I got to know the places with the slightly over-enthusiastic approaches and deliberately walked on the other side of the road as they ran after me shouting, "Yes please! Yes please!"

Local menus are reassuringly pseudo-Greek, with moussaka and Kleftiko on the same menu as a Sunday roast, popular with less adventurous travellers, and various pasta options. There's usually someone outside handing out discount meal vouchers, making eating out extremely good value. A word of warning – local alcohol is cheap, but imported drinks are probably more expensive than in England.

Argassi nightlife is predominantly bar-based, with a couple of small clubs, so you really have to venture into nearby Laganas for a big night out. I'd advise caution. It's an 18-30's paradise overrun by topless males displaying red chests and beer bellies, and I would give it a wide berth unless you want to attract a lesser-spotted red-breasted male. No wonder the Loggerhead Turtle population of Laganas Bay is diminishing!

It's worth hiring a car and exploring the island as it's small, you can see the highlights in two weeks, and still get some sunbathing in. Make your way along the coastal road to Yerakes, or one of the other beauty spots on the Vassilikos Peninsula to relax on the fantastic sandy beaches, as Argassi beach is a practically non-existent strip of shingle. For some cosmopolitan

shopping, head to Zante Town and check out the cafes, jewellery shops and harbour.

If you're really feeling brave, drive up into the mountains and experience the pure fear of navigating the winding roads, take in the sheer drops with non-existent crash barriers, the breathtaking scenery that makes it all worthwhile, and the laid back ambience of a Greek evening in a taverna on the west of the island, watching the sun drop behind the clouds.

That is, if it ever stops raining...