



Walking the Islands...Symi

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About Symi

The guidebooks for independent travellers describe Symi as a “day tripper island”, and you will surely get that impression if you arrive on one of the late morning sailings from Rhodes. But if you find somewhere to stay, not easy in high season, make the most of the town and waterfront in the early morning and later evening, and either disappear to a remote beach or, of course, head for the hills, you will find that this amoeba-shaped island of 58 square kilometres has its hidden delights. Symi was the island that really sparked off the *Walking the Islands...* project in the 1980s and the walks need refreshing and adding to. So watch this space for updates!



For now, in summary, here's what Symi offers:

- 👣 A photogenic harbour, with neo-classical mansions in a huge fjord like inlet, with an opening protected by an islet inhabited by goats
- 👣 The remnants of one of the largest boat-building and sponge-fishing industries in the Mediterranean
- 👣 Up 500 steps, a sleepy upper town with panoramic views
- 👣 An almost eerie proximity to Turkey; when walking the hills, it's sometimes difficult to distinguish whether you're looking at the hills of Symi, the islets or the Dorian Hills on the Turkish coast

- 👣 A comprehensive day boat service linking the port with islets and remote, cliff-backed bays and beaches (with possibilities for linear walks)
- 👣 A remote monastery at the far end of the island, with a massive Panegyri (festival)
- 👣 Juniper woods , a network of trails and spring and autumn flowers in abundance

The over-arching theme on Symi is its former glories. Once heavily forested, and presumably without today's desperate shortage of water, Symi was an important boat building centre for the Knights of St John. The tradition continued and today distinctive kaiques from Symi grace many a fishing and day-boat fleet. The sponge fishing industry sustained a wealthy community; by the turn of the 20th century the population was over 30, 000 and the islet of Sesklia to the south housed another 3,000 people. The classical villas, now ruined, lining the waterfront and arrayed in tiers up the slopes behind are a testament to the island's former prosperity.



Several factors have led to the decline of boat building and the sponge trade. One obvious one is the advent of synthetic sponges. Deforestation led to the reliance on Turkey for boat-building timber, but this link was broken when hostilities resumed. Over-fishing meant that the sponge divers had to go ever deeper and ever further. Further often meant sailing out of the Mediterranean and way down the African coast, and deeper led to huge risks to health and safety. In an interview in 1988, Kalymniot Kapetan Manolis, then aged 53 said, “Divers used to sink to the bottom clutching a piece of marble. They could stay down up to two minutes at 20 to 30 fathoms. Then they’d pull us up fast with a rope tied around our waists.” Death and disability became even greater occupational hazards. Then in the 1980s a catastrophic virus spread through the sponges, reducing the crop (on Kalymnos) from 38 tons in 1986 to 6 tons in 1988. William Travis¹ in his readable account of three years spent on the island in the Seventies, describes Symi as “an island built on sponges”. He describes island life at the time, very different from today of course, and the relationship between the expatriots and those left behind. I’ll leave you to read the book to discover the reason for the unusual title, but I will offer the clue that there’s a similar story on Halki. Perhaps I’ll offer a bottle of finest vintage retsina (!) to anyone who can answer this little conundrum. For a tie breaker, what is a “candle auction” and what is the main smuggled commodity between Turkey and Greece these days?

Returning to the theme of “former glories”, the current winter population of Symi is less than 3,000 and of Sesklia Σεσκλιὰ nil, tourism has succeeded sponge-fishing as the major source of income and water is tinkered in from Rhodes (maybe piped by now?). Nearly everyone lives in the port/Chorio, apart from a

¹ William Travis; Bus Stop Symi, Readers Union, 1973,

settlement over the hill at the second harbour of Pedhi Πεδι, a scattering of isolated farmsteads (kahlivia) and a huge monastery, with a sole resident monk at Panormitis Πανορμιτις in the south. The monastery of Taxiarchis Michail Panormitis Ταξιαρχηις Μιχαηλις Πανορμιτις (The Archangel), the destination of day boat trips, excursions from Rhodes, and one day but not yet, a walking route in this guide, was founded in the sixteenth century but has, in the words of Ernle Bradford² a façade in “overpowering nineteenth century style and capped by a campanile worthy of (Prince) Albert’s Kensington. The lines of the waterfront are saved by three long residential blocks built in a discreetly Italianate style with agreeable balconies.” Inside the monastery complex are frescoes and walnut carvings and an eclectic museum, with a collection of ship models and, reportedly a long case clock dated 1780 which at the time of Bradford’s writing (1970s) “has been going continuously since 1880 and keeps good time.” The summer festivals at Panormitis are huge, even by Greek standards.

Also in the south the islet of Sesklia Σεσκλια, reachable by day-boat, is uninhabited, though there is a chapel and some remains of its former community, including an abundance of potsherds. Sesklia is a breeding ground for Mediterranean monk-seals and Shearwaters, a popular grazing ground for goats and, for the record, we have seen Golden Eagles there.



Getting to Symi

As the *Walking the Islands...* project began on Symi, I’ll include my first impressions from my first visit in May 1987, “Our arrival on Symi by evening ferry was unforgettable. We left Rhodes harbour at 7pm, when the bustle was at its peak; tourist, traders, yachts, taxis, mopeds, tavernas and bars. Gradually the atmosphere on the “Symi 1” became more intimate. Tourists, like me, eagerly awaiting their first glimpse, returnees watching for our reaction, locals with their shopping and emigrants from Australia and Italy anticipating their reunion with their Symiot families.

As dusk falls, we skirt close to the Turkish coast, with no sign of habitation apart from the odd beacon on a barren rock. We start to see the dark shape of Symi looming ahead. Then, just as darkness falls, a gasp of excitement as the lights of Chorio come into view as we pass Pedhi bay. As quickly as they appeared, they vanish as if switched off, but of course they are eclipsed by Noulia, the 250m hill forming the island’s northeast finger. As the ferry rounds Cape Koutsounpas, the lights reappear and the harbour twinkles its welcome. As we get nearer, we see movement, bustle again, though on a much smaller scale than back in Rhodes, which seems like miles away and years ago! Waiters at the tables, meeters on the quay, a few waving hands, groups coagulate in anticipation, officials straighten hats and tighten ties. The ferry negotiates between the outstretched arms of Noulia and Drakounda, sheltering the harbour, and we’re on land again, this time the welcome of a small island replaces the impersonality of the city of Rhodes. What will we find here tomorrow?”

² Ernle Bradford; *The Companion Guide to the Greek Islands*, Collins 1988 0-00-217862-1

Symi's principal connection is with Rhodes, a daily hydrofoil (50 minutes) small ferry (1¼ hours) and day boat link in the summer. It connects on most days with other Dodecanese, Tilos, Kalymnos, Kos, Nissiros, and Patmos, and with the Cyclades (4 hours to Astipalaia, 8 to Amorgos, 10 to Naxos). The customary approach for international travellers is from Rhodes airport, though it can easily be done from Kos too. Athens via Piraeus, then Naxos, would be a feasible, if rather long means of approach and would give you a sense of really having travelled, and plenty of opportunities to glimpse a cross-section of life in and on the Aegean.

Getting around Symi

Symi is still an island of boats rather than road transport, apart from the bus to Pedhi, and I bet by now, truck trips over the hills to western and southern beaches. The hinterland is, I believe, still riddled with monopatia/kalderimia and goat tracks, and the usual Dodecanese warnings about shortage of water and scratchy bushes apply here.

Staying on Symi

Rooms are concentrated around the port, and range from basic to high standard hotels. Symi has a reputation for being hard to find a room on the spot in high season, so it's best to book ahead. I've not heard of any campsites, though with an abundance of secluded coves, I'll bet there's a number of freelancers under canvas on various beaches. Water might be an issue though.

Maps and other information

The Anavasi Topos **maps** have not yet reached Symi, but keep checking www.mountains.gr ! For now, there are several Tourist maps that outline the topography to choose from. The ones I have from 1987 will doubtless have been added to by now, but for the record, they are

- 2cm to 1 Km Map of Symi, by Michael Th. Skevofilax, including depths in fathoms and a basic Lat/Long grid (included in his book Panormitis and on sale separately)
- Tourist Map of Symi, I Koza, no scale given but it's about 3cm to 1Km and numbers all the chapels (there are 62)

and don't forget Google map gives you a satellite view, which is fascinating www.google.co.uk/maps

Apart from the usual range of general guides to Greek Islands, some possible reading, if you can track down a copy:

- William Travis; Bus Stop Symi, Readers Union, 1973
- Ernle Bradford; The Companion Guide to the Greek Islands, Collins 1988 0-00-217862-1
- Kostas Farmakidis & Agapi Karakatsani, Symi- A guide, K Michalas, Athens, 1975.

A plethora of websites describe the island, and give you links to accommodation: eg

www.greekisland.co.uk www.the-greek-islands.co.uk www.greece.gb.net

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