

Forget the ferry. This is the best way to get around the Greek islands

A new, surprisingly good value helicopter service is a breeze, says Ben Clatworthy, who used it to hop from Mykonos to Folegandros and Santorini



Ben Clatworthy

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Santorini's cliffs at Oia, with their white buildings cut into the rock and blue-domed churches, are a hazy speck in the distance when the penny drops.

I have found the answer to what is admittedly a first-world problem: how to escape the chaos of getting around the Greek Aegean islands without breaking the bank. Less than an hour ago my girlfriend, Alix, and I were drinking coffee by a swimming pool on the rugged island of Folegandros. After being dropped at the island's heliport to meet the chopper, we are descending into [Santorini](#). In about 45 minutes we'll be sitting in another hotel, by another pool, sipping another drink. Greek island-hopping has never been such a breeze.

Of course, choppering between the islands is nothing new. The super-rich have been chartering helicopters to transport them between Athens and the Cyclades for years, while everyone else queued for the ferry. That is slowly changing with the arrival of Hoper, the islands' first scheduled helicopter service, with flights sold by the seat.

"It is an amazing view," says 24-year-old Walter, one of six pilots shuttling passengers around the islands in Hoper's Robinson helicopters. "It can be really hectic in the summer, there's a lot of demand from people who want to visit multiple islands but not spend hours on the ferry," he says.

We hover over the runway at Santorini's international airport and are guided to the helicopter stand by a car with lights that flash "Follow me". Passengers boarding a Ryanair flight get their phones out to snap a picture of the chopper following behind the car.

It's all rather surreal, and made even more so when, once we're on the ground, a huge bendy airport bus — capable of carrying a whole planeload of passengers — turns up to ferry the two of us to the terminal.

From Mykonos to Folegandros

Our trip, designed to see whether the Cyclades could really be made effortless, had started in [Mykonos](#), where five-star hotels are almost as common as beach clubs.

We stayed at Kalesma, a discreet hillside hotel looking out over Aleomandra Bay. It opened in May 2021, but doubled in size last summer with the addition of 25 rooms. It is built to feel like an old village, with whitewashed rooms and villas tumbling down the hill towards the sea.



Kalesma has a mixture of rooms, suites and private villas

Our villa — all stone, wood and linen — has doors opening onto a private pool and a small outdoor kitchen. Not that you would lift a finger to cook. The food in the restaurant is superb, with a menu that changes daily depending on the catch and what's in season.

At about 5pm the local fish distributor calls the head chef, Costas Tsingas, with news of what he will be bringing by. "It is all Greek, all line-caught and cooked on open coals," Tsingas says. "It can be wild octopus or sea bass. I just never find out until late afternoon, when we know what has been caught."

Olive oil is sourced from trees on the site, there is a small kitchen garden and about half the cheese served is made in the hotel's kitchens. Best were the homemade pitta, pale taramasalata — nothing like the insipid pink of UK supermarket tubs — Greek salad and crispy potatoes served with our whole white fish.

The prospect of an easy hop to Folegandros makes peeling ourselves off the sunloungers and getting into the taxi to the heliport a smidgen easier. It is about a 20-minute drive to the heliport and as far from the ferry experience as you can get. Our driver chuckles as he turns off the road on to a bumpy dirt track. At its end is a metal shipping container with a small covered terrace overlooking the helipad, where our red Robinson helicopter awaits.