



BLUE, BLUE ELECTRIC BLUE

WHILE MYKONOS IS FAMOUS FOR ITS NIGHTLIFE AND HYDRA FOR ITS ART, ON SANTORINI IT'S ALL ABOUT THE DRAMA. HERE ARE THIS SEASON'S NEW ACTS AND REVAMPS - TO BE CLEVERLY SAVED UP FOR WHEN THE HIGH-SUMMER CROWDS MELT AWAY

BY RACHEL HOWARD. PHOTOGRAPHS BY ANA LUI





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HE FIRST TIME I saw the caldera, in the early 1990s, I had arrived on an overnight ferry, in darkness hot and thick as melted pitch, waking at dawn to a view that stung my eyes with tears. It's as close as I've ever come to a spiritual awakening. Whenever I return, that smouldering blue, rimmed by a crescent of bruised cliffs, still provokes a little gasp and a long silence.

Today, the bone-white villages huddled on the cliff around the volcanic crater are no longer ghostly, half-ruined after a terrifying earthquake in 1956 that sent two thirds of the population into exile. Far fewer survived the eruption that buried Akrotiri, the centre of a great Bronze Age civilisation, whose streets, squares and frescoed homes were astonishingly well-preserved beneath a cloak of ash around 3,600 years ago. Archaeologists have unearthed poignant details of lives interrupted: pots of barley, a basket of sea urchins, a golden ibex in a clay chest, perhaps an attempt to appease the wayward gods.

If time has stopped at Akrotiri, the rest of Santorini has changed dramatically. The humble *yposkafa*, vaulted houses sculpted from ash, pumice stone, solidified lava and sand, have been transformed into expensive cave hotels. Black-clad grandmothers hanging out bedsheets have been replaced by girls in crochet dipping their toes into plunge pools. If they keep chiselling away at the cliffs to carve out one more sea-view suite, the precarious villages of Oia and Fira might just tumble into the sea.

Of course, like anywhere with an active volcano on the horizon, that could happen at any time. Perhaps this underlying vulnerability is what gives Santorini its raw intensity, its quietly devastating beauty. Fame has brought new pressures. With over two million visitors a year, infrastructure is strained on a small island with a population of about 15,500. Passenger ships clog the waters around Fira and buses crawl along the hairpin roads, desperate to get to Oia in time for sunset. When the local residents' association protested that its tiny village could not cope with the crowds, an official allegedly replied: 'If the residents of Oia don't like it, we'll move the sunset to Kamari.'

Ironically, it was wastrels and scoundrels who traditionally inherited land on the world's only inhabited caldera. Farmland in the interior was far more valuable. In the mineral-rich soil, it was possible to eke out cherry tomatoes, white aubergines, and golden fava beans. It is here, inland, that you will find traces of the old Santorini. In the subdued villages of Megalochori, Pyrgos and Emporio, at religious festivals in blue-domed chapels surrounded by vineyards, among the ruins of ancient Thera on the summit of Mesa Vouno, a giddy rock-face flanked by the black beaches of Kamari and Perissa.

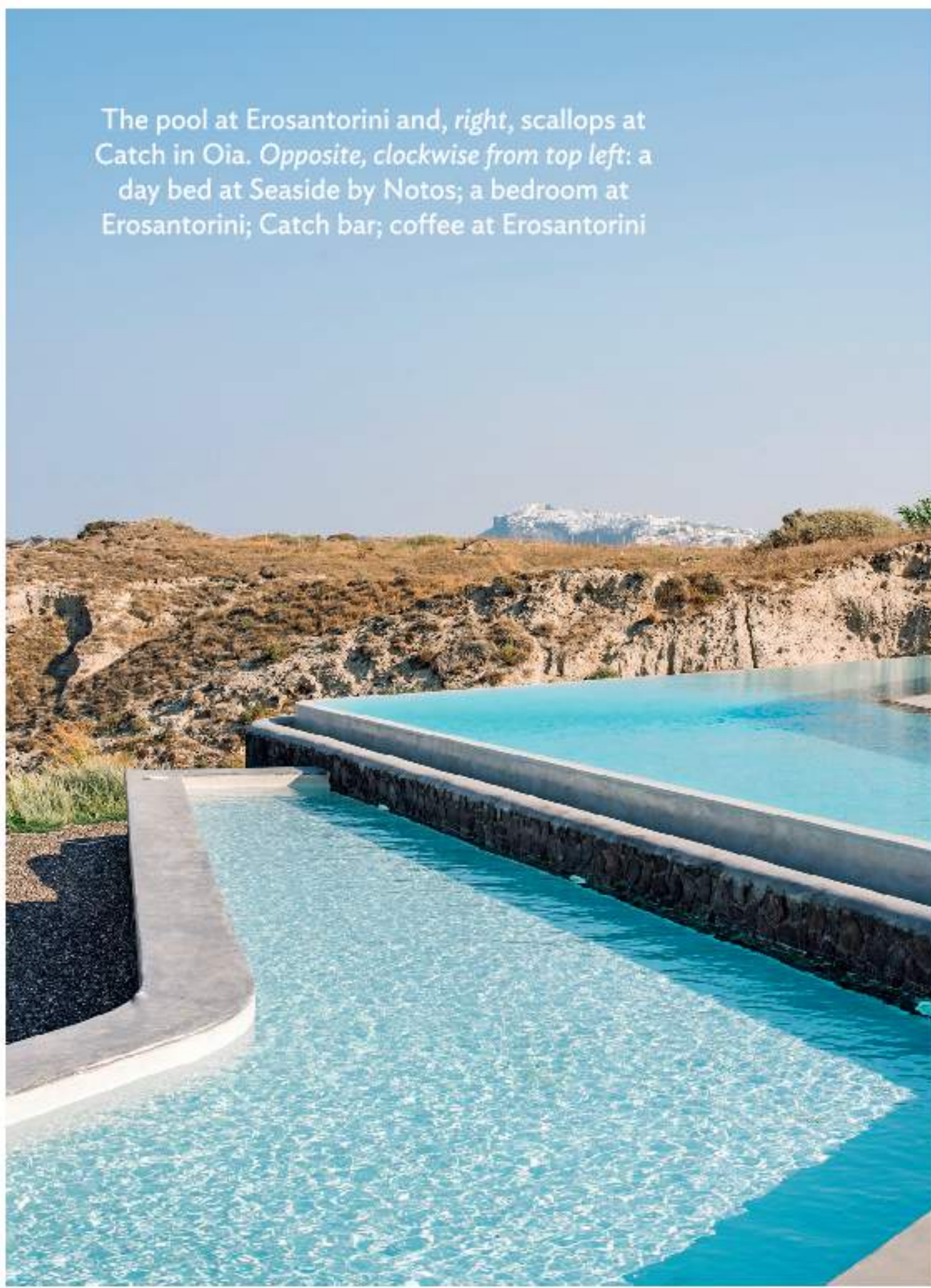
When the photographer Robert McCabe first came to the island in 1954, he took a picture from up here. There were only two small houses on the vast plain of Perissa, now one of Santorini's most developed resorts. 'For those of us who had the privilege to visit in that era, the changes are sometimes difficult to accept,' he wrote in 2006. 'Yet still, each time we make landfall, we are overcome with awe at this unique place.'

Other Greek islands may be more authentic, wild and untainted by the darker impulses of nature and man. But none have the same magnetic pull, the same physical impact as you stare into the drifting light, entranced.



From above, the pool and outdoor seating at Erosantorini. Opposite, clockwise from top left: a church in Oia; pomegranates at Perivolos Hideaway; a pool and the minimal interior at Erosantorini. Previous pages, a terrace at Andronis Boutique Hotel in Oia

The pool at Erosantorini and, right, scallops at Catch in Oia. Opposite, clockwise from top left: a day bed at Seaside by Notos; a bedroom at Erosantorini; Catch bar; coffee at Erosantorini



WHAT TO BOOK ON SANTORINI

HOTELS

PERIVOLAS

This is the hotel that made me fall hard for Santorini. And it's what keeps me coming back. While the rest of the island can feel overrun at times, here everything is understated, unhurried, almost preternaturally calm. Much like the owner, Costis Psychas, a blond titan who built this honeycomb of cliff-side houses, stone by volcanic stone. More sculptor than builder, Psychas has distilled the eerie landscape into a cocoon of crisp white sheets on low-slung beds, a scattering of fuchsia cushions, a shapely pool seeping into the horizon. His clear-eyed daughter Sandrine now runs Perivolos with the same lack of pretension. This year, they've enlisted Theodoros Kakoulis, a brilliant young chef, to refresh the guests-only restaurant; smoked tomato and shrimp risotto and fish baked in vine leaves, served with sesame green beans and strawberries, are tantalisingly light yet complex. Another perk for the many repeat visitors: a smart new gym and grey lap pool. perivolos.com; doubles from about £480

PERIVOLAS HIDEAWAY

A splinter of land detached from Santorini by a volcanic eruption in 1613BC, Thirassia has somehow escaped everyone's attention. Very few visitors bother to visit this breakaway island. Even fewer get to stay at Perivolos Hideaway, a magnificent villa resurrected from the ruins of a pumice mine. Invisible from afar, the red-and-black stone house appears like a floating mirage as you approach by speedboat. (The only other way to reach it is by helicopter.) The sea is framed in every

arched window, the barely there but ever-ready staff are a dream, but it's the roof terrace that steals the show. At dusk, Santorini turns blue-black across the caldera, villages sparkling like fairy lights strung along the clifftops. perivolashideaway.com; from about £10,960 per night (sleeps eight, minimum three-night stay), including all meals and drinks, watersports and use of RIB boats

SANTO MARIS OIA

The location of this all-suite hotel, on a scrubby hill just below Oia, feels slightly off at first. But as the sun drops seaward in a swirl of pink and lilac, right in front of your hot tub, it all starts to make sense.

Ask for one of the new rooms, added this May, for the very best views. The cavernous spa is another draw. As well as scrubs, wraps and facials, you can get the Lucky Treatment: a four-hand massage that supposedly makes any wish come true. Dubious, but it will make you glow. santomaris.gr; suites from about £435

EROSANTORINI

Privacy is a rare privilege on Santorini. This stunning villa breaks the mould. Behind stone walls covered with prickly pears, through a narrow passageway, is a sudden vast terrace and a tiered pool plunging 1,000ft to the sea. With whitewashed kilims and giant spotty beanbags, the playful, graphic design is unmistakably Paola Navone, the Italian designer behind several COMO hotels. Four softly monochrome suites are in separate houses, which you can rent individually or as a whole. (Unusually for Santorini, children are

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welcome and there are no steep stairs.) Watching birds, boats, sunbeams and stars draw patterns on sea and sky is like stepping inside a 360-degree Viewmaster. With a wood-fired oven, wine cellar, marble spa, yoga instructor, outdoor cinema and a winsome staff of 10, you barely need to venture out. *erosantorini.com*; from about £6,930 per night (minimum three-night stay) for exclusive use of the estate for up to 10 people; doubles from about £875

THE VASILICOS

The Vasilicos – a play on the Greek word for regal and the basil plants that scent the terracotta-tiled terraces – is also an homage to the late Vasilis Valambous, a bon vivant and art collector. His sparky children, Daphne and Yannis, have transformed their family's beloved summer house into a seven-room hotel. Decorated with original antiques, it all feels personal and thoughtful. Generous breakfasts are brought to your cliff-top balcony (beg for the home-made baklava); at night, the chef serves a five-course dinner, paired with award-winning wines from the family's Vassaltis winery. There's a library curated by Atlantis Books, a clued-up bookshop in Oia, and a boutique selling beachwear by Greek designers. *thevasilicos.com*; doubles from about £315

RESTAURANTS

BOTARGO

At the pinnacle of Pyrgos, Santorini's prettiest village, is a medieval fortress where people flock to Franco's, a classic spot for operatic sundowners. Now there's another reason to venture up the meandering alleys. In a 19th-century mansion, Botargo has original frescoes on the ceiling, modern art on the walls, Cole Porter on the stereo, and white linen tables scattered across the candlelit square, balcony

and roof terrace. The team behind Ftelia and Farma on Mykonos have triumphed again with the Mediterranean menu: marinated octopus with fava bean, marjoram oil and pickled carrots, John Dory with beetroot cream and fennel sauce, and a sensational chocolate cake with hazelnuts and sea salt. +30 22860 30070; about £95 for two

OVAC

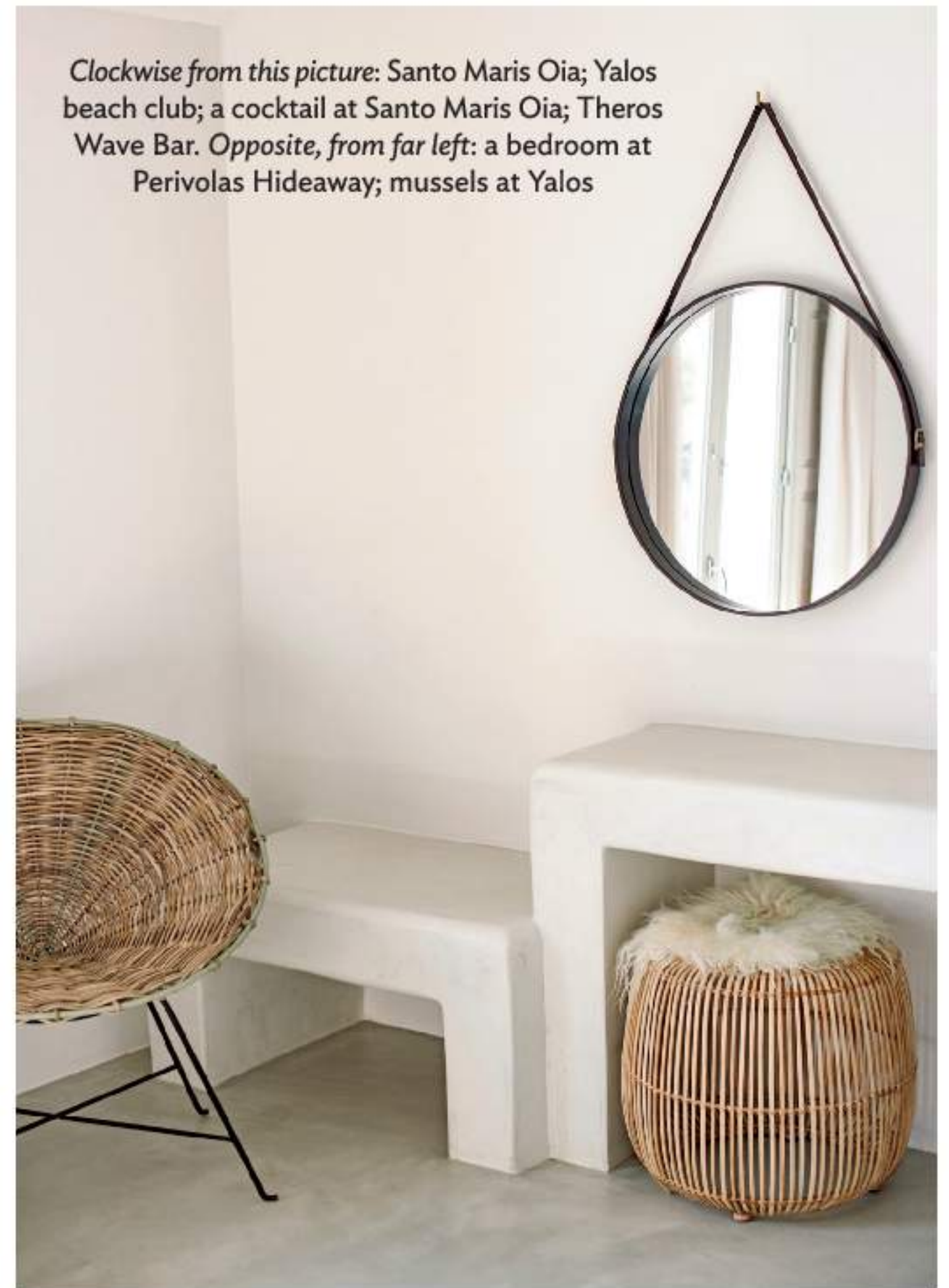
One of the loveliest hotels on Mykonos, Cavo Tagoo opened an offshoot on Santorini last year – a ritzy little number with 11 rooms poised on the caldera. But the accommodation is almost an afterthought: the star attraction is the clubby poolside restaurant, Ovac, where a glamorous crowd gather at night for the island's best sushi and cocktails (my favourite, the Aegean Julep, is a refreshing blend of gin, cucumber, ginger, lemon and green-apple liqueur topped with Aegean tonic). At first, the Greco-Asian menu is confusing. You're not sure whether to order king-crab tacos or halloumi *saganaki*. Whichever direction you take, you can't go wrong. *Spanakopita* gyoza, sea-bass nigiri with sriracha, lobster and black-truffle *giouvetsi* are outstanding. Even a simple dish of broccolini charred on the wood-fired grill is heaven. But none of it comes cheap. +30 22860 28900; *ovac.gr*; about £125 for two

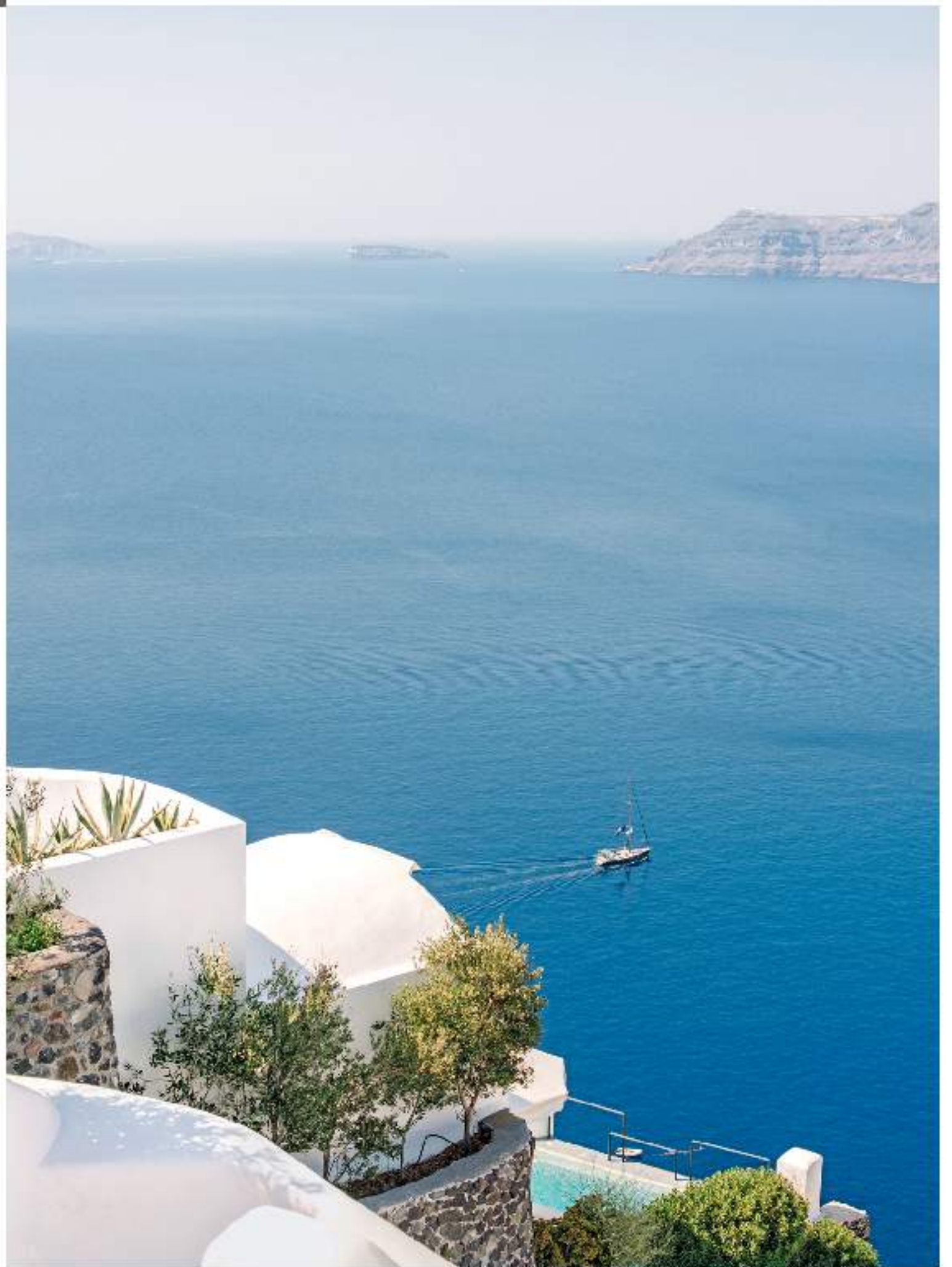
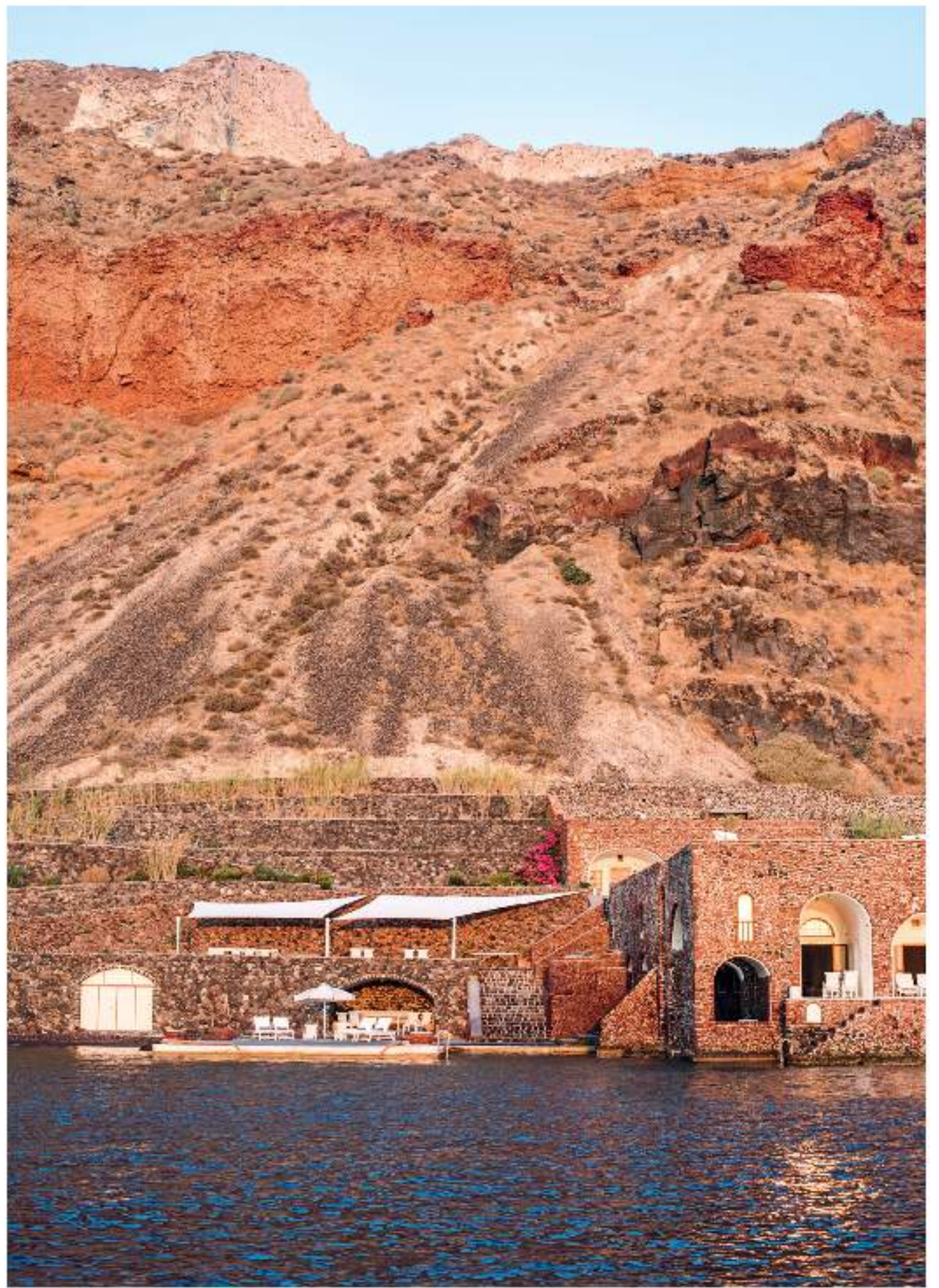
TO PSARAKI

It's not new or fancy, but this jaunty tavern overlooking Vlichada's fishing port serves some of the best (and most honestly priced) seafood on the entire island. Alongside whole grilled fish, order sea-urchin salad, sardines stuffed with fresh herbs, and for pudding, pears poached in local Assyrtiko wine. Be sure to call ahead to book a table overlooking the harbour. While you're there, check out Santorini Arts Factory, an old tomato-canning plant that's been



Clockwise from this picture: Santo Maris Oia; Yalos beach club; a cocktail at Santo Maris Oia; Theros Wave Bar. Opposite, from far left: a bedroom at Perivolos Hideaway; mussels at Yalos







Seafood at Catch and, right, the nearby Melitini café. Opposite, clockwise from top left: a pool at Perivolos; Perivolos Hideaway, set in an old mine on the tiny island of Thirassia; looking out to sea from Perivolos; Santo Maris in Oia



converted into a museum, gallery and café, with a funky shop selling ceramics, totes and sarongs by Greek designers. +30 22860 82783; topsarak.gr; about £65 for two

SEASIDE BY NOTOS

This restaurant and beach bar on bustling Perivolos beach wouldn't look out of place in Ibiza, with its Moët and oyster bar in the black sand. Waitresses in cut-offs deliver elaborate fruit platters and Champagne cocktails to the cabanas; in the airy restaurant, the volume is loud and the focus is on Med-Asian seafood. +30 22860 82801; seaside-restaurant.gr; about £75 for two

AGAZE

New this year, this yellow and blue bistro just outside Pyrgos is a cheery pit stop for excellent coffee or brunch. Pick up beautifully packaged sandwiches for a picnic and some of the herbal tea blends as souvenirs. +30 2286 031003; agazesantorini.com; about £60 for two

BEACH BARS

THEROS WAVE BAR

Santorini's volcanic beaches look extraordinary, but they aren't actually great for a cooling dip. The sea can be murky and the natural drama diluted by the thrum of basslines and jet skis. Vlychada is the polar opposite – it's like swimming on the moon. And finding this mellow hangout on the beach is half the fun; navigating the dirt track through wind-sculpted rocks is like careening through a scene from *Star Wars*. Reggae floats across the terrace down to sunbeds shaded with thatched umbrellas. Get the party started with Palomas (mezcal, agave syrup and grapefruit soda). +30 22861 12015; theroswavebar.gr

KATHAROS LOUNGE

Only a few minutes from Oia, on a narrow deck wedged into a ravine and overlooking a secret beach, is the perfect post-swim hideout. It's the creation of Bronte Oh and Vasilis Kavallierakis.

Oh's vegetarian menu is bright and beautiful: a rainbow of beetroot, orange, rocket and feta, griddled cauliflower with salsa verde, and smoked aubergine speckled with pomegranates. It's easy to linger long past sunset drinking Crazy Donkey IPA (brewed locally), especially if some musicians show up – maybe a jazz trio, or a Syrian playing the oud. +30 6970966754

YALOS

Exo Yalos roughly translates as 'the outback beach'. Beside a huddle of tumbledown fishermen's shacks and a marina bobbing with wooden boats, it feels deliciously out of sync with frenetically popular beaches such as Perivolos, Perissa and Kamari. Between sandstone cliffs and crashing waves (the beach catches the north wind), Yalos is a converted boatshed with a laid-back, surf's-up vibe. After dark, there are bonfires in the shadows, tables in the sand, and garlands of lanterns twinkling between the canvas sails overhead. Order the catch of the day three ways: sashimi, ceviche and simply grilled. +30 22860 25816; yalos-santorini.com

GETTING HERE

British Airways (britishairways.com) flies direct from London Heathrow to Santorini. For more information on Santorini, go to the Greek National Tourism Organisation's website visitgreece.gr