



REDISCOVERING RHODES

Boasting thousands of years of important
Mediterranean history and culture, we
explore the many-layered isle of Helios

Words **Juliet Rix**





Alamy



Masterpiece for a Master
The origins of The Palace of the Grand Master of the Knights of Rhodes date all the way back to the 7th century, but its imposing features were added during the extensive renovations in the 14th and 15th centuries; (previous spread) Twilight at Hippocrates Square, Rhodes Old Town

When Zeus shared out the earth between the Gods, Helios the sun god was absent. He was left with nothing, until out of the sea rose a beautiful island. Claiming it as his own and naming it after his sea nymph lover Rhodos, Helios has been its protector ever since, or so the story goes.

Certainly, Rhodes is blessed with plenty of sun, as well as emerald seas, golden beaches, whitewashed villages tucked into dramatic rocky landscapes, and many of the other attributes of an ideal Greek island. Rhodes Town however is far from typically Greek, and there are clues all over the island to its unique and variegated history, as layered as a delicious local filo pastry pie.

Rhodes has in fact been ruled by Greeks for less than a third of the last 1,000 years. The Old Town, a UNESCO World Heritage Site, is marked particularly by two pre-20th-century cultures – neither of them Greek – and it passed from one to the other 500 years ago this year. I was going to spend a week exploring the historic sites of this ancient island, hoping that Homer was correct when he described Helios as a god who ‘gives joy to mortals’.

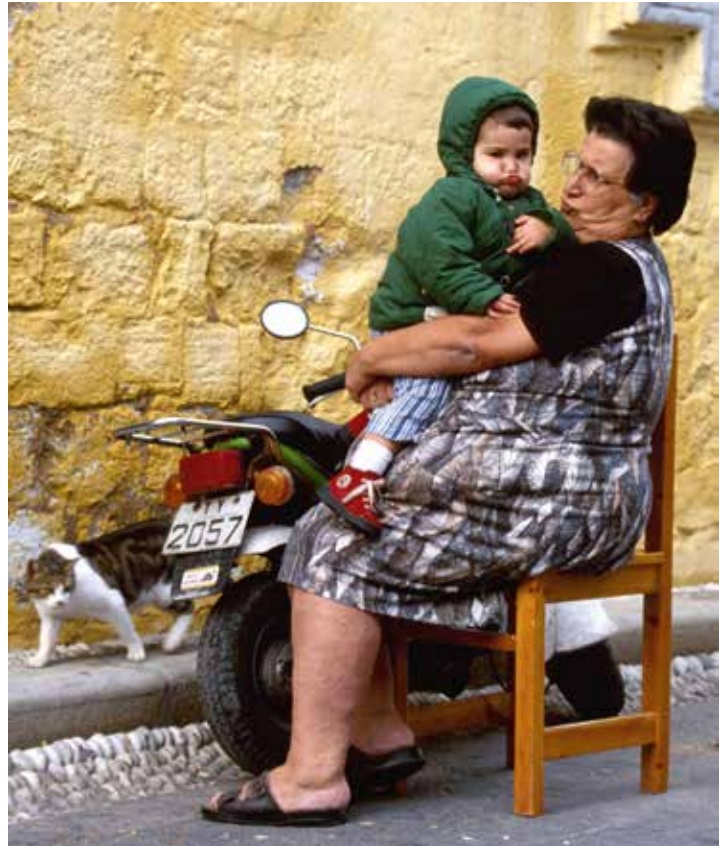
EXPLORING THE OLD TOWN

We arrived at night through St Athanasios Gate, the very same spot where the Ottoman Sultan Suleiman the Magnificent is said to have first entered the city after seizing it in a six-month siege in 1522. He took it from the Knights of St John Hospitaller, the Catholic warrior monks who had ruled Rhodes for more than 200 years. And five centuries later, our zigzag route into the Old Town ran beneath an arch still emblazoned with the Knights’ coat of arms, across a triple bridge over their deep dry moats, and through a tunnel in their bastion walls. Emerging onto a tiny street barely wider than the golf buggy that we and our luggage were travelling in, we zipped along atmospheric alleys between rough stone houses, some more than half a millennium old, and beneath anti-earthquake buttresses creating vaulted passageways with ceilings of starlit sky.

We woke the next day in the heart of the Medieval quarter, looking down into the courtyard of the tiny 13th-century church of St Finourios (or Phinourios), its arched interior boasting Byzantine wall paintings, albeit somewhat damaged by time. The saint is known for helping to find lost things, so I popped in and paid my respects, asking him please to bless our trip pre-emptively so I wouldn’t need to bother him again.

This little church is unusual in being active. Almost all the Old Town’s pre-1522 Christian places of worship were converted into mosques under the Ottomans. While the minarets were removed after the Turks in their turn were displaced by the Italians in 1912, the churches were never re-consecrated and are now ‘monuments’ or museums.

The Ottomans built new mosques too, of course, and just around the corner in Dorieos Square I found the terracotta-domed rear of Agios Finourios almost bumping up against the Retzep Pasha Mosque (built 1588), its elegantly ►



A Rhodes ramble (clockwise from top left) As the main focal point of the Old Town, the Palace of the Grand Master of the Knights of Rhodes has been a key government building for the Knights Hospitallers, the Ottomans and, in the 20th century, the Italians, before being transferred to the Greeks at the end of the Second World War; life in the narrow lanes of the Jewish Quarter, in the Old Town's south-east corner; the 'Street of the Knights' (Ippoton) housed the forces of the Knights Hospitaller, with each nationality – or rather language – getting its own inn on the street; medieval deer statues now mark the spot where the Colossus of Rhodes may have stood

carved façade now closed off for restoration. The ritual fountain out in the square, though, is well-preserved, columned, latticed and prettily dappled beneath a giant ficus tree.

The city's highest point, the top of the 19th-century clock tower (€5, including a drink in the neighbouring café), is the perfect place to get your bearings. I climbed the winding steps to find, spread beneath me, a jigsaw-jumble of roofs and alleyways punctuated by towers and domes alternately topped with crescents and crosses. Neatly encircling it all are powerful fortifications flanked by the sparkling harbours that made this place so desirable to the region's traders and invaders, from far earlier than either the Knights or the Ottomans.

ON THE TRAIL OF THE KNIGHTS

This citadel city was founded in 408 BC when the island's three city states, Lindos, Kamiros and Ialysos, joined together as one – and thrived. The walls include many ancient stones, but in the Old Town at least, this period survives most vividly in early descriptions. We learn, for instance, that having seen off a siege in 304-303 BC, the relieved victors gave thanks to their protector by creating one of the Seven Wonders of the World, a shining 32m bronze of Helios – the Colossus of Rhodes.

"It probably did not stand astride the harbour entrance as it's often depicted," said our excellent guide, Maria Morava, as we stood alongside the deer-topped columns and the Knights' St Nicholas fortress that now greet arrivals by sea, "otherwise when it fell in the earthquake of 227 BC it would have fallen into the water. In fact, it was described still lying on the ground 250 years later.

"It most likely stood there," she added, pointing towards the tower of the Knights' Grand Master's Palace rising above the fortifications, "That was the lower acropolis of the ancient city. The most important places, physical and psychological, are usually taken over by each new power."

The fortress-like Palace of the Grand Master – now housing impressive Greek, Roman and Byzantine mosaics, mostly from Kos – was certainly claimed by the Ottomans. They remained the administrative heart of the island until its destruction in a gunpowder store explosion in 1856. It was rebuilt – accurately on the outside, not so within – by the Italians who, having taken Rhodes from the Ottomans, were keen to quickly establish their (Christian) legitimacy by laying claim to the island's pre-Islamic history. Most of the extensive Knights' city we see today is the result of Italian restoration and rebuilding, although the two are sometimes hard to untangle.

They also built frantically afresh. Between the Old Town walls and Mandraki Harbour we passed a parade of their monumental public buildings. Those from the 1910s and '20s are in an enjoyable syncretic style – combining architectural elements of classical, Knights-period, Ottoman and modern – while those of the '30s and early '40s are typically, belittlingly fascist. Most are still used for their original purpose, including the main post office with its appropriated roundel of Helios above the door.

"We wandered through the City Walls, beneath bastions striped with arrow slits, embellished with bougainvillea and little caper bushes sprouting between the bricks"

The Greek God stares across the road at the Church of the Annunciation, an exact Italian replica of the Knights' early-14th-century Church of St John (the original, by the Grand Master's Palace, was also destroyed in the explosion). The exterior is plain, even dour, as intended by the military monks, but the interior belongs to the post-1947 modern Greek era and harks back to before the Knights. It is covered in a panoply of Byzantine-style Greek Orthodox paintings.

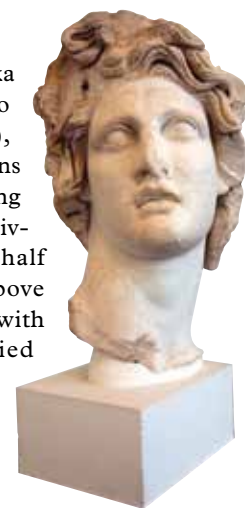
We wandered back through the City Walls, beneath bastions striped with arrow slits, embellished with bougainvillea and little caper bushes sprouting between the bricks. After passing the remains of a third century BC Temple of Aphrodite (patron goddess of sailors) and the cobbled, plain-faced Street of the Knights where they lived in their language groups, we entered an expansive arcaded courtyard. Guarded by a Hellenistic lion that once stood on the ancient city's acropolis, this is both the most untouched of the Knights' buildings – their late 15th-century hospital – and today's Archaeological Museum.

Here, where the Knights Hospitaller once tended their patients, we traced the island's past – and its web of connections spanning Sicily, Egypt, even Cornwall – through pottery, grave goods, votive offerings, ancient inscriptions and sculptures from Rhodes' artistic heyday. "There was a time," said Morava, "when they were churning out statues so fast that even private individuals had them. Cassius took 3,000 statues off to Rome in 43 BC but there were plenty left." A couple of the most impressive, a crouching Aphrodite and a head of Helios, were away at a show in Athens but due to be returned in 2022.

Most extraordinary of all the exhibits was a set of bronze-framed monocular lenses used for engraving, each marked with its focal length. I'd have guessed they were 17th century; in fact, they date from the 7th-6th century BC. These little instruments alone testify to the sophistication of the communities on Rhodes at the time of the three ancient city-states. So we headed out of town in search of the remains of these remarkable societies.

HEADING SOUTH

After a glorious swim at sweeping Tsambika Beach (we wondered why the far end was so popular – turned out it was the nudist beach), we made a brief stop at the dramatic clifftop ruins of the Knights' Faraklou Castle before arriving at the picture-postcard town of Lindos. A thriving settlement for more than two-and-a-half millennia, the town is cut into the cliffs above beautiful, beach-fringed bays, and topped with a towering, night-lit, acropolis. Occupied since Neolithic times, this high point was fortified and sanctified by (at least) the Ancient Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, the Knights and the Ottomans.

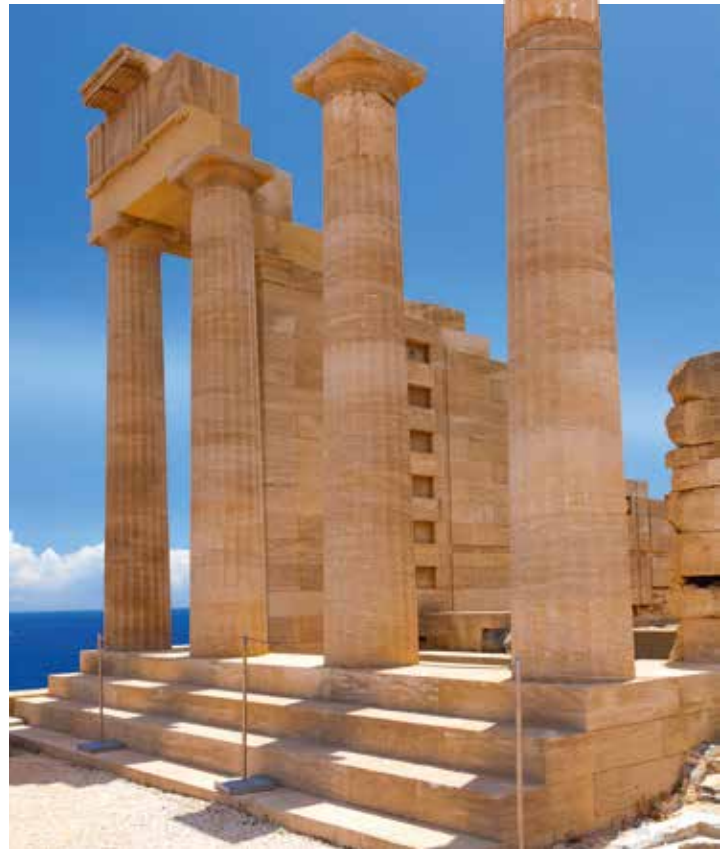




Rhodes rooftops

The characteristic white rooftops of Lindos looking towards the acropolis, sitting over 100m above the town and dating back to the 3rd century BC





Beyond the Old Town (this page, clockwise from top left) The remains of the ancient Ialysos acropolis are found in the grounds surrounding the 15th-century Monastery of Panagia Philerimos; the 4th century BC Temple of Athena Lindia at Lindos, dedicated to the goddess Athena; a peacock at Philerimos Monastery; the ruins of Kamiros – one of the island’s three large Doric cities – along with Ialysos and Lindos – that united in the 5th century BC to create the city-state of Rhodes; (opposite page, top) the ruins of the 15th-century Monolithos Castle keep a watchful eye over the Aegean Sea

Alamy, Juliet Fox



We stayed the night (wishing to see Lindos without day-trippers) and spent the evening chatting over grappa at one of the island's best restaurants. Wandering the tiny, pretty pedestrian paths that wind between whitewashed buildings, we spotted characteristic rope-patterned door-frames, legacy of Lindos's time as a centre of pan-Mediterranean maritime trade. This past is celebrated too at the entrance to the acropolis, where the prow of a near-life-size ship is cut cleanly into the rock. It looks as if it was done last century, but dates from 180 BC.

Passing through Knights' fortifications and a Hellenistic *stoa* (arcade) once filled with shops (not unlike those that crowd the lower slopes today), we reached the crowning glory of the acropolis, the Temple of Athena Lindia, completed around the 4th century BC. Its now-roofless Doric columns rose from the rock's peak into the clear blue sky.

None of the trio of city-state sites has much left from their pre-merger heydays. But at the southernmost tip of Rhodes, past the Cape with its sweeping double beach that links Prasonissi island to the mainland at low tide, we found the extraordinary site of seventh-to-sixth-century BC Archaic Vroulia, a short-lived settlement perhaps serving as an intermediate harbour for the cities. We traced a long terrace of excavated living quarters tucked against a fortification wall that rose up the hillside until we reached what archaeologists have identified as a defensive tower and a sanctuary. It's an evocative site surrounded by azure sea and, unlike in busy Lindos, we were quite alone.

REMARKABLE RHODES

And so we mostly remained on our final stretch, driving up the west coast, through wild landscapes of sandstone-stripped mountains gleaming in the evening sun. This was the case until we reached Monolithos, named for the dramatic

100-metre monolith atop which perches a romantic castle ruin where we joined a gaggle of tourists gathered for a panoramic sunset. By day, it is deserted, but for elegant Eleanora's falcons circling overhead.

It was equally calm at Kamiros, just a little further up the coast, as we explored the expansive archaeological site that displayed all the key elements of the city, rebuilt after the earthquake in 227 BC. From the high acropolis, complete with piped water system and 200m stoa, we then descended along streets that swept amphitheatrically down to the public spaces below – the agora, temples, fountain, sanctuaries to the gods, a later Roman bathhouse, and of course, an altar to Helios, the protector of Rhodes.

His sun rose strongly off the honey-coloured stone so we stopped for a refreshing dip in the sea before heading on up the coast to complete the trio. The monastery of Philerimos, on the site of a Byzantine castle that sits on the ancient acropolis of Ialysos was an appropriate place to end our many-layered journey. Peacocks posed on the stones of a Temple of Athena lining the forecourt of the Gothic-style monastery built by the Knights of St John.

A highly decorated little underground chapel, once a knight's tomb, was re-dedicated to St George, the custodian tells me, "perhaps because the next power, the Ottomans, did not disapprove of him".

Rhodes has seen rulers come and go for millennia, but ask any local and they will tell you that the people have always felt "Greek, Greek, Greek". This is perhaps why, despite the return to rule by Greece and the Greek Orthodox Church, they still hold on to the legendary omnipresence of Helios. As we turned to go, the sun glinted off the carved column-tops of the ancient temple and, behind it, lit up the Medieval cross of the Catholic Knights; Helios, in his undoubted Greekness, seems to be claiming it all. ►

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