

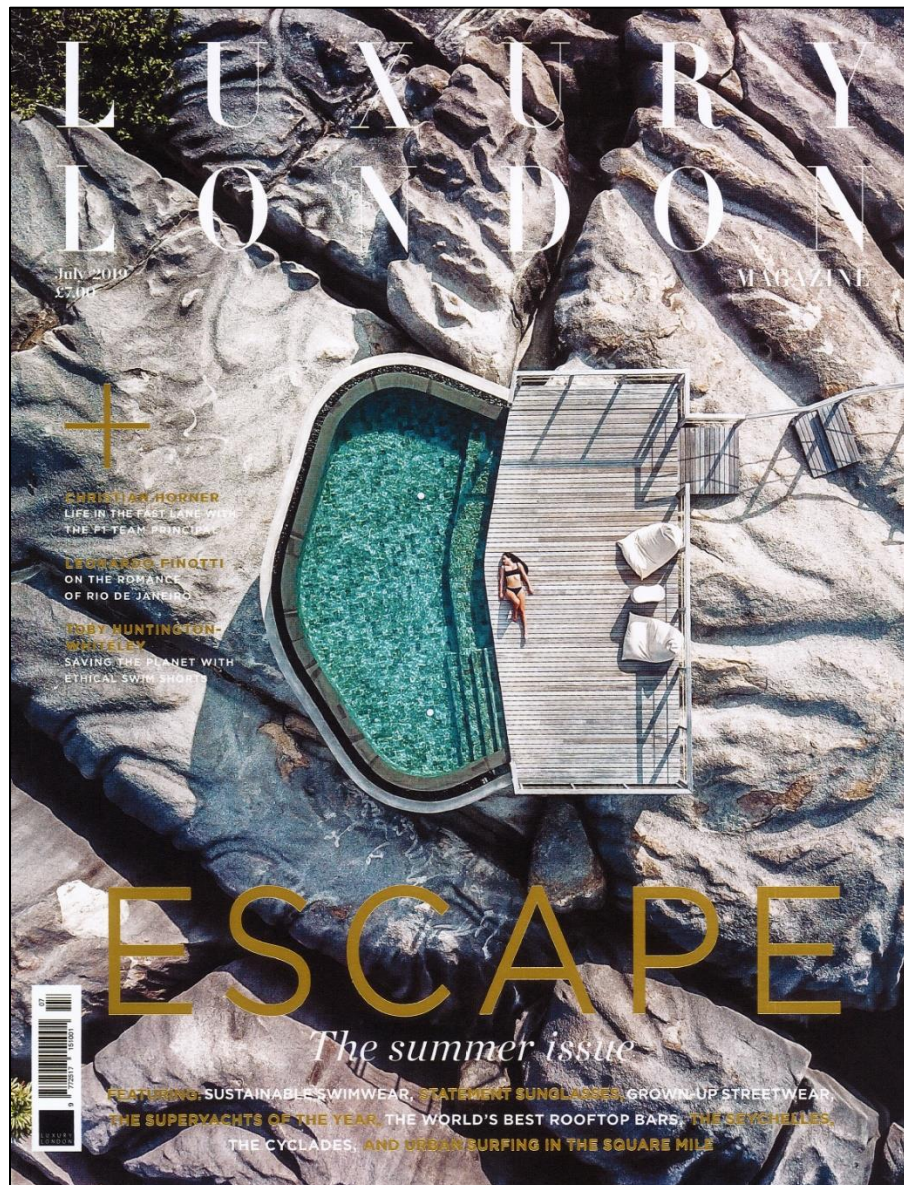
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Red-hot tempers on hot black tarmac. A three-day backlog of ferries arrives in the concrete port of Athinios all at once. There's one way in; one way up. A single, precipitous road that zig-zags from sea level to the summit of a 700-ft cliff.

It's bumper to bumper. In a desperate bid to make their ferry before it leaves, people at the top are abandoning their coaches and running down the switchbacks with suitcases above their heads. Scooters weave through the melee, making things worse. It's farcical. It's dangerous. Santorini is failing the stress test.

By the water's edge, the sun-drenched pandemonium continues. A hot, sticky cacophony of car horns, ferry horns, lorry brakes, police whistles, and that sweet, festival smell of a thousand sweaty bodies sharing too little space. Buses don't venture

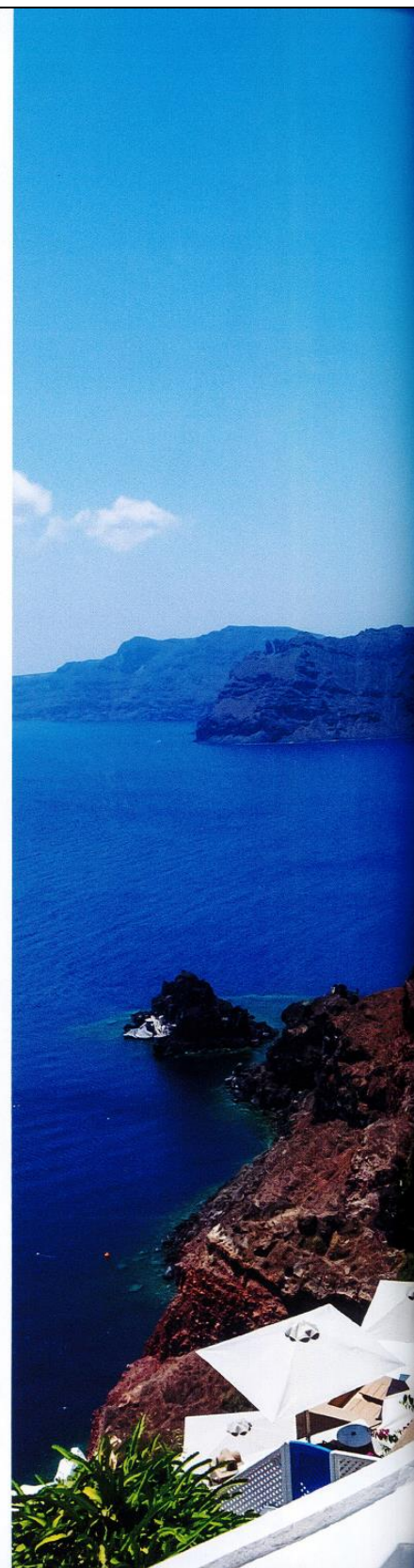
down here. All taxis are taken. All cars are full. Salvation arrives in the shape of a Mark Ruffalo look-alike in a rented Suzuki Swift. We thumb a lift and are in his back seats before he can say no.

Santorini. The southernmost member of the Cyclades. The sunset Mecca. Three miles wide. Ten miles long. Two million visitors a year. They come for the caldera – a sea-filled crater created some 3,600 years ago when a round volcanic island erupted, buckled and collapsed into itself. Croissant-shaped Santorini was the consequence. Seismic tremors are still a fact of life. In 2012, café owners watched as empty wine glasses started to rattle. Tour guides reported smelling strange gasses. Scientists discovered that a swell of more than 10 million cubic metres of molten rock had rushed into the magma chamber under the island. The last great earthquake struck in 1956. It levelled most of the island's two main villages. Inhabitants were

SURVIVING SANTORINI

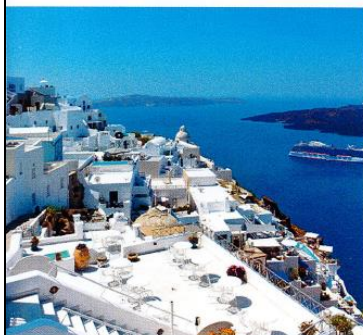
THANKS IN NO SMALL PART TO SOCIAL MEDIA, SINCE 2017 SANTORINI HAS BEEN FORCED TO CAP THE NUMBER OF TOURISTS DISEMBARKING ON ITS SHORES. DESPITE THE CRUISE SHIPS AND SELFIE STICKS, HOWEVER, THIS SEISMIC ISLAND STILL HAS THE POWER TO MOVE YOU – IF ONLY YOU KNOW WHERE TO STAY

Words: Richard Brown





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you see on
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Carved into the
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► forced to migrate to Athens. Slowly they returned. Now it's cash-strapped Athenians who seek solace in Santorini's hand-over-fist hospitality industry.

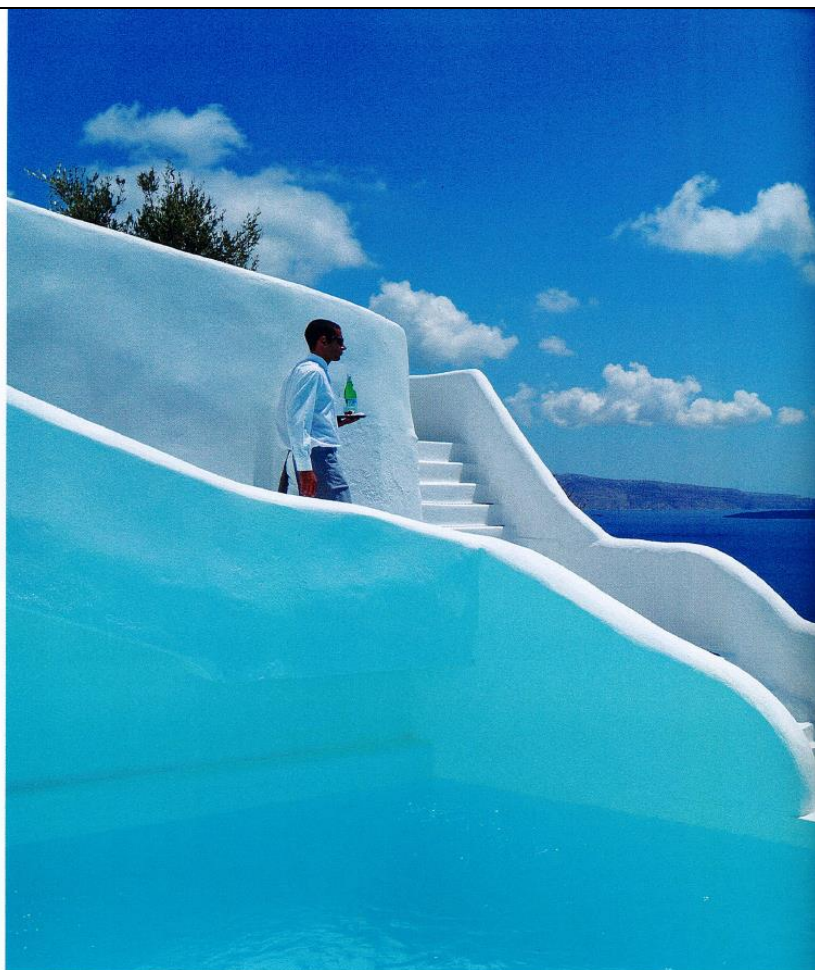
The island's not called Santorini. It hasn't been since the first half of the 19th century. It was the Romanian Empire that named it so in the 13th century, a reference to the Christian martyr Saint Irene, or Santa Irini. Five hundred years later, newly-independent Greece officially renamed it Théra – which morphed into Thera, which can also be spelt Thira. More helpful still, the capital city is called Fira. The rest of the world seems to have settled on Santorini.

Mark dropped us off at the side of the road at the top of the cliff. We paid him some money, bade him farewell and put in an SOS call to Kirini. Twenty minutes

later, a taxi arrived. Ten minutes after that, we were handed a welcome cocktail in the calming white confines of cave-style Kirini hotel. Out of the madhouse, into the asylum.

Reopened after a renovation in 2015, Kirini is part of the Katikies group. The original Katikies hotel opened in the late 1980s as the first property in Santorini to feature an infinity pool and rooms with private plunge tubs. Where it led, every other Santorini hotelier followed. As well as Kirini, the group now operates Villa Katikies and Katikies Garden. Given their joint-affinity for the letter K, you might have thought the Kardashians would have chosen one of the group's properties for their 2013 Santorini sojourn. As well they might.

Kirini is the Santorini you see on





Instagram. Carved into the cliffs at Oia – the island's most picturesque town on its celebrated, elevated, sunset-facing west coast – the vertically set, all-suite property is a series of white, domed scafta (the Greek name for those traditional houses carved into rock) linked by a labyrinth of white-and-grey stairways. It has a communal infinity pool, suites with private Jacuzzis and, as you'd expect from a property that employs someone full time to re-touch the brilliant-white paintwork, is picture perfect from every angle.

A team of around 30 staff oversees 26 rooms. Each is soundproofed and comes with an iPod and docking station. Choose from a mood-ranging selection of pre-loaded playlists. Nice touch. Ditto the Nespresso coffee machine. There's a spa and, come sunset, the chance to sample local wines al fresco at the hotel's perfectly-angled Anthós restaurant. For the rest of the time, though, it's about having that spectacular panorama all to yourself – a rarity in Santorini. ■

Rates at Kirini Santorini start from €340 (approx. £296) per night for double room, including breakfast, katikies.com/kirinisantorini



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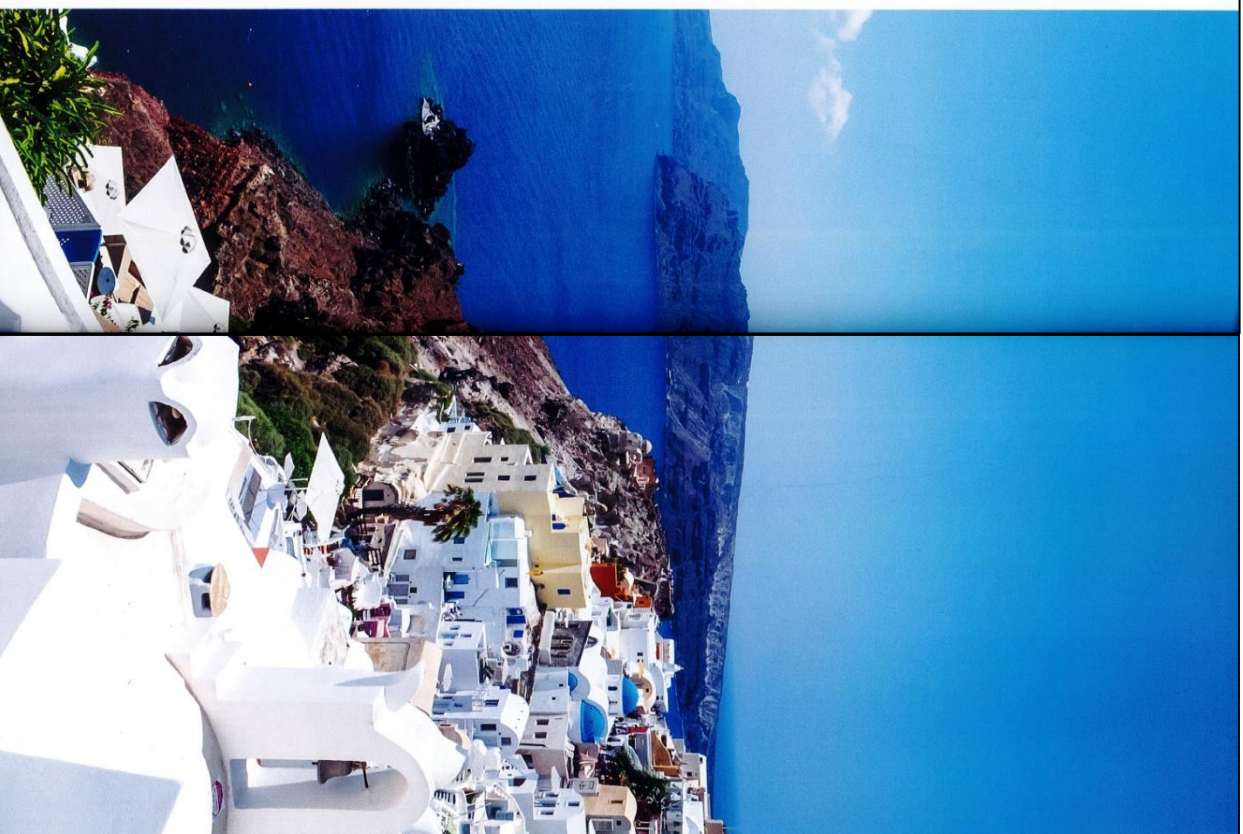
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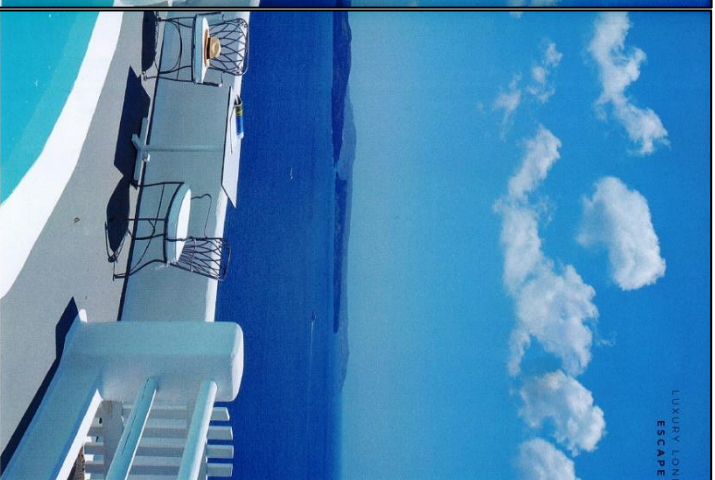
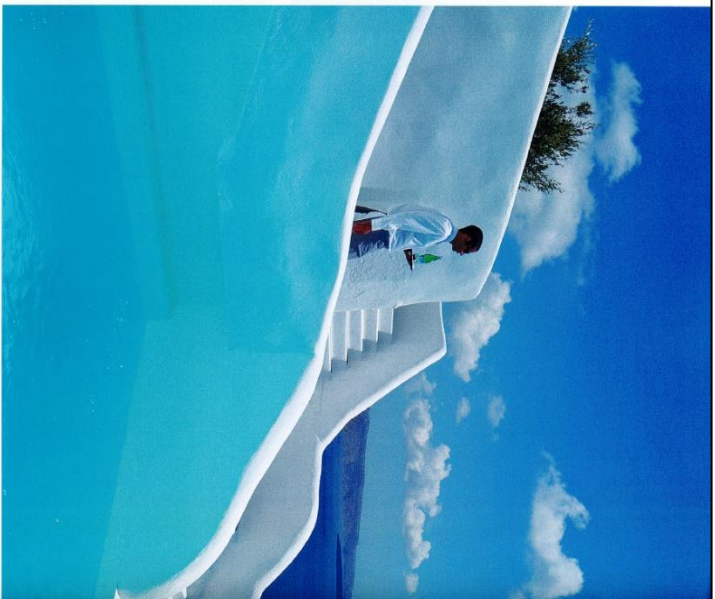
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ESCAPE



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129

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