

# Lesvos

## Leaf of a plane tree

This eastern Aegean island encapsulates perhaps better than any other Greece's tradition, culture and spirit

BY HARIS ARGYROPOULOS

**"Nowhere else on Earth do the Sun and the Moon reign together so harmoniously, share their power so fairly, as on this piece of the Earth where, who knows, in what incredible times, what god, on a whim cut and blew away this leaf of a plane tree in the midst of the ocean"**

*Nobel-prize winning poet Odysseus Elytis on his native eastern Aegean island of Lesvos.*

Rich in beauty and natural resources, Lesvos, Greece's third-largest island after Crete and Evia, is an integral part of the country's identity, an important contributor to its history, economy, culture and gastronomy. Elytis was preceded by other notable contributors to the arts and letters – poets Sappho and Alcaeus in antiquity, novelists Stratis Myrivilis and Argyris Eftaliotis, as well as painter Theophilos in more recent times.

A view of the capital Mytilene from the sea confirms the sense of the "unique" which the islands of the eastern Aegean exude. Buildings whose styles cannot be categorized stand alongside traditional stone houses and more modern apartment blocks – all surrounded by the greenery that abounds on much of Lesvos.

This motley architecture – with aesthetics to match, from the exterior decor of wooden windows and imposing 19th-century mansions to churches where elements of Byzantine, Gothic and even Ottoman architecture harmoniously coexist – vividly reflects the history of the place.

The Romans, Genoese and Turks left indelible marks and monuments in successive periods. Geographical proximity meant strong economic and cultural ties with Asia Minor during Ottoman rule, which lasted several centuries, spurring industrial development in the late 19th century. In fact the people of Lesvos are renowned for their industriousness.

The serene landscape, dominated by forests and olive groves, also hosts several unique natural habitats, making Lesvos a major birdwatching destination. The petrified forest of Sigrí offers an impressive insight into the island's geological history.

But nothing is more strongly associated with Lesvos than ouzo, the national spirit, around which a large part of Greek gastronomy has developed.

Although the drink wasn't "invented" here, Plomari – a small town on the southern coast – is acclaimed as the mecca of ouzophiles. Lesvos is better



known for the quality of its farming produce than as a tourist destination per se, although its large size provides ample space and plenty of choice for quiet holidays even in the high season.

In addition, the abundance of natural and cultural attractions means there are plenty of options for excursions, and while the island is not famous for its beaches, there are numerous fine sandy



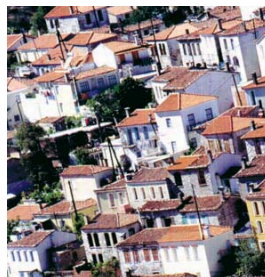
1

### Getting there & basic info

There are several flights a day from Athens and their number increases in summer (Athens Airport, tel 210.353.0000). There are also ferry departures from Piraeus to Mytilene (Piraeus Port Authority 210.451.1311, Mytilene 22540.28647). From June 3, Blue Star Ferries will be running a weekly service from Thessaloniki to Sigrí, departing at 8 p.m. on Fridays, arriving at 5.30 a.m. and then going on to call at Chios, Samos, Kos and Rhodes. Area phone code: 22510; tourist police: 22776; tourism office: 42511; hospital: 43777.

### Spiritual appeal

Plomari – a small town on the southern coast – is acclaimed as the mecca of ouzophiles



2

### Where to stay

In the capital Mytilene: Archontiko Mytilinis (tel 22510.46681, www.archontikomytilinis.gr), expertly restored prewar mansion near the center with fully equipped rooms and suites; Iliotropio I & II (41629), deluxe rooms and apartments on the coastal road to the airport; Pyrgos Mytilinis (25069), 12 deluxe rooms in French Imperial style. In Molyvos: Delfinia Hotel & Bungalows (22530.71502), 70s style in a large estate with superb sea views; Panselinos (22530.71905), spacious studios and apartments with lush gardens on Eftalou beach.

stretches. Vatera, extending for several kilometers in the south, is the highlight.

Perhaps second only to ouzo in fame is Molyvos. This picturesque village, once a rather insignificant seaside settlement in the northwest, with an imposing medieval castle and narrow cobblestone streets – now attracts more visitors than any other place on the island. Although



3

### Where to eat

In Mytilene: Aspros Gatos (tel 61670), classic dishes in quiet garden surroundings; Ermis (2 Kornarou & Ermou), historic taverna in Epano Skala, excellent choice of appetizers and ouzo; Kalderimi (2 Thasou, in the market area), simple but fresh seafood, very busy at lunchtime. In Molyvos: Vafeios (22530.71752), excellent traditional cuisine in a lovely building with garden and town views. In Kalloni: Mimis, one of Lesvos's best-known tavernas. In Perama: Balouhanas (51948), family-run taverna, fish and classic Greek dishes.



the proliferation of signs for rooms, bikes and "best English breakfast" spoils the picture somewhat, a stroll to the castle in the morning followed by a coffee at one of the establishments with beautiful views offers ample compensation.

A trip to the petrified forest around Sigrí in the northwest of the island takes more than two hours from Mytilene, but is rewarding in itself as the road winds through verdant villages before suddenly emerging into a lunar landscape, with petrified trunks scattered over an extensive area as well as on display in an excellent museum. A dip in the crystal-clear waters at Sigrí is highly recommended.

Southeast of Sigrí is Eressos, according to many the most tastefully developed spot on the island, with a beautiful beach and few tourism-related eyesores. Being the birthplace of Sappho, it is popular with gay women.

Nearer Mytilene (27 km) it's worth visiting Agiasos, a quaint town 480 m above sea level nestled in the midst of an exquisite pine forest ideal for walks and with a pleasantly laid-back pace of life. In the Gulf of Gera and Plomari you'll find many fine ouzo establishments. The potent spirit also flows at the Sardine Festival, hosted every August in Kalloni, which has an attractive beach.



4

### What to see & do

The Museum of Industrial Olive Oil Production, at Aghia Paraskevi (22530.32300); the petrified forest and museum at Sigrí (22530.54434) and the info center in Mytilene (22510.47033); Mytilene Castle, founded in the 5th century, is one of the most expansive in the Mediterranean; the two archaeological museums, old and new; Polichnitos hot springs; Theophilos Museum in Varía; the Natural History Museum at Vrisa; swim at Aghios Ermogenis, by the road to the airport; Aghios Fokas offers the best sunsets.