

THE AUSTRALIAN 

TRAVEL+ LUXURY

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10

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Days of wine and wonder

Temptations abound on the Greek island of Santorini

FIONA CARRUTHERS

With hindsight, the red flag was in the “Champagne Facial” day spa treatments and the fact the hotel was built around a 400-year-old vineyard. (Note to self: in future, avoid staying at a former winery on an island obsessed with its homegrown wines when writing about wellness.)

I arrive in Santorini in early June not with the story brief of drinking the island’s addictive dry, acidic wines morning, noon and night, but rather to sample the Greek family-owned Empiria Group’s three properties here: Vedema, Istorla and Mystique. And, more specifically, to explore Empiria’s focus on health the Aegean way, and hoping to attain wellbeing under the blazing Cycladic sun in just four days. The way, say, the Ancients might have after a particularly arduous battle.

Even before landing, I’m channelling the mythology. After arriving at Thira Airport on the wings of Pegasus (EasyJet flight EJU3671 from Milan), I jump in a four-horse chariot (a Mercedes-Benz V-Class shuttle), eagerly anticipating a degustation dinner fit for Euphemus at Michelin-starred Lure restaurant at Mystique Hotel in Oia village. (Legend has it that Euphemus, Po-

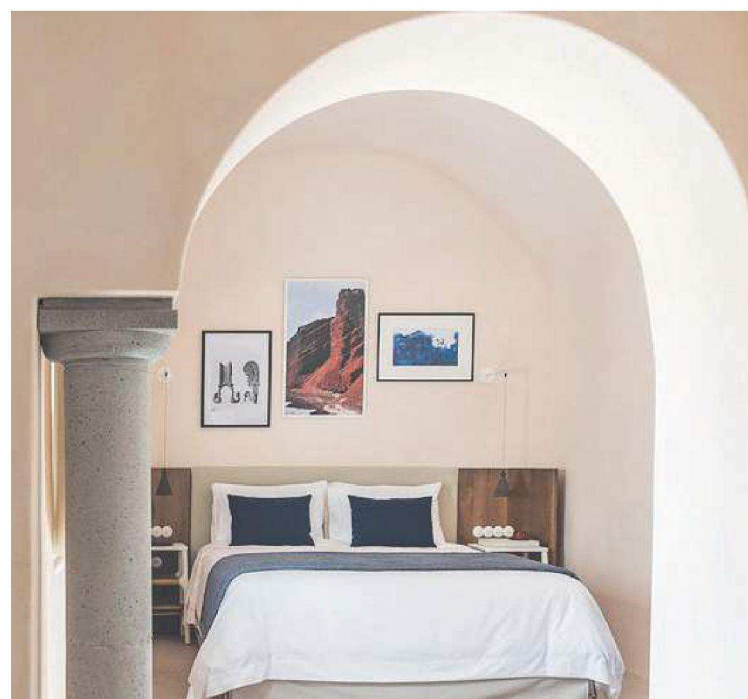
seidon’s son, created Santorini by throwing a clump of earth around 1600BC.)

I’ve spent the flight reading up on the holistic and preventive medicine beliefs that underpinned the Ancient Greeks’ theories of wellbeing and am eagerly anticipating my itinerary, the highlights of which include a body wrap of olive oil and ground volcanic sand, a lesson on an ancient Lyre of Apollo, and a carefree canter along a black-sand beach.

I picture myself striking warrior poses at dawn while living off local feta and yoghurt, thyme-infused honey, capers, berries and fresh Santorini cherry tomatoes nestled on a bed of oregano. Then again, the Ancient Greeks trumpeted all things in balance, so I’m willing to indulge in a few greasy gyros and chips as well.

But first, a hotel tour. On arriving at Vedema for the first two nights of my sojourn, hotel general manager Konstantinos Chatzikonstantinou suggests: “Let’s start in the heart of the property.” Imagining we’ll be heading to the largest of the hotel’s many pools (perfect for laps and boasting 360-degree views), or perhaps the Fitness Centre, then Elios Day Spa, I’m surprised to be standing inside a 400-year-old, heritage-listed underground cave constructed of the island’s famed black volcanic stones.

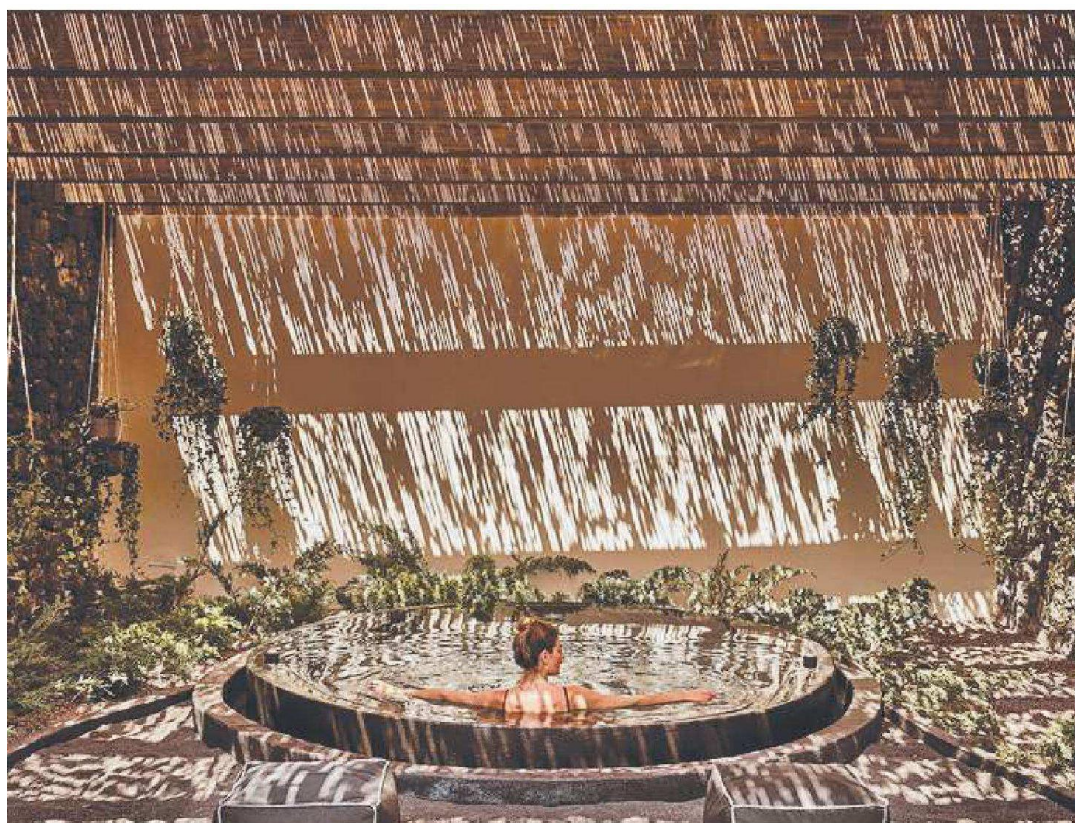
“Wine tastes different in an underground cave. What



Lure restaurant at Mystique Hotel, top; Istorla hotel guestroom, above

would you like? Red or white?” Chatzikonstantinou asks. When I protest that it’s barely 10am, he shrugs and books me in for the hotel’s 5pm wine tasting ahead of dinner at Lure.

Six hours later, following a nap and a large gyros for lunch at Vedema’s main poolside restaurant, I’m still no closer to eternal wellness. Rather, I’m back in the wine cave with two fellow guests, where Vedema’s sommelier, Eleni Alachmoneti, is about to induct us into Santorini’s homegrown plonk. This jewel of the Aegean is well-known for its beauty, but the island also has a strong wine industry, with 21 official wineries. “To be honest, just about every local here has a barrel and grapes growing in their backyard,” Alachmoneti says. “Everyone makes wine at home, but they are not allowed to sell it.”



Assyrtiko is the most common grape variety, and Santorini wines are known for their high acidity and minerality. “In volcanic soil, you find sulphur, copper and iron,” Alachmoneti tells us as we sample an Assyrtiko from local Argyros Estate. As we work our way through the vino, we enjoy a gruyere shot through with oregano and rosemary from nearby Crete, and a delectable creamy Kariki by a cheesemaker from Tinos island. We nibble and sip, and Alachmoneti shows us the local vine or “wrap baskets” that keep the fruit protected from the island’s high winds.

“Sea and vine baskets,” she sighs, looking out the window. “My favourite view in the world.”

Vedema began in this very wine cave in the early 1990s, after Greek shipping magnate Antonis Eliopoulos fell in love with the winery. Empiria was founded and is run by Eliopoulos and his wife, Kalia Konstantinidou. It opened in 1993 with about 25 rooms, when it was billed as Santorini’s first five-star hotel. Today it has 74, of which 15 suites are brand new, including two and three-bedroom villas with private pools. The suites have large kitchens and plenty of al fresco private dining flair. Or, if you want to go down the Hollywood route, note that Angelina Jolie stayed in one of the older-style villas more than two decades ago when filming 2003’s *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider – The Cradle of Life*. The key selling point here, though, is the notion of a village within a village, given the hotel is situated in historic Megalochori, a medieval village often billed as the prettiest in Santorini. “We know we’ve got the look and feel right,” says Chatzikonstantinou, “because people think we are an extension of the village and just wander in.”

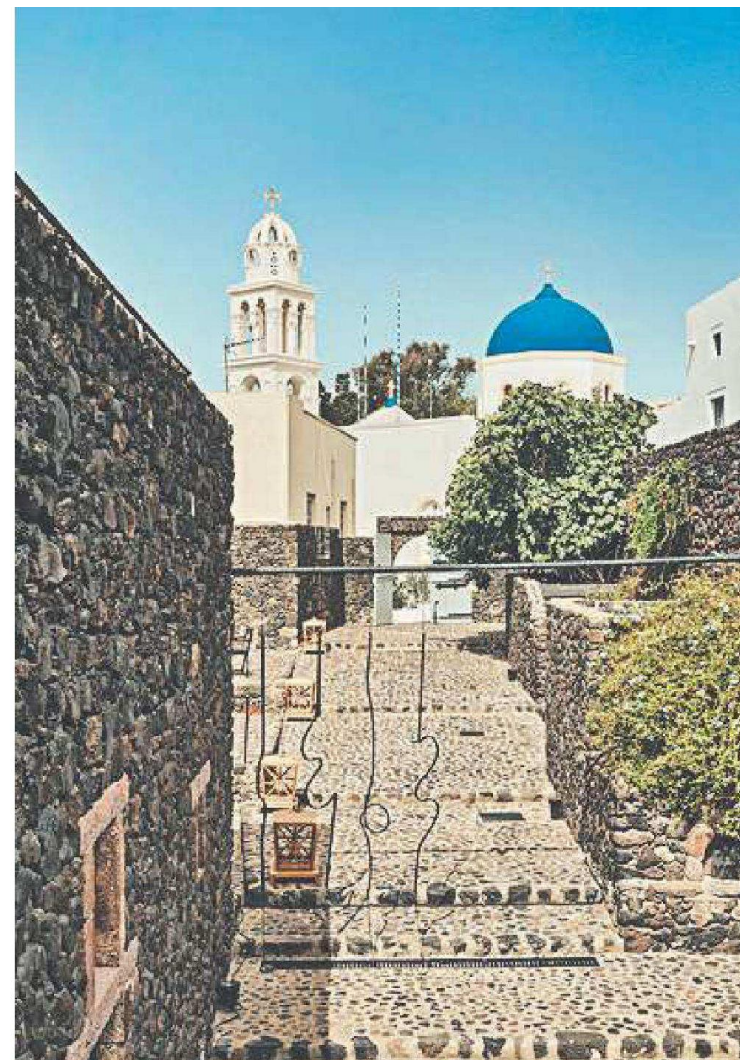
By 8am on my last morning at Vedema, I’m feeling sheepishly off-course. Yet again, I’ve failed miserably to rise at dawn for yoga or to jog. I lie in bed instead, listening to donkeys bray a few paddocks away. A scheduled 9am visit to the village’s Symposium Cultural Centre is bound to get me back on track. The Symposium is run by Yannis Pantazis and his wife, Argy Kakissis, who have been on a decades-long mission to keep Ancient Greek musical instruments alive, including the tra-

ditional Greek bagpipes dating back to around the fifth century BC, made with goatskin bags.

I arrive and begin by admiring their Mythological Botanical Garden, learning about how the island’s original inhabitants used herbs. And then I am back to square one. “Would you like a drink? Coffee, tea – or how about some local wine?” Kakissis asks, signalling towards the cultural centre’s Muses Wine Cafe. She explains that this property was also once a vineyard, built about 100 years ago. The couple restored it in 2016, and the room out the back of the main building, once used for pressing grapes, is now a workshop, where Pantazis conducts music lessons, instrument-making classes and “wine philosophy” tastings. I agree only to an iced water with fresh garden mint, and turn Kakissis and Pantazis to the subject of how these instruments were used to help heal and calm the sick or troubled, a subject Pantazis often lectures on, including at England’s Cambridge University.

“Music and mythology were an important part of medical treatment in the ancient world,” he says. “Today, I take the seven-string Lyre of Apollo into nursing homes and schools. I love that anyone can play this instrument. No lesson is needed as you just pluck the strings. Two people can play the one instrument, offering a tremendous sense of human connection.”

Floating down the hill from the Symposium for my transfer to Istoria, I prepare to embark on the action-packed phase of my itinerary – including a bird’s-eye-view joy ride with Flyhoper over to Folegandros island and back, an invigorating massage in Bergamot-scented oil in Istoria’s open-air day spa, and a swim in the dreamy green and grey-tiled lap pool. But it seems there is just no escaping. As he checks me into one of the hotel’s 12 beautifully designed suites, Istoria’s general manager, George Pagonis, asks if I’d like a wine delivered to the hotel’s guests-only beach club across the road on black-sand Perivolos Beach. I reply: “But it’s not even 11am – in Australia we’d say it’s a bit early for wine.” Pagonis



Relaxing at Istoria hotel, above left; Vedema in Megalochori village, above; pool deck at Vedema, below; horse riding on Eros Beach, left

IN THE KNOW

Vedema hotel is in Megalochori village, Santorini; new suites from €370 (\$660) a night based on double occupancy; villas from €770 to €2070 a night.

vedema.gr

Istoria hotel is in Perivolos; suites from €400 a night based on double occupancy.

istoriahotel.gr

Flyhoper helicopter flights from €168.

flyhoper.com

The Cultural Symposium Cultural Centre has regular performances and events, plus a restaurant.

symposionsantorini.com

Santorini Horse Riding experiences on Eros Beach from €90 a person.

santorini-horse-riding.com

responds: “Really? In Santorini, we’d say this is late.”

That afternoon, I’m cantering along nearby Eros Beach on a feisty pinto mare named Ilona, accompanied by Alice, a French equestrian exchange student at Santorini Horse Riding. Istoria has stolen my heart in less than a day; it’s both a horse and fine hotel lover’s heaven. This sublime property was built as a large villa by a wealthy equestrienne, with large stables attached. It has converted brilliantly into a boutique hotel, opened in 2024. “At Empiria group, we are all about stories,” says Pagonis over lunch at the hotel’s delightful Mr E Restaurant. “So you will see the story of this property is kept alive with our symbol of the horseshoe, and with bridles and other equestrian gear hung around the hotel.”

During my one-hour beach ride, Alice and I chat about equine therapy, a practice started in Ancient Greece to help injured soldiers recuperate. Hippocrates, the father of medicine, talked about “riding’s healing rhythm”. As we canter, Alice exclaims: “Nothing beats riding on the beach!” I can only agree. Even if I am actually thinking about sampling a Pure Volcanic Slope Vineyards Assyrtiko at dinner.

Fiona Carruthers was a guest of Empiria Group.
empiriagroup.gr