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Santorini's vaulted-cave homes

By Caterina Pizanias, [The ArtExchange](#)



Santorini ("Thera" to us Greeks), the southern-most island of the Cyclades (the "circular" islands in Greece), lies at the top of the intersection of two geological faults. Occasional eruptions in this area have been affecting the shape of the Aegean Sea and its civilization throughout the millennia. Thousands of years ago Santorini was known as Strongyle (round one) or Kallisti (most beautiful) because it was truly a round, beautiful and very fertile island. Many scholars and history buffs have claimed also that Santorini is/was none other than Plato's lost Atlantis, the ancient civilization which vanished due to a natural disaster. What we know for sure is that it was a Minoan colony, one of the most advanced Mediterranean civilizations, and that it came to an abrupt end around 1500 BC. Its demise was caused by a volcanic eruption that brought about the end of the Minoan culture and formed the present crescent shape of Santorini, with its impressive caldera. The greatness of early Santorini can be seen today at the re-opened Akrotiri ruins south of Fira, Santorini's capital city.

Despite the occasional volcano eruptions, Santorini was colonized over the millenia because of its strategic location within the Aegean Sea. It was occupied by various ancient Greek peoples, as well as the Romans, Venetians, Ottomans and assortments of rogues and pirates, each leaving behind a mark of their passing. It was the Venetians who gave the island its commonly used name of Santorini by naming it after a chapel of Saint Irini that they saw upon their arrival, Isola di Santa Irini, that eventually became Santorini.

Today, the much admired stark landscape with its phantasmagoric rocks and unique architectural settlements are all the result of occasional volcanic eruptions—one safely may claim that Santorini is its volcano. The volcano's presence is best seen, felt and admired on the hills surrounding the caldera—the cavity left by the collapse of the volcano's cone. Architecture on the island, like the rest of life, had to adapt to its geography and climate, giving Santorini a "look" so different from the rest of the Cyclades.

Santorini's inhabitants discovered that the top layer of the volcanic sediments, the aspa or tephra, was not only easy to quarry, it became an excellent first material to be mixed with limestone and a little water—Santorini is almost waterless—becoming a cement-like material that did not require the use of timber, which is non-existent on the island. Coming into the caldera by boat allows a visitor a full view of the dug-out dwellings for animals, tools and storage/protection, and the vaulted caves-cum-houses for humans. Perhaps the easily quarried aspa, Santorini's defining first material, was the volcano's way of saying thank you to the islanders, making up for the earthquakes and devastation resulting from each successive eruption.



Walking through the settlements of Fira, Oia, or Imerovigli extending along the precipitous edge of the caldera, one marvels at the homes, tunneled into the sheer cliffs; some of these homes have a facade at the very edge of the cave and others have been built partly in the mountain and partly protruding on the outside. But all traditional homes exhibit the best "scarce materials" characteristics—they share the same simple front wall that has a door, two windows on either side, and fan lights on top allowing the light in and controlling the climate to almost perfect temperatures throughout the seasons. Although one cannot easily see them, most of these homes have sternes or cisterns to collect the rain water for household needs. Some had also kanavas or wine cellars—to this day Santorini's volcanic soil produces some of Greece's best wines, including its most known and revered Vinsanto —and bee-hive ovens shared by a few families in the immediate vicinity. Even the famous architect Le Corbusier when he visited the island in the 1920s was so impressed by its vernacular architecture, the organic forms and use of local materials, that he tried to adopt and adapt some of the islander's solutions in his own practice!



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Unlike the present day "regulation look" for the Cycladic islands as painted in brilliant white (a habit that resulted from massive tourism since the 1970s), the traditional architects borrowed a colour palette from the surrounding volcanic rocks. Colours such as ochre, red, and bright green were the norm pre-1970; one can catch some of these colours in the surviving debris from the last major quake of 1956 and in villages in the eastern part of the island. Brilliant white or not, the humble anonymous architects of the earlier settlements have left us with an architectural landscape second to none. During your next visit to Santorini take a boat ride across the caldera, walk leisurely along the winding narrow streets of Oia, take in the sunset at Imerovigli, and above all sip a glass or two of Hatzidakis Estate's Nyhteri ...while precipitously sitting on a table at the caldera's edge!



[1] Vinsanto has been Santorini's most popular wine since the Venetian occupation. Some claim that its name comes from its reference to Vino Santo wine used in church rituals (holy wine) but I believe the research of Stavroula Kourakou, one of Greece's most respected wine historians is closer to the truth: Vinsanto derives from an abbreviation used by the stevedores across Europe's ports for the crates marked as carrying "Vino di Santorini" or "wine from Santorini."

[2] Nyhteri in Greek means "working the night away." Grapes for Nyhteri are picked when ripe just before dawn and pressed before the end of the same day. Hatzidakis' Nyhteri is made from Assyrtiko, Santorini's defining white grape.



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