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## Hydra- Greece's most painted island

By Caterina Pizanias, [The ArtExchange](#)



Hydra, one of the most spectacular and now better-known Saronic Islands, has had a rather illustrious and illustrated past. It takes about 1½ hour by boat to reach Hydra from Pireas, Athens' port, or one can take one of the many day cruises, so popular at the moment, that stop at Aegina, Poros and Hydra. I'd say, though, that if you can afford it you should stay at least a night or two.

Hydra, as a "must" stop destination has had a very short history—the island's popularity was really initiated after the late Carlo Ponti filmed his "The Boy on the Dolphin" there in 1957. More of that later. It is customary when one writes/speaks about a Greek locale as a travel destination to go

back in antiquity to guarantee the place's provenance. Yes, Hydra was populated for millennia but did not acquire a historical significance until after the 15<sup>th</sup> century when it became a refuge for displaced peoples. And it was not until the 18<sup>th</sup> century that Hydra became powerful during the Venetian-Ottoman Wars, when Hydriot ships and their captains controlled the seaways and commerce. Hydriots became wealthy then, and played an important role in Greece's revolution against its Ottoman occupiers. Later, they took part in the governing of free Greece. To this date, Hydriot families occupy a solid position in the who's who of wealth and intelligentsia in Greece.

Back to "The Boy on the Dolphin" movie where Sofia Loren played of all things...a Greek woman sponge diver! It was cheesy and improbable, but Hydra's landscape stood its ground against a most luscious Sofia Loren, in her first ever English-speaking role. The Greek director Mihalis Kakoyiannis followed suit by filming his award winning "The Girl in Black" (1960) on Hydra, and after that as they say, "the rest is history": wealthy Greeks and foreigners stopped by Hydra's picturesque Harbour with their million dollar yachts—some of them of Hydriot decent—rediscovering the island and renovating the family mansions.

In between the rich and the not so famous, the intelligentsia followed suit—foreign born such as Leonard Cohen and Henry Miller, and many visual artists, too many to mention, came to call the island home, drawn by the quintessential light, the austere rocky landscape against the wine dark blue sea. Hydra was not a "secret" anymore but a regular "must" see of mass tourism. The locals have tried to protect the island's architectural heritage by establishing a strict building code; to date there are no vehicles, transportation is done on foot, by donkey or boats. Hydra is a small island and it is fun to explore it on foot. In the spring time trekking up the hills to various monasteries is fun and the vistas are rewarding. Not a bad place to visit, especially in the off-season and with some time to spare.

Because of its exciting, colorful and wealthy past, Hydra produced many artists in all media and some of the most important and influential modern Greek painters come from Hydra: Nikos Hatzikyriakos, Gikas, Nikos Nikolaou, and Panayiotis Tetsis. The island has held a central interest in their work throughout their very successful careers in Greece and abroad. But none of these captured the essence of the landscape better than Tetsis. He was born on Hydra and studied painting in Greece and in France; at some point he was also the Director of the School of Fine Arts in Athens; he has received many awards and the highest honour in Greece by being elected to The Greek Academy of Arts. His work can be seen in most of the public and private museums and collections across Greece.



If you plan a leisurely visit to Hydra, read up on its history, look up paintings by Tetsis and others, and if you have a good video rental where you live, check out "The Boy on the Dolphin" and see who has fared better with the passage of time, Sofia Loren or the Hydra Landscape!



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