

Chances are you'll arrive on the island by boat in the middle of the night. You wind up a pine-scented road towards the castelated, hilltop monastery, then walk down a stone alleyway, past sleeping houses and watchful, feline eyes. When you reach the Stefania Mansion House, the door's brass knocker is shaped like a lady's hand. Grasp it while turning the key on an antique lock, complex as the Antikythera Mechanism—a portal to another realm. Inside, all is quiet, perfumed by garden jasmine, polished wood, and a hint of amber. Or is it frankincense wafting up from the nearby convent? Patmos is a deeply spiritual place, long venerated by monks, nuns, priests, and pilgrims and liberally sprinkled with Byzantine chapels and hermits' retreats. However, it is also an island devoted to beauty. The homes here are relics of a prosperous, cosmopolitan class of merchants and captains who traveled and treasure-hunted from Alexandria to Constantinople, Odessa to Marseilles, and beyond. But history can wait till morning. You take the stone stairway to an airy bedroom, where a brass bed awaits, and the benign spirits of previous inhabitants lull you to sleep.

I wake to sunshine and start exploring, though Stefania already feels like home. The view is spectacular: over the village's oldest, 'Cretan' neighborhood to the Icarian Gulf (where Icarus's feathers failed) and south across fields and donkey paths to the chapel-topped mountain of Prophet Elias. At first glance, little but the electric lights reveal the house's modernity, though the well-equipped bathroom-dressing room is a conversion and capacious enough for a cocktail party. Downstairs, the enchanting terracotta-colored kitchen boasts a 400-year-old, carved-stone wellhead and a functioning underground cistern (water remains a precious resource). Nevertheless, tactfully tidied in cupboards are all the mod cons required by an espresso-drinking, toast-eating, fridge-using person. I take my breakfast into the 'secret' garden, where lemon and apricot trees are clipped low to withstand the *Meltemi* summer winds—a spray of Schiaparelli-pink bougainvillea splurges across a freshly lime-washed wall.

Later, when my hosts arrive, it feels natural to serve them coffee as if I'd been living there for months. We take a tray with their dainty, inherited cups and go

upstairs to the sala on the piano nobile. Traditionally, this room was reserved for special occasions, the walls lined with chairs to accommodate large gatherings. Although the furnishings look like they've been there forever, the wood-framed sofas, floor cushions, and giant brass tray table are arranged for contemporary life. Restrained elegance is reflected in muted colors: white walls, venerably worn, bare floorboards covered with a few rugs, and shutters and doors painted two-tone in sage and dove grey. Gilt mirrors hang angled away from the walls, resting Patmian style on narrow wooden ledges.

The original house was from the early 17th century, though 19th-century restoration brought the high ceilings, broad doorways, and sash windows, whose generous proportions are reminiscent of Georgian architecture. When the current owners acquired Stefania 25 years ago, there was no furniture (not even door handles) left. However, beautiful quirks remain from earlier eras: the steep, narrow staircase to the roof terrace and the display cabinets with interiors painted cardinal scarlet. The task was to recreate something authentic but alive, avoiding the static atmosphere of a museum. "The house determined the work," explains my hostess. Over the years, antique beds, sofas, hand-crocheted blankets, and wooden chests were acquired locally or from neighboring islands. But the huge rug was sourced in Florence, and the bathroom's four-meter linen curtains in Cairo. Two old portraits of a 19th-century couple turn out to be Maltese, though they would pass as Stefania's earlier Greek master and mistress. The eclecticism is entirely appropriate. This is what prosperous Patmian families did in previous centuries; they combined a Levantine aesthetic with touches of European, Russian, and Eastern finesse: ceramics from nearby Samos and Venetian glass; home-spun blankets and Parisian fashions; local goat cheese and Oriental spices. Island life was not isolated.

Before catching the midnight boat back to Piraeus, I watch the sunset from the bedroom that faces the Aegean as icons on the iconostasis acquire extra gilding from the glow. The sea darkens to purple, and a rosy light tints the doves that swoop and circle above Zoo-dochos Pigi, the Convent of the Life-giving Spring.

The Stefania Mansion

Arriving in Darkness and Awaking to Beauty

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