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Natural Delight

Text / Michele Koh Morollo



The most famous of the Cyclades islands, Santorini is one of the most photographed destinations in Greece, and a top choice among honeymooners. A volcanic eruption in 1600 BC left the island with a crescent-shaped underwater caldera in the middle of the Aegean Sea, where today picturesque villages cleave to the cliff's edge. Almost as awe-inspiring as the island's striking topography is Santorini's unique architecture, with its smooth-edged, whitewashed, vaulted cave-style dwellings that have become one of the island's main tourism draws.

Known as an *yposkafo*, the traditional cave house of Santorini is essentially an archway carved into the rocky cliff face of the caldera. 'Santorini's volcanic soil, *aspa*, has self-supporting structural properties that allow one to dig in without it sinking inwards. Cave houses allowed for large interior spans on an island that had a scarcity of trees, and thus no wooden beams to support flat roofs. Most of the villages are built on the very steep inclinations of the caldera, and cave houses fit seamlessly in this topography, minimising any new footprint from walls and foundations while maintaining maximum heat insulation thanks to the thickness of the walls and the overhead soil,' says Memos Filippidis of MPLUSM Architects, which was responsible for the 2013 renovation of Villa Anemolia — two interconnected, cave-inspired luxury vacation residences.

Historically, the inhabitants of an *yposkafo* were sailors or poor islanders without access to the scarce construction material; thus, they made their homes in hollow spaces dug out from the island's volcanic rock surface. Not only did these homes offer protection from gusty winds, rain and the unrelenting summer heat, they also allowed inhabitants to conceal themselves from the pirates who sometimes roamed the nearby waters.

As time passed, new buildings were introduced with frames and flat roofs, but many chose to retain the characteristics of the traditional *yposkafo*. 'Aspa, rocks and pumice were used in a large number of houses that, although rectangular and free-standing, would implement a vault structure within to bridge the interior span without the use of concrete,' says Filippidis. The architect believes that cave-style houses are now especially popular among hoteliers because they constitute a local vernacular where organic geometry heightens emotions and evokes a sense of the archaic.

Markos Chaidemenos, manager of Canaves Oia holiday properties, adds that cave-style accommodations offer more privacy and intimacy than standard rooms, and are especially attractive to couples and honeymooners. 'The interesting architecture combined with minimalistic yet stylish interiors provides an unparalleled experience and has without a doubt been a major selling point of the island.'

The homes' natural features are highlighted through simple design. Ioakeim Patsios and Anastasia Patsiou, who recently reconstructed the Cave Suite at boutique hotel 1864 The Sea Captain's House, explain that white is the preferred colour scheme for cave-style rooms because it allows the greatest possible diffusion of physical light and brings out the distinctive traditional morphology and shapes of the shell. Patsios says that in the last three years, a growing number of old and abandoned *yposkafo* houses have been renovated to the standards of luxury suites to meet the growing demands of tourism, Santorini's core industry.

Much attention is also paid to furnishings, of which common prototypes can look out of scale and too rigid for the cavernous, undulating interiors of *yposkafo*-inspired spaces. For Villa Anemolia, Filippidis and his team custom-

Previous page: Boutique hotel the 1864 Sea Captain's House overlooks the Aegean Sea from the Greek island of Santorini. Image by Vangelis Paterakis



designed many of the residences' furnishings (with the exception of some items from Collection Harp, designed by Rodolfo Dordoni for Roda). 'We replaced all previous free-standing furniture and included built-in beds that appear like a continuation of the cement floor, new wardrobes that merged with the walls, and a wooden sofa bed on the flanks of the common living area. A large mirror next to one of the wardrobe areas extends the oblique geometry of the rooms,' he says.

Giorgos and Alexandra Alexiou, a husband and wife who own and designed the award-winning

Aenaon Villas, used traditional quarter-sphere upright sconces to illuminate dramatic features like domed ceilings and curved walls. They furnished their villas with original wooden dining and coffee tables in combination with chairs, sofas and beds from Italian designer Paola Navone's Ghost Collection. 'If architectural elements are properly organised, a simple design concept works extremely well with such spaces because the curves and contours of the walls can be showcased,' says Giorgios. 'This clean, straightforward approach also means that the incredible views outside are not upstaged by overly embellished interiors.'

The clean, crisp interiors of the 1864 Sea Captain's House. Image by Vangelis Paterakis



Top: Aenon Villas' living area features a fireplace and enviable views with no need to move from the sofa. Image courtesy of Aenon Villas

Bottom: The entrance to the 1864 Sea Captain's House rooftop terrace. Image by Vangelis Paterakis

Top and bottom: A terrace overlooking the surrounding rooftops and a bedroom showing the modern minimal restoration at Villa Anemolia. Images courtesy of MPLUSM Architects