

# Spetses Greece

*Charlotte Smith* visits the island paradise with a proud naval history – newly enhanced by a Music Academy for young performers



Water slides:  
a choir of trombones  
performs in the harbour;  
(below) Music Academy  
head Leni Konialidis

To appreciate fully all that the island of Spetses has to offer, it's important to see it from the back of a moped. It's from this vantage point that I find myself taking in clear, azure waters, fragrant pines, bright white sailing boats, and the many intimate coves and beaches, as my guide – architect and president of the Anargyrios and Korgialenios School of Spetses (AKSS), Petros Petrakopoulos – nimbly races around sharp bends and up steep hills, all the while pointing out interesting landmarks. As my very real

terror gives way to wide-eyed wonder, I understand why it's crucial that this small island, just two miles off the coast of the Greek mainland, prohibits cars – bar the odd delivery van and taxi – and why a whopping 42 per cent is owned by the AKSS Foundation, which seeks to protect its historic vegetation and architecture, and discourages all but the most discreet building.



In fact, the town of Spetses is the only large settlement on the island. Here affluent, mainly Greek, tourists enjoy fine dining in the many glamorous outdoor bars and cafés, centred around two main harbours, each paying testament to the island's naval history. In the main

dock is a statue of Laskarina Bouboulina, admiral and heroine of the Greek War of Independence. Further along, the



Group dynamic: a trombone class rehearses at AKSS; (below) flute teacher Stéphane Réty

Old Harbour forms the backdrop every September to a commemoration of the victory of 1822, in which a Turkish flotilla was torched by bold Greek revolutionaries.

At the centre of the town is the Poseidonion Hotel, built in 1914 in the style of its French counterparts by Sotirios Anargyros, descendant of a great shipping family and tobacco tycoon in his own right. Anargyros was responsible for re-introducing pine seedlings to the hills of the island – at the time in danger of extinction due to excessive logging – and for founding the AKSS, a premier boarding school for boys based on the British models of Eton and Harrow and attended for a time by the composer Iannis Xenakis. Though closed in 1983, the school's buildings are today used for conferences and events – and for the last three years by the Music Academy of AKSS, the brainchild of Leni Konialidis.

Establishing a ten-day programme of masterclasses in multiple disciplines alongside year-long 'music initiation' workshops for local children, not to mention free public performances, is difficult under any circumstances. But Konialidis managed the feat during the first year of the pandemic, with full testing and masks. So, this third edition, running from 24 July to 2 August and welcoming 64 students aged 12 to 30 from all over the world, seems a walk in the park.

Attending a selection of masterclasses – all open to the public – during my first



full day at the Academy, I encounter numerous nuggets of wisdom from the professors instructing students in seven disciplines: voice, flute, trombone, violin, cello and – new additions for this season – clarinet and viola. 'It's too beautiful; it needs to be drier,' says violin tutor Bartek Niziol as

a student performs with an undeniable sweetness of tone that nevertheless lacks

## The Academy is providing so much for its students and the wider community

dramatic conviction. Meanwhile, in the flute class, instructor Stéphane Réty is giving a lesson in communication, as a welcome sea breeze drifts through the open windows. 'We need to understand your text like a singer,' he says. 'This music is full of love, hope and tenderness.' Viola professor Jean-Eric Soucy describes a lesson from earlier in the day in which a chamber ensemble of two flutes and viola, formed for the course, came to understand the value of working together. 'The only way to learn music is to play with better people than yourself and to grow,' he says.

That lesson is demonstrated in spades as the trio play with great sensitivity at



Life's a beach: Olivia Colman in Spetses in *The Lost Daughter*

## Inspiration island Spetses in fiction

Unsurprisingly, Spetses has provided the setting for several elegant novels and movies, among them John Fowles's 1965 novel *The Magus*, which describes many real-life locations on the island, including the AKSS, at which he himself taught English, and which he renames the 'Lord Byron School' in his fictionalised version. The island is also the backdrop for Catherine Lind's 2014 novel *Unexpected Journeys*, and for director Maggie Gyllenhaal's 2021 film *The Lost Daughter*, as well as Rian Johnson's 2022 murder mystery *Glass Onion: A Knives Out Mystery*, starring Daniel Craig.

one of three performances I attend during my stay – in the Poseidonion Hotel, in the beautiful courtyard of the Church of Agios Nikolaos and, finally, an appropriate send-off in the outdoor amphitheatre of AKSS. Performing for tourists and locals in interesting locations around the island is a hallmark of the Music Academy – I'm reliably informed that an outdoor harbour concert, given by a large ensemble of trombones, attracted a lot of interest!

And in the end, the Academy is providing so much, not only for its students, but for the wider community. As the sun sets behind the pines at the closing concert, the full contingent of students appears on stage together as 2023's newly formed chamber orchestra and chorus for a performance of 'Time to Say Goodbye' – for this year, at any rate, as here is an initiative that is set to grow and grow. 🌊

**Further info:** [maakss.com](http://maakss.com)