

Why Santorini Holiday Rentals Beat Hotels for an Authentic Cyclades Experience

There is a moment, just after the ferry rounds the northern tip of the island, when the whitewashed cliffs of Santorini rise out of the Aegean Sea and you understand why people return year after year. The caldera wall, layered with volcanic rock, supports a string of villages that seem to glow in the afternoon light. Most visitors book into one of the larger hotels in Fira or Oia, but after a decade of traveling through the Cyclades, I have come to believe that Santorini holiday rentals offer a far more genuine connection to the place.

The difference starts with space. A hotel room, no matter how well designed, is still a room. A villa or a cave house gives you a kitchen, a terrace, sometimes a private plunge pool. You are not just sleeping in Santorini; you are living there, even if only for a week. That changes how you experience the island. You buy fresh tomatoes and feta from the market in Fira, you make your own breakfast on a balcony overlooking the caldera, and you move at your own pace. For me, that independence is the core of a memorable trip.

The Case for a Home Base in Santorini

When people ask me where to stay in Santorini, I always start with the same question: What kind of traveller are you? If you want to wake up and walk straight to a pool deck with a towel already laid out, a hotel in Imerovigli or Oia works fine. But if you value privacy, the ability to cook a meal after a long day of hiking the caldera path, or the freedom to come home at 2 a.m. without disturbing anyone, then [Santorini holiday rentals](#) are the better choice. I have stayed in both, and the difference in daily rhythm is significant.

During peak season, the streets of Oia can feel like a corridor of selfie sticks from late afternoon until sunset. A rental property set back from the main footpath gives you a refuge. You can watch the sunset from your own terrace, glass of Assyrtiko in hand, without elbowing for space at the castle ruins. That alone is worth the switch for many people.

Types of Properties: From Cave Houses to Luxury Suites

Santorini's architecture is unique, and the best rentals respect that tradition. The island is famous for its cave houses, carved directly into the volcanic pumice. These homes stay cool in summer and warm in the shoulder seasons, and they often feature the curved, whitewashed walls and built-in beds that define the local style. I have stayed in a cave house in Imerovigli that had a small courtyard with a jacuzzi and a view that stretched all the way to the Skaros rock. It was not flashy, but it felt rooted in the place.



On the other end of the spectrum are the luxury suites, many of which occupy the prime caldera-front spots. These properties often come with infinity pools that seem to spill into the sea, private chefs, and concierge services. They are expensive, but if you are celebrating a milestone or simply want to treat yourself, they deliver an experience that no hotel can match. Between those extremes, you will find villa rentals that sleep four to eight people, perfect for families or groups of friends. Many of these villas have multiple bedrooms, full kitchens, and terraces with outdoor dining areas. I have seen groups book a villa in Fira for a week and barely leave the property except to hike down to Amoudi Bay for lunch.

The variety means you can match the property to your travel style. A couple looking for romance might choose a luxury suite in Oia with a private plunge pool. A family with teenagers might prefer a larger villa in the quieter village of Pyrgos, where the pace is slower and the views are just as good. The key is to look beyond the big booking platforms and consider direct booking with local agencies, which often gives you better rates and more accurate descriptions.

How to Book: Direct vs. Aggregators

This is where the conversation gets practical. Most travellers start their search on Airbnb, Booking.com, or Vrbo. Those platforms are convenient, and they offer some protection through their review systems and cancellation policies. But they also take a significant commission, and that cost is built into the price you pay. I have found that booking directly with a local rental

agency or property owner often saves 10 to 20 percent, and the communication is usually more personal. You are dealing with someone who knows the island, not a call centre.

That said, direct booking carries some risk. If something goes wrong, you have less recourse. So I always recommend buying travel insurance that covers trip cancellation and property damage. Also, read the cancellation policy carefully before you pay a deposit. A good local agency will have clear terms and will respond quickly to questions. I have booked Santorini holiday rentals through both channels, and my best experiences have come from smaller, specialised agencies that curate their listings and know each property personally.

Another practical point: check the ferry schedules before you book. Santorini is accessible by ferry from Athens and other Cyclades islands like Mykonos, and the schedules change seasonally. If you are arriving by ferry, choose a rental that is not too far from the port of Athinios or the airport. The roads on the caldera side are steep and winding, and hauling luggage up a hundred steps is not how you want to start your holiday.

Location: Oia, Fira, Imerovigli, and Beyond

Location matters more in Santorini than in many other destinations because the island's geography is so dramatic. The caldera villages are built on a cliff, and each has a different character. Oia is the most famous, known for its sunset views and blue-domed churches. It is also the most crowded during the day. If you stay in Oia, choose a rental that is away from the main pedestrian route, or accept that you will be sharing the sunset with hundreds of other people.



Fira is the capital, with more nightlife, more shops, and a busier vibe. It is a good base if you want to be in the middle of things and have easy access to buses that go to the beaches and other villages. Imerovigli, perched on the highest point of the caldera, is quieter and offers some of the best views on the island. It is sometimes called the balcony of Santorini, and for good reason. The walk from Imerovigli to Oia along the caldera edge is one of the finest coastal hikes in Greece.

Beyond the caldera, villages like Pyrgos, Megalochori, and Emporio offer a more local experience. These settlements have their own charm, with winding streets, traditional tavernas, and fewer tourists. The views are not of the caldera, but of the vineyards and the sea. If you rent a car, staying in one of these villages can be a smart move. You get more space for your money, and you are a short drive from the caldera viewpoints.

Practical Considerations for Your Stay

Santorini is a popular destination, and Greek tourism has grown steadily over the past decade. That means peak season, from June through August, is busy and expensive. If you can travel in May, September, or early October, you will find lower prices, fewer crowds, and weather that is still warm enough for swimming. I have visited in late September and found the island relaxed, the sea warm, and the light perfect for photography.

When you book Santorini holiday rentals, pay attention to the access. Many properties on the caldera are reached by steps, sometimes a hundred or more. If you have mobility issues or heavy luggage, look for a property with road access or ask the owner about porter services. Also, check whether the property has air conditioning. Some cave houses stay naturally cool, but not all, and summer temperatures can reach the mid-thirties Celsius.

Another detail that surprises some visitors: the water. Santorini has a desalination plant, but the water is still not great for drinking. Most rentals provide bottled water, or you can buy it at the supermarket. And while many properties have kitchens, the local produce is so good that you will want to eat out at least a few times. The tomato keftedes, the fava, the grilled octopus at a taverna in Amoudi Bay - these are experiences that no rental kitchen can replicate.

The Bigger Picture: Why Rentals Matter for the Island

Beyond the personal experience, choosing Santorini holiday rentals over large hotels supports a more sustainable model of tourism. Many rentals are owned by local families who have lived on the island for generations. Your booking puts money directly into the local economy, rather than into a corporate chain. That matters in a place where the character of the island is its main draw. The more the island is shaped by international hotel brands, the more it risks losing the very things that make it special.



That is not to say hotels have no place. They do. But the balance has shifted in recent years, and the growth of platforms like Airbnb and Vrbo has given travellers more choice than ever. The challenge is to use that choice wisely. A well-chosen rental can give you a home in the Cyclades, a place that feels like yours, even for just a few days. And that feeling, I think, is what keeps people coming back to this island.

So when you plan your trip, take the time to look beyond the first page of search results. Read the reviews, ask the owner specific questions about the location and access, and consider booking directly if the terms are right. A little extra effort upfront can turn a good holiday into a great one. And on an island as beautiful as Santorini, you deserve nothing less.