The old landlady is waving to visitors from afar. In Lionas Bay, however, no further invitation is needed to indulge in dolmades and tsatsiki, followed by a serving of grilled fish. During the off season, the remote beach strip in the northern part of Naxos is only inhabited by a dozen people, all making their living at the local taverns. The few visitors, who stray from the main roads and wander down the narrow, dusty path, are treated to a delicious meal and homemade wine bottled in plastic water bottles—one of the many provisional arrangements you are certain to fall in love with.

Upon exploring the Hellenic civilisation, the famous German writer Johann Wolfgang von Goethe remarked: “Of all peoples, the Greeks have dreamt the dream of life best”; on Naxos, this dream is still much alive. According to the myth, Dionysus and Ariadne were married here. Like the gods, the island combines opposites that make it attractive: white sandy beaches cover the southern coast, while sparse mountain ranges and solitary villages dominate the northern regions. Roman Catholic and Greek Orthodox churches along massive Venetian castles and Hellenic cult sites tell of the island’s multicultural history. Greeks, Persians, Italians, and Turks long fought for dominance in the Aegean, and only since 1832 has the island been part of Greece.

Naxos lures locals, as well as tourists, with a more peaceful ambience nowadays. Visitors are greeted by the iconic Portara, the entrance to an unfinished Unfinished
temple from the 5th century BC. Although Chóra—as the capital is called by locals—has an airport, most visitors take the ferries that leave from Piraeus in Athens three times a day. On the airy decks, weekenders unite with backpackers and Greek grandmothers, who occasionally feed tourists with cookies and fruit. Security instructions should always be followed, since the ferries here tend to be overcrowded. Only recently have ferry workers protested against their poor working conditions.

With an area of 500 square kilometres, Naxos is the largest island of the Cyclades; yet, it managed to resist the mass tourism that swept through Greece in the 1980s and 1990s. As a result, you will not be able to find resorts or big holiday complexes that are common on other islands, like Crete and Rhodes. Instead, the island offers a vast number of decently priced apartments that will make you forget the buffet when you can enjoy breakfast on your sea-view balcony. The tourism business has brought moderate wealth to Naxos, which was formerly known only for its marble mining industry and its excellent citrus liqueur.

There is plenty to explore on the island: the still intact, picturesque Castro in Naxos-City with the Venetian Museum; the Temple of Demeter in the Naxos-City centre; the unfinished Kouros statue of Apollonas; the Dimitra temple near Sangri; and the Dionysus temple at Glinado, to the centre and north of the island. Agia Anna and Plaka, just outside Naxos-City, are the most well known beaches. But only a few kilometres south, each remote and beautiful beach is followed by another, connected only by twisting dirt tracks that challenge even the most experienced drivers.

A dusty road meanders invitingly down to Lionas Bay, and the journey is absolutely worth it as the landlady is sure to be expecting you already.