

# Postcard from Greece: hero of the Small Cyclades

While other ferries disappear when the summer ends, the plucky little Express Skopelitis keeps on sailing

October 5 2022



© Matthew Cook

"This is the VIP area. Only room for one," quips the chief mate, aquamarine eyes aglitter. He's sitting on an old blue chair plonked among giant coils of rope, drinking coffee from a paper cup. His crinkly smile and leathery skin

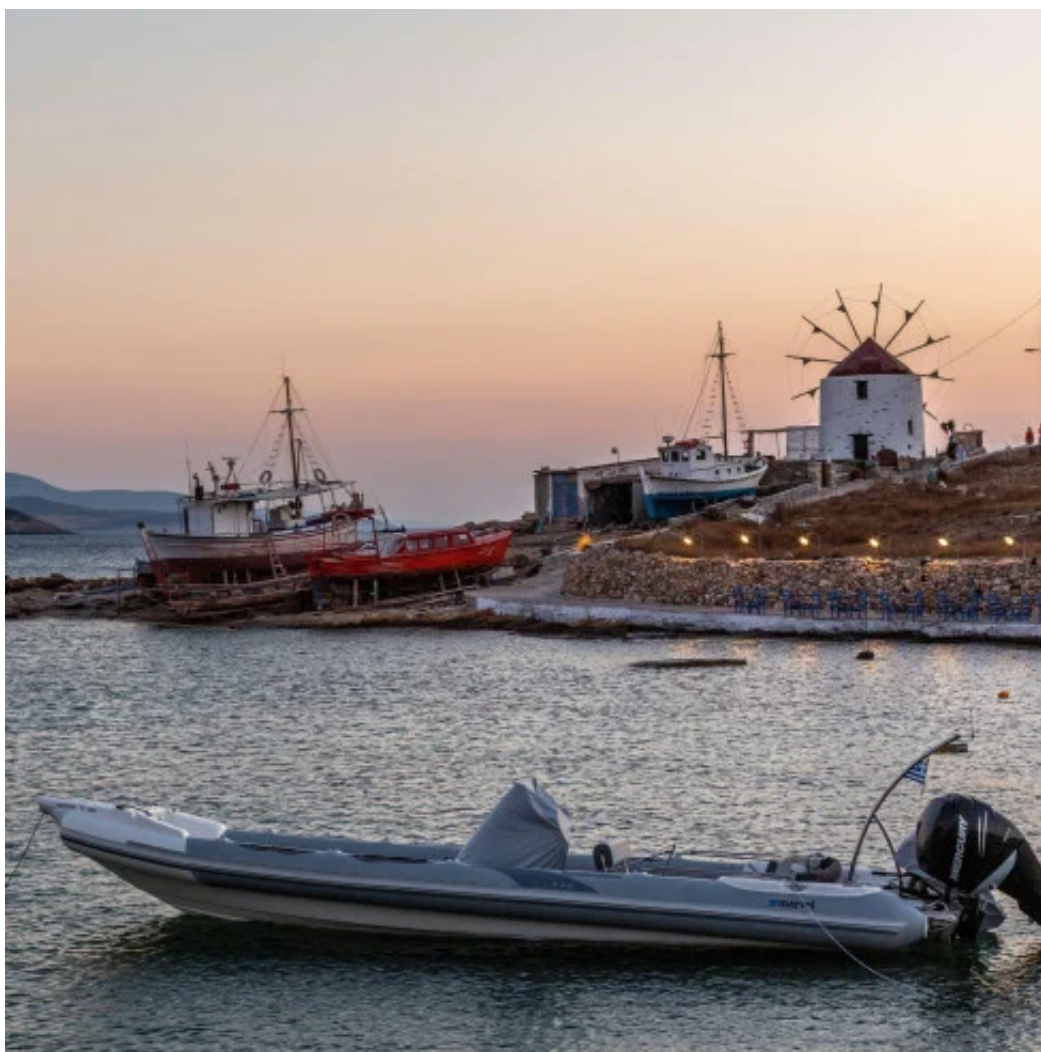
confirm a lifetime of seamanship. He wears a sun-bleached navy T-shirt, emblazoned with a red S wrapped around a white anchor below the name of the ship: Express Skopelitis.

Those who have travelled on this plucky little boat know that speed is not one of her strengths. (The Express moniker was added when her even slower predecessor, the Skopelitis, was decommissioned.) But a journey on board this old-fashioned ferry is a rite of passage for Greek island-hoppers — a rollicking, salty interlude that is both pleasurable and surprisingly affordable, unlike the stuffy high-speed catamarans that now dominate the Greek seas.

Run by three generations of the Skopelitis family since 1956, [Small Cyclades Lines](#) is an anomaly: a shipping company with just one ship. With a passenger capacity of 340, and space in the hold for fewer than a dozen vehicles, the Express Skopelitis services the archipelago of tiny islands between Naxos and Amorgos: Iraklia, Schinousa, Koufonisia and Donousa. With a few hundred inhabitants between them, these islands and the islets around them are known as the Lesser or [Small Cyclades](#), but I like to think of them as Pure Cyclades. The landscapes are the archetype of barren beauty: naked coves and low-slung hills flecked with huddled white hamlets. Cars are scarce; you get around on foot or on fishing boats. There are no sunbeds, no resorts, no banks (the ATMs often run out of cash), and (apart from Koufonisia) no pharmacies.



The Express Skopelitis plies the straits between these islands six days a week, 11 months a year. (For one month, the ship undergoes essential maintenance.) Medicine, bread and other essentials are transported free of charge. Residents also travel for free. The Skopelitis is their mailboat, their ambulance, their only lifeline when the tourists have gone, taking the lucrative shipping companies that service the Small Cyclades in high summer with them. "During winter, we're dedicated to ensuring the islanders have everything they need," says Dimitris Skopelitis, the 35-year-old captain-cum-shipowner. "Weather conditions are tough, and the infrastructure in the harbours is basically non-existent, which makes our job more difficult."



Koufonisia island © Alamy

Like other routes connecting the most remote and sparsely populated Greek islands, this one is known as *agoni grammi* (literally, the unfruitful line). These shipping routes are subsidised by the state, as they are not commercially viable. The recent spike in fuel costs has brought a steep rise in ferry ticket prices: most fares have increased by 25 to 30 per cent compared with last year, making a holiday to the islands unaffordable for many Greeks already struggling with surging inflation. But on the Skopelitis Express a return ticket from Naxos to Iraklia (1.5 hours each way) costs just €13.60. "We're not allowed to raise our prices because the route is subsidised," Skopelitis explains. "But the government hasn't increased subsidies to help us absorb rising fuel costs, so operating this line is becoming unsustainable."

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no question of abandoning ship.  
The Express Skopelitis rarely

*violently sick. The first mate burst in and said: 'Come on, people! You pay good money for this at the funfair'*

cancel a crossing. "If we don't show up, the islanders will stage a revolution," chuckles Captain Giannis Fostieris, a crew member since 1990. During a layover at the port of Naxos, the administrative capital of the island group, I watch delivery

vans, couriers and pedestrians drop off plants, a washing machine, a birthday cake, new shoes, construction materials and dozens of other packages, which the 10-man crew patiently load and sort. Each island has a designated area in the hold. "We're more flexible than the big ships that hurry people on and off. If someone is held up at a court case or at the doctor, we'll wait for them," says Fostieris.



Dimitris Skopelitis, who founded the ferry line in 1956, on an earlier incarnation of the ship. His grandson, of the same name, now runs the service © Skopelitis family

Once the ship sets sail, passengers pop up to the bridge to say hello. Fostieris clacks his worry beads, eyes to the horizon, as they chat. On deck, tourists hunched in bucket seats are sprayed as the ship rolls into the northerly swell. The waves are peaky as whipped cream. The saloon downstairs is straight out of a Wes Anderson movie, with its salmon-pink curtains, vinyl banquettes and round tables inlaid with nautical motifs. A fellow passenger recalls making this trip in very rough seas: "Everyone was

being violently sick. The first mate burst in, looked around and said: 'Come on, people! You pay good money for this at the funfair.'"



The Express Skopelitis © Alamy

As the Skopelitis manoeuvres into the dinky port of Iraklia, locals rush to the quayside to see what she has brought. A ginger cat called Patata (Potato) is part of the welcoming commotion. The crew, as much social workers as seamen, exchange parcels and banter with the residents. With fuel prices continuing to rise, I wonder how this enterprise will stay afloat. "I've been making this crossing since I was a schoolboy," says Dimitris Skopelitis. "It's a way of life."

## Details

For ferry bookings see [smallcycladeslines.gr](https://smallcycladeslines.gr). For more on visiting the islands see [naxos.gr](https://naxos.gr)

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