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**Island Edens: Europe's Carless Paradise**

Posted by [Jeanine Barone](#) in [Beyond the Guidebook](#) on February 11, 2015

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Hydra derives its name from the Greek word for water. (Photograph by Constantinos Iliopoulos, Alamy)

Imagine travel without cars.

Scenery wouldn't rush by in a swirl of colors. The air wouldn't vibrate with the honking of horns and the squeal of brakes.

Going at a slower pace allows travelers to engage all of their senses and even notice minute changes in flora and topography.

A landscape sliced by streets where horse-drawn carriages roll by and locals go about their daily errands on foot or bicycle may call to mind a bygone era. But, in fact, a journey to a simpler time is exactly what many car-free islands in Europe offer amid the clamor of modern life.

**Here are five easily accessible options that share their own piece of paradise**

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### > Hydra, Greece

Those arriving via catamaran or hydrofoil from Piraeus, Athens's main port, are met with a charming sight: Splendid centuries-old mansions once owned by wealthy ship captains climb the slopes of a crescent-shaped harbor.

Of the five Saronic Islands, Hydra is clearly the most unspoiled—it's designated as a national monument—making it easy to understand why its history has long been interwoven with the arts. Numerous painters, poets, and composers, from Milos Sachtouris to Leonard Cohen, maintained a Hydra connection.

Donkeys, mules, and horses clip-clop around the cobbled lanes in the main town, which has a time-warped quality. Family-run **Rafalias Pharmacy** has been around since the 19th century, and it displays apothecary jars and other artifacts from throughout its history.

Collector **Pauline Karpidas** established her contemporary space, the Hydra Workshop, near the port that's also home to a branch of the School of Fine Arts of Athens. Beyond town, myriad trails lace mountainous Hydra—some more exhausting than others—leading to calm coves, wee villages, and old monasteries, including one dedicated to the **Prophet Ilias**.

For those in search of a tan with a side of culture, Limnionas Beach is snuggled in a pebbly, shallow bay that can be easily reached by boat or, more adventurously, on foot (walking and water taxis are the main ways to get around, as bicycles are not welcome).

### > Comino Island, Malta

Sandwiched between Malta and Gozo, the two largest islands in the Maltese archipelago, petite Comino is a popular day-trip destination owing to its Blue Lagoon.

Though the cyan-colored waters of this wildly popular cove are plenty attractive, staying overnight at the island's sole accommodation, the Comino Hotel, allows travelers to experience the tranquil escape in its laid-back glory. (The hotel closes in winter, but ferries continue service from Malta and Gozo.)



Comino Island's famed Blue Lagoon (Photograph by viaggiovero, Flickr)

On this craggy 1.5-square-mile expanse that's laced with dusty roads, discoveries can be made. One path leads to St. Mary's Bay, a lower-key alternative to the Blue Lagoon for snorkelers and swimmers. And there's nothing but solitude at Smuggler's Cove, a magnet for kayakers and divers, as well as families who enjoy luxuriating in calm tidal pools and watching tiny crustaceans and fish swim about.

With barely a handful of residents, Comino was once the stomping ground of the Knights of Malta, who used the island as a defensive post and as their private hunting grounds, eventually wiping out the wild boar population.

Hiking through the wildflower-speckled landscape, a path courses to an isolated, rubble-ridden area, the perfect setting for 17th-century **St. Mary's Tower**. Built to protect the channel from pirates, the square fort stands 250 feet above sea level, offering a scenic view of the island and neighboring Malta and Gozo.

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### > Veliki Brijun, Croatia

Most who venture to Veliki Brijun, the largest of a string of 14 lush islands making up Brijuni National Park, hop aboard a tourist train, never straying from the well-trodden sites. But those who rent a bike will find they have the place almost all to themselves.

Verdant Mediterranean forests and uninhabited bliss are just a 20-minute ferry ride across the Adriatic from mainland Fažana, a small fishing village on the Istrian peninsula.

Josip Broz Tito may have made the Brijuni Islands his official summer residence following World War II (his luxe villas still stand), but their appeal dates back much further. Hundreds of dinosaur footprints dating to the Cretaceous period have been discovered on Veliki Brijun. In between, the islands have belonged to Venice (quarried stone from the islands help build the city) and the Austrian Empire.

On Veliki Brijun, pedal along through forests of Holm oak, sequoia, and eucalyptus to discover an array of archeological features. The remains of a fish pond, multiple terraces, and elaborate promenades set along picturesque Verige Bay point to the sumptuousness of a Roman *villa rustica* in use until the sixth century.

Crumbling walls, columns, a baking oven, and a water cistern are among the ruins at the Byzantine castrum (fortress) that's spread across a more-than-two-acre expanse. The site has presented scientists with a trove of relics left behind by people who settled here beginning in ancient times, including evidence of olive and wine processing. Some of these residents likely worshipped at St. Mary Basilica, which stands relatively well preserved nearby.

### > Île-d'Aix, France

In 1815, Napoleon may have spent only a few days of freedom here before being exiled to St. Helena, but his legacy is firmly imprinted on Île-d'Aix: Its grassy square, Austerlitz, takes its name from the emperor's famed victory, while "Napoleon" appears on a main street and a mansion (now a museum) where he briefly resided.

After the 30-minute ferry ride from Fouras-les-Bains on the mainland, many day-trippers choose to remain ensconced within the fortified walls that ring the brightly painted village.

But exploring beyond the beaten path reveals a natural wonderland.

Those with a bicycle or good walking shoes can easily circle this two-mile-long island, exploring the coastal batteries, as well as Pointe Park, which makes for a good seaside picnic spot.

The island's northeast portion is especially lovely, blanketed with thick pinewoods and rimmed with two jewels: Baby and Yellow Sands Beaches. Plage de l'Anse de La Cross, dominated by twin lighthouses, and Le Grande Plage are of equal appeal.

Île-d'Aix is also home to one of two remaining mother-of-pearl ateliers in France, inside the family-owned Nacre Museum.



Île-d'Aix is located off the central west coast of France. (Photograph by michaelclarke, Flickr)

## > Büyükada, Turkey

Trade the chaos and traffic of Istanbul for carless serenity by catching a high-speed ferry across the Sea of Marmara to Büyükada ("Big Island" in Turkish), the largest of the nine Princes' Islands.

The archipelago's name derives from its early history as a site of exile for Byzantine-era royalty, but the islands's dark past bears little resemblance to the peaceful atmosphere found there today.



A phaeton shuttles visitors around on Büyükada. (Photograph by charlesfred, Flickr)

Büyükada's Ottoman-style ferry terminal with its colorful glass windows, ornate tile work, and grand dome is also the gateway to its transportation network, where horse-drawn *phaetons*, bicyclists, and pedestrians share the road.

Beyond the tourist-laden main town, simple pleasures abound on this compact isle: a picnic spot on the grassy Cape Dil where the sea licks the shore below; a bike ride along Karacabey Bay past olive groves and offshore islets; a quiet uphill stroll through fragrant woodlands on Hristos, one of the island's twin peaks.

For a scenic view, trek up a steep hill to the island's highest perch, where you'll find Aya Yorgi, a charming sixth-century church and monastery dedicated to St. George.

*Jeanine Barone* is a freelance travel and food writer who writes for National Geographic Traveler and other publications. Keep up with her on Twitter @JCreatureTravel and on her blog.

**What would you add to the list?** Share your insider intel about other car-free islands in the comments section below.

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Chris  
Dublin  
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Ohh Hydra, Last time i went there was 25 years ago. Still have memories of the clean waters and the waves. Thanks for the article. <http://www.flybreak.com>