

Why literary tourists are flocking to the Greek island

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Hedonists party in Mykonos, tourists flock to Santorini, but literary types have only one Greek island on their minds – Hydra.

The rocky outcrop in the Saronic group of islands is only 37 nautical miles from Athens, about a 70-minute ferry ride.

Not hard to see the appeal – Hydra island has plenty of cats and boats, but no cars. *iStock*

It's not only popular for its proximity to the capital but for its beauty. The main town (permanent population: 2000) clusters around a pretty port from which stone pathways and steps wind up the steep hills.

Cars and bicycles are banned, so it's left to long-suffering donkeys to transport visitors' luggage to the lofty hotels and guest houses.

Since the 1950s it has attracted a bohemian set – artists and writers who drifted to the peaceful and inexpensive island where they worked, played and indulged in plenty of illicit love affairs. Lawrence Durrell, Henry Miller, Cyril Connolly and Patrick Leigh Fermor were among the writers who found inspiration on Hydra.

A Hydra cat sleeps in the shadow of a donkey at the harbour.*iStock*

But most associated with the island these days is Canadian singer, songwriter and novelist Leonard Cohen. He lived there in the 1960s, in an on-and-off relationship with Norwegian woman Marianne Ihlen, who was married with a child. The biographical TV series *So Long, Marianne* screened earlier this year on SBS.

Cohen's house high above the port is now a tourist attraction, with hundreds of pilgrims weekly climbing the steps to pay tribute to him.

When I visited Hydra for the first time this September, I was more interested in another literary figure who made Hydra her home, Charmian Clift.

Leonard Cohen (second left) plays guitar on Hydra with Charmian Clift (third left), and Marianne Jensen (also known as Ihlen) in October 1960. *James Burke/LIFE/Getty*

The Kiama, NSW-born writer and her then more famous novelist husband, George Johnson (*My Brother Jack*), moved there in 1957 with their two children. She became a kind of den mother to the artistic community and the drifters on Hydra, including Leonard Cohen, with whom she struck a close friendship.

She was somewhat in George's shadow as a novelist. Later, after they returned to Australia, she would write a column for *The Sydney Morning Herald*. She took her own life in 1969, on the eve of the publication of George's novel *Clean Straw for Nothing*, which betrayed details of their marriage and infidelities.

George and Charmian had a tempestuous relationship. There's a fascinating documentary, *Charmian Clift: Life Burns High*, playing on Binge. Along with Nadia Wheatley's *The Life and Myth of Charmian Clift*, both elevate Charmian's immense talent to its rightful place in the Australian literary pantheon.

Charmian's house is not so much of a tourist attraction as Leonard's. It's not on any tourist maps. But perhaps it should be, as more people, especially young Australians, become drawn to her story.

It's left to long-suffering donkeys to transport visitors' luggage to the lofty hotels and guest houses.*Getty Images*

The connector in modern Hydra is garrulous ex-Philadelphian Josh Hickey, a writer and publisher who founded the Hydra Book Club above the Historical Archives Museum in 2021.

Everyone I met in Hydra recommended I climb the stairs to the bookstore, which is stocked with interesting new and vintage books from the international writers who were drawn to the island. Clift's memoir of the island, *Peel Me a Lotus*, is there, of course.

The bookstore is buzzing the day I visit and there are a few Australian accents. I overhear Hickey talking to someone who is also looking for the Clift-Johnson house. He says that few young people know the name George Johnson any more, but they know about Charmian. So, I guess she's had a kind of revenge, after playing second fiddle to George for most of her life.

Hickey will draw you a map of where to find her house if you ask nicely.

Marianne Ihlen (right) and Leonard Cohen on a donkey trek around Hydra. *Getty Images*

As I'm leaving, a small woman comes in with a stack of books for sale. She's introduced as Judy Scott, and she has written a memoir about her time in Hydra in the 1970s, *Leonard, Marianne, and Me*.

From conversations I have with strangers in tavernas, Hydra seems to be populated by women writing their memoirs, but Judy's is the real thing, well written and well documented. She lived with Cohen and Ihlen and kept up the friendships over many years, and, like Cohen, had an intense romantic relationship with Marianne.

The intimate and revealing memoir had Cohen's blessing before he died. (I bought a copy, of course.)

My time in Hydra is short, but I can see why creative people were and are drawn to it. Leaning out the window of my bedroom in the bougainvillea-draped Hydra Hotel, 101 steps up the hill and not far from Leonard's house, the sea air smells like freedom.

The writer was a guest of Luxe Sailing and Land Tours.