

TURNING THE TIDE

ON THE WEST COAST OF SYROS, THE FOUNDER OF GREEK LABEL ZEUS+DIONE HAS GIVEN A HISTORIC MANSION A STYLISH, STRIPPED-BACK UPDATE

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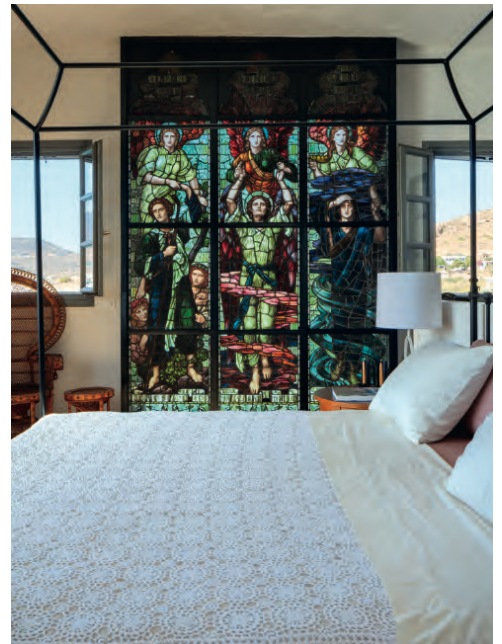
HOUSE CALL



Villa Delle Grazie in Syros, Greece



Top row, from left: dining room; Dimitra Kolotoura wearing a Zeus+Dione Hera design; Paola Navone sunloungers. Middle row, from left: living room with Mavriki mirrors; exterior; stained-glass window beside bed dressed in Zeus+Dione silk sheets. Bottom row, from left: hallway; terrace; travertine marble bathroom



ON THE DOCKS NEXT TO GREECE'S OLDEST SHIPYARD, Dimitra Kolotoura waves amid the cargo being disgorged from the ferry on its Athens-Mykonos-Syros circuit. Only a handful disembark at Ermoupolis, as Syros is not on the usual party-island bucket list. Dimitra is luminous, a vision in silk, standing out in a crowd of backpackers. With dark blonde tresses framing tanned skin and amber eyes, she looks like she is made of poured honey; a perfect ambassador for her ethical fashion and lifestyle brand, Zeus+Dione. Its designs draw on goddess mythology, mining Greek craftsmanship and heritage for inspiration.

She reaches for my luggage with a bejewelled fist, sunlight gleaming on the polished onyx of her great-grandfather's ring, which she never takes off. She also carries a thumbnail-sized effigy of the Virgin Mary – made for her by the monks of holy Mount Athos – and confesses that, like her fellow islanders, she wards off the “evil eye” with the colour blue and offers pomegranates to attract good fortune.

We leave behind the Neoclassical splendour of Ermoupolis harbour, zigzagging up past the fortified medieval city of Ano Syros, built on the mountain summit to resist the incessant Saracen pirate raids of that era. “This house you are about to see has been my salvation in the hurdle of the past 15 years,” she says, changing gears. “Reclaiming it after divorce proceedings was a major battle won.” The house had been part of the landscape of her childhood and teenage summers with her grandparents, who were native islanders. “The villa was a connecting thread with my youth, I played with the children of this house,” she tells me. In 2008, just after she gave birth to her only daughter, she and her then husband put in a bid to buy the villa. “I wanted my daughter

to herself, and the house feels like the latest problem she has overcome with positive thinking, having already recovered from physical paralysis, after been diagnosed with MS 14 years earlier.

The 19th-century waterfront mansion sits within the exclusive historical neighbourhood of Della Grazia on Syros's western seaboard, where shipowners and merchants would compete to build the most elegant turreted villas. This one was designed by a Scottish judge who was helping rewrite the Greek constitution after the country's independence in 1821, with three-foot-thick walls to protect against the summer heat and strong Meltemi winds. He brought over extraordinary Burne-Jones-inspired stained-glass windows through which sunlight pours in, leaving claret and chartreuse pools across the master bedroom. Dimitra describes the glowing Pre-Raphaelite figures as her guardian angels, and the biblical quotations in glass – “Show me the Path of Life” – feel like Victorian versions of her own confidence-boosting Post-it notes.

“Harmonia” is another affirmative message in stone, inscribed into the wall above a profile of a classical goddess. She presides over a marble dining table, around which the renovations were centred. Dimitra stripped out the 1970s pebble dash, leaving only the original beautiful marble chequerboard floor for the dining room-conservatory. To match the floor, she chose a table made from a vast one-ton chunk of rare pink marble from Tisaío Oros.

Inevitably, the villa works as a dramatic backdrop for the Zeus+Dione homeware designs she launched earlier this year, including silk sheets with a jacquard weave made by the women of Soufli in Thrace. The brand has helped breathe life back into the ancient silk town in the

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to enjoy those same summer rituals on the same beaches as I did. I longed for that continuity.”

But following the divorce in 2016, it took several years before Dimitra became the sole owner of the house. With a desire to restart her life in Syros, she stripped the villa back to its bare bones, helped by architect Stelio Agiostratitis, who has designed stadiums and universities, and interior designer Valerie Decklerque. It was finished last summer and the result could not feel more Greek in its embrace of elemental simplicity. Waves break against the arched windows and exterior walls, left bare to allow for the play of water reflections on the whitewash. With the sea calling below and the sunlight pouring into the house on three sides, it exudes an energy that is both meditative and exhilarating.

We pull up outside Villa Delle Grazie's blink-and-miss-it entrance. It is just weeks since the builders left and days after a successful first rental to an Italian film star, whose naked swims from the bathing platform have already become legendary. Hidden behind walls on a stretch of the coastal road to Voulgaris beach, fringed with tamarisk trees, fortress-style doors open into a space that gives onto sea, sky and wind. It is a kind of Tardis, a house of many windows. The eight bedrooms, spread across various levels, all lead out onto Foinikas Bay. The plaque in the entrance, with the Villa Delle Grazie name chiselled in marble, was a housewarming gift from Mareva Grabowski, the original Zeus+Dione co-founder, who had to quit the company due to her commitments as the wife of Greece's prime minister. Dimitra rechristened the house in gratitude for support from Mareva and other friends. This gratitude is a key part of her mindset. She writes messages of thanks

same way that Dimitra has championed embroidery from Argos, woven textiles from Crete, macrame from Metsovo and felt-making from Volos.

The dynamic of the interiors hinges on the marriage of old and new, humble and noble, traditional and contemporary. There are monastic candlesticks and handmade Zeus+Dione ceramics designed to reflect island pottery and churchware. Furniture-wise, vintage Parisian rattan sits alongside Dimitra's grandmother's antique inlaid walnut heirlooms. On the walls is a smart hanging she commissioned, made from the brand's unused wool and yarn.

Irish gardener Sally Razelou, a founder member of the Mediterranean Garden Society, created the grounds. Cacti, prickly pears, olive trees, marigolds and pines thrive in the salty breezes and sunshine that greet my arrival. At sunset we venture out for dinner to the wondrous Iliovasilima (“sunset”) restaurant in Galissas. Then, out of nowhere, a storm roars in. Waves are galloping towards the sunbathing platform on our return, rearing up against the windows. “I have to do something,” says Dimitra calmly, “or the sea will carry everything away.” She discards her shoes and tucks her kaftan into her underwear as I follow obediently, water swirling around our thighs as we secure the Paola Navone sofas and loungers in the cellar. Panting, drenched and laughing like drains, we leave the scene as it gets even wilder. It is time to dry ourselves off, pull a cork and raise a glass for the most dramatic Greek baptism of a beautiful house called Gratitude. 🍷

Villa Delle Grazie can be booked through fivestargreece.com, which will arrange transfers from Athens and stays in the capital's smart One Acropolis apartments. Prices on request.