

## Milos Island — Promoting mining through Geotourism



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Recently, I visited the beautiful Greek island of Milos, which is typical of the Cyclades with its relaxed atmosphere, sun-drenched landscape and white-washed homes set against the clear blue Aegean Sea. Before traveling to Milos, I researched the island's attractions using various online resources and guidebooks. Two key aspects of the island were consistently mentioned. One is that Milos is where the famous Venus de Milo, now displayed in the Louvre, was found by a farmer in his field. The other is that Milos has been "scarred" and "ruined" by quarrying that started in the Neolithic Age and continues today.

Despite the guidebook warnings, tourists come to this mostly unspoiled island to enjoy the beaches, explore ancient ruins and experience the unique volcanic landscape that lends the island a dramatic, other-worldly quality. Recently, the island has also been attracting geotourists. This type of tourism is relatively new to Milos and was conceived by government authorities and industry leaders as a way to grow the local economy by simultaneously developing tourism and mining as mutually supportive activities. It is a bold and progressive idea and one that recognizes the unique situation on Milos, where mining and natural beauty coexist in a fascinating outdoor geological museum.

The Miloterranean Geo Experience was born from this initiative and offers visitors many ways to explore the island's rich natural, cultural and mining histories. One that particularly appealed to me is a series of seven Geo Walks linking significant mine, archeological and geological sites through a network of well-marked goat paths and roads that traverse the island. These walks have intriguing names, such as Sulfur Mines and Volcano. High-quality fold out maps are available for each walk, and they are designed so that visitors can take advantage of all that Milos has to offer: spectacular views, small scenic villages with taverns selling cold drinks and secluded beaches for refreshing swims. Armed with these maps, I can easily imagine spending a week exploring the island's many treasures, including early-Christian catacombs, ancient Roman theaters, historic mining sites and small fishing villages tucked into coves.

For anyone desiring an indoor experience, there is a well-designed mining museum that offers clear and informative displays on the technical, as well as social, aspects of mining on Milos. Particularly moving are videotaped interviews of mine workers telling the human side of the story in a way that is open and honest. The workers' words, coupled with their deeply lined faces, express pride, hardship and longing for a life imbedded in the rhythms of the miner's daily physical labors. The stories are compelling and authentic. The museum also traces the mining history of Milos from the Neolithic Age to modern times, starting with the extraction of obsidian and continuing with sulfur, kaolin, pumice, bentonite, barite, perlite, lead and manganese.

In keeping with the concept of proudly promoting mining as a tourist attraction, the museum sells glossy full-color postcards of a beautiful and impressively large bentonite mine. The image proves that mines can be viewed as aesthetically pleasing feats of engineering that are as awe-inspiring as many natural sites. It also raises the possibility that it may not be too far-fetched to consider some of the world's grand scale mines on par with ancient engineering wonders, such as the Great Pyramids of Egypt, the Great Wall of China and the unparalleled Incan architectural achievement of Machu Picchu.

It is fitting that Milos hosted the 6th International Conference on Sustainable Development in the Minerals Industry in June. I can't think of a better place to discuss the public's perception of the environmental and social consequences of mining than in Milos, which provides a natural laboratory for probing these issues through real world examples. The island's mining heritage is directly linked to its strong economy. Today, mining accounts for 40 percent and tourism accounts for 55 percent of its domestic product. Wealth created from mining activity has fueled the island's economy throughout much of its history. Ruins of significant monuments built on this mineral wealth and left behind by thriving ancient civilizations sustain today's tourism industry. Milos is engaged in an experiment. We will know that the experiment has succeeded when the guidebooks recommend a visit to Milos to explore its fascinating 6,000 + year history of continuous mining. ■