

# FOREST FIRES IN RHODES DO NOT SCARE OFF TOURISTS



visit the island without interruption.

In July, massive forest and bushfires broke out in the southeast of the Greek holiday island of Rhodes, forcing around 20,000 tourists to evacuate the area. The locals helped evacuate people with pick-up trucks and buses, while firefighting helicopters picked up water from hotel pools to extinguish the fire. Some media even called it "holiday hell". Despite the dangerous situation, tourists continued to

The tourist season in Rhodes officially comes to an end this weekend. Despite the fires in Rhodes, the balance is extremely positive. **At the beginning of November, the island's airport received up to 11,000 holidaymakers daily.**

Manolis Markopoulos, head of the Rhodes Hotel Association, says they are doing even better this year than last. In 2022, around 2.5 million visitors traveled to this sunny island, which is said to have once belonged to the Greek sun god Helios. Rhodes boasts around 280 days of sunshine and more than 3000 hours of sunshine a year.

Looking back, it seems that the island suffered more from the reports of the fires rather than the fires themselves. "It only burned in the southeast of Rhodes, and not even five percent of the island's area was affected," clarifies Markopoulos, criticizing the international media for painting a bad picture of the island, as if it was on fire. Of around 100 hotels that had to be evacuated due to fires, only three were closed afterward due to major damage. The rest were able to reopen.

Despite the fires in Rhodes, many holidaymakers continued to enjoy their holidays undisturbed, and new tourists were not deterred from visiting.

The Rhodians are proud of how well they handled the evacuations; there were no casualties, according to Markopoulos. The government reports that it was the largest evacuation operation ever carried out in Greece. Many tourists were also full of praise for the islanders, some of whom accommodated the people in their own homes. They show their appreciation by returning to the island.

## **Lots of Bookings for 2024**

European tour operators still heavily depend on Rhodes. The hotel association reports that reservations for 2024 have already exceeded this year's bookings by up to 40 percent. TUI, a tour operator, has even added more flights to Rhodes from Central and Northern Europe to meet the increasing demand.

The Greek government has promised to support the tourists affected by the fires in July. Prime Minister Kyriakos Mitsotakis has stated that those who had to cut short their holidays will be allowed to spend a week free of charge on the island during the low season of spring or autumn 2024. The Ministry of Tourism has recently suggested to tour operators how this action can be realized.

## **Concern about Extreme Weather and Natural Disasters**

Although the fires in Rhodes didn't discourage tourism, people still worry about the increasing weather extremes and natural disasters. This is particularly important for Greece, where the tourism sector is a major source of revenue.

There were fires in August not only in Rhodes but also close to Athens, the Peloponnese, and the port city of Alexandroupolis in northeastern Greece. Additionally, there were devastating fires in the nearby Dardia National Park. Storms that were severe and caused flooding hit the port city of Volos in central Greece at the beginning of September. This resulted in the loss of lives, including a couple from Austria, during the floods in September. The floods swept away their holiday home.

**The government holds climate change responsible for the occurrence of extreme weather conditions.** Years ago, the Ministry of Climate Crisis and Citizen Protection established a warning system that sends SMS alerts and facilitates rapid evacuations in case of fires or floods. This system is also accessible to foreign visitors through smartphones, although it may have disrupted many holidays this year. But even so, Greece remains a popular destination, with approximately 30 million tourists visiting the country yearly.

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