

Everyone was really enjoying Ios – the next day, the streets went silent

Hordes of teenagers come to blow off steam after the Leaving Cert, but Patrick O'Donoghue finds the mood on the Greek island has changed since two boys died

PHOTOGRAPHS BY GIORGOS VENTOURIS

When the former St Michael's College students Andrew O'Donnell and Max Wall made the 3,000km journey from Dublin to Ios in the Aegean Sea, they were not just embarking on a post-Leaving Cert Greek odyssey, they were also taking their first steps into adulthood. The keenly anticipated holiday for Irish teenagers after the tough two-year programme has become a rite of passage.

They plan extensively for the chance to kick back and relax after the exam stress. The deaths of the 18-year-old friends, in separate incidents, have cast a pall over the island. O'Donnell is believed to have fallen as he walked home in the dark along a rocky slope just outside the town of Hora; Wall, who had previous cardiac issues, was found collapsed while searching for his friend. The boys were part of a group of about 80 students from the private Spiritan college on Ailesbury Road, Dublin, and among up to 1,000 Irish teenagers on Ios on a post-Leaving Cert break.

described the deaths as a "wake-up call" that "changed everything" for their summer holiday and sparked safety concerns from their parents at home. Lara Devitt and Ciara Hardy, two 18-year-olds from south Dublin, said the news of the tragedy had affected their entire group of friends. "It was hard to take it all in. That night we went out and we just went for a very quiet dinner and sat and talked because it was hard to process," said Devitt, who wants to study musical theatre. "It changed everything," added Hardy, who is interested in studying law and

history at university. "The first day we were here, it was fine and everyone was really enjoying themselves, then the next day the streets were just completely silent, and a lot of us didn't leave our rooms. Some people were scared, some people were really upset."

Both attended Wall and O'Donnell's guard of honour to pay their respects as the teenagers' bodies were taken from the island and transferred to Athens last Tuesday. Devitt and Hardy said everyone in their friend group was even more cautious on nights out since the deaths, and they had separately heard rumours of drinks in clubs being spiked. They had joined a Life360 group, which allowed their friends to keep track of each others' locations at all times. "It's a strange place; it's good to have your wits about you. We were expecting a lot of celebration, and there are moments of that, and there is the relief of the Leaving Cert being over, but also there are so many new factors that we wouldn't have when going out in Ireland, to the point where you're wary. And then there's also the tragedy," Devitt said, comparing nights out in Dublin to Ios.

Hardy added: "There is a lot more drinking going on here because you can't really afford to at home. It's way cheaper. But then again I feel like it's watered down anyway, so people get very giddy rather than drunk. The roads are horrific. You've got buses beeping at you, speeding down the road."

They both said their parents had been keeping in contact more frequently since the news of the deaths broke.

Amelia Bolger and Lada Kuzmenko, also both 18 and from south Dublin, arrived on the island last Wednesday as part of a group of five. They had also heard rumours of girls' drinks being spiked in some nightclubs. Both said the reports, regardless of their veracity, were making them feel more nervous and less inclined to drink while out in bars. "It is kind of worrying hearing all the stories because we came late, so we've heard everything afterwards," Kuzmenko said.

Bolger added: "We've heard stories of people just collapsing in the bars and stuff. Losing your friends is a huge deal because there are so many people and you get separated so easily."

Bolger said the "mood was definitely really low" in the wake of the deaths. "People that have been here from the start were contemplating going home because it's such a tragedy and I think the whole island just kind of shut down for a while. We kind of felt a bit guilty going over to enjoy ourselves," Bolger said.

The roads connecting Hora, the capital of Ios, with Ormos, the island's port, and Mylopotas, a village near its most popular beach, are winding, narrow and treacherous, with broken glass bottles and crushed disposable vapes littering the arid landscape. Teenagers who head to bars and restaurants on foot, rather than pay for a taxi or bus, walk along the side of the mountainous roads just metres from the passing traffic.

“We've heard stories of people just collapsing in the bars. There are so many people that you get separated easily



St Michael's College pupils Andrew O'Donnell, top, and Max Wall died during the same weekend on Ios

Other teenagers hire quad bikes from the rental services down in the port, allowing them to zoom past the groups heading to meet friends on foot along the rocky terrain.

Marthos Rice, a 19-year-old from Greystones, Co Wicklow, who hopes to study engineering, shielded his eyes from a barrage of dust and sand being blown into his eyes by a strong wind as he walked down to the port to meet friends.

He described the news of the teenagers' deaths as a "bit of a wake-up call" for him and his friends. "My parents gave me the option of heading back early. I've been way more in contact with them and letting them know where I was," Rice said.

The heat on the island was "brutal" and nights out on the island were "very different" from in Dublin, he said, but added: "There is no rush to get home."

Rice said that he hired a quad bike with his friends and drove around the island. "I wouldn't say we were unsafe on the roads but it's definitely less safe than in Ireland."

Down at the port, hundreds of teenage arrivals, who have travelled from all over the world, are ferried in at intervals from neighbouring islands such as Santorini and ushered down the boat's gangway, each of them brimming with a sense of adventure, but also trepidation as they step out into a place far away from home and the comfort of the family unit, often for the first time in their young lives.

As some groups arrive laughing with friends and smiling excitedly in anticipation of the memories they are planning to make together and hope will last a lifetime, other groups sit in the port's main square waiting to leave the island. Some nurse hangovers and take naps on benches in cafés, sharing them with the port's stray cats.

One 17-year-old from Cabinteely in Dublin said that he would have preferred to travel somewhere closer to home, such as Magaluf in Majorca, for his Leaving Cert holiday.

"Since the news, you're just even more careful going home and stuff. They aren't really many paths up here. My dad texted me [after hearing the news], and he told me to be more careful. It can be very dodgy," he said.

Mike Maloney, an 18-year-old from Kildare who travelled to Ios in a large group, said that while he had not had any "negative" or "dodgy" experiences, it was important to be vigilant. Maloney said that he had stayed near his accommodation on nights out, which made getting home less risky.

"We did all the stereotypical things of just keeping in contact all the time and, if someone hadn't been seen for a while, we'd make sure to text them to see where they are," he said.

Maloney said that his mother had been shocked by the news of the deaths and contacted him more frequently to check in on him as a result. "She was sending me a text every night," he added.



Lada Kuzmenko, left, and Amelia Bolger, who arrived on Ios after the Irish teenagers' deaths, said the mood had been really low and they felt a bit guilty enjoying themselves. Above and far left, holidaymakers are still seen arriving in their hundreds on the island. Above right, those heading to restaurants and bars on foot have to navigate winding roads close to speeding traffic

behaviour of young people, which he believes is encouraged by some venues. "It's not supposed to be a party place. This idea that you do things without limits here, this is something very bad that must change. It is not very good for the locals here and also for the island," Kast said.

He would like to see tighter security and greater law enforcement to improve life on the island for local people and promote greater levels of safety. He added that he was "in shock" when he heard about the teenagers' deaths.

"They were young guys. I have a brother the same age. I don't want anyone to feel that pain. It was a shock for all the locals here," he said. "The islanders are very close, so news travels fast. I would like all the people here to protect young people and also for young people to be just a little more careful. I am living in Hora. I am facing drunk people and rubbish every morning. I wake up early and see the result every morning."

Another pair of teenage women from south Dublin, aged 18 and 19, who asked not to be named, said last Thursday that

instituted it was "family orientated" area, despite the rush to judgment that it might be an unsafe place to visit following the deaths.

"I've been coming here since 1987. Obviously, I've seen a lot of things. If anything happens, it's pure accident. The focus on this is such a double tragedy, and they're so young. Before it became big news, I was walking past the church and I saw one of my friends, a Greek girl, and she said, 'I'm upset, I'm worried.'"

"I asked why and she said because an Irish boy has gone missing. This was the tone everywhere. They are family people, they know it could happen to anybody," Brooke said.

Konstantinos Karapoulos, 28, is the manager of the hotel Olga's Pension but also used to work in the port at one of the quad bike rentals. He said too much cheap alcohol was sold on the island at late-night venues, and the overconcentration of teens in a handful of locations on the island made it more difficult to keep the nightlife under control.

"I don't like cheap drinks. Cheap drinks means more cheap drinks. This is your holiday, you are here for a good time. If you want to go out, go out, but don't get so drunk that you end up forgetting where you are. You lose the next day, you have a terrible headache. Be sensible," he said.

However, Karapoulos said parents should not be "afraid" of their sons and daughters holidaying in Ios.

"You should be concerned about your child wherever they are, it doesn't matter the place. If they drink too much, yes you should be concerned. If they do substances or anything, yes you should be concerned, but this is not just Ios, this is the whole world. Ios is not a dangerous place."

"In the dangerous thing is the amount of people. There are so many young people in one place. If they were more separate, it would be much better," he said.

Karapoulos said the local medical centre was not usually busy and very few of the injuries assessed at the centre were alcohol-related but typically the result of inexperienced driving by young people on the quad bikes. People driving quad bikes on the island are required to have a driving licence.

"They are mostly about small accidents on the road. We have lots of vehicles and because people are not used to driving these vehicles they have some accidents. The quads mostly. They are not serious accidents, usually scratches and this kind of thing. The accidents are not during the night, the accidents are in the daytime. Alcohol has nothing to do with it, it's the experience," he said.

However, Stamatis Kast, a 26-year-old ship engineer who works in the port of Ios, said the island needed to change its passive culture and introduce restrictions on the excessive



they were going home to their hotel and the shock of hearing about the deaths meant they had chosen to reduce their nights out partying until the early hours.

"When we were leaving, the biggest concern was waking up with a hangover or being dehydrated and then you hear this and it takes a bit of a toll," one said.

"They said they had been planning the holiday for after their Leaving Cert exams since last September."

"We have always stuck to our guy friends just for safety concerns. Luckily, we haven't had any bad experiences so far but I know there have been a lot. We've heard about spiking. We've kind of isolated ourselves a little bit from the nightlife. We haven't gone out as much since we've been here. It [the news] just made me not want to go out at all," the other added.

Max Wall will be laid to rest tomorrow in Kiltiernan Cemetery Park following a funeral at the Church of the Sacred Heart in Donnybrook at 11am.

Andrew O'Donnell's funeral will take place on Wednesday at 11am, also in the Church of the Sacred Heart, Donnybrook, followed by a private family cremation.

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