

# Earthquake in Santorini: The Island Shakes, the Economy Trembles

The 5.2-magnitude earthquake that struck Santorini in February 2025 shook the island, famous for its picturesque landscapes and mass tourism. Although there were no casualties, the event caused significant damage to the local economy. Travel cancellations, a drop in bookings, and widespread uncertainty about the 2025 tourist season have left Santorini in a precarious situation. The island must now recover and perhaps reconsider its economic model in the face of a crisis that goes beyond seismic tremors.

“I thought the island was going to collapse beneath my feet.” This alarmed cry from Dimitris, a waiter in a Fira restaurant, sums up the shock experienced by thousands of residents and tourists when the ground started to shake violently. The 5.2-magnitude earthquake that hit Santorini this February caused no deaths, but it was enough to destabilize one of Europe’s most iconic tourist destinations. Buildings trembled, streets emptied, ferries were stormed, and in just a few hours, the entire local economy teetered on the brink.

## A Tourism-Dependent Economy in Jeopardy

Santorini is not just a living postcard—it’s an economic engine. In 2023, the island welcomed over 3.4 million visitors, the vast majority arriving via cruises or connections from Athens. Tourism accounts for more than 90% of the local economy, according to the Greek Ministry of Tourism, generating around €820 million annually. Since the start of the seismic crisis, bookings have dropped by 23%, and air seat availability to the island has fallen by 9%, according to tourism analytics firm ForwardKeys.



Santorini's buildings shook under the impact of the earthquake

Both luxury hotels and family-run guesthouses are experiencing significant losses. Some establishments have even suspended operations for the season. “We’ve closed temporarily. With so much uncertainty, keeping our staff has become a luxury we can no longer afford,” says Giorgos Papadakis, manager of a small resort in Oia.

## Tourists Are Leaving the Island: The Road to Recovery Is Uncertain

The shock is all the more brutal for Santorini’s tourism industry, as the island typically draws millions of visitors every year, especially in high season when the bustling streets of Fira and Oia are crowded with travelers. However, since the February quake, cruise cancellations and a sharp decline in hotel occupancy tell a different story: the island is facing an unexpected exodus. Hotels both upscale and budget report cancellation rates of up to 40% for the coming months, and ferry companies are seeing near empty vessels. The absence of bookings for the summer season has plunged the local industry into growing uncertainty.

“Cancellations are pouring in from everywhere. It’s a massive blow for us,” says Stavros, owner of a hotel in Imerovigli, one of the island’s most popular districts. Local businesses from hotels

to restaurants are being forced to scale down and revise their forecasts for the summer. Several hotels have even postponed their planned openings for peak season.

The Greek government, aware of the tourism sector's vital role in the island's economy, reacted quickly. Emergency aid measures were introduced, including subsidies for local businesses and Europe-wide promotional campaigns aimed at reassuring potential travelers that the island remains safe and welcoming. But fear and uncertainty continue to outweigh these efforts. "We need to reassure our clients. It's not just about rebuilding it's about restoring the island's image. Santorini is a globally recognized symbol, and it must remain so," explains Ilias, director of a travel agency in Athens, highlighting the critical economic stakes involved in reviving tourism. Yet tourists' fears remain palpable.



Tourists and residents leaving Santorini

A study by the Santorini Hoteliers Association reveals that nearly 30% of potential visitors are considering postponing their trips to the island over the next two years, citing safety concerns due to seismic unpredictability. A Canadian tourist, interviewed before deciding to delay her trip, shares: "After what happened, I'd rather wait. I read that aftershocks could still occur, and the idea of taking a ferry or staying in damaged buildings makes me hesitant."

So, as Santorini strives to preserve its status as a must-visit destination, the island finds itself at a crucial crossroads: how can it restore travelers' confidence and ensure a prosperous future while minimizing the risk of further disruption?

### **An Economy to Rebuild, and a Model to Rethink**

Beyond the immediate crisis, the earthquake may mark a turning point for Santorini. The island, already under immense pressure from its tourism success, could seize the opportunity to rethink its economic model. The dependency on mass tourism, emphasized by several experts, may no longer be sustainable. "This crisis could be a chance to reassess our tourism strategy. Mass tourism may no longer be viable in the long term. We need a more sustainable model," says Nikos, a Santorini resident. Key infrastructure, such as main roads and the port of Fira, suffered considerable damage. Local authorities are already working on repairs, but reconstruction may take months, disrupting the movement of both tourists and residents. Massive investments will be required to restore the island and ensure the future safety of its infrastructure. "The damage



People rebuilding infrastructure

is significant, but this earthquake could also be an opportunity to redefine our tourism future," explains local architect Antonis Kyriakos, who is involved in the island's rebuilding efforts.

Local authorities and the Greek government are considering new safety regulations and increased infrastructure investments to mitigate future risks. Experts recommend a more balanced approach between economic development and the preservation of the environment and cultural heritage.

## **Rebuilding the Island, Rethinking Its Future**

Ultimately, the earthquake may give Santorini the chance to reevaluate its approach to sustainable tourism. The growing eco-tourism sector could allow the island to maintain its appeal while preserving its authenticity. Several local residents suggest steering the island toward a model that respects its natural and social limits. “We’ve faced a crisis, but it’s time to learn from it. It’s not just about rebuilding—it’s about reimagining the future of tourism here,” concludes Giorgos, stressing that a more responsible management of tourist flows will be essential for long-term sustainability.

Santorini, long seen as a symbol of luxury and mass tourism in Greece, now stands at a turning point. Hard hit by the earthquake, the island must balance the urgent need to restore its infrastructure with a longer-term reflection on its economic model. The Greek government and local stakeholders are preparing for potentially radical changes that could reshape the face of tourism on the island. The February quake, although a severe blow, might yet become a catalyst for a more resilient and sustainable future.

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