



THE WEEKENDER

Messinia

It's hard to believe this region of mainland Greece has remained unspoilt for so long, says Anastasia Bernhardt

This quiet corner of the southwest Peloponnese has resisted the onslaught of package tourism in Greece – and long may it last. The beaches are among the best in the Mediterranean, without being packed, and the old Venetian towns of Pylos and Methoni have retained their charm, without a strip of Brit-packed bars in sight. Thanks to fishing ports and the Kalamata olive, the region has a rich foodie culture and, as to be expected, there are both ancient and modern historical sites in abundance.

STAY It's hard to imagine that just four years ago the only accommodation on offer was a handful of bedsits and B&Bs. Now, there's the resplendent, eco-friendly Costa Navarino destination. It's split into the ultra luxurious Romanos and the Westin, which is more family focused but equally classy. Book a seaview room; most come with a personal infinity pool and the sound of waves breaking (plus heavenly



FROM TOP Marathou beach; Romanos lobby; Westin Royal Villa Methoni



mattress) is guaranteed to result in a good night's sleep. It's a big complex done very well, featuring everything you could desire – rock climbing, diving, tennis courts, gym, pools, spa, beach – without feeling busy, impersonal or, most crucially, crass.

VISIT If naval history's your thing, visit Neokastro. Despite meaning 'new castle', it's an old 16th-century Ottoman fort with bus-wide walls. Climb the crumbling buttresses (there's no health and safety here) to gaze out onto the waters of Navarino Bay, where, in 1827, a decisive battle would lead to Greece's victory in the Greek War of Independence. It was the last naval battle in the world to be fought with sailing ships, in case you were wondering. It's worth taking proper shoes as the timeworn stones don't mix with flip-flops. For a more light-hearted afternoon, take a towel down to Voidokilia beach. It's shaped like the letter omega with a semicircular strip of sand dunes. Sheltered, with oh-so-blue waters, it's considered to be one of the best beaches in the Med.

BUY Olive oil, obviously, but it's worth investing in good brands like Lia (liaoliveoil.com). And, of course, you'll want to take home the fruits of your labour (see do). Thankfully, the hotel has its own top-notch locally produced food range called Navarino Icons. The oil is delicious, but the olive spoon sweets are extra special, soaked in herby syrup and stuffed with almonds. If you run out of room in your suitcase, don't panic, the range is on sale in Harrods and M&S too.



Messinia has some of the best beaches in the Med

WHATEVER YOU DO...

Join a philosophy walk through the olive groves. The Ancient Greeks believed that the motion of walking aided thought process.

Take the plunge at the hotel's scuba diving centre. Greece has great diving visibility and you might even spot a caretta-caretta turtle.

Spend a long lunch nursing a large glass of white and the grilled octopus at Barbouni beach restaurant.

LIVE LIKE A LOCAL...

Put some elbow grease into making pasteli, a sesame and honey energy bar – the Ancient Greeks' answer to Red Bull.

Visit the two lovely old ladies, Anna and Loula, in nearby Pylos. They'll rustle up an authentic Messinian feast before dragging you to your feet to dance until late. Go at sunset for unbeatable views across the bay.

Don't smash plates, nobody does it anymore (unless they've had too much ouzo).

DO Greece produces the finest olive oil in the world, at least according to the Greeks. Messinia is thought to be one of the best growing regions thanks to high levels of polyphenols (the stuff that extends your life-expectancy), low acidity and for being hand-picked, which you can do yourself at Costa Navarino's olive groves. It's wonderfully therapeutic to spend an hour thwacking at the laden branches with a pitchfork. If you over exert yourself, pull up a chair in Pylos town square for a spot of people-watching over an iced coffee. Once recharged, grab a bike and skirt the coast till you reach Voidokilia beach.



BOOKIT: *The Westin Costa Navarino*, from €180 and *The Romanos Costa Navarino*, from €250; costanavarino.com. EasyJet flies from Gatwick to Kalamata from £21.99 per person; easyjet.com



Eleon Restaurant serves up fresh seafood fayre

EAT There's so much more to Greek food than feta and greasy gyros, with each region producing distinct specialties. The close proximity to the sea naturally means that the fish and seafood is superb, cooked simply with lashings of local olive oil. Swap the lunchtime salad for Trahanas Xinos, a delicious gloopy combination of tomato, cheese and bulgur wheat. Local sweet treats are syrupy and sticky. Try Diples, honey curls that are folded, deep-fried then drizzled with honey, cinnamon and crushed walnuts. It's traditionally served at weddings to symbolise that the couple will have a sweet life together, but is equally good with a powerful Greek coffee after dinner.