



The sunken treasures of Greece: From World War II wrecks to technicolour fish, some of the best sights in Messinia sit beneath the waves

- Diving trips from the tiny village of Pylos start at €60 per person
- Highlights include sunken World War II wrecks and tropical fish
- The Bay of Navarino has 89 wrecks in total, including ancient Spartan

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The wreck lay a few metres from the beach. Hidden away in a small rocky cove, the Greek merchantman sat, broken-backed, on the seabed where Italian bombs had deposited it more than 70 years before.

I'd been apprehensive, not liking the idea of scuba-diving with skeletons. 'No, no', Yannis, my deeply-tanned curly-haired guide had insisted.

'There's nothing more down there than nuts and bolts and the odd bit of rotted cargo.'

As I was about to discover, there was far more down there than that.



Spectacular: The bright blue waters of the Messinia coastline hide a spectacular underwater world

I had arrived a few days earlier, touching down at Messinia's Kalamata airport after a particularly grim 5am red-eye from Gatwick.

I'd stumbled out of the typically tiny airport to be confronted by a flat concrete car park blotted with bollards and a whiff of hot tar and thyme.

Back in Greece for the first time in years, I was headed for a place called Costa Navarino, a tiny clump of hotels perched on a round bay that had, over the years, been fought over by the Spartans, Persians, Turks, British and latterly, the Italians.

But while this might have been the stomping ground of Spartans Leonidas, Helen, latterly of Troy, and Menelaus, there was very little that was Spartan about it.

I was staying at the Westin, one two hotels at Costa Navarino, a pretty spot that sprawls across 346 acres of scrub and thyme dotted land that, along with a seashell-shaped beach, also includes a golf course and an on-site olive grove.

It's not cheap but neither are the rooms: mine boasted a large private pool, trails of shocking pink bougainvillea and a bedroom the size of the average London flat.



Wonderful: Travelmail explored one of the 89 wrecks littering the seabed in the Bay of Navarino



Luxe: The Westin Hotel at Costa Navarino proved the perfect base for an undersea adventure



Private: Each suite has a private pool and stunning sea views

Tempting though spending most of my time ensconced beside the pool was – and believe me, that's what most do – I had a date with a diving instructor to attend.

Greece, although much-loved as a sun-dappled family holiday destination, isn't known for its diving. In reality, there's plenty to see beneath the Grecian waves, whether shoals of tropical fish or the wrecked seabed remains of the many cultures and peoples who have passed through.

Navarino Bay, a scallop-shaped stretch of gleaming cobalt water freckled with azure patches of coral is no exception. The bay has been the site of several naval battles, the first in 426BC when an Athenian fleet destroyed a defending Spartan fleet in a bloody encounter.

More recently, a combined fleet of British, Russian and French ships joined forces to defeat a Turkish-Egyptian war group in the bay during the Greek War of Independence. Later, during the Second World War, Navarino Bay was the site of Italian attacks on Greek shipping – among them the ship I was about to see, 30ft below the waves of the bay.

One of 89 wrecks that litter the sea bed, the Greek merchantman was the victim of an Italian bombing strike, albeit a spectacularly cack-handed one.

Having managed to miss the ship on its first run and instead destroying a rocky outcrop, the rubble of which can still be seen, the bomber was forced to circle around – providing the Greek crew with ample time to jump ship.



Timeless: Away from the beach, the landscape looks much the same as it did during Spartan times



Wildlife: As well as wrecks and tropical fish, the clear waters are famous for sea turtles

The second run hit the target, breaking the ship's back and consigning it to a watery grave. The fishermen who risked their lives to save the sailors returned to Navarino Bay's main harbour of Pylos to a heroes' welcome.

Today, the men of Pylos, a picturesque little village set around a honey-stone square dotted with cafes, are largely employed in the tourist trade – including as dive masters. One such was Yannis, a genial six-footer with curly hair and a penchant for cigarettes who ferried us out into Navarino Bay. The ship we were heading for was tucked away in a quiet cove, a scalloped spot surrounded by asperous rocks blotched with lichen set above a small stretch of bright white sand.

It was from there that we headed into the sea – no backwards roll off the side of the boat here – and plunged into an underwater world of trailing seaweed and fish in every shade from delicate blush pink to bright nasturtium yellow.

Then the wreck itself hove into view, dappled with sunshine from above and rusting gently in its watery grave. Salt encrustations thickened its rails and bows, while brightly coloured fish dipped in and out of its portholes.

Broken-backed, it sat in two pieces with debris scattered around the seabed around it. A compass. A coil of rope. A mysterious collection of cans, burst open with their contents gone. All the essentials, in short, for life aboard ship.



Stunning: Navarino Bay is dotted with beaches, including the scallop-shaped Voidokilia Beach

Further out, the debris gave way to rocks and fish and as the land sloped away, to delicate shells and vast grassy stretches of seaweed.

Small clumps of coral littered the seabed, as did chunks of rock gouged by the sea from the sloping cliffs of the cove. A starfish. A purple conch. A school of transparent, tiny fish. It wasn't the vivid world of the Caribbean or the Red Sea but it was beautiful: a shimmering symphony of azure, palest pink and lemon yellow.

Back on the boat, we took a detour on the way back to Pylos to inspect a smattering of Spartan graffiti etched onto the pink rock of another small cove – a reminder, if ever there was one, of the long history of this spot.

Ancient villages and an even older landscape surround Costa Navarino, a harsh, barren and ultimately beautiful place pocked with olive groves that still looks very much as it would have to the Spartans.

Diving in Greece might not have the glamour of the Caribbean but for beauty, history and some of the best food in the world, it's hard to beat. And getting there takes less than four hours - even if you do have to brave early morning easyJet. Can't say fairer than that.

TRAVEL FACTS

easyJet flies from Gatwick to Kalamata up to twice a week, with prices starting from £21.99 per person (one-way, including taxes and based on two people on the same booking). All flights can be booked at www.easyjet.com

A night at The Westin Resort Costa Navarino starts from €200 per night. To book and for further information visit www.costanavarino.com.

Snorkelling costs 35€ per person and diving 60€ per person.

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