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Travel: A romantic Greek odyssey

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Costa Navarino resort consists of two beautifully designed, low-rise hotels, The Westin and The Romanos, offering a combined total of more than 700 beds.

Is there anything more oppressive than the atmosphere that descends between two people in a car when you are completely and utterly lost?

"I don't think this is right."

"Well I'm just going by what the map says."

"Yes, but the map is obviously wrong . . . or you read it wrong."

"You don't read a Google map, you follow it."

Silence.

"I'm not going to argue with Google Maps."

"No, you're just going to argue with me."

Silence.

A build up of internal rage.

A yearning to scream obscenities.

We were travelling across the Peloponnese region of mainland Greece and had somehow managed to run out of road. Literally. The tarmac ran out 7,887ft up in the Taygetus mountains, where we had not seen another car for at least an hour. As we crunched along a narrow, vertiginous dirt-track trying to ignore the noise, as the base of the car scraped off yet another rock, I realised it also marked the first bump in the road between myself and himself, for what had been, up until then, the perfect, romantic Greek odyssey.

With the nose of our car facing skyward, I ventured, "I think we should turn back."

"The only way of getting back down is to Thelma and Louise off the edge of this cliff."

I looked into the gorge below which was filled with a blanket of cotton wool clouds.

Shirley Valentine, yes . . . not Thelma and bloody Louise!

Prior to this little blip, our Greek holiday had been going swimmingly. Flying into Athens two days earlier, we had driven two hours west to Nafplio, the former capital of Greece, and apparently one of the most romantic cities. So hand-in-hand, we explored the old town and all its charm, with its narrow cobbled streets. We kissed on the steep stairways and tavernas shaded with beautiful big bunches of bougainvillea, all dominated by Palamidi Castle which sits on top of the cliff overlooking the city.

We checked into Pension Marianna, run by the friendly Zyotos brothers, Pedros and Panos, where on arrival we were offered homemade lemonade, wine and olives, all from their organic farm on the outskirts of town. Though we were tempted to stay in one of the romantic cave rooms, we opted for a room with a view, out over the sparkling Aegean Sea, with the ancient rooftops of the old town stretched out beneath us.

Eager to shake off the journey, we set off up the 999 steps to the top of Palamidi Castle, built by the Venetians in 1711, then cooled down with a swim at Arvanitia Beach, followed by sunset cocktails at the Café Del Mar-esque Blublanc beach bar. I had been wondering how different holidaying on the mainland would be to the islands, and so far it was just as magical. The Greeks are masters of hospitality, and our evenings were spent eating calamari and fresh fish by the water's edge in small, friendly tavernas.

From Nafplio, we motored down the coast, passing remote village after village, toward the hidden island town of Monemvasia. Cut off from the mainland by a giant earthquake in 375AD, Monemvasia is now essentially a Gibraltar-like rocky outcrop connected to the mainland by a short causeway. The island is about 300m wide and a kilometre long, and rises to a plateau 100 metres above sea level. On the seaward side of this plateau, lies the small town hidden from the world. There are no cars allowed so you enter the old fort by foot and step back in time. It feels like a living museum of Byzantine, Ottoman and Venetian history. A lot of these ancient buildings have been lovingly restored into small hotels and restaurants to cater for the ever-growing tourist market, which began to bring this place back to life in the 1970s.

à la Shirley Valentine, we said "Goodbye rock!" and were on the road again heading west to our final destination of the beautiful Costa Navarino. Instead of the main road and motorways, we opted for the scenic route up and over the winding, dizzying roads, through the Taygetus mountains. Thankfully, opting out of a Thelma and Louise Greek bailout, an agonising 20 minutes later, a tarmac road surface appeared in the hazy distance and calm was restored.

The Greek county council in this neck of the woods had obviously decided it was too hot or too high up for any imbecile tourist to find themselves here and that there was no need to finish the 3k stretch of road, 7887 ft above sea level. I do not know how many Greek gods there are, but at this height, I was sure one of them had heard us bickering and resolved to set us straight. We travelled through Sparta and the ancient settlement of Mistras, into the province of Messinia, and on to the beautiful Costa Navarino.

Having casually slobbered along from village to village, staying in small family-run pensions and hotels, arriving into the grand, white-marble foyer of the stunning Romanos Hotel felt like we had stepped into a different world. In all my time travelling to Greece, I had never experienced such an overwhelming sense of luxury.

Regretting arriving in my bikini and see-through kaftan with no shoes, himself in a sun-cream-stained T-shirt, we gingerly made our way to the check-in desk. We were greeted with warm smiles, a delicious fruit cocktail, and I breathed a sigh of relief as people sauntered past half-naked (albeit in Dolce & Gabbana onesies) on their way to one of the three luxury pools.

Relaxed luxury is what this place is all about. The Costa Navarino Resort consists of two beautifully designed, low-rise, five-star hotels, The Westin and The Romanos, offering a combined total of more than 700 rooms, suites and villas with their own infinity pools, including the Royal Villa which can be yours for a measly €27,000 per night. It also features two 18-hole golf courses, 20 dining facilities, and the mind-blowing 4,000m/sq Anazoe Spa. All of this only metres from the seemingly endless golden sands of the Dunes Beach.

The Westin is definitely geared more toward families, with an Aqua Park, bowling alley, cinema, and American diner.

The word resort usually sends shivers down my spine but here the design of the whole property means you don't ever really see the size of it. You can't see it driving in and you can't see it from the beach. There are 1,300 staff employed, many from the local area, and it was a local-boy-done-good who had a dream and created what is now reality. Let's face it, Greece could do with a good-news story, so here goes.

In 1948, 13-year-old Vassilis Konstantakopoulos had to leave his village in the West Peloponnese in search of work in Athens. At 18, he talked himself on to a ship and spent six unpaid months at sea. Twenty years later he bought his first ship and Costamare Shipping Company was born.

Today it is one of the largest shipping companies in the world. The captain, now a billionaire, went back to his homeland to put Messinia on the global tourist map and breathe life back into the area. With his passion for sustainable eco tourism, he wanted people to be a part of the Costa Navarino story.

It is as good a five-star as I've experienced anywhere in the world, and, truth be known, I was not expecting that. The service is second to none, from Oliver at the Romanos pool bar to Panos who brings a lot of flair to your Italian experience at El Pero. You never have to leave the confines of the resort, but the hotel philosophy, unlike many others, is that they actually want you to get out and explore.

The famous Voidokilia beach, voted one of the best in the world, is only minutes away. Another 15 minutes down the coast, at the beautiful little harbour village of Pylos, you can rent a boat and explore the countless coves not accessible by land; definitely a highlight for me.

You can go olive-harvesting, or take a traditional cooking class. Or, if you're feeling slightly more adventurous, mountain-bike the rugged terrain or explore the old shipwrecks with one of the resort's many qualified scuba instructors.

On our last day, we treated ourselves to a Melisseus honey massage at the breathtaking Anazoe Spa, followed by lunch at Flame restaurant and a 45-minute transfer to Kalamata Airport; it was the perfect end to our Costa Navarino story. It was a pleasure to be part of it.

Oh, and just for the record, I did read the map wrong, not that himself ever needs to know.

Getting there

Costa Navarino: Rates at the two hotels at Navarino Dunes, start from: The Westin Resort Costa Navarino, from €200, and The Romanos, a Luxury Collection Resort, from €310. To book and for further information visit: www.costanavarino.com Aegean Airlines offers daily flights from London Heathrow and London Gatwick to Athens. For more information please visit: www.aegeanair.com Hotel Marianna, Nafplio: www.pensionmarianna.gr For the best car rental rates with Hertz, log on to www.hertz.ie

Take three

Stuffed vine leaves

Greek salads are a favourite because you are reminded what fresh tomatoes, cucumber, red onion and green peppers should taste like. But for fear of getting bored, try dolmades, stuffed vine leaves which are unbelievable, or Messinian kagianas, an insanely tasty salted-pork dish, or traditional tourlou made with aubergine, crushed tomato, white wine and garlic. The Romanos Hotel will organise a traditional cooking evening.

Epidaurus Theatre

A must-see is the The Great Theatre of Epidaurus, one of the most beautiful and well-preserved theatres in all of Greece. It dates back to 340BC and the ancient theatre has a capacity to seat 14,000 people. Concerts and performances are still held there today. The acoustics are so good, no matter how far back in the gods you are seated, you can hear a match lit on centre stage. Those same acoustics still astound experts today.

Life's a beach

If you still fancy a taste of island life while travelling across the Peloponnese, head to the (not so pretty) town of Neapolis and catch the ferry across to the tiny island of Elafonisos. It's 19 sq km with the most stunning sandy beaches, Simos being the best. Loll around in the crystal aquamarine waters. Only a couple of hundred people live on the island but it's well capable of catering for the many tourists who drop by.

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