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Why you should holiday in Greece: Costa Navarino [Family travel review]

We took a trip to the awesome bay of Costa Navarino on the west coast and discovered why Greece is such a wonderful destination for families this summer



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Beautiful Costa Navarino

Costa Navarino is a wonderfully beautiful place, rich in colourful history centuries old and largely untouched. Deep in Messinia, southwest Peloponnese, Greece, it has been preserved thanks to a distinct lack of tourist development. But there is much here for the intrepid family to discover, as well as those seeking an idyllic place to relax and rejuvenate. The first phase of the Costa Navarino development, **Navarino Dunes- including a Westin** and a **Romanos** hotel, has been lovingly created to provide a luxurious base from which to learn about local culture, explore the intriguing region and enjoy the incredible natural scenery.



The beach at the Westin and Romanos resorts



Voidokilios beach



Our view from our balcony at the Romanos



Our room at the Romanos resort

Turning Costa Navarino into a 'destination' was the clever brainchild of famed local man, Vassilis Constantakopoulos, who, after making his fortune in shipping, returned to his homeland with a vision - to create a sustainable and eco friendly place for people to enjoy the best of his locale, along with somewhere that would provide job opportunities for local people. He succeeded way beyond his dreams, purchasing land of which only 7% is as yet developed with hotel accommodation, and will only ever be 20% at the most, meaning the creation of a haven for local flora and fauna - as well as a luxury hotel and leisure resort. Also, 70% of the staff here are local people, giving a real sense of community and expertise to guests, as well as meaning that generations of families do not have to leave their homeland in search of work.

Nearby, the bay of Navarino shimmers and glistens, Voidokilios beach (a perfect horseshoe) is regularly voted as one of the top ten beaches in the world, and the quaint fishing village of Pylos is, as yet, still untouched by tourist traps. The *Westin* and the *Romanos at Navarino Dunes* (itself a 20-minute drive from Pylos) are both luxury hotels, which welcome, and provide for, families. The word 'eco' here means sustainable and thoughtful design. The rooms and suites interspersed with restaurants, swimming pools and the Anazoe Spa, mean a widespread playground to cover. Golf buggies are abundant and you can order one from wherever you are or catch one enroute, for easy navigation of the resort (and ideal for tired legs - of any age).

There are 12 (yes, 12!) categories of room at the *Romanos*, which can be filtered by price, size or number of people - extra beds can also be set up for families. There are 321 rooms in total, and all are sophisticated, modern and spacious. Almost all of the ground floor rooms have their own private infinity pool, some have beach or pool views and others overlook the golf course, but all are sweet-dream inducing. And if you are feeling especially flush, you might be interested in some of the villa residences by the sea...



The Sandcastle kids' club



The Sandcastle kids' club



The amazing waterpark!

The best kind of family holidays, in our opinion, are those where the lines between 'activities' for various ages are pleasantly blurred. Travelling with your family should surely mean spending quality time together: not just leaving the children in a bland kids club. Costa Navarino, Greece, is the direct opposite of 'bland', instead bursting with the possibility of adventure. The two hotels within the resort offers the best of both worlds; beautiful grounds, luxurious facilities, family activities and a world class kids club with facilities that even adults will be envious of.

The Sandcastle kids club and waterpark

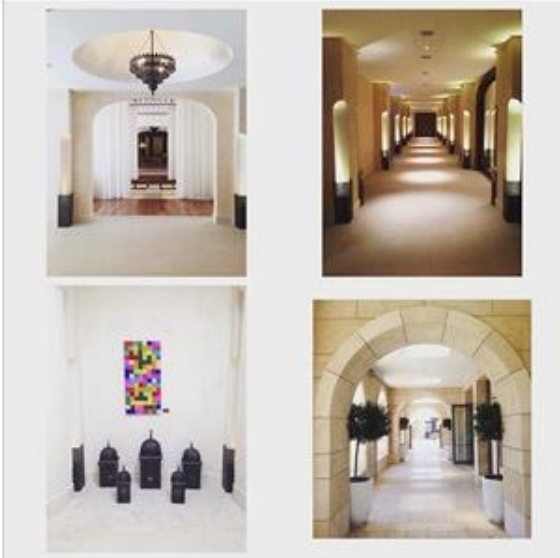
Upon our visit to the kids' club at *Navarino Dunes* we were taken aback at the breadth of activities available and the ingenuity of what was on offer. As well as the fairly standard indoor heated pool and play area, the 'Sandcastle' building looks and feels unique straight away. It is a stand alone building, built for purpose. Mini racecars and in-floor giant chime keyboards wait patiently to be played with. The playroom itself has chalky scrawl all over the walls, adding to it's charm. A bank of chairs with table has face paints and crayons in bowls. A row of mirrors can be mechanically lowered for the children to look into for face painting - yes, it is as cool as it sounds.

The piece de resistance must be the double level 'hotel', where children can check in for an overnight sleepover. For an additional fee, single bed and bunkbed rooms are offered for kids to enjoy a night away from mum and dad, with fully trained staff on hand, of course. Then, the waterpark outside only adds to the excitement. The water toys and installations are brightly-coloured and look like something from a cartoon. We love the merry go round swingset for toddlers

The amazing waterpark!



The Sandcastle kids' club



The Anazoe Spa



Sail around the bay of Costa Navarino and visit the castle at Pylos

We love the merry go round swingset for toddlers which will dangle their legs in the water as they swing round. There is also three large flume slides for the older kids - including adults. The waterpark is free for guests to use, and half/full days at the Sandcastle can be booked via the concierge for an extra cost.

Family-friendly activities

When you've exhausted the Waterpark, (if that's possible), the next door *Natura Hall* is a must-visit. Unique to any hotel we have ever stayed in, it is an interactive modern museum. Filled with touchscreen videos that inform in a fun and visual way about local wildlife and conservation. Our favourite was the sea turtle room. Relevant since the turtles do visit the dunes to lay eggs. The hotel was even designed to accommodate this with shrubbery planted to shield the turtles from the beachfront suites. In the same vein, oxygenating pools of water are placed all over the property and every olive tree that was removed to allow building was kept and replanted on the new hotel grounds. It is this kind of thinking that makes *Navarino Dunes* feel lived in and cared for, even though it is relatively new.

If you are looking for activities to get the family's adrenalin pumping, there is a dive school, tennis and paddle board club, (with separate mini tennis court for kids) and a bike centre with everything from mountain bikes with attachable kids seats, to regulars children's bikes and balance bikes. Also, they offer the latest craze - electronic trikes, which are kind of like segues but upon which I would say you feel much more stable. The staff can take groups on tours on any of these around the area, or supply you with cycle routes to local beauty spots.

What else is there to do?

- You must visit the onsite [Anazoe Spa](#). This rates as one of the most beautiful spas we have

the castle at Pylos



A selection of greek delicacies at Navarino Dunes



Barbouni restaurant, Navarino Dunes

rates as one of the most beautiful spas we have been to - as well as the one you are most likely to get lost in. It is a veritable maze of sweet-smelling corridors, draped with billowing white cotton curtains, copper lanterns and warm lighting. As well as multiple treatment rooms, there is a relaxation room, a bar area, a herb garden, hydro pools and heat experience rooms. So, in a nutshell - the ideal place to lose yourself in (away from the kids...) for a few hours. I had an Olive oil and barbary fig scrub and moisturising massage treatment, which was calming, sensual and relaxing. It also left my skin baby soft, and provided the perfect base for a great tan.

- Golf is also a big attraction for guests to the resort, with multiple courses and regular tournaments held, cementing its increasingly stellar reputation as a top class golf destination.

- Book a yacht trip, via the hotel concierge, to sail you around the bay of Navarino for a half day, which will take around two hours and includes a stop off for swimming. You can also choose to be shown some of the local monuments and learn more about their history, along the way. The coastal scenery is vibrant and some of the rock formations are awesome. It is one of the largest natural harbours in the world and since it is still 'undiscovered' by major tourist markets, it is often pretty empty. On the day we sailed, we had the whole bay to ourselves, which made it feel pretty exclusive.

What is there to eat?

Delicious, traditional Greek food - and lots of it! There are plenty of restaurants to choose from, most of which serve Greek delicacies, including Tzatziki, Greek salad, souvlaki, fried fish, baklava and moussaka. There is also an Italian restaurant, Da Luigi, and a Japanese restaurant, Inbi, which is an offshoot of the renowned eatery in Athens. All restaurants welcome children.



The beautiful pools never feel too busy



Learning how to cook Greek style



Learning from the professionals!

Souvlaki cafe does what it says on the tin and provides a light lunch and snacks that will suit all tastebuds, even the not so adventurous. Next door is Kayak, the ice cream and frozen yoghurt parlour, which is seriously addictive - we recommend the Ferrero Rocher ice cream. Flame is a grill restaurant, onsite at the golf club house. Here, you can expect piles of quality chargrilled meat, served up with far reaching views of the Peloponnesse mountains. Babouni is the icing on the culinary cake. Located on the beach, the draped curtain ceiling dance in the wind, providing a picture perfect setting that lends itself to a very long lunch. Most of the restaurants offer a la carte dining options or mezze dishes served on platters - a brilliant way to introduce children to local flavours, most of which are fairly plain, yet delicious.

Junior credentials

The pool areas are exquisitely designed, with swim up bars, intricate layouts and separate (just as luxurious) toddler pools. And the beach is long, sandy and perfectly ready for play time. But, as well as providing luxurious communal areas for guests, and the aforementioned activities that will get you out and about the local area, *Navarino Dunes* also offers it's guests a programme of immersive lessons and experiences. We tried these:

* Olive oil tasting class

Learn more about the area's largest export and taste the difference for yourself. 90% of the olive oil exported from Messinia is extra virgin olive oil - that's far more than anywhere in Italy. You can buy the natural products in shops in the central marketplace on site. The range is called *Navarino Icons* and includes the locally produced olive oil, wine, bottled tomatoes and eggplant and sesame seed biscuits.

* Cooking class

One of the highlights of our trip, the cooking



Sailing around the bay of Navarino



Cute kids' fashion in the shop at the Agora, Navarino Dunes resort



One of the highlights of our trip - the cookery class with two local homecooks is fun for all ages, and is a great chance to immerse yourself in local culture. The hotel has renovated a local house, which arguably has the best view of the bay - especially at sunset, to include a large kitchen and dining area. Cooks Lula and Anna walk you through the steps and ingredients to create local dishes. We made pasta by rolling, trimming and cooking it, a vegetable dish and milk pie for pudding. After eating as a group, Anna turned on the Greek music and we danced off all that food on the front porch.

* Philosophy walk

Greek people know how to have a good debate, no question. The ancient art of philosophy is brought to Navarino in the form of a sunset class which takes place underneath an old olive tree in the grounds. We joined a group, of all ages, to discuss platonic love and the philosophy around it. Engaging for the mind, but even if you don't understand most of it, you are almost guaranteed to come away feeling peaceful and hopefully intrigued. A change of pace from the usual sightseeing options, at least.

* Shopping

There is a curated selection of shops onsite at the Agora (the central marketplace), including a *Saludos* shoe shop, a pharmacy and a kids fashion and toy shop, which sells a huge range of Junior's favourite brands (*Mini Rodini*, *Sunuva*, *Madpax bags*, *Saltwater sandals*) alongside some cool brands that were new to us.

Essential info

From the UK, you can fly to Athens or Kalamata. You can organise a road transfer via the hotel with either of these flight options.



Greek food is delicious - and Navarino Dunes makes the most of local ingredients

Staying at the Westin Resort Costa Navarino costs from €200 per person per night, and The Romanos, a Luxury Collection Resort costs from €310 per person per night. 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 visit www.aegeanair.com.

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For further information on Anazoe Spa and the signature treatments available please visit www.anazoespa.com

Extra activities:

- Cookery course, 60€
- Philosophy walk, 30€
- Half day boating tour - half day tour with Navarino Sea Yachting at the Bay of Navarino with Motor Yacht 800€/per route or with Sailing boat 750€/per route. Max capacity 10 people
- Olive oil tasting, 25€
- Anazoe Spa signature treatments 50min, 115€
- Navarino Icons food and drink products are available to buy in Harrods and Marks & Spencer in the UK. For further information visit www.navarinoicons.com
- For further information on Anazoe Spa and the signature treatments available please visit www.anazoespa.com

Will the Greek economic crisis effect your holiday? In a word, no.

The Embassy of Greece in London has issued a statement to reassure holidaymakers heading to the beaches and resorts.

“The Greek government informs those visiting or about to visit Greece, that the announced measures restricting the movement of capital do not affect in any way those who wish to make transactions or ATM withdrawals using debit or credit cards issued abroad.

“It should be also noted that there is ample availability of both fuel and all products and services that ensure a smooth and fun stay for the visitors in every city, region and the islands.

“Greece continues to guarantee a high level of quality of services offered to visitors who have made our country a top tourist destination worldwide.

“The minister of tourism, Elena Kountoura, reiterates that Greek tourism remains high in the preferences of our visitors. The tourists who are already here, and those who are planning to come, will not be affected in any way by the events and will continue to enjoy their holiday in Greece with absolutely no problem.”

The official advice from the Foreign Office is simply: “Make sure you have enough euros in cash to cover emergencies, unforeseen circumstances and any unexpected delays.” The Foreign Office also advises that you should have more than one means of payment with you, so take your debit card and credit card as well.

A spokesman for the UK Cards Association commented that Greek establishments may prefer that you pay in cash. “You may find that smaller retailers, such as restaurants, may prefer cash payments to improve their current cash flow”.