

THE  TIMES

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03.02.18

The **TRAVEL** SPECIAL

Giles Coren revisits
his childhood hols

The wildest hotels
in the world

GILLIAN ANDERSON
THE ACTRESS WHO NEVER
PLAYS IT SAFE

'I could be in a relationship
with a woman next year'

**TRAVEL
SPECIAL**

SUN, SEA, FAGS AND WINE

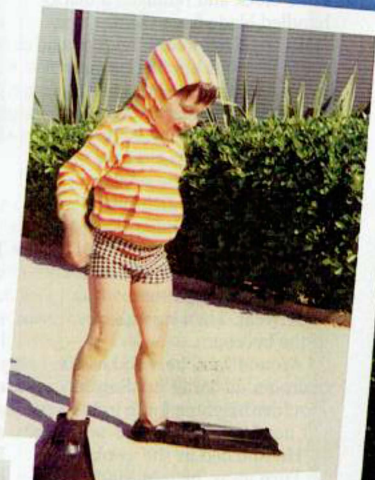
How to holiday like it's 1974



1987

Hanging out all day by the pool, whisky sours and rosé for the adults, chips and cheap orange juice for the kids – those annual fortnights on the Med were a highlight of my childhood, says **Giles Coren**. So what happened when he went back with his own children?

PORTRAITS Jude Edginton



1974



Giles Coren with his daughter, Kitty, 6, and son, Sam, 4, at the Costa Navarino in Greece, 2017. Opposite: Giles with his sister, Victoria, and father, Alan, in Aix-en-Provence in 1987, and three snapshots of him from a 1974 trip to Ibiza



There are many things that we inherit from our parents. Money is the most useful of these, of course, but there may not be much of that and some dodgy probate lawyer or tarty little second wife is sure to diddle you out of most of it. And what you do receive, you have to give nearly half of to the government. But other things you get to keep. Such as your bent nose, your flat feet, the hair on your back, your irritating laugh, your massive bum. Nobody comes round from HMRC after your parents have died and says, "We're having 40 per cent of those back from you." Sadly.

And then there are the more cerebral things. The things you can't see in the mirror or hear on a tape recording. I, for example, inherited both my father's competitiveness and my mother's laziness. So I really want to win at everything, but can't be bothered to make the effort. On the plus side, I inherited my dad's ability to make money from words as well as my mum's ability to make money from money. So I am okay for money. Then again, I inherited both my mum's distracted, inattentive driving and my dad's much too fast driving. So the money mostly goes on car insurance.

In the end, everything comes from your parents. Sir James Dyson thinks we even inherit our preference for an upright or cylinder vacuum cleaner from them. And he's got a net worth of £8 billion that says he's right.

So you had better believe me when I say that we inherit from our parents a preference for a certain sort of holiday. If your folks took you skiing as a kid, then you probably ski. If you sailed with your parents, then you sail with your own children now. If the thing your parents liked to do was to camp in the high Andes, hike across the Yukon, kitesurf off Cape Trafalgar, self-cater on a gorgeous little farm in Umbria, play golf in the Algarve, safari in Botswana, visit temples in Thailand or wadi-bash in Oman, then that is unquestionably what you do now. Or some variation of it.

You'll be one of those people who say, "Oh, I can't just sit on a beach all day. I'd go mad. I have to be *doing* something when I'm on holiday."

Well, my parents felt the same. They had to be doing something too. They had to be lying by a pool, with a whisky sour and an ash tray on a little plastic table, smoking a fag and reading the new Maeve Binchy. Or, at a push, the Jeffrey Archer.

Then lunch. Plenty of rosé. Then back to the pool. More fags. More Maeve Binchy. Little sleep. Dip in the pool. Gin and tonic. Dinner. Bed. Repeat for a fortnight and then home.

And so that is what I have always done, too. Bar the fags, which I knocked off nearly 20 years ago, and Maeve Binchy, whom

TO MY SISTER AND ME, THESE HOTELS WERE THE MOST EXCITING PLACES IN THE WHOLE WIDE WORLD

I never quite got the hang of. More likely Robert Harris or Sebastian Barry or whatever is left on my Kindle from last year. But the sunbathing all day with occasional swims, plus alcohol deployed as a protection against sunburn in the classic 1970s manner because suntan lotion is greasy and boring, that's my ideal summer holiday every time.

And my wife feels the same way, fortunately. As a child she never went on holiday at all, except for a week to the farm her mother grew up on in darkest Wales. And that isn't there now. So to her, simply getting on a plane is the most glamorous thing in the world. And



then to find sun and a swimming pool and booze and someone else doing the cooking, well, who but a crazy man would call that boring?

And anyway our kids are small. Six and four. You'd have to be mental to try *doing* anything with them. Mental, or one of those superposh, eccentric families who just don't give a damn and go paddleboarding round the Grenadines with their six children, aged between two and fourteen, and literally don't even notice if a couple of them aren't on the plane home because they drowned a week ago, somewhere near Tobago.

So, for the moment, all I try to do when the summer comes around is to recreate what we did when I was a kid. And what we used to do, always, was fly economy to a nice hotel in Portugal or Ibiza or Corfu or the south of France, get two adjoining rooms and then get down to the pool.

That's "nice" in a 1970s sense. I'm talking high-rise, on a road, view of the beach and the other hotels being hastily built along it. The rooms were pretty basic boxes with balconies. View of the big rectangular pool and the sea. Narrow twin beds, telly with two foreign channels. Small bathroom, shower but no tub. I have no idea what the food was like. It was the 1970s. It was presumably bright orange and tasted of tin.

Breakfast came up to the room as long as you remembered to fill in the little door-hung menu the night before (so much fun!) and involved hot chocolate and exotic curly pastries called "croissants". You could have cornflakes but the milk was sterilised and tasted of soap. There was orange juice, made from concentrate and tasting like Kia-Ora (so delicious). And, if you were lucky, pain au chocolat. And you could have it in your pyjamas! On the balcony! And nobody shouted at you for getting it all over your face and pyjamas because they were in their own room, on their own balcony, smoking fags and reading Maeve Binchy, so they didn't know! To my sister and me, these hotels were the most exciting places in the whole wide world.

And then down to the pool in my red and blue swimming trunks with my cloth "50m" badge stitched on and my "100m" badge and my "Bronze survival" badge. And on top, my "Mighty Dyno" T-shirt, because I loved superheroes but in those days you couldn't get T-shirts with Marvel or DC heroes on them except at special shops. My mum bought my clothes at Marks & Sparks, so they featured only superheroes who had been invented by the St Michael brand, such as the Mighty Dyno. Or possibly he was from C&A.

The huge, roiling hotel pool was the centre of everything: the Coren swimming races, the funny-jumping-in competitions, the eating of Super-Maxi choc ices on sticks, the trying to read Donald Duck comics in Portuguese (my

The Corens in Greece in September. Opposite, from top: Victoria and Giles in Ibiza, 1974



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dad pretended he could speak Portuguese – and every other language – and would “translate” the stories for us until he got into a terrible mess and nothing he was saying matched any of the pictures), the eating of chips, the diving for coins, the being too scared to talk to other children so just sitting there taking the mickey out of how they talked ... It was the only place we ever wanted to be.

All of this despite the fact that every morning carried with it the horror of my dad’s “dive” into the pool. The scariest dive in Europe. The most embarrassing thing on Earth.

The other guests – supine in rows around the pool like bodies laid out in a makeshift morgue after some terrible natural disaster, Wilbur Smith novels shading their faces, plumes of fag smoke arcing up out of ashtrays – had no idea what was about to happen.

But we knew. My sister and I. We watched him, crouching like an Olympic swimmer in his brown Speedos for a racing dive, then not fancying it, pacing once around the pool again, then back to his spot. Always a bit of a challenge, just going in, fearing the cold, being not used to choosing discomfort, even briefly. And always the chance of drowning because he wasn’t really much of a swimmer. The child of not

especially bothered Jewish parents in 1930s Barnet who took their holidays at the family-run kosher hotel in Bournemouth, my father had never properly learnt how. For kids like my father, school was a place to strive in and get up and out of, and they didn’t teach you to swim anyway. And Saturday was for *shul* and Sunday was for *cheder*. Not swimming lessons at the Holiday Inn Swiss Cottage like us, his kids, who swam like fish and dived like dolphins.

The old man crouches again, swings his arms, with their dusting of ginger hair, forward and back two or three times like an orangutan. A huge intake of air which makes a handful of the supine readers look up, and then a leap forwards, hands outstretched, fully horizontal, but knees bent at right angles and soles pointing to the sky, looming out across the pool, further, further, but at no point turning downwards, no arc, and then, like Wile E Coyote realising he has run off a cliff, he simply falls onto the water with an almighty KABOOM! As if he has been dropped from a plane.

It is an explosion of man on water that scares birds from trees and brings cars to a stop, a splash that engulfs several rows of sunbathers. Roars of rage and disappointment from the soaked citizens, gales of laughter from

those not actually consumed by the tsunami, and cringing embarrassment from his children.

And then he’d surface, like a corpse, and begin his inimitable progress across the pool to the other side, involving a lopsided breaststroke kick with a front crawl arm motion that caused him to judder erratically across the pool, face buried in the water, lacking the technique to turn sideways and breathe, reaching for the side from the very first stroke, eventually stopping the motion and floating very, very slowly to the edge. Then stand up and blow his nose hard in his hand, then sink again and float back towards the middle of the pool on his back, triumphantly, staring at the sky, like Michael Phelps after another 100m butterfly gold. Then out of the pool, a fag, maybe a gin and tonic, a little *shluf*.

Unless I could persuade him to stay in the water and let me dive off his shoulders. That was the best thing in my world. He’d sink under the water and then I’d get my feet on his shoulders, either side of the thick, bull-like neck that I have now inherited, and feel the slippery surface of his muscular back on the soles of my feet, slick with Ambre Solaire, on which they’d struggle to get a purchase. And at the same time I’d put my little hands in his much bigger ones, also slippery with sun oil (yes, oil), and then he, feeling that I was secure, would stand slowly and rise out of the hotel pool like the kraken or the sword Excalibur, reddish-brown and freckled, bald on top with a collar-length trim of dark hair hanging down his neck, slowly achieving a fully vertical, firmly set position, like a weightlifter in the second phase of the clean and jerk.

And when he was steady, it was time for me to dive. A small knee flex and a take-off, not giving it much because I didn’t want to scratch him with my toenails or kick him in the nose (again). Trying to get a bit of height to jack-knife for vertical entry (because he paid plenty for my swimming and diving lessons and I wanted to give value). A little splash, and I’d come up to see how I’d done.

My mum, in her red bikini, hair gone bubble-curly from the effects of swimming on a 1970s perm, would look up from the packet of Rothmans in which she was rummaging for one last snout before lunch and crack a huge smile and give us a round of applause. And my sister, red-nosed, gap-toothed, hair in bunches, orange armbands round her tiny biceps, white as a seal pup with the inch-thick coat of Uvistat my mum had applied, like a farmer greasing a pig for the county fair, would follow suit briefly and then go back to her colouring in.

And then chips for lunch, choc ices for pud and then up to the room for “quiet time”, which meant those Portuguese comics again, poker dice, maybe listening to *Little Grey Rabbit* on tape, while my parents slept. ➔

Hang on. I say "slept". But I'm wondering for the first time if maybe what they were doing was having sex. After all, I am a parent now myself, with children of my own, we go on holiday all the time and my wife and I ... Ah, yes, no, they definitely weren't having sex.

As we got older, our parents tried to find more for us to do. We went to Club Med a couple of times and we'd all have a tennis lesson on the first day and get terribly sunburnt, and then the next day my dad would try to sail a dinghy and bang his head on the boom and have to have stitches and my sister would form a lifelong hatred of some girl at the kids' club and swear never to leave her room again if anyone suggested going there. And so there we'd all be, on the third morning, stretched out by the pool, eating choc ices, smoking fags, reading Portuguese comics and Maeve Binchy.

Which is exactly what I knew would happen when Esther and Kitty and Sam and I went to Costa Navarino in the Peloponnese, Greece, last summer in search (well, I was) of the holidays of my youth.

I had looked at Club Med, as it happens, but times have changed and I have grown more demanding. The life I lead in London is more luxurious and better fed than it was in my youth. That's true of most urban,

middle-class people. The food is better now in shops and restaurants. Entertainment is better. Sport is more widely accessible. Homes are better decorated. Life does not automatically improve with a flight to the sun as it once did. And Club Med looked a little bit ... second-rate. As did almost all the hotels I looked at. Some sticky boxroom with non-opening windows and office furniture, limited breakfast buffet, naff old restaurant serving badly rendered international dishes plus a "local" night when some old rapist comes and plays flamenco guitar while you eat fish with the heads still on wasn't going to cut it.

Costa Navarino looked to be of another order altogether. There was a superposh high-spec hotel and resort called the Romanos for ponces like me, with amazing rooms and mega-swish breakfast spaces and grovelling flunkies and huge marble hallways with billowing curtains and fountains, and then a slightly more prosaic one, the Westin, to which Romanos guests also had access, which was lower spec, less shine, but with a more relaxed vibe for the kids and access to a water park.

There was a plethora of breathtaking activities to be ignored by a whole new generation of Corens: tennis, sailing, wind and


kitesurfing, scuba diving, golf, wakeboarding, cooking, go-karting, plus a kids' club ...

And then, when we got there, it was ... not remotely disappointing. Which allowed it to kick the arse of 90 per cent of hotels right there. Rather than struggle to make their very ordinary complex look dazzling on the internet, these guys had failed to make it look even half as awesome as it was.

We had lovely big connecting bedrooms, which is the key to a happy life (rooms too far apart and you worry, but share one big room and nobody gets any sleep), with balconies that looked out over a landscape as beautiful and pristine as Teletubbyland. Which is to say, a golf course. But you can't escape golf courses.

I'm not going to go too much into the details of the hotel because nothing is more boring than reading about someone else's holiday, but over the course of a week it became clear to me that I really was reliving the best of all my childhood holidays, all the love and fun and silliness, but spruced up for the 21st century and the way we live and holiday now.

The restaurants, for example, were countless and quite excellent. They were mostly located in a sort of faux village, built in a pastiche Greek style around an agora and amphitheatre, that was buzzing with



For the time spent together...

activity. We ate three or four times in the very respectable Italian restaurant, Da Luigi – outdoors, looking at the stars, scoffing first-rate pizza and good Greek rosé, while our children chased cats or birds or other children around, as you would in any normal Greek village, but without the smells and dangers of traffic and possible child abduction. It's Disney does Greece, but I liked it. On the giant screen at the back of the amphitheatre, ghastly rock concerts were broadcast nightly which fully fixated our children over dinner and allowed us to get on with eating and drinking and laughing at how bad Greek pop music is.

There was a wonderful souvlakeria in the agora, too, and a posher Greek restaurant where we ate very well a couple of times, though it was the kebab suppers of local veal and a tangy tahini dressing on steaming hot flatbread that linger most. In the 1970s, I was happy queuing behind my dad at the Club Med buffet for lasagne and chips and my kids no doubt would be too, but this was much more up my street now, both as a parent and a bon viveur.

Sam and Kitty disappeared gleefully each morning into the state-of-the-art air-conditioned kids' club. And they would have remained there all day, every day, staying for lunch with all the holiday orphans of high-rolling execs

who filled the place, but we missed them too much and pulled them out every lunchtime for fried calamari and mackerel and bass and cheeburgers and chips and rosé (well, Kitty likes a small glass; Sam's more of a Coke man) at the beach restaurant.

And then in the afternoons we would wander the acres of interlocking lagoon pools as a family, looking for the best places to race and dive (forbidden rather sternly by lifeguards who, luckily, just aren't numerous enough to police such a sprawling archipelago of pools) and frolic and scream.

And when they tired of the pools, we'd pad off towards the Westin and the hilarious water park there, full of water cannons and spuming statues and rides in a couple of feet of water across an area the size of a football pitch, with two water slides, one slow and meandering, the other sheer and terrifying, which the kids took five days to entice onto, and then the whole rest of the holiday to persuade to leave. The lagoon of swimming pools there is bluer, more retro than at the Romanos, with waterfalls and swim-up bars. It's just so 1970s (but spicker and spanner) that I was almost in tears.

The whole Costa Navarino resort is just so pretty and big and elegant and effortlessly friendly. We've been to a fair number of very

special family hotel complexes – the Anassa in Cyprus, the Blue Palace in Crete, the One&Only Royal Mirage in, yuk, Dubai – and this was by far the warmest and most welcoming of them all. Though it is big, don't get me wrong, and very expensive, and there is golf, and lots of stressed execs on holiday, glued to their phones, and you don't see a lot of Greeks, or much apart from the hotel and its environs (although that was probably our choice), so don't be coming here if you're trying to recreate some Gerald Durrell going-native idyll of the 1930s.

But recreating a Giles Coren idyll of the 1970s (albeit in a place that is committedly and wondrously 2018), that you can do. And when the time came, and Kitty got herself steady on my greasy shoulders, and I rose out of the water like the kraken, and she flexed her knees and took off (sometimes without kicking me in the nose), and then flopped like a tossed pancake onto the water, there was a chance to dive every bit as badly as my father ever did. And to have just as much fun doing it. ■

Scott Dunn offers seven nights at Costa Navarino from £1,795pp B&B, based on a family of four staying in connecting rooms. Includes two kids' club places, flights and private transfers (scottdunn.com; 020 8682 5040)



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