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On the cover...

Titleist introduces the all-new AVX ball promising high-performance and remarkable distance with exceptionally soft feel

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Inside...

Director of golf at Costa Navarino, Yiannis Tsioukanis talks about his career as a journalist, and the impact the resort has made on Greek tourism





AUSSIE BORN
Golf operations manager at Costa Navarino, Yiannis Tsioukanis



ILLUMINATING
The impressive clubhouse at The Dunes Course pictured at night

Aussie Rules at Costa Navarino

Tucked away in a corner of Greece are arguably two of the most naturally beautiful golf courses in Europe. Michael Lenihan flew to Costa Navarino to meet with golf operations manager, Yiannis Tsioukanis to see for himself.

Ouzo, olive oil, tavernas, feta cheese and salad all spring to mind when conjuring images of Greece. Famed for its history, culture and philosophy, the country has over 6,000 tiny islands – many of whom form the bed rock of the nation’s tourism industry – which catered for 30.1 million visitors last year.

As a tourist destination, Greece can comfortably hold its own.

Yet think again of Greece, and it probably doesn’t figure too highly as a golfing mecca, probably in part to the fact that the entire country has just seven 18 holes courses.

Yes, that’s right... just seven, with Costa Navarino accounting for two of them – the Dunes and Bay Courses.

Located in the Greek province of Messinia in the southwest Peloponnese region, the Navarino coastline offers unspoilt and breathtaking scenery which has been shaped over the past 4,500 years.

The Battle of Navarino was fought in the bay overlooking the aptly named Bay Course, where, in 1827, during the Greek War of Independence, allied forces from Britain, France and Russia defeated Turkish and Egyptian troops.

The entire coastline is literally festooned with temples, castles and sites of historical interest dating back centuries, so when locally born Vassilis Constantakopoulos decided to build a golf resort complete with two hotels, he had a vision to create a sustainable development that would not only put Messinia on the map as a tourist destination, but at the same time offer employment to local people.

Constantakopoulos’s vision was realised in May 2010, when Costa Navarino opened for business.

Constantakopoulos made his fortune in shipping, and first set sail at the age of 18. He spent the next 21 years at sea, working his way up to the rank of Captain, before forming the Costamare Shipping company in 1974 which years later became one of the largest shipping companies in the world.

A keen golfer, Captain Vassilis as he was affectionately known, passed away in 2011, and would rest easy knowing that the two golf courses at Costa Navarino were in safe hands under the stewardship of Yiannis Tsioukanis.

Australian-born from Greek parents, Tsioukanis arrived at Costa Navarino in



BATTLEGROUND
The view from the Bay Course across the Bay of Navarino with the village of Pylos in the background



2013 after spells working in Sydney, Moscow, Sardinia and Lithuania, and is golf operations manager at Costa Navarino, which was voted European Golf Resort of the Year in 2017.

Yet unusually for someone in his position, Tsioukanis started life as a journalist, after obtaining a degree in PR, communication and journalism.

"I was at the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which is one of the biggest newspapers in Australia and a very reputable newspaper," he explained. "I started as a copy boy when I was at university, but I quickly learnt that I didn't like it. I quickly learnt that it was not the journalism that I wanted to do."

After becoming disillusioned with life as a cub reporter, Tsioukanis and a friend

decided to see the world as he explains: "A friend of mine said, 'Let's go to the World Cup in 1998 to France', so off we went, and I haven't been back since. Then I travelled for almost two years before settling down in London."

Before setting off on his travels, Tsioukanis's first experience of golf was as a 15-year-old when he played on his local course for the first time. "I played 133 shots, not including the air shots. I just loved it," he recalls fondly.

Yet within 18 months he was playing off three and working part-time at a golf club whilst studying for his degree at Western University in Sydney.

After settling in London, golf seemed an obvious choice given his desire to leave behind a career in journalism, and

after a two-year hiatus away from the game, Tsioukanis sent his cv to all of the clubs in the south of London, with The Wisley calling back and offering him a position as a trainee professional.

Tsioukanis spent two years learning his trade at The Wisley, before an opportunity to work in Moscow presented itself, as director of golf at the Moscow Country Club. "It was a fantastic job. I worked like crazy," he recalls.

"Life was amazing. Brilliant. Obviously, everyone has pre-conceived ideas about Moscow, but I was fortunate that I was the director of golf of the only 18 hole golf course in the whole country at the time."

And perhaps life in Russia, which shares a lack of golfing history with



NATURAL LANDSCAPE

Left, the 11th hole on the Dunes Course; below left, Yiannis Tsioukanis pictured in the pro shop; right the view from the Bay Course across the Bay of Navarino, and below right, the lobby of The Westin hotel, one of two hotels at Navarino Dunes



“Within the Costa Navarino destination the overall goal of the owner was to create awareness of the region of Messinia”

Greece, stood Tsioukanis in good stead when the opportunity to move to Costa Navarino presented itself.

“It was a time when the ownership here wanted to employ people who had a great background and some international experience. What attracted them to me, is the fact that I had the ability to speak the language. I was Greek, in the way, that I could understand a lot about the people, and it was something that they liked,” he recalls.

The 18-hole Dunes Course – which was designed by Bernhard Langer, in association with Ross McMurray of European Golf Design – was the first course to open in May 2010.

Set in diverse topography with spectacular sea and river views, tall dunes divide some of the holes adjacent to the golden beach. Inspired by the character of the natural landscape, much of the contouring mirrors the rugged outlines of the distant mountains.

Close to the sea, there is a links-like feel, adding to its unique style and playability, while inland it reflects a more typical Greek landscape of olive and citrus groves. Several holes run along a small river that meanders through

the site and there are large undulating greens, wide fairways and steep-faced pot bunkers.

The second signature-designed course sets Costa Navarino on its path to becoming a world-class golf destination. Opened a year later and playing to a par of 70, The Bay Course is situated a few minutes’ drive away and offers an alternative set of challenges.

Designed by Robert Trent Jones II, the course places a slightly greater emphasis on strategic play and positional golf. The idyllic setting runs through foothills and right alongside the historic Bay of Navarino.

Most tees offer breathtaking sea views and the course twists and turns through three distinct natural landscapes, providing striking contrasts that create a dramatic and memorable round.

Both courses have won widespread acclaim since opening and were initially managed by Troon who invited Tsioukanis to the site in 2005, five years before the resort opened for play.

“I was invited by Paul Dellanzo who was the Troon guy at the time and who signed the original contract,” said Tsioukanis.

“I came down for a week and I was sold on the product then.

“What I saw during that trip is something I haven’t seen from owners. They were very accommodating. They asked questions and the questions they asked made you think, ‘Well, these guys have done their research. They’re willing to take their time.’

“It seemed like everything was being done in a very meticulous manner, not rushed, and for good reason.”

Despite having the same climate as Turkey and the Algarve, the Messinia region of Greece is regarded as a seasonal destination with most of the airlines that fly into the local airport at Kalamata. However, despite the lack of all-year round accessibility, Tsioukanis has still been able to grow the golf business in recent years.

“We’ve gone up 33 per cent,” he said. “Considering the restrictions that we have – we’re very isolated and difficult to get to and access is one of our most difficult issues – we’ve increased each year.

“We’re never going to increase a huge amount because we always concentrate on certain things to keep the quality. We never double book people; we would



Experience Costa Navarino at The Westin

At The Westin Resort Costa Navarino, every aspect of your stay is designed to ensure that you leave feeling better than when you arrived. Set in an unspoiled and sun-drenched land of olive groves and vineyards, The Westin Resort Costa Navarino is a rejuvenating haven by the Ionian Sea featuring a 1.5 km sandy beach, refreshing pools and award-winning Anazoe Spa.

Inspired by old Messinian mansions, the low-rise villa clusters at Westin Resort Costa Navarino use natural stone and local design elements to create a motif in perfect harmony with the virgin sandy beach and pristine scenery. Each of the 445 rooms and suites – including 131 with individual infinity pools – features a private balcony or terrace to connect with the splendour of the hotel's setting.

Savour nourishing menus, based on the lush flavours of the area's countryside, complemented by the freshest homegrown ingredients and the finest Messinian extra virgin olive-oil. In a stunning variety of dining venues, sample an intriguing range of ethnic, continental, Greek fusion and local fare created by award-winning chefs.

Kalamata International Airport (KLX) is the main hub from selected destinations across Europe with seasonal direct flights. The driving distance from Athens International Airport (ATH) is approximately 270 km, and from Kalamata it's 50 km.

The port of Patras is the main entry point for visitors arriving to Greece by ship directly from Italy, with a driving distance of less than 200 km.

always start at 8:00; we'd always have ten minute tee times, and we limit the amount of people we have in order to maintain the quality. We were never going to increase too quickly, but we never wanted to."

With plans for a further two additional golf courses set to be announced later this year, Tsioukanis is keen to stress that the long-term plan is to see Messinia vying for golf-related business with some of the more established regions in southern Europe.

"Costa Navarino is a destination. It's not a resort," he adds. "Within the Costa Navarino destination the overall goal of the owner was to create awareness of the region of Messinia where he was brought up. His goal is not to create a Costa del Sol; it's to create a high-quality destination.

"Costa Navarino has four different sections to it. Navarino Dunes is where the hotels are now, and Navarino Bay is the one that's now going to get developed with the hotels and the clubhouse.

"Navarino Hills is where they're going to build two more golf courses and again, create a golfing experience there which is very close to the Bay Course.

"Then you have Navarino Blue which is more towards Kalamata, which again, will feature a hotel, clubhouse and 18 holes of golf."

With plans for two more golf courses, a new clubhouse at The Bay Course and more hotels across the four resorts, the future certainly looks promising for Costa Navarino as it firmly establishes itself among Europe's elite.

And further still, Navarino Residences – a collection of 50 freehold pool villas built to exacting standards and with unobstructed sea views – is under construction, and will become the first gated golf community in Greece.

As for Tsioukanis, who is aged 47, the decision to move away from journalism and pursue a career in golf appears to have been the correct call. "I need to challenge myself," he says.

"By the time I leave this world and get into retirement – if I ever do – I want to have said, 'Yeah, I've done a few different things and been to a few different places and I've had an effect.'"

Tsioukanis has certainly had an effect and will leave his by-line on Costa Navarino as it continues to write headlines across Europe. **GMÉ**