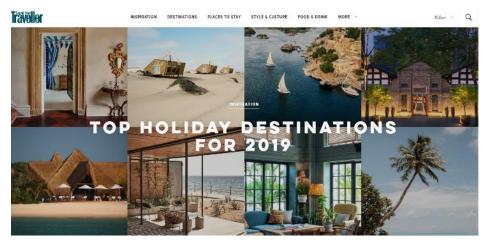
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THE PELOPONNESE, GREECE

A go-slow corner of the Mediterranean

While the starriest <u>Greek islands</u> – such as Santorini and Mykonos – grapple with over-tourism, forward-thinking visitors are heading to the mainland and discovering the wide-open spaces of <u>Greece</u> off-season. The Peloponnese has been bubbling just below the radar since <u>Costa Navarino</u> opened in 2010. Soon afterwards, the local airport at Kalamata opened up to international flights, shaving off several hours' driving time from <u>Athens</u> and boosting arrivals to the region by 15 per cent last year.

In 2019, the rail service linking the port of Patras with the town of Pyrgos, in the south-western Peloponnese, will resume after a seven-year halt. A train ride is the perfect way to explore this laidback region which has been a destination for wellness and fitness since Hippocrates prescribed therapeutic olive oil massages and naked athletes limbered up in Olympia. Athletes (dressed in more than just a slick of olive oil) will be hitting Costa Navarino in April 2019 for Greece's first Iron Man race. After a 1.9km swim in the Ionian Sea, competitors will cycle through olive groves before embarking on a half marathon that runs alongside Voidokilia beach, a perfect semi-circle of burnished sand.

The west coast of the Peloponnese is rippled with mile upon mile of sand dunes. Kourouta may not be the quietest beach, but it will soon become the hippest. In May, Dexamenes hotel opens in an abandoned wine factory on the waterfront. K-Studio (the architects behind all the coolest new hotels in Greece, from Branco on Mykonos to Perianth in Athens), have barely interfered with the industrial aesthetic: bedrooms are fashioned from old storage tanks, their gritty concrete walls punctuated by black steel piping, with polished terrazzo bathrooms screened by textured glass and sliding windows framing the sea views.

The adjacent buildings are being transformed into a taverna, a grocery selling local produce, and a history room that will connect guests to the local culture of wine-making. The Peloponnese has more wineries and grape varieties than any other region in Greece. It's a tradition you can taste at Eumelia, a farmstead set among 50 acres of organic olive groves and vineyards, which has quietly built a reputation for immersive foodie and creative retreats; and Zz Kyllini LA, a swish new estate in Kyllini that produces its own wine, grappa, honey, and Zea flour.

Euphoria Retreat, Greece's first destination spa, is modelled on a Byzantine monastery, but it's not all about spiritual awakening and slowing down.

Active retreats include the 'Spartan adventure in nature', which features rock climbing, rafting and paragliding. There's more off-grid action at Villa Vager Mani, from hiking and archery to kayaking and scuba diving. This family-run guesthouse has four suites in a fortified mansion built in 1858.

It's a 20-minute drive from the village of Kardamili, where the most desirable property in the Peloponnese will be available to rent for three months of the year from 2020: the peachy stone house poised above a private cove was built by travel writer Patrick Leigh Fermor in the 1960s – 'a world of utmost magical beauty' where he wrote, swam, and entertained poets and painters until his death aged 96. By Rachel Howard

To plan and book an under-the-radar Grecian getaway, email besttrips@condenast.co.uk