

Playground of the gods

The Westin is the family-friendly half of Costa Navarino in Greece's Peloponnese region. *Matthew Parsons* checks in with his young brood to see what it has to offer



The Agora comes to life in the evenings, much like a Greek village

"Is this Greece?" asks my four-year-old daughter innocently as we push open the door and enter our room at the Gatwick Hilton. "Nearly" I reply, not quite lying as I remember we have to wake up at 3.30am for our 5.40am flight to Kalamata.

It's to be the first of many questions Elea will fire off (the most worrying being if she can marry Dimitri, our amicable driver/guide - more of that later), ahead of our short break to Costa Navarino, in Greece's south-west Peloponnese. This resort hosted Abta's Travel Convention in 2015, and feedback from colleagues was excellent. But how does the resort cater for a family of four?

Young at heart

Costa Navarino, which opened in 2011, is split into two hotels - the family-friendly Westin and adult-orientated Romanos. To say "friendly" is actually

an understatement - the Westin positively embraces children with open arms.

The warm welcome is felt from check-in, with children's toys located conveniently next to the reception desks. Also travelling with us is one-year-old Theo, and my wife and I beam as the receptionist points out facilities on the map that are near our Infinity suite: aqua park, indoor heated pool, American-style diner with ten-pin bowling, and the all-important kids' clubs Cocoon (four months to three years) and Sandcastle (four years to twelve).

After unpacking, I give into Elea's pleas to go swimming, so we head for the 21-metre indoor pool. The outdoor pools, and sea, are still fairly fresh in early May, so it's nice to have balmy 29C water to splash around in. The outdoor whirlpool is even warmer, so whatever month families with young children want to visit,



Matthew with his family

swimming will always be on the cards.

Post swim, we stroll to the aqua park, featuring three twisting waterslides, water canons, carousels, tunnels and much more - all in shallow water and with a lifeguard. There's even a sandy playground next door for Theo to run around in.

We also check out the adjoining kids' clubs - parents will want to showcase these to their children as soon as possible, to familiarise them with staff and the spaces if they

decide to use them (and pre-booking is required). With pirate training, a treasure hunt and lunch on the agenda, it ticks all the boxes and we book them both in for our second day.

Beach bonus

The next day, after dropping the children off at the clubs (factor in at least 20 minutes to go through the paperwork), we relish the chance to eat at Barbouni, the beach-front fish restaurant, for a tranquil and romantic lunch.

It's clouding over, and starting to drizzle, but we don't care as we gaze out to sea and dine on fried whitebait, taramasalata and grilled talagani cheese with red pepper coulis. The service and quality of food here, like all other resort restaurants, is exceptional. Prices can, however, vary drastically between them, and for longer stays the half-board [Turn to 62](#)



Costa Navarino caters for both children...

option would be worthwhile. The setting is soothing and peaceful, and it's with great effort we prize ourselves away to stroll along the beach to collect Elea and Theo.

The clubs are a hit, and we return to our suite with two happy, and more importantly worn out, customers complete with pirate flags, eye patches and hats.

Slightly farther from our suite, on the other side of the lobby, lies the focal point for both hotels, the Agora. Inspired by the agoras - places of assembly - of ancient Greece, this large amphitheatre-style space is surrounded by restaurants, cafes, bars and boutique-style shops. We feel like we're staying in a local village, and during the evening we watch the children run around safely, and make new friends, as we dine at Italian restaurant Da Luigi.

Da Luigi is the most reasonably priced of the restaurants (from €7 for a large pizza or pasta from the children's menu, and just €10 for adults), popular with families, and a great spot to catch the sun setting over the sea.

On our third day, exploration calls. While it would be easy to spend the entire time making the most of Costa Navarino's facilities (there are also excellent golf courses), the resort is only a 15-minute drive from Voidokilia beach - a perfect horseshoe-shaped bay with crystal-clear water and mythological features.

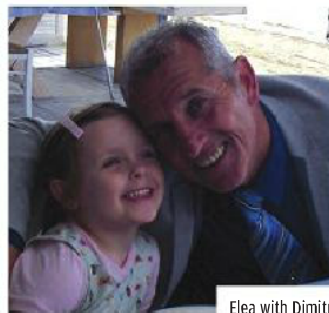
Above the bay is a cave believed to be Nestor's Cave from Greek

mythology, and also the location where Hermes supposedly hid 50 oxen stolen from his brother, Apollo.

Apart from the presence of the ancient gods, the beach is deserted and two hours fly by as we search for shells and play in the sea.

Afterwards our driver Dimitri takes us to a nearby church, with views over Navarino Bay, where he explains more recent history, including how British, French and Russian fleets took on the Ottomans in 1827 during the Greek War of Independence. The allies destroyed the enemy's armada, paving the way for an independent Greece. The waters are protected and diving prohibited because of the huge amounts of gold and other treasures that sunk along with the dozens of ships.

We then drive 10 minutes to Gialova, to eat at Koxili Tavern. With Dimitri still in charge, he orders giant prawns in tomato and paprika sauce, stuffed tomatoes, mussels and freshly made pasta. As Theo continues his afternoon sleep and Elea plays with Dimitri on the beach, we relax in the sun with a carafe of



Elea with Dimitri



... and adults alike

local white wine. Dimitiri is such a hit with Elea she feels compelled to marry him, which he deftly deals with by Skyping his girlfriend. Crisis averted.

The captain's vision

Another aspect the resort embraces just as enthusiastically as keeping children happy is keeping the environment happy.

Sustainability is a major theme for the Starwood Hotels & Resorts property and it was awarded Travelife Gold certification in 2015. Its eco-credentials include hiring 70% of employees from the local area and helping to increase the annual income of local restaurants by €2.35 million via Costa Navarino's visitors.

And it all started with one man, really: Vassilis Constantakopoulos, or "Captain Vassilis". The shipping entrepreneur had always wanted to give back to the area he grew up in, and in 2006 construction began on the ambitious resort. Despite setbacks during the start of Greece's economic crisis, the resort opened in 2011, shortly after Vassilis passed away.

Staff who knew him speak fondly of the man, and explain how his vision is living on among the people. One example is the local cooking classes on offer, with Vassilis said to have personally chosen the menu that villagers help cook with guests.

The Captain Vassilis Foundation also educates local farmers, and the resort's restaurants buy produce from the local area, while a resort garden is dedicated to reintroducing long-forgotten species of vegetables,

helping bring ancient recipes back to life. The resort also helps monitor climate change, with the University of Stockholm, and a Nature Hall plays host to visiting schoolchildren and showcases local flora and fauna with its interactive science museum.

It's clearly a resort with a conscience, warm hosts and an almost textbook example of how tourism can be a force for good. Despite our short stay, we all feel revived and that we've played a small part in the Costa Navarino story. And at the end of our holiday, I confidently tell Elea: "This is Greece."

Book it: Olympic Holidays offers seven nights' half-board at the Westin Resort Costa Navarino in a garden view family suite for two adults and two children flying from Gatwick with easyJet from £6,167 departing August 4.

■ olympicholidays.com

Making early starts easier

Advise families with an early flight to stay at an airport hotel. We stayed at the Gatwick Hilton, which was a five-minute walk from the airport's South Terminal. A children's fun pack was provided at check-in, and the buffet restaurant should satisfy the fussiest of eaters. A double room starts from £105; a family room with parking from £209.

■ holidayextras.co.uk