



The best places on earth and how to get there in style

Edited by **Bill Prince**

Travel

THIS MONTH: An upgrade in Ancient Greece; one magical night in Vienna



Odyssey and opulence

One of the world's finest eco-resorts, **Costa Navarino** is no myth – but it is heavenly, discovers Rebecca Newman

Rest in Greece (clockwise from main): The luxe lobby of Westin Resort, Costa Navarino; Voldokilla Bay's seafront; Westin's waterfall and reception terrace



The jagged southern coast of Greece is enticing: its heady mix of myth and wine and warrior epic; its beaches, clear seas and nubile, olive-skinned maidens. In our current, cynical age, few places live up to imagination. Yet here, on the furthest tip of the mainland, is a place you could well call legendary.

Costa Navarino is an empire of a resort, built by a local boy turned shipping magnate. Having made his billions, Vassilis Constantakopoulos decided to create the finest eco-resort in the world. He bought hundreds of kilometres of coast and created a fantasy of colonnades and arches, of golf courses, olive groves, waterfalls, restaurants and rooms whose floor-to-ceiling windows look out to the Ionian Sea. It's the kind of place

film stars stay – Ethan Hawke was in residence last summer – dedicated to the ancient pursuit of lotus eating.

Touch down in Athens and a three-and-a-half hour drive down pristine roads (thanks to EU funding) brings you to this Messinian peninsula. The closer you get, the more spartan the landscape: this is a place of crumbling dust, gnarled olives and cicadas buzzing in the heat. We arrive early evening and the air is still hot, but embracing. We are led past stone colonnades to our room and enjoy a drench in the plunge pool under a singing night of stars.

The hotel centres on a contemporary take on the old Greek



“agora” or assembly, a wide circular space which, as we venture out for a drink, has an open-air screen showing the climactic scenes of *Carmen*.

The air is rich with the scent of planted lavender and the aroma of grilled meat from a small cafe serving skewered lamb souvlaki.

If you simply want an idyllic beach/pool/sporting holiday, you could cocoon yourself in Costa Navarino and barely care you were in Greece. While there are Greek restaurants, Japanese, Italian and American establishments compete for attention in an Olympic jostle.

If, however, you prefer to peel yourself from your daybed, take ☺

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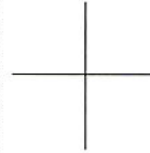
Greece

➤ mountain bikes round the curve of the neighbouring Voidokilia Beach. Alternatively, explore: you can find the best of Greece moments away.

On a baking morning, fired up by memories of the *Odyssey*, I head to the Palace of Nestor. One of the great Greek kings, Nestor was fabled for his generosity. As we stand in the remnant lintels of its gate, Homer's "wine-dark sea" glitters beneath us.

It was over the water here that Nestor sent a fleet of vessels to fight at Troy to win back the lovely Helen; here that Odysseus' son Telemachus disembarked, seeking word of his lost father. When he arrived, Telemachus was bathed by Nestor's youngest daughter, Polycaste. An ancient bath still stands here, battered, but still marked with the whorls designed to demonstrate the eternity of Nestor's kingship. Having been washed, Telemachus would have been rubbed with oil-scented herbs, another tradition the resort champions: as well as a panoply of Jacuzzis, the spa boasts rooms of masseuses, ready to relieve the tension from the body.

As well as its ancient history, in 1827 Navarino Bay also saw one of the decisive battles in the Greek War of Independence, at the end of which, after 400 years of subjugation, the Greeks overthrew Ottoman Turkish rule. It was a war that captured the imagination of artists and poets across Europe – Byron famously died in the cause. The resort has chosen to commemorate it by naming its homegrown wine 1827. Over a charcoal-grilled steak, which would have succoured Odysseus, and as the sun turns the sky to blood, I raise a glass: to Epicurus, and to pleasure-seeking. ☺



WHERE TO STAY

A deluxe garden-view room at the Westin Resort, Costa Navarino, starts from €140 (approximately £118) per night. For more information, visit costa.navarino.com



GETTING THERE

Aegean Airways offers flights from London Heathrow to Athens, as well as daily flights from Athens to Kalamata. For more information, visit aegeanair.com



History meets luxury: Navarino Bay, now an exclusive eco-resort, was in 1827 the focus of the Greek War of Independence