

# Unspoilt beauty and laid-back life: Discover Messinia, Greece

IF you like peace and quiet, you'll love this laid-back Greek peninsula.

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Pylos Harbour at sunset

This doesn't look much like any other beach I've ever been to in Greece. Where are the sunloungers, the umbrellas, the rows of carefully oiled bodies?

But this isn't a place normally associated with Greek beach holidays. I'm in Messinia, in the southwest corner of the Peloponnese peninsula, a region famous for its unspoilt [beauty](#) and laid-back way of life.

The beach is called Voidokilia (meaning "cow's belly"), a sweeping semicircle of light golden sand on the Ionian coast. Surrounded by towering limestone cliffs, it's said to be one of the most beautiful in the world.

Today, in early April, it's deserted, with no sound save for a light breeze and the pale turquoise water lapping the shoreline. It's a warm day and I feel like leaping in, which wouldn't be such a wise [move](#) given that I'm on a cycling tour and have left my swimming gear back at the hotel.

Dimitri, my cycling guide, points out the ruins at the top of one of the cliffs. "That's the Paleokastro (meaning "old castle"), built by the Franks in the 13th Century to guard the bay. Just below it is Nestor's Cave."

I Google "Nestor" later and discover he is an [important](#) figure in Greek mythology, who was mentioned in Homer's famous epic poem The Iliad.

As we walk back to the top of the beach where we've parked our electric-powered mountain bikes, Dimitri tells me a little of the region's history.



Methoni Castle

Messinia was fought over and eventually conquered by the Spartans in the 7th Century BC, and it was here that the Greeks defeated their Turkish occupiers at the Battle of Navarino (modern-day Pylos) during the Greek War of Independence in 1827.

"There are dozens of monuments and shipwrecks under the sea around here, some from ancient times, others from the Ottoman era," he says. A new underwater antiquities museum is being built in the pretty coastal town of Pylos, where some of these treasures will be on display, although no date has yet been set for its opening.

We cycle back past the lovely Gialova lagoon, an important wetland area for migrating birds and the only European habitat of the African chameleon. Orange trees and olive groves line the [sleepy](#) country lanes that take us back to the Costa Navarino resort, my base on this three-day break.

Founded by the late Captain Vassilis Konstantakopoulos, a local boy turned shipping magnate and a committed environmentalist, the 320-acre resort (which houses the four and five-star Westin and Romanos hotels) is built and run on strict eco-friendly lines. The company funds research into local wildlife projects, such as the protection of the loggerhead turtle, which comes to nest and lay eggs on its private beach.

It's also one of Greece's premier golf destinations, with a championship 18-hole course, but if you're not into golf, don't let that put you off – there are plenty of distractions.





The Costa Navarino resort funds local wildlife projects, such as the protection of loggerhead turtle

One is the Anazoe Spa, where I spend a blissful hour being slathered (in a nice way) with therapeutic olive oil. The [treatments](#) are based on ancient local therapies found inscribed on clay tablets at the nearby Palace of Nestor.

Another distraction is food. As someone who doesn't do much home cooking but enjoys it when I get the chance, I book myself onto a Greek cookery course with Anna and Loula, two friendly Greek women who have been demonstrating the delights of Messinian cuisine to tourists for years. The lessons take place at a house 10 minutes away, where I have a go at rolling out the pastry used to make traditional Greek noodles.

These are then cut into strips and put into a pan with olive oil and cinnamon. The best part is the feast at the end – we dine on a selection of traditional Messinian kagianas (eggs and tomatoes) and tourlou tourlou (oven-baked vegetables) and a delicious galatopita (custard pie) made using vanilla pods and semolina. It's all washed down with plenty of local wine.

One of the most impressive historic monuments in the area is the Methoni Castle, built in the 13th Century by the Venetians to allow safe passage for pilgrims heading for the Holy Land during the Crusades. Located on a rocky promontory jutting out into the sea, it's one of the biggest castles in the Mediterranean and definitely worth an hour or two of your time.

Inside its massive walls, there are remains of a Turkish mosque, a hamam (bathhouse) and plenty of underground passages and spooky chambers to explore. The whole place looks like something out of a film set and, despite its turbulent history, is a beautiful, romantic spot.

It's all a very long way from the Greece you've probably come to know.

#### **Way to go**

**A three-night break at The Westin Resort Costa Navarino ([westincostanavarino.com](http://westincostanavarino.com)) with Design Holidays ([designholidays.co.uk](http://designholidays.co.uk)) starts from £975pp for a deluxe garden view room with breakfast, daily flights from London Heathrow to Athens with Aegean Airlines ([aegeanair.com](http://aegeanair.com)) and transfer (around 2.5 hours) to Westin Costa Navarino. The cookery lesson includes dinner with wine and costs £48 per person.**

**A three-hour guided cycling tour on an electric mountain bike costs £40pp. Both can be booked at the hotel.**



Discover the beach on bicycle

## Ten things you must do in Messinia

- 1 Enjoy history but hate crowds? Be among the few tourists to visit the remains of the vast ancient city of Messini.
- 2 Visit Nestor's Palace, 17km north of Pylos, built around 1300BC and the best-preserved of all Mycenaean palaces.
- 3 Stroll round the Niokastro (New Castle), in Pylos, built during the Ottoman occupation.
- 4 If the heat gets too much, cool off under the Neda waterfalls at Kyparissia, a natural beauty spot.
- 5 Eat dinner at a traditional fish restaurant by the quayside in the village of Gialova.
- 6 Explore well-preserved Methoni Castle, built by the Venetians in the 13th Century.
- 7 Join a sailing boat excursion into the beautiful Navarino Bay.
- 8 Hike to the top of the cliffs above Voidokilia Beach for a magnificent view.
- 9 Learn how to make traditional Messinian cuisine on a group cookery lesson.
- 10 Ride a mountain bike through the local countryside.

<http://www.express.co.uk/travel/beach/664877/Things-to-do-Messinia-Greece>