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I'm not a fan of resorts, but this Greek haven seduced me

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Kalamata on the Ionian Sea CREDIT: ISTOCK

Local heroes may not grow on olive trees but across the salt marshes south of Kalamata on the Peloponnese peninsula, Captain Vassilis is mentioned with a reverence reserved elsewhere for Nelson Mandela and Barack Obama.

As local legend has it, this poor boy from the village of Diavolitsi left his bug-infested backwater for Athens in his early teens, determined to make his fortune. A sojourn in the navy earned him his captain's stripes, after which he went on to buy his first cargo ship. The rest, as they say at Costa Navarino, the ambitious resort he went on to create, is history.



The unmistakable coastline of Mediterranean Greece CREDIT: ISTOCK

In the Eighties he bought up parcels of land in his native Messinia. Today those small pieces have grown to become a vast estate boasting two major hotels out of a planned five. The family-friendly Westin and more chilled Romanos sit in proximity to each other, flanked by two world-class golf courses and the whole estate borders the historic Navarino Bay.

History lovers will recognise the name as the site of the last great sea battle fought with sailing ships, in 1827, when Russia, France and Britain took on the Ottomans and won a decisive victory in the Greek war of independence.

Nowadays it's a tranquil natural harbour, the scent of gorse and pine pungent in the midday heat. Encircled by dramatic peaks, a protected habitat for migrating birds lies at one end of the sandy bay and, further along, a path leading to Old Pylos Castle offers a worthwhile climb for the intrepid.



Mariella is not a resort-lover by nature

It was on this glassy water that my children learnt to cross the wake on their water-skis thanks to the instruction of the patient Alex and Nicola.

A couple of miles or so along the coast lies Captain Vassilis's Costa Navarino complex. Those looking for family fun in a contained environment would be hard pushed to find a better playground. There's a long, yellow sand beach, four swimming pools, basketball and tennis, an American diner and 20 other eateries, exercise classes and a well-equipped gym, an aqua park and an inspired water carousel for toddlers. For more serenity, the perfect escape lies in the award-winning spa, Anazoe.



The 14 best Greek islands for families

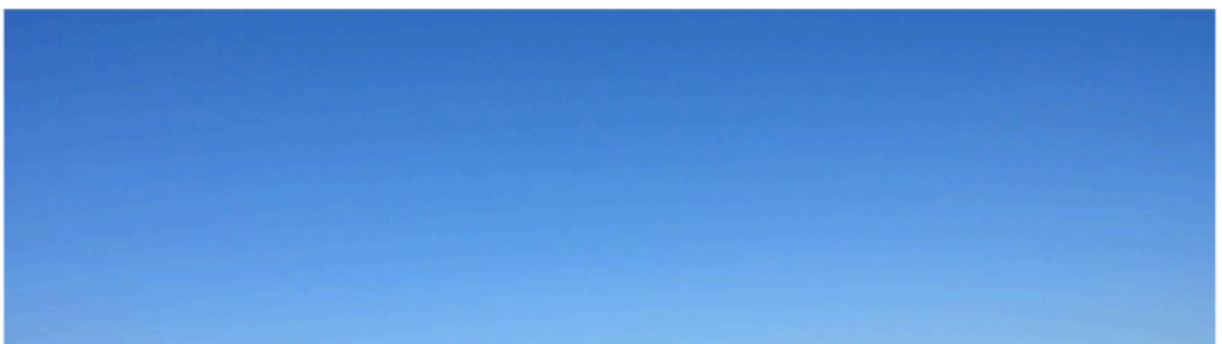


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If golf, tennis, basketball, yoga, a torturous abs and bums exercise class, tennis, paddleboarding and kayaking aren't enough to keep you occupied, or you're looking for more cerebral stimulation, within easy driving distance lies a wealth of classical ruins from Ancient Olympia to the Venetian fort of Methoni.

The taxi driver who took us there informed us that before Captain Vassilis made his investments, the area was a swamp, elaborating on the one-time malarial marshes and deserted villages. The young and fit emigrated to Athens and across the globe from Canada to Australia to escape unemployment, leaving old men and women to mourn the absence of their offspring.

Now, she told us, two of her three children work locally, one at the resort and one as a doctor, and the local schools are full as families continue to arrive.





A beach at the Costa Navarino resort CREDIT: GETTY

The Pylos population of 2,000 includes some 750 Navarino employees, with young people being trained in skills from beauty therapy to tennis coaching and hospitality. No wonder the resort boasts such impeccable service; every employee seeming genuinely friendly. I'm not a natural resort lover but I was seduced.

On our first night, the community aspect of Navarino was on full display, with the Champions League final being shown on a massive screen that dominated the agora, the ancient Greek name for a central gathering place.

With tables set up outside the Italian restaurant Da Luigi for diners, voices raised at the players in a babble of European languages and children racing to and fro from the artisan ice cream shop, Kayak, it really had the authentic feel of a village square. Looking around it was hard not to marvel at the way one man's dream has virtually single-handedly put this forgotten area back on the map.

The story has a happy ending, too, as Captain Vassilis lived long enough to see the resort open, passing away a few months after the first guests were welcomed a decade ago.

The essentials

Red Savannah (01242 787800, redsavannah.com) offers seven nights for a family of four at The Westin Costa Navarino, with return flights between London Gatwick and Kalamata and transfers from £4,262.
