



The 2nd green on Costa Navarino's Dunes course

GREEK ODYSSEY

Roderick Easdale immerses himself in all that Costa Navarino has to offer and learns about the resort's ambitious plans

A round of golf can lend itself to deep thoughts such as what is the meaning of life, why are so many golf shoes white, how come buildings aren't called builds? For those who look to ponder the weightier questions of human existence walking through attractive surroundings, Costa Navarino is ideal for golfing and non-golfing philosophers alike.

Among the plethora of activities at this resort are philosophy walks, led by classical scholars, whereby you wander

and wonder through the countryside discussing "important modern-day issues through the prism of ancient Greek philosophical thinking".

Costa Navarino, which opened in 2010, was the brainchild of Captain Vassilis Constantakopoulos, who grew up in Messinia and made a fortune in shipping. Costa Navarino was conceived, in large part, to ensure the people of his home region have employment to allow them to remain in the area, and to preserve the local culture and landscape.

Sustainability underpinned his philosophy and at the resort is a well-presented museum, the Natura Hall, about the local flora, fauna and sea life, and ways to protect them.

LOCAL EXPERIENCES

The promotion of culture means activities on offer to guests include the chance to join locals in their homes to learn to cook the regional specialities; in August and September guests can observe – and even join in – with the wine harvest; from

October to December comes the opportunity to engage in the olive harvest and olive oil making. Wine and olive oil classes run throughout the year, as do tours through the resort's botanical gardens, astronomy nights, art tours and embroidery workshops.

There are also more universally found resort facilities such as a beach, tennis courts, spa and a range of dining options, which here include an American diner with a three-lane bowling alley. For those who wish to explore the wider area, there are various bike tours, hikes and mountain climbs for all abilities.

Costa Navarino exists over two sites at present, with three more planned. The two hotels, the Westin – where we stayed



There's little rough to speak of on the Dunes

and which had friendly service and gorgeously comfortable beds – and the upmarket Romanos, are both at Navarino Dunes. Navarino Bay, about a quarter of an hour away by resort shuttle bus, already has a superb 18-hole golf course, with a hotel and new clubhouse under construction. A third site is being built at

Navarino Hills, which will have two golf courses and a hotel.

I was there for the Messinia Pro-Am, staged every February. The general consensus of the competitors was that the Dunes course was the better test and the Bay more enjoyable. Scores were higher on the Dunes – in round one, ➤

Greece



The Bay course enjoys glorious ocean backdrops

of the 31 pros, one carded 22-over-par and nine were double digits over par!

The main defences of the Dunes course are the many bunkers and the undulating greens on what is a fairly open track. Only the 2nd hole has an ocean backdrop, but several have an attractive inland view of distant rolling hills. When we played there was no rough to speak of, but in summer it is grown to 5cm. This, and the fact that the challenges and hazards are clearly set out from the tee, makes losing balls hard.

It can be done though. One of my opponents announced that he had only brought six with him, and having lost two in his first round, could he borrow two of mine. Adding to my list of mysteries of the universe to consider is what 20-handicapper goes on a trip involving several rounds on unfamiliar courses with only half a dozen golf balls? And why did he not visit the pro shop? But I could not ponder either of these questions while walking through the countryside, as the Bay course is buggies only.

The Bay course is a delight, with plenty of character, variety and splendid views – reminiscent of Alcanada in Mallorca on those holes when you play downhill towards the bay. There are some tight drives, and the putting surfaces are not

quite as bunker-fringed as on the Dunes, but several use swales around the green as a back-up protection.

The only time water appears inside the course is on the 1st, which is a crescent fairway around a lake, where you have to decide how much of the water to take on with your tee shot – how bold you are depends as much on ego as strategy on this short par 4. The order of the holes will change when the new clubhouse is completed, and the current 6th will become the opener.

MORE GOLF TO COME

You cannot stray from the tee as you can on the Dunes and the greens are just as fiendish, but the course is shorter. There are half a dozen par 3s, none of them long. The shortest is 122 yards from the tips, plummeting to a green protected and flanked by bunkers front, right and left. The longest par 3 plays over a valley to a green cut into the hillside, so that anything short runs back towards a ditch.

Two more courses are in construction at Navarino Hills on a hillside overlooking the bay where the Battle of Navarino was fought in 1827. It was the last battle to involve solely sailing ships and, in being won by the fleet of British, French and Russian ships, under British command, eventually led to Greek independence from the Ottoman Empire. The bar at the Westin is named 1827 and paintings of the battle adorn the hotel lobby.

The longer of the two courses here will cling to the higher ground and offer spectacular views over the bay from the closing holes. It is planned at around 7,300 yards and it is hoped to bring top professional events here. It is due to open in 2020 and its sister, which will run through forest, in 2021.

ESSENTIALS

How to get there

Kalamata, about 45 minutes from Navarino Dunes, has seasonal direct flights from London, Manchester and Birmingham. Athens, about three hours away, has direct flights from London, Manchester, Edinburgh and Bristol. Flight times from London to Athens are about three and three-quarter hours.

Where to Play

■ **Navarino Dunes**

Stats: par 71, 6,581 yards

■ **Navarino Bay**

Stats: par 70, 5,931 yards

W: costanavarino.com

Where to Stay

■ **The Westin at Navarino Dunes**

W: costanavarino.com



4th green on the Bay course



The Westin hotel's grand lobby