



Spinalonga island, northeastern Crete; inset, the novel whose author inspired the name of Villa Hislop

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Georgios Tsichlis

Book of life

A new villa in Crete can put clients at the heart of a beloved British novel, writes **Alice Barnes-Brown**

Gazing towards the islet of Spinalonga from the villa's pool terrace, I can't help but picture the characters from Victoria Hislop's novel, *The Island*, set during Spinalonga's days as a leper colony in the mid-20th century. I watch as Maria, the teacher, walks along its dusty paths on her way to school, while on the water, her husband Giorgos rows over supplies from the village of Plaka – the only connection between Spinalonga and the rest of the world. But my favourite character, the kindly Dr Kiritsis, is sequestered in the old hospital facing me, working on a cure for the patients who once inhabited this island.

Having such a storied scene within its sights, it's no wonder this new villa in Crete has been named Villa Hislop. As a fan of the author, I jumped at the chance to see the island up close and stay in her namesake villa.

VILLA LIFE

Villa Hislop was built in 2025 and is one of the latest additions to the Oliver's Travels portfolio. Besides its phenomenal panorama and infinity pool, the stone-built villa is well equipped for big bookings.

Its 10 en-suite bedrooms feature beds that can be configured as doubles or twins, with most offering private terraces and sea views, while the cinema room, table tennis facilities and array of games will keep everyone entertained.

A lift helps guests get between the three floors, and the ground floor comes with a hammam, sauna, gym and two hot tubs. Outside, there's a small adventure playground for children, a kitchen and barbecue area and even a whitewashed wedding chapel with the Greek flag fluttering overhead.

From here, I stroll down the mastic tree-lined path to the private beach that Villa Hislop shares with the rest of the complex. It's small but perfectly formed, with comfy beanbags and dappled shade. Advise clients to bring a snorkel mask to spy the marine life.

MIND AND BODY

Because this villa is part of Oliver's Travels' Wellness Collection, clients can book various experiences, including in-villa massages and yoga classes. One morning, while the air is still cool, we are guided ➤

ASK THE expert

"Greece has always been a favourite with our customers, and we expect it to be one of the standout destinations this summer. Villa Hislop appeals mostly to multigenerational families. All the bedrooms are en suite, so if you have multiple families or a group of friends, they'll get equal rooms. Another selling point is that the villa is 10 minutes' walk from Plaka, so clients could easily come without a car."

Jo Grimwood, product manager, Oliver's Travels



fast fact

Oliver's Travels has created a £5,000 referral incentive, after seeing trade bookings rise 22% year on year and a 49% increase in its agent database

BOOK IT

Oliver's Travels offers weekly rates at Villa Hislop from £8,961 in total, sleeping up to 20 guests. The price excludes flights, luggage and transfers. oliverstravels.com/travel-partners



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Villa Hislop; yoga session led by instructor Christos; local chef Ioannis **PICTURES:** Alice Barnes-Brown



through a vinyasa yoga session with local instructor Christos. "Bring your awareness to the sounds around us, both near and far," he says, but I hear only the waves and the distant bleating of a goat. Christos moves slowly and deliberately, determined to help us work our stresses away.

"Breathe in more energy, and breathe out anxiety, tension – all that you don't need," he sighs in a melodic Cretan accent. I exhale, feeling immensely grateful that I am at last seeing this ethereal place with my own eyes.

If clients would prefer to relax on the water, suggest they book a half-day catamaran cruise around Mirabello Bay with Ocean Spirit (costing from €900 for 10 passengers). Steered by captain George and his wife Georgia, we stop first at the secluded coves of Kolokythia island to paddleboard and snorkel in bright blue seas, then munch on some meze as we sail over to our next swimming spot. But the best is yet to come: returning to Plaka, we approach Spinalonga in awestruck silence.

SPINALONGA SAILING

This little island has lived many lives – first as an ancient fortress, then a Venetian bastion, a Muslim village during the Ottoman period and, most notoriously, as Greece's largest leper colony from 1904 to 1957. Hislop's bestselling novel brought its history to life for a new generation, and Spinalonga has now become the second-most popular attraction in Crete.

The only way to access the island's interior is through a long, dark tunnel – you can almost imagine how patients with leprosy might have felt, trudging through with their belongings after being cast out from their families. But the darkness belies what sits beyond the end of the tunnel, as I emerge into a sunny, picturesque square with a plane tree at its heart.

Doors of the old Ottoman workshops and homes are brightly painted in primary colours, and inside there are fascinating exhibits about different parts of the island's history – such as the games lepers used to play and the thriving trade Spinalonga had with the rest of Crete. I pore over silver rings with rubies still sparkling, enamel tableware and more, displayed next to harrowing medical tools from the leprosarium.

I spend an hour walking the perimeter of the island, dipping into Orthodox chapels with gilded chandeliers and incense-scented icons. I pause to wonder how the lepers took comfort in their faith, before stepping outside for a breath of calming sea air and to admire the symmetrical Venetian fortifications.

Before I board the boat back to Plaka, Spinalonga's cemetery beckons. The graves of the Muslim villagers neatly face the direction of Mecca, but the leper plots are decidedly messier. A plaque carries a stark reminder of the devastation wrought on so many lives by the disease: "In this martyrs' place, hundreds of our fellow human beings, struck by leprosy, buried all their hopes for life. From their lives, we learn lessons."



FROM FAR LEFT:
One of the 10
guest rooms at
Villa Hislop; the
property's terrace
PICTURES:
Alice Barnes-Brown

COOKING CLASSES

Crete is known for two things: its nourishing cuisine and its fiery-but-friendly islanders, which Hislop captured so well. Clients staying at Oliver's Travels villas can hire their own chef (at extra cost) – and ours, Ioannis, was Crete personified.

Cooled by a glass of Cretan white wine, we set things up for a

cooking class in the outdoor kitchen. I tell Ioannis I've been learning Greek, and suddenly become the de facto translator for his foodie musings. "My grandparents would only eat produce in the right season. You would have watermelon in summer and beans in winter. Now we have watermelon in spring, summer, autumn and winter – but

they are not local. That's the problem we have today," he says.

I take stock of his ingredients, sourced from the *laiki* (public market) that morning: big, beefy tomatoes, crisp green onions and kilos of feta. To make *soutzoukakia* meatballs, Ioannis rhythmically squishes blended onion, meat and nutmeg into the bowl with his bare hands.

When the *soutzoukakia* are cooked to the chef's exacting standards, we sit at the 16-seat wooden table to enjoy the spread, backed by that spectacular view of Spinalonga. I've got the best seat in the house and notice that three of my fellow travellers, inspired by all we've seen, have picked up *The Island* and started to read. **TV**



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