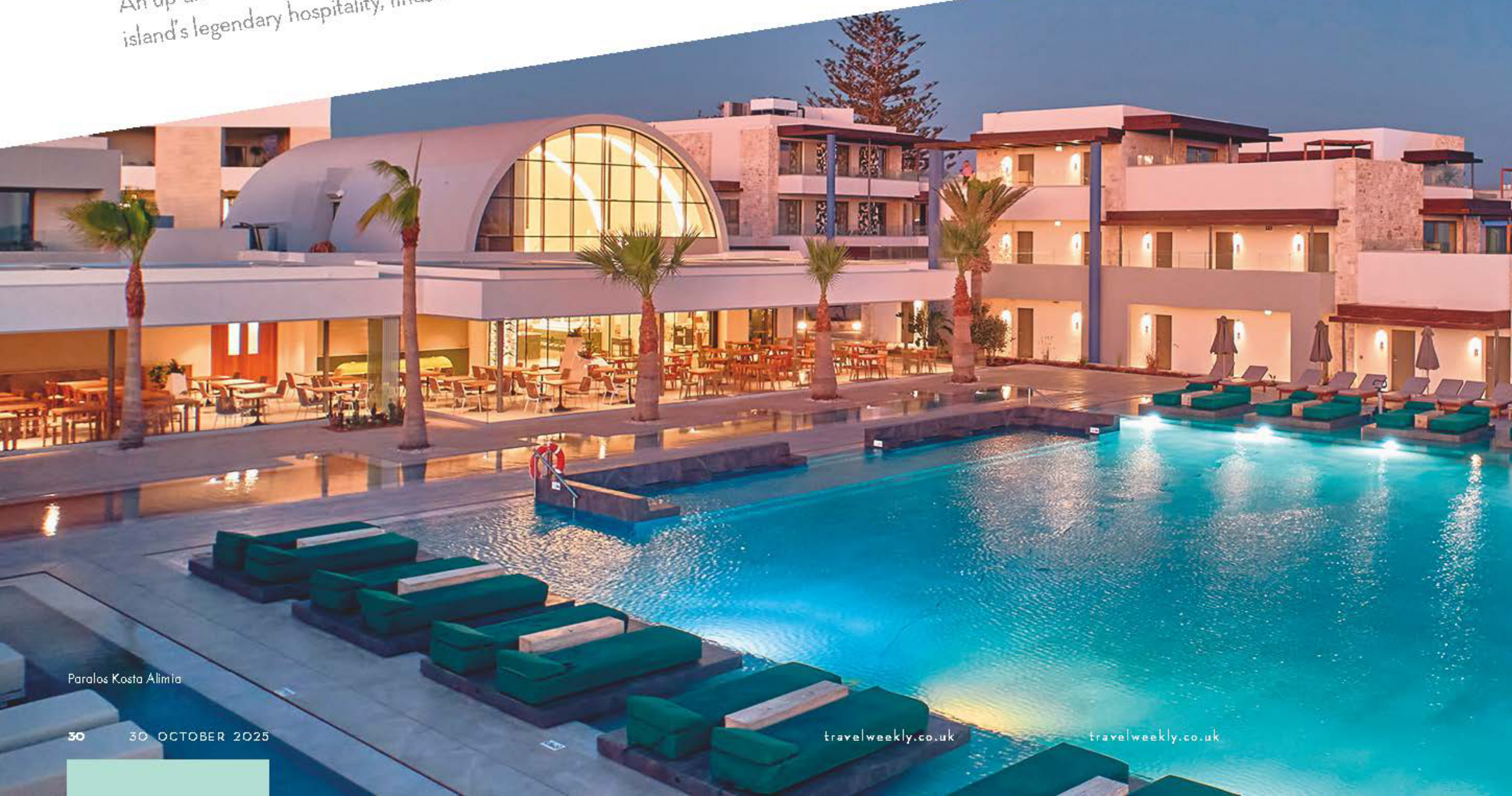


Crete expectations

An up-and-coming Greek resort brand showcases the island's legendary hospitality, finds Alice Barnes-Brown



Paralos Kosta Alimia

I can tell you the exact moment I fell in love with Greece. On the eve of my 10th birthday, I was sitting opposite my little brother in the restaurant of a family-run hotel in Crete. As Mum erred between the moussaka and stifado, the patriarch of the Cretan family who owned the hotel gave us kids a cheeky smile, gleefully ruffling our hair to make us giggle. This simple yet playful gesture made me feel instantly at home – a feeling I experience every time I go to Crete, even as a grown-up.

NORTHERN EXPOSURE

Before heading to the island on an agent fam trip with resort operator Paralos Hospitality, I wondered if that warm, genuine welcome I've come to associate with Crete would still be evident in a larger resort. The adult-oriented Paralos brand has five hotels in Crete, one in Kos and one in Rhodes, and is endeavouring to expand its reach with the UK trade.

The flagship resort is 152-room Kosta Alimia, which opened in 2023 in the north coast town of

Analipsi, a 20-minute drive from Heraklion airport. Thoughtful details throughout make it impossible to forget which Greek island you're on. Breakfast is served in a bright, circular atrium resembling the Venetian storehouses on Heraklion's historic waterfront, and regional food takes centre stage at the buffet, including sfougato (courgette frittatas) and a tea blend featuring 40 immunity-boosting herbs, a traditional recipe brought down from the mountains that rise in the distance.

With 14 room types, five restaurants and three bars, Kosta Alimia offers plenty of choice for clients on either its half-board or all-inclusive packages. Day and night, they'll also find lots to do: think 150 metres of beach with a DJ, bars open until 1am, a pool with underwater music and even an alfresco amphitheatre for musicians and movies.

FEAST FORWARD

We next visit the four-star Paralos Lifestyle Beach on the Blue Flag-listed shores of Ammoudara. Hotel manager Katerina Kampouraki ➤

WHAT TO SEE

Heraklion

The Cretan capital offers plenty of ways to spend a day, ranging from Venetian forts and fountains to outdoor cinemas.

Knossos

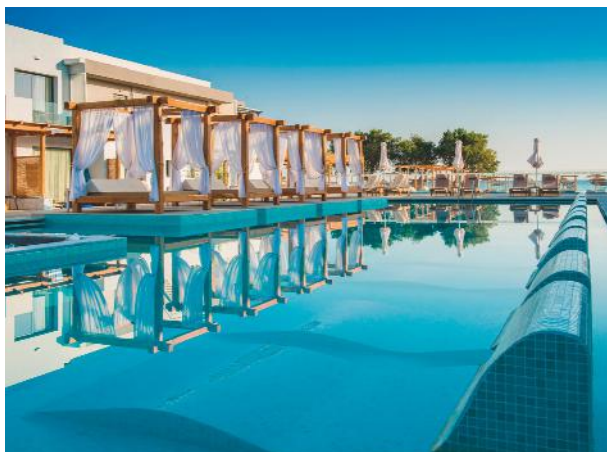
Said to be built atop the infamous labyrinth where the Minotaur ran rampage, this Bronze Age site features vibrant restored murals.

Mount Ida

Crete's highest mountain offers five challenging routes, but for those less keen on hiking, suggest a drive to Iteon Andron cave.

Preveli Beach

This unusual beach is edged by a forest of endemic Cretan date palms and a turquoise river that flows into the Libyan Sea.



tells us the 148-room hotel is almost fully booked, but we manage to view two suites before sitting down to a multi-course Cretan lunch in Armonia restaurant. As Kampouraki and I chat over a glass of white assyrtiko wine and watch kitesurfers leap across Aegean waves, a chef massages local olive oil into a leg of lamb in the show kitchen.

"Clients are the alpha – providing a good service is the most important thing for us," she says, as mezze ranging from creative feta doughnuts to moreish mushroom capellini pasta are served. My eyes widen when I realise these are just the starters. With a knowing smile, Kampouraki adds: "It's not the full Greek experience if you don't eat

and drink until you are..." She trails off, exhaling as she mimics her stomach ballooning.

SOUTHERN COMFORT

The only family-friendly Paralos property on the island is Irini Mare, on the south coast. The nearby village of Agia Galini offers a snapshot of what Crete was like in

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CLOCKWISE FROM FAR LEFT:

Paralos Lifestyle Beach; lunch in Armonia; Junior Suite Mountain View Sharing Pool, Paralos Irini Mare; fam trip attendees; Agia Galini; Paralos Irini Mare

PICTURES: Yannis Fais; Alice Barnes-Brown; N Fragomanolakis



AGENTS' verdict



"My highlight was the incredible food and the attention to sourcing

locally. Paralos would appeal to lots of different clients, but certainly those who are looking for something unique and people who appreciate good service."

Mark Kendall-Young,
director, Auria Travel



"Kosta Alimia is all about relaxation and would appeal to clients in their 40s and

50s. The beach is spread out and doesn't feel overcrowded, plus it's very chilled."

Nikki Stanfield, manager
and franchise director,
Premier Travel



"Sustainability and authenticity go hand in hand at Irini Mare. It's a thoughtful

choice for both couples and families seeking Crete at its most grounded."

Holly Matthews, product
development manager,
Discerning Collection

its 1970s hippy heyday, with steps in the blue-and-white of the Greek flag and steep streets sprinkled with blooming bougainvillea leading down to a fishing harbour.

After a 10-minute walk along the beach, we reach Irini Mare. While we admire murals painted by local artists and sip a refreshingly cool drink, managing director Antonis Milolidakis explains: "The pomegranate juice you are drinking is from our fields. We pick them in October then freeze them, so there are no preservatives."

This farm-to-table ethos extends to the buffet, where I spy a fresh pasta machine, home-baked bread and even local honeycomb and homemade goat's cheese ice cream.

Like the hotel I visited as a child, this is a family operation. Executive management assistant – and Antonis' sister – Marili Milolidaki is drizzling peppery olive oil onto carob bread. She says: "This is from my grandfather's olive trees. We produce enough to cook with it, sell it to our guests and use it in our houses in the winter."

There is a mix of couples and families chatting over a long, lazy lunch in the à la carte restaurant, Tomatini, where all guests are entitled to one free dinner a week. When asked about the property's guest profile, Marili says: "Britain is a new market for us. We attract people who want to discover a new destination – and we have a very good repeat rate."

NEW SUITES

Next season, there will be even more for agents to entice clients, as 23 new suites with private pools are set to open, as well as

a suite that offers the opportunity to sleep on the rooftop under the stars. "We have zero light pollution in south Crete, and many guests suggested these stargazing rooms in questionnaires," says Marili.

With a wholesome meal under my belt and a bottle of olive oil in my bag, I leave satisfied in more ways than one. Despite concerns of overtourism on the island, Paralos offers a Cretan experience as generous and genuine as it was 20 years ago. Whether clients are based in a resort or a boutique hotel, they'll feel like part of a big, fat Greek family here. **TW**

BOOK IT

The Greek Specialist offers a seven-night all-inclusive stay at Paralos Kosta Alimia from £899 per person, based on two sharing. Includes luggage, transfers and Sky Express flights from Gatwick to Crete via Athens on May 6, 2026.
thegreekspecialist.co.uk

Discerning Collection sells a seven-night stay at Paralos Irini Mare from £1,245 per person, half-board, based on two sharing. Includes luggage, transfers and flights from Luton departing on May 2, 2026.
discerningcollection.com