



The Parthenon
at sunrise, Athens

PICTURE: Shutterstock/S.Borisov

Greece enlightening

A guided tour can help clients get under the skin of a destination, as **Rhodri Andrews** and nine new-to-touring agents find out on a Just You fam trip in Greece

A knot of terracotta-topped houses. A curving bay of blue. A local woman offering a smile as she tended to her bougainvillea. I'd never been to Greece before, but Nafaktos, a coastal town overlooking the Gulf of Corinth, was exactly how I'd pictured it would be. Yet I'd never have discovered this authentic corner of Greece if it weren't for this touring itinerary.

A few days earlier, I'd joined nine agents in Athens on a fam trip with solo touring specialist Just You, all of us new to the sector and experiencing an escorted tour for the first time.

CAPITAL GAINS

Athens proved the perfect starting point – a destination that felt familiar yet gave the guides a platform to shine. "Lots of people think this is the Acropolis," said guide Gina Volakou, pointing to the colonnaded ruins as we climbed up Athens' emblematic landmark. "In fact,

the hill is the Acropolis, and the building is called the Parthenon." It was only the first morning, and I'd already started learning.

"Without a guide you don't understand what you're seeing – it's like it's in black and white," said agent Vikki

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Simpson from Dawson & Sanderson. "Gina has added so much colour and context to our tour."

My mind soon weighed heavily with facts and anecdotes from ancient Greece so, in the name of balance, our Just You tour leader Kirstie Kasrani ➤

DESTINATIONS

ESCORTED TOURS | GREECE

ASK THE agents

Find out what the agents thought at the start and end of this new-to-touring fam



Before: "Many of my clients are of an older demographic and have mobility issues. I want to find out how accessible the itinerary is for them."

After: "It's given me an insight, especially as I have mobility issues. I now know what to look for, as I don't want to discourage clients from these kinds of trips."

Elizabeth Ryan,
Personal Travel Agents



Before: "We have a lot of solo clients so I want to see how the guided element will work."

After: "There's more to touring than I expected. It's quite a hand-held experience, but one that can be taken at the pace of the client."

Becky Punched,
Fred Olsen Travel



Before: "I want to upskill and cross-sell to regular clients, and see if it's a stepping stone for them to a new type of travel."

After: "It has made me appreciate how supportive the holiday director is. They really take care of the little details."

Katey Robinson,
Booking the Bucket List
(Your Holiday Booking)



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Agents Ross Ellis, Vikki Simpson, Millie Pierrepont and Katey Robinson loving a visit to the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus; gathered at the Parthenon in Athens; Corinth Canal, a feat of engineering

PICTURES: Ross Ellis; Shutterstock/Antoine2K; Rhodri Andrews



allowed us time to freely wander through Plaka, Athens' oldest neighbourhood. Its labyrinthine lanes, flanked by lemon-hued buildings sprouting with vibrant bougainvillea, oleander and jasmine, were the ideal epilogue to the Acropolis.

After dinner at the Athens Tiare Hotel, Kirstie took us to one of her favourite rooftop bars, the MS Roof Garden. Almost immediately, our eyes caught the Parthenon, lit up in gold and framed by the night sky. We were quite literally open-mouthed at the view, leaving us surprised for the second time that day.

MARITIME OF YOUR LIFE

The Acropolis by night was the perfect image to end our stay in Athens, as we swapped the city for the mountains of the Peloponnese, en route to Nafpaktos. Western Greece harbours a mixture of myths, picturesque towns and a hearty dose of Greek *filoxenia* (hospitality), so it made sense to soak up some of it on the journey.

Our first stop was the Corinth Canal, a marvel of maritime engineering. Nearly four miles long yet less than 25 metres wide and flanked by towering walls of limestone, it's an achievement best appreciated from above. "Seeing this in the flesh is incredible," said Millie Pierrepont, assistant manager of Hays Travel's Bridlington branch. "I love that this tour has taken us to places clients wouldn't have gone to otherwise."

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The canal has been on my must-see list since, as a child, I watched Michael Palin pass through it on his *Around the World in 80 Days* series. But the lure of a touring adventure is all about connecting clients with the places they're excited to see, as well as those they might not have visited on their own.

We moved on, first to the Ancient Theatre of Epidaurus, dating from the fourth century BC and famed for its excellent acoustics; then to coastal Nafplio, with its narrow streets and Venetian architecture. Kirstie remarked that before Athens, it was modern Greece's first capital, and is now known as its current ice cream capital. No prizes for guessing how we decided to honour our afternoon there.

HELLENIC HERITAGE

Waking up in Nafpaktos and looking out from the hotel balcony, the Gulf of Corinth glittered in the morning sunshine. I strolled to the town's horseshoe-shaped harbour where, over a refreshing freddo cappuccino (iced espresso with frothed milk), I craned my ➤

DESTINATIONS

ESCORTED TOURS | GREECE

INSIDER *insight*



"The solo market is the fastest-growing market in the industry and Greece is the ideal destination for new-to-touring clients. It's a country that will feel familiar to them, but a tour combines the classics with the unknown Greece they might not have thought about. They might not know they want to do a tour until you put that option in front of them."

Beverley Philpotts,
key account manager,
Travelsphere and Just You

LOCAL *expert*



"Tours are important because clients get close to local people, so they really feel like part of the local story. I see it as more of an exchange of experiences. Clients don't just learn from guides like me, but I also learn from them too. Having a local person show you around really makes the difference."

Gina Volakou, Athens
guide, Siva Travel Services



ABOVE: The horseshoe-shaped harbour in the town of Nafpaktos, on the Gulf of Corinth PICTURE: Shutterstock/Constantinos Iliopoulos

neck to see the town's storybook medieval castle. The Byzantines, Ottomans and Venetians all ruled from there at one stage. No wonder it was in high demand, given the view I had in front of me.

Nafpaktos proved the ideal launchpad for a legendary pair of ancient Greek sites over the next two days – Olympia, home of the ancient Olympic Games, and Delphi, home of the oracle Pythia. In the former, I roamed where athletes once fought for glory and even ousted several agents in a running race through Olympia's ancient stadium, adding my name to the roster of champions. However, it was Delphi's spiritual aura that had many of us gripped. Looking down from the site's summit, the Temple of Apollo, Ancient Theatre and Treasury cling to the slopes of Mount Parnassus before the ancient landmarks give way to the dramatic depths of the Pleistos Valley.

We interspersed this wealth of ancient history with exploring Greek heritage through our tastebuds, first trying award-winning olive oils at Agriturismo Magna Grecia – part of a delicious farmhouse lunch – before making our own *tiropitakia* (cheese pies) and enjoying a tour and tasting at Ktima Bairaktaris winery.

"I've been really impressed by how diverse this touring itinerary has been," said Elizabeth Ryan of Personal Travel Agents. "We've done such a range of experiences that I think would be really hard to match if clients tried to do this independently."

CLOSE KNIT

The variety of experiences, safety of an organised itinerary and knowledgeable tour leader impressed every agent during our Greek adventure. But beyond everything we'd seen – the ambition of the ancient Greeks, the mouthwatering meals and spellbinding scenery – was the incredible camaraderie we'd built up over five short days.

Sharing meals always helps create friendships (especially when feasting on souvlaki and moussaka) but what really accelerated our bond were the coach journeys we had together in between each stop. Long periods on a bus are usually something to dread, but they became effortless opportunities to get to know one another. We'd met each other as complete strangers five days ago but spent our final night sharing gyros and ice cream beside a moonlit harbour in Nafpaktos, after an evening of traditional Greek dancing. We'd embraced the philosophy of *filoxenia* without even realising it – and it meant my first taste of Greece would be one to remember. **TW**

BOOK IT

Just You offers an eight-day Athens, Olympia and the Corinth Coast trip from £2,379 per person, with no single supplement. The price includes return flights from London, accommodation in three or four-star hotels, all transfers, some meals and tours. justyou.co.uk

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