

Natural nirvana

The carbon-neutral Sani Resort is setting the standard for sustainable holidays in Greece, discovers **Alice Barnes-Brown** while staying at the newly renovated Porto Sani

The forests of Halkidiki are my happy place: sandy paths beneath my feet, the heady scent of Aleppo pine in the air and a sparkling Thermaic Gulf beckoning through the trees. On the branches overhead, birds twitter seemingly in delight at the summer sun. “They’re very chatty today – there must be a lot of gossip,” whispers Ino, my eco-guide at Sani.

Set in 1,000 acres of nature reserve, Sani is made up of five five-star hotels (Sani Beach, Sani Dunes, Sani Club, Sani Asterias and Porto Sani) set along four miles of glorious bay. It’s both a family resort and a bona fide luxe getaway – with sustainability credentials that are second to none.

It became Greece’s first certified carbon-neutral resort in 2020, and aims to be net zero by 2030. I bedded down at the just-renovated Porto Sani to try out the resort’s excellent range of free eco-activities and to see what ingenious new innovations are helping them slash their emissions.

NATURE AT WORK

Ino and I emerge from the forest – currently being surveyed for its carbon-capturing capabilities – into the marshy Sani wetlands, home to about half of all the bird species found in Greece. Deftly as we can, we pick our way through the reeds to a lake. There’s a faint flap of wings as a coot makes a splash landing, while herons stand sentinel at the edge. We set up the binoculars to spy on a group of nesting cormorants.

On our way back to Porto Sani, Ino shows off the Bee Spot, a peaceful wildflower garden that opened in May 2022. Built in collaboration with Greek NGO The Bee Camp, the honeycomb-shaped bee hotel gives parents and kids a chance to play pollen-themed games and discover how wild bees are crucial to both the local and global ecosystem.

Another pillar of the Halkidiki landscape is the olive tree – there are around six million here. On a different outing, Ino takes me and about 25 others to a fledgling grove of olive trees behind the resort, ➤



Aegean Sea view from Sani Resort

ASK THE operator



Erin Johnson,
marketing
director,
Sovereign
Luxury Travel

“Porto Sani
has long been
a favourite

destination for Sovereign guests looking to make the most of their time away. Particularly exciting this year is the host of new services and facilities available following the recent renovations. A personal favourite is the new Spa Suite, which includes Anne Semonin treatments, such as the Gold Seekers Face and Body treatment, in addition to a Junior Spa menu for guests aged 12 years and above. It’s a great way for families to really treat themselves and relax together, and a great selling point.”



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Marina at Sani Asterias; Halkidiki coastline; herb picking at Sani Resort; birdlife at the Sani wetlands PICTURE: Ektotas Nikolakis

where I dig the dusty soil with my hands and plant one more. She tells me that in four years, it might just bear some juicy olives that’ll end up in a guest’s dinner.

FARM-TO-TABLE FOOD

Halkidiki olives are far from the only local ingredient on the menu. Almost two-thirds of Sani’s produce is sourced from within 100 miles of the resort. Much is even closer to home: one morning, I see chefs picking little leaves off the sage bushes in Sani’s fountain-filled courtyards.

If your clients love food, Sani’s half or full-board Dine Around programme encourages them to discover all the mouthwatering ways local ingredients are put to use across 27 dining venues. One such place is Tomata, an alfresco grill at Sani’s glamorous yacht marina. And, in 2022, Tomata became the first Sani restaurant to pilot an AI system that weighs and monitors food waste.

Not that there’ll be very much. After starters of Greek-grown charred mushrooms, plus aubergines and artichokes seasoned from a spice rack that covers much of the world, I polish off homemade linguine spruced up with lemon, basil and enough olive oil to mop up with spongy bread afterwards.

WILD THINGS

After dinner, I arrive at the Sani Marina – bathed in the warm evening glow – for a sunset cruise. Even the

pleasure cruises here have a sustainable twist: in 2022, Sani lent these vessels to a non-profit organisation called iSea to conduct the first proper photo survey of dolphins in the Thermaic Gulf. If you’re really lucky, you might just see a pod hurdling over the boat’s wake.

More or less every activity at Sani has an environmental angle. During my stay, I pedalled six miles through the wetlands, dunes and watermelon fields to a wild flamingo habitat; paid homage to Mother Nature with morning yoga by the beach; zipped around on electric golf buggies; and had a go on the treetop zipline course. Clients can even learn to go off-grid at the Bear Grylls Survival Academy.

Of course, what’s happening behind the scenes is more vital. The resort has run on renewable electricity since 2019, uses all its wastewater for irrigation and recently banned all single-use plastic. Naturally, Sani’s green initiatives are a work in progress: its own solar farm hasn’t yet been built, and refilling stations for reusable bottles are currently popping up to replace complimentary water cartons. But this groundwork could easily help Sani to become Greece’s first net zero hotel.

Halkidiki clearly isn’t just my happy place. It’s a safe haven for the birds and the bees, the fish in the peacock-blue sea, and the trees that have rooted in its soil for thousands of years. And with Sani’s ever-evolving environmental strategies, it looks set to stay that way. **TW**

WHAT’S NEW AT PORTO SANI?

A €30 million investment since 2020 has resulted in:

- 50 new suites
- Makeovers for the other 98 suites, with decor combining beach chic with modern sleek
- A brand-new spa
- Revamped crêche and kids’ club
- Two new restaurants: Lima, offering Japanese and Peruvian cuisine; and Elia, which serves modern Greek mezze

BOOK IT

A seven-night full-board stay in a Junior Suite Private Garden at Porto Sani costs from £3,299 per person, based on two people sharing, departing on June 12, 2024. The price includes return flights from Gatwick and a 10% early booking discount. sovereign.com