

Smooth sailing

The Greek mainland has just as much to offer high-end holidaymakers as the islands, finds Rose Dykins at Sani Resort and Katie McGonagle at Costa Navarino

TRIED & TESTED:

Sani Resort

Squinting through the heat rippling off Cape Sani's brilliant blue sea, I spy a couple of camels standing on a jetty in the distance. It's not the ouzo – they are just incredibly life-like statues.

These Arabian effigies represent the Silk Road theme of this year's Sani Gourmet festival – an annual 10-day celebration of the resort's restaurants. And during sunset drinks on the jetty, the camels are a hit with the champagne-fuelled selfie-seekers.

Before its development in the 1960s, Cape Sani was a stretch of forest and wetlands fringed by a curve of golden sand on the Kassandra peninsula, the southernmost finger of Halkidiki, jutting out from mainland Greece. Though tamed into a five-star microcosm of four hotels, it retains its wild edge with a 1,000-acre eco-reserve and back-to-nature feel that will appeal to those wary of an artificial resort environment.

Thessaloniki is a 50-minute drive away, and easyJet offers daily flights from Gatwick and thrice-weekly from Manchester.

► FOOD FOR THOUGHT

One of the factors behind Sani Resort's 40% return visitor rate is undoubtedly its culinary offering, with no fewer than 18 refined restaurants offering everything from classic-yet-contemporary Greek at Ouzerie to sophisticated sushi at See You Up, new this year. The resort also boasts Greece's only caviar restaurant, the opulent Byblos – a lure for the superyachts moored in Sani's own 215-berth marina.

Room rates are half-board, including breakfast and dinner at guests' home hotel, but a Dine Around package allows them to eat at restaurants throughout Sani Resort, regardless of which of the four hotels they are staying at. Certain restrictions apply, but it's a great way of adding variety to guests' dining experiences.

► PAUSE AND PLAY

Aside from the restaurants, Sani's facilities are extensive. These

include a sports centre with six clay tennis courts, Padi diving centre (with a nearby shipwreck to explore), two watersports stations, and a mountain biking centre. All cost extra.

Free scheduled activities include games on Sani's mini-football field, basketball and beach volleyball tournaments, hiking and archery. One morning, we rise for open-air yoga at one end of Sani's bay, peppered with pink lotus flowers. The atmosphere is relaxed and inclusive and a passing guest even decides spontaneously to end her coastal walk and join in.

Sani can arrange day trips to hip-yet-historical Thessaloniki, Greece's second city, and Afytos village, with its stone cottages and incredible cliff-top views, 10 miles from Sani. Other excursions include wine tours, coastal hikes, eco-tours of the neighbouring wetland bird sanctuary, and cruises past 'Holy Mountain', Mount Athos, which houses 20 Orthodox monasteries and can only be visited by men.

Sani Resort combines chic, all-white spaces with a child-friendly

ethos – this may put some honeymooners off, as toddlers frequently potter around the lobbies and make their presence known in restaurants.

Extensive family services include 'Babewatch' babysitting on the beach (the first 30 minutes is free), kids' mini-clubs at each hotel for four to 12-year-olds, and a teenagers' club (high season only). Sani has also introduced explorer-themed clubs so younger visitors can experience local wildlife, spotting birds, heading into the forest with magnifying glasses and creating beach eco-systems in jam-jars.

► SANI BEACH HOTEL

This sociable, six-storey option is best for guests seeking a classic hotel environment. Most of its 389 rooms have been refurbished, offering calm, modern decor with beachy touches and balconies (sea-view rooms are worth the price increase from garden-view). A top-tier category of suites has been added, offering direct beach access. The hotel's four restaurants and five bars are

→ chic yet informal, and the freshwater fun pool, new infinity pool, and the three golden-sand beaches are well-maintained. The relaxed spa with 10 treatment rooms uses Anne Semonin products.

▶ SANI BEACH CLUB

These 205 rooms and suites housed in low-rise bungalows are a five-minute drive from the rest of the facilities, but house the only private pools in Sani Resort in 10 top-tier Junior Suite Pool units. All rooms have light and contemporary furnishings and outdoor patios. There are four bars and three restaurants, including an adult-only cocktail bar and refined tavern-style dining at Ouzerie. A sizeable private beach, 380sq m pool and an eight-room spa with a couple's suite round out the facilities.

▶ PORTO SANI VILLAGE

With its enormous lagoon pool – arguably the best on resort – and laid-back vibe, Porto Sani Village comprises 109 ground and first-floor suites – including a new top tier of three-bedroom family suites – all with serene, minimalist decor. Though the property doesn't have its own beach, guests have access to Sani Asterias Suites' peaceful beach and Bousulas beach at Sani Beach Hotel. The earthy-chic spa has eight treatment rooms and an inviting indoor pool with Jacuzzi. Poolside Sea Breeze bar serves brunch cocktails, including a winning combination of Greek wine, sugar and

lime, and its three restaurants include Byblos, which offers a €75 Caviar Experience tasting menu.

▶ SANI ASTERIA SUITES

This gated 48-suite option has easy beach access and a small-scale, exclusive feel that may appeal to honeymooners. Some units have marina views; all have elegant, neutral furnishings and Jacuzzi tubs. There is an 800sq m pool, and guests have access to three beaches, one private. There's no spa, but in-room treatments can be arranged, and guests can use Porto Sani Village's spa and fitness centre.

TRIED & TESTED:

Costa Navarino

Move over Mary Berry, I've got a new culinary idol. Well, two, to be precise. Ana and Loula, the local ladies who host cooking classes for guests of Costa Navarino resort, have a twinkle in their eyes even as we arrive for our evening lesson. They've got more than just recipes up their sleeves, it seems.

What starts with rustling up a few simple dishes – cinnamon-dusted pasta from scratch, and Greek salad overflowing with olives and feta – soon turns into a fun-filled evening of local culture, as we finish dinner with a glass of ouzo and a rousing round of Greek dancing in the yard outside.

It hardly matters that we don't speak the same language: sitting in a stone-



ABOVE: Porto Sani Village

built cottage surrounded by bunches of drying herbs and a spell-binding view across the serene Navarino Bay, it's the sense of Greek hospitality that speaks volumes.

With two Starwood hotels and a championship golf course to its name, you'd be forgiven for expecting Costa Navarino – the luxury development in mainland region the Peloponnese – to be just another identikit resort, but that's emphatically not the case.

Unlike some large-scale developments, which could be transplanted from one country to another with no discernible difference, here, there's a real sense of connection to the community. From regional foods and locally-made toiletries to a list of excursions led by characters



Sani Holidays offers a week at **Sani Beach Hotel** from £389 half-board, including **Sani Dine Around**, easyJet flights from Gatwick to Thessaloniki, taxes and baggage. Departures from Manchester start at £459, and airport transfers from £45 return. saniholidays.com



LEFT: Sani Resort eco-reserve
BELOW: Sani Beach Hotel



Cyplon offers a week in a superior garden-view room at **The Westin Costa Navarino** from £4,499 for a family of four staying half-board in the summer holidays, with BA flights to Kalamata and private transfers, departing on August 11. cyplon.co.uk



→ like Ana and Loula, this resort is rooted in its surroundings, offering a window onto an increasingly popular region of Greece.

ON THE MAP

The Peloponnese has flown below the radar for some time, but after hosting this year's Abta convention and welcoming new flights from the UK - British Airways has added Heathrow-Kalamata flights between April 30 and September 24 next year, alongside easyJet and Thomas Cook Airlines - it is coming into its own.

The arrival of the Starwood development can certainly take some credit, but this region has plenty of natural assets in its favour too. It's the largest wine-making region in Greece, home to medieval castles, and to one of the most important wetlands in Europe, Gialova Lagoon, where migratory birds flock in their thousands.

The hotel's excursions team, Navarino Outdoors, can organise trips to these and other beauty spots. My favourite was a hike to the waterfalls of Polilimnio, meaning 'many lakes'. Between turquoise pools, thick jungle-like foliage and flashes of hot-pink oleander,

it felt more like a Caribbean island than an area of mainland Greece, proving this up-and-coming region still has plenty of surprises in store.

THE WESTIN RESORT

Few resorts straddle the divide between appealing to couples and families, but this well-executed exception proves the rule.

For adults, there's an award-winning golf course and enormous Anazoe spa, an outdoor cinema screen showing movies and music, plus a host of truly first-class restaurants ranging from the local - melt-in-the-mouth Greek mezze and souvlaki - to the international, with Japanese and Lebanese cuisine.

Much of this is in the Agora, a central area between the two resorts, but it's on the Westin side that families will find a cornucopia of facilities just for them, with a kids' waterpark, adventure playground, bowling alley and American diner, climbing wall, basketball court and kids' club, to name but a few.

Add to that a 446-strong inventory of bright, airy rooms and direct access to a

LEFT: Polilimnio Falls

RIGHT: Bay of Navarino

FAR RIGHT: The Romanos, A Luxury Collection Resort



sizeable beach, and this resort is a compelling prospect for any family seeking a comfortable and unpretentious escape.

THE ROMANOS, A LUXURY COLLECTION RESORT

This property has a different vibe from its neighbour, with its dark-wood decor, sizeable rooms and low-rise layout lending a classy and secluded feel.

Its 321 rooms are incredibly well-appointed, with separate bath and shower, double sinks, balconies and impressive views even in lower-category rooms overlooking the gardens or golf course, so it's a good bet for clients who prefer a lead-in room at a five-star resort over the best category somewhere more mid-range.

It is better suited to couples than families, although parents with very young children will

find the Cocoon infants' club (four months to three years) on this side of the resort, along with tennis courts and a 24-hour gym.

The facilities of the Westin aren't far away though - it was a brisk five-minute walk from my room at one end of The Romanos to the gorgeous thalassotherapy pools at the Anazoe spa - so this should suit clients seeking a quiet escape with all the amenities of a large-scale resort. **TW**

LUXURY HOLIDAYS IN CYPRUS

- ★ EXCLUSIVE SUMMER 2016 OFFERS
- ★ FLIGHTS FROM REGIONAL UK AIRPORTS
- ★ PAPHOS, LIMASSOL, LARNACA & MORE...
- ★ PRIVATE TAXI TRANSFERS INCLUDED
- ★ 100% FINANCIALLY PROTECTED



NEW 2015 BROCHURE OUT NOW!

CONTACT US ON FREEPHONE
0800 074 8888
or visit www.cyplon.co.uk



Great value holidays for Winter 15/16 and Summer 16

- £59 deposit - every holiday, every date*, beach, city and ski
- Unbeatable flexibility - Monarch scheduled flights and 000's of hotels, villas & apartments
- Fully ATOL protected - Your customers' money is safe when you book a holiday with Monarch

Monarchagents.co.uk



ABTA No: V0331 Monarch Holidays holds an Air Travel Organiser's Licence (ATOL) which is granted by the Civil Aviation Authority. * Deposit of £59 is per person (including children) and available for holidays booked at least 10 weeks before departure. Full balance is payable 10 weeks before departure.