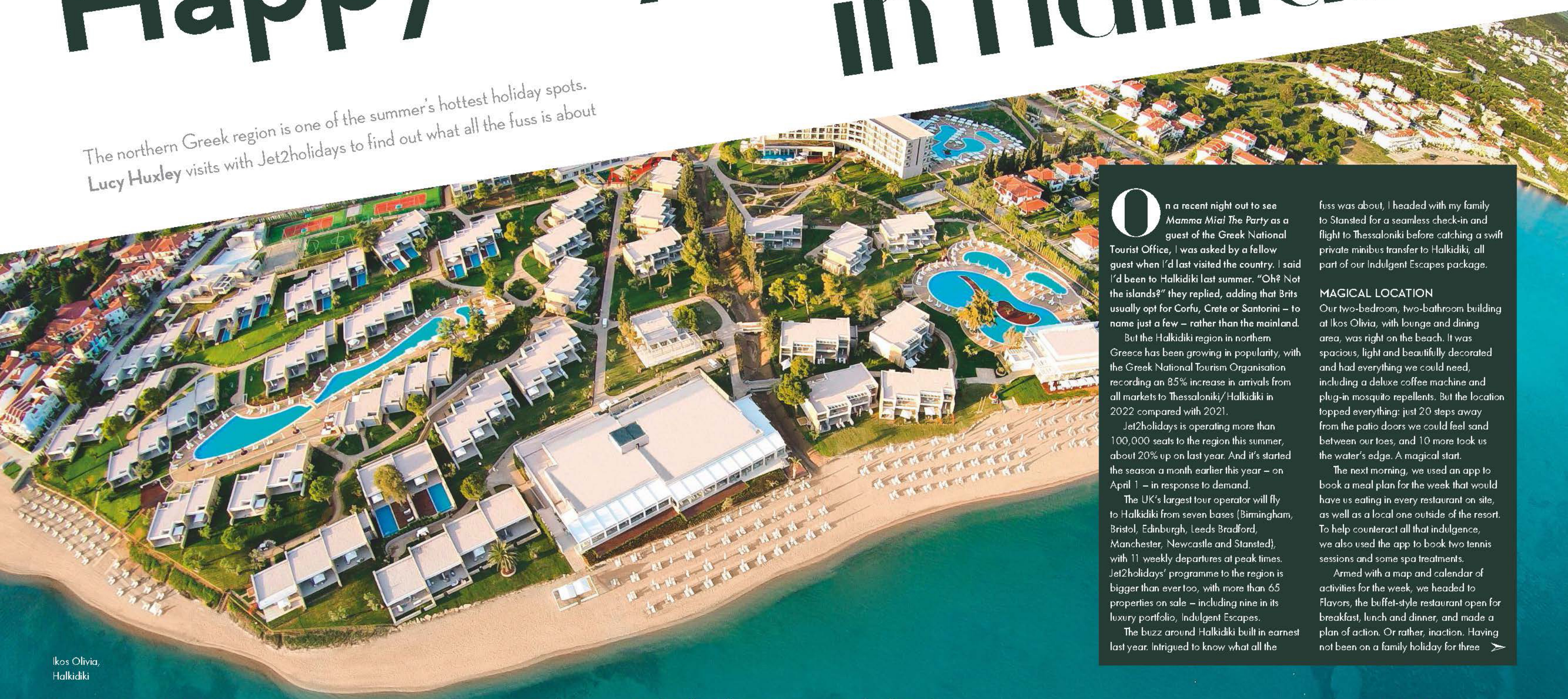


Happy days in Halkidiki

The northern Greek region is one of the summer's hottest holiday spots. Lucy Huxley visits with Jet2holidays to find out what all the fuss is about



Ikos Olivia,
Halkidiki

On a recent night out to see *Mamma Mia! The Party* as a guest of the Greek National Tourist Office, I was asked by a fellow guest when I'd last visited the country. I said I'd been to Halkidiki last summer. "Oh? Not the islands?" they replied, adding that Brits usually opt for Corfu, Crete or Santorini – to name just a few – rather than the mainland.

But the Halkidiki region in northern Greece has been growing in popularity, with the Greek National Tourism Organisation recording an 85% increase in arrivals from all markets to Thessaloniki/Halkidiki in 2022 compared with 2021.

Jet2holidays is operating more than 100,000 seats to the region this summer, about 20% up on last year. And it's started the season a month earlier this year – on April 1 – in response to demand.

The UK's largest tour operator will fly to Halkidiki from seven bases (Birmingham, Bristol, Edinburgh, Leeds Bradford, Manchester, Newcastle and Stansted), with 11 weekly departures at peak times. Jet2holidays' programme to the region is bigger than ever too, with more than 65 properties on sale – including nine in its luxury portfolio, Indulgent Escapes.

The buzz around Halkidiki built in earnest last year. Intrigued to know what all the

fuss was about, I headed with my family to Stansted for a seamless check-in and flight to Thessaloniki before catching a swift private minibus transfer to Halkidiki, all part of our Indulgent Escapes package.

MAGICAL LOCATION

Our two-bedroom, two-bathroom building at Ikos Olivia, with lounge and dining area, was right on the beach. It was spacious, light and beautifully decorated and had everything we could need, including a deluxe coffee machine and plug-in mosquito repellents. But the location topped everything: just 20 steps away from the patio doors we could feel sand between our toes, and 10 more took us the water's edge. A magical start.

The next morning, we used an app to book a meal plan for the week that would have us eating in every restaurant on site, as well as a local one outside of the resort. To help counteract all that indulgence, we also used the app to book two tennis sessions and some spa treatments.

Armed with a map and calendar of activities for the week, we headed to Flavors, the buffet-style restaurant open for breakfast, lunch and dinner, and made a plan of action. Or rather, inaction. Having not been on a family holiday for three



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: Lucy Huxley and her children Marijke and Tom at Ikos Olivia; parasailing; a local restaurant



SELLING *Halkidiki*



Lloyd Cross
general manager trade sales, Jet2holidays

World-class beaches

Greece's beaches are among the world's cleanest and Halkidiki's are right at the top, according to the 2022 Blue Flag list. Its 300 miles of shoreline and shallow waters make it perfect for little ones.

Summer in the city

Halkidiki isn't just beaches and blue seas. Thessaloniki is not only Greece's second-largest city but also a vibrant port full of historical gems, hip bars, live music and harbourside cafes.

Three peninsulas

Kassandra's swish resorts serve up coastline, beach bars and fabulous restaurants. Sithonia's rugged good looks are ideal for sporty stays. But many say Athos, with its stunning Byzantine monasteries, is the most beautiful of all.

The culture

Halkidiki is a hotspot for history – it is Aristotle's birthplace, after all.

years due to the pandemic, much of the first day was spent lounging around one of the resort's three pools – one by the main hotel, a private one for Deluxe Collection guests, and a lagoon pool with a swim-up bar, where we lazily set up camp for the day. Waiters were always on hand to offer us ice-cold water, fresh lemonade, beers, cocktails, or, for the kids, endless chocolate milkshakes – though not enough to spoil their appetites for dinner.

Ikos Olivia has four speciality restaurants. Provence offers the full French fine-dining experience, with small plates of exquisite tidbits such as ricotta-stuffed cherry tomatoes and beef patties with foie gras. Greek restaurant Ouzo is the beach spot, with a more relaxed, friendly vibe and a menu of traditional-meets-modern Greek dishes created with local ingredients by Michelin-starred chef Lefteris Lazarou. Italian Fresco's beautiful setting alone would make it a standout, but the amazing food by Michelin-starred chef Ettore Botrini just added to the appeal, and my

“Spotting octopus and fish on a sea dive off Sani was an unforgettable experience for my daughter

kids said the dessert was the best they'd ever tasted. Asian restaurant Anaya's more grown-up vibe, enhanced by background chill-out music from DJ Lazarus and a woman playing a hang drum, was different again – and the pad thai sensational. Finally, outside the resort, Greek restaurant Ithaki is included as part of an initiative designed to put money back into the local economy.

ACTION STATIONS

With all that food, keeping active was essential, and there was plenty on offer. Paddleboarding or sea-kayaking first thing – when the sea was millpond calm – was a firm

favourite, and ball sports like tennis, table tennis, beach volleyball and basketball through to classes like aqua aerobics, Pilates and Zumba were all tried and tested.

A massive plus for my daughter was the free scuba diving lesson in the pool, which she loved so much that an excursion to Sani beach for an hour's dive in the sea (€110) was inevitable, with the multiple fish and octopus she spotted making it an unforgettable experience. Equally good fun were the armchair inflatables (€20) and parasailing over the bay (€130 for two).

Before we knew it, the week was over, and it had flown by so quickly that we hadn't booked any of Jet2holidays' enticing-sounding Halkidiki excursions. These included a lagoon cruise of the Sithonia peninsula, a cultural tour of Thessaloniki and a trip to Meteora and its complex of monasteries. The home to Eastern Orthodox monks is also the backdrop to the James Bond film *For Your Eyes Only*. Sadly, on this trip, it wasn't for ours. Now there's an excuse to go back... **TW**