

# Ionian idyll

A revamped resort on Corfu's east coast is a tranquil base to explore the island's many multicultural influences, finds **Katie McGonagle**

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The rooftop bar is buzzing with the chatter of couples enjoying an early-evening aperitif as we step out onto its sweeping terrace, tree-covered hills rising to form a dramatic backdrop behind us while the still waters of the Ionian Sea spread out straight ahead.

Just across the narrow Straits of Corfu sits the Greek mainland at its border with Albania, the shadowy ridges of these neighbouring coastlines disappearing into a pink-tinged mist as the sun sets, casting everything in a warm, soft glow.

Or maybe that's something to do with the wine tasting we're enjoying amid these scenic surroundings at the Tarazza Rooftop Bar in the recently reopened Valmar Corfu. Formerly the four-star Ionian Sun, this all-inclusive resort was completely refurbished and reopened last July to become part of Louis Hotels' Elegant Collection of five-star properties.

We sample a white assyrtiko from Santorini, a rosé from the Greek island of Evia, a pouilly-fumé from France and a valpolicella from Italy, a range the waiter proudly tells us is in tribute to Corfu's multicultural heritage. This island is a melting pot of influences from its past rulers, including Venice – which dominated the island for 400 years, leaving it outside the sphere of the Ottoman Empire – and later the French and British.

It's been in the cultural spotlight thanks to popular ITV show *The Durrells*, telling the story of British naturalist Gerald Durrell and his family who lived on the island in the 1930s; as the birthplace of the late Prince Philip; and more recently as the setting for *Amanda & Alan's* ➤

# DESTINATIONS

## GREECE, CYPRUS & BALKANS | CORFU



The tiny island of **Paxos** and its even smaller neighbour, **Antipaxos**, are just a short boat trip from Corfu's main port, and an ideal day out. The main town on Paxos swarms with visitors as day-tripper boats arrive, with many stopping for drinks on the harbourfront (pictured), shopping for clothes and keepsake jewellery or picking up souvenirs featuring the island's famous trident icon. Local legend would have you believe Paxos was formed when Poseidon, Greek god of the sea, broke off a corner of Corfu to create a paradise for his wife, the sea nymph Amphitrite, but lost his trident to the islanders in the process. Look out for dolphins in the waves or take a swim in the warm, clear waters before returning to Corfu Town.



### BOOK IT

**Jet2holidays** offers seven nights at the five-star Valmar Corfu from £849 per person, based on two sharing on an all-inclusive-plus basis, departing Stansted on May 9. The price includes flights, 22kg of luggage and transfers. The resort opens for the season in May. Farm tour and tasting from €45. [jet2holidays.com](http://jet2holidays.com)



**CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** Aerial view of the beach at Valmar Corfu; The Liston, Corfu Town; writer Katie McGonagle; the Old Fortress **PICTURES:** Katie McGonagle

Greek Job, also filmed on location. For clients seeking a new take on this old favourite, the revamped resort offers a peaceful setting from which to explore.

### SEA TO SKY

It's easy to see how the hotel gained its new name of Valmar, taking a combination of the Italian words for the mountain valley and the sea to encapsulate its breathtaking location on the east coast of Corfu. And nowhere is that more apparent than on this enormous rooftop terrace, home to a lively bar, Peruvian fusion restaurant Viru and unbeatable 270-degree sea views.

The multi-level resort is built right into the lush hillside, with 141 of its 201 rooms offering a sea view that captures the morning sunrise. It has easy access to a pebble beach where guests can enjoy light lunchtime bites or fresh fish for dinner at the seafront Gill and Olive Mediterranean restaurant (reached by crossing the coastal road or via a short underpass).

The views aren't just for the grown-ups, however. The family pool, neighbouring kids' club and splash pool and the tennis and basketball courts enjoy similarly panoramic prospects, set towards the back of the resort in a lofty spot high up on the hillside. That means parents can soak in the scenery while their little ones play, without having to worry about them disturbing other guests.

### TOWN AND COUNTRY

A benefit of its location near the coastal road is the direct bus route that takes guests to Corfu Town in around half an hour. As we stroll its winding streets, tour guide Nausika Katsarou points out the many cultures that left their mark on the island's capital. She even jokes that Corfiots are known for "speaking Greek with an Italian accent".

The city was contained between two Venetian-built fortresses for more than six centuries, and that Italian heritage is apparent in its cuisine, language and art. But then there's The Liston, an arcade of pretty shops and pavement cafes that wouldn't look out of place in Paris; the cricket pitch at central Spianada Square that is a leftover of British rule; and the Palace of St Michael and St George, built using sandstone from Malta and now home to the Museum of Asian Art.

Another curious import that has become a symbol of Corfu is the kumquat, first introduced in 1924 from east Asia. The small citrus fruit thrived in the Corfiot climate and has given rise to a host of local delicacies, from marmalade and candied fruits to a fiery orange kumquat liqueur. We sample it at Lazaris, part sweet shop, part distillery and a popular spot for local souvenirs.

A more original taste of the island comes by way of Dr Kavvadia's Organic Farm, a 19th-century homestead restored by the eponymous doctor and his Corfu-born wife. It has 4,000 olive trees: the native lianolia variety and the highly sought-after thiako, transplanted from fellow Ionian islands Kefalonia and Ithaca and prized for its high antioxidant levels and distinctive taste.

Estate guide Marco Moraitis leads us through the groves of gnarled olive trees to a drying-out room, where fragrant marigold petals, St John's Wort and lemon verbena are laid out in rows ready to be sold as organic herbal teas. "This place brings you closer to the nature around you, the natural cycles of when things grow and when they stop. I find it truly fascinating," says Marco.

Whether here, in the peaceful setting of this century-old farmstead or on the coast surrounded by hills on one side and sea views on the other, Corfu's natural beauty draws visitors back time and again. **TW**