

Magical Messinia

As mainland Messinia gears up to host next month's Abta Convention, Lina Molloholli looks at how to sell a crowd-free Greek getaway

Fhough the Greek islands often steal the show, mountainous Messinia in the southeastern Peloponnese proves Greece's mainland can be just as alluring. Its mix of olive groves that stretch as far as the eye can see, and medieval castles overlooking sparkling bays, will be back in the spotlight this year as flagship development Costa Navarino plays host to the Abta Convention.

It's easy to reach too, with direct flights to Kalamata from London on British Airways, Jet2.com, easyJet and Ryanair, plus more regional links with Jet2.com adding capacity from Birmingham, Bristol and Manchester this summer. The growth reflects rising interest in the region: the Greek National Tourism Organisation reports 59,011 travellers were due to fly from the UK to Kalamata in March-October this year, a 25% increase from 2023.

There are better times by road as well, with a highway built in 2017 from Kalamata to Athens meaning clients coming by car or coach from the capital can be there in less than three hours.

Sunvil director Dudley der Parthog says: "Messinia is a secret no longer, with flights from a number of UK regional airports, but development remains limited and the resort villages are small. The area has everything our clients look for: pretty fishing villages such as Finikounda or Agios Nikolaos, miles of sandy beach and history nearly everywhere you look – a journey through the centuries from Homeric legend to Byzantine chapels and Venetian castles."

WHAT TO SEE

Horseshoe-shaped Voidokilia Beach is a highlight for its white-sand dunes and pool-like waters. Gialova Lagoon, which backs onto the dunes, is a protected wetland with more than 270 bird species, including flamingos and herons. Here, travellers might spot the ➤

PICTURE: Shutterstock/Verveidis Vasilis

DESTINATIONS

GREECE & CYPRUS | PELOPONNESE



CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT: The castle and village at Koroni; Venetian castle, Methoni; Ormos Beach Club, Costa Navarino

PICTURES: Shutterstock/Aerial-motion, Pit Stock



endangered African chameleon, unique to this part of Greece. Clients can do a short hike from the beach up to Nestor's Cave, a site mentioned in Homer's *Odyssey*, then continue to the ruined castle of Navarino for spectacular views of Voidokilia. Elsewhere, nature lovers can explore the Polilimnio Waterfalls tucked away in a green gorge, with natural pools ideal for a cooling dip.

In Kalamata, clients can wander among neoclassical buildings, lively tavernas and a bustling central market, sampling juicy Kalamata olives or fresh olive oil. The region is also known for high-quality wines – just outside the city are some of Messinia's best grape growers, including Papanonis Winery and Navarino Vineyards.

WHERE TO STAY

From luxurious all-inclusive resorts to boutique hotels and apartments, Messinia has a wide range of accommodation. Alan Cross, director of travel agent relationships at Jet2holidays, says some of the operator's most popular destinations in Messinia include laid-back Stoupa and historic Agios Nikolaos.

In Stoupa, self-catering apartments and boutique hotels rule the roost. Bonos Apartments offer just 10 rooms and are only a short walk from Stoupa Beach and Kalogria Beach, while Villa Kosta Hotel & Apartments has an adult-only lounge bar and bikes for hire. For bigger parties and families, suggest lo Villas – just three villas set around a saltwater pool.

Cross says: "For a traditional yet cosmopolitan resort, recommend a property in Kalamata, such as the 188-room Grecotel Filoxenia or 38-room Horizon Blu, both surrounded by churches, tavernas and buzzy bars.

For a luxury escape, push Costa Navarino resort." Costa Navarino brings together four high-end properties and a collection of villas, with facilities including two golf courses, a tennis centre, restaurants, shops and children's activities. These include the family-friendly Westin Resort with a spa and a splash park; W Costa Navarino, the first W property in Greece when it opened in 2022 (minimum age 12); and sophisticated stays at The Romanos. Newcomer Mandarin Oriental made its first foray into Greece here with 51 suites and 48 pool villas that blend into the landscape with plant-covered 'living' roofs.

HOW TO SELL

Messinia is bursting with ancient history and varied terrain, so there's plenty to entice cultural and active travellers. For avid walkers, suggest the 12.5-mile Vyros Gorge trail, which winds past rustic villages as the peaks of the Taygetos range loom above. For an easier walk, the flat Stoupa to Agios Nikolaos coastal path is ideal for families and those who would like a gentler, hour-long stroll fringed by the Messinian Gulf.

Sporty types can relish rafting in the Lousios River – where it's said Zeus took his first bath – or canyoning and ziplining around the Polilimnio Waterfalls. All activities can be booked through local company Explore Messinia, which pays agent commission and features kayaking, e-biking and canyoning excursions.

History buffs, meanwhile, are well served in the southern end of Messinia, where the Venetian castles at Methoni and Koroni sit on the shores of the Ionian Sea and the fascinating ruins of ancient Messini, a 30-minute drive from the airport, are still under excavation. **TW**

LOCAL EXPERIENCES

Here's a taste of what delegates can try at Abta's 2024 Travel Convention at Costa Navarino.

Olive oil tasting

Experience an exclusive olive oil tasting to learn how the region's soil, olive varieties and meticulous production methods combine to produce 'liquid gold'.

Hiking Gialova Lagoon

This Intrepid Travel adventure sets off on a scenic trail around Gialova Lagoon, crossing the dunes to Voidokilia Beach and the old castle of Navarino.

Cycle for Abta Lifeline

After some Greek mountain tea, this e-bike tour includes a visit to a restored monastery, an olive oil and wine tasting tour, and a traditional Greek lunch.

Messinia Without Trash

Supported by Costa Navarino and the sustainability-focused Captain Vassilis and Carmen Constantakopoulos Foundation, with easyJet holidays matching donations from delegates, this activity gathers local volunteers and participants to collect recyclable litter on Divari Beach.



COSTA NAVARINO, GREECE | 7-9 OCTOBER 2024

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BOOK IT

Olympic Holidays offers a seven-night stay at Grecotel Filoxenia from £589, staying in a Cozy Room on a bed and breakfast basis, including flights from Gatwick departing on October 5. olympicholidays.com

Sunvil offers a seven-night stay in a self-catered Studio Room at Fotis Apartments in Finikounda from £825 per person, including transfers and flights from Gatwick departing on October 5. sunvil.co.uk