

# Wet 'n' Wild

Laura French embraces her sporty side at Neilson's Retreat Beachclub in Sivota

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## TRIED & TESTED

### *Neilson Retreat Beachclub, Sivota*

I didn't quite realise what I was letting myself in for when I casually agreed to a one-and-a-half-mile open-water swim

around Goat Island, just off the coast of Sivota, Greece.

I soon realised my mistake when I saw half the group kitted out in triathlon suits and swimming caps, and my bright pink bikini – combined with a severe lack of goggles – suddenly felt worryingly inadequate.

But it was too late: I wasn't about to back down, so off I

set in a swimming style that was more akin to a chimpanzee than a championship swimmer, splashing my way through the calm water of the bay and eventually turning a corner where it suddenly got a whole lot choppier. Oh dear.

Fast forward an hour and six minutes and I stumbled onto the shore like a washed-up whale,

wobbling like jelly to a round of 'well done dear' applause. I might have come third from last but I'd made it, and it felt pretty good.

## ► OASIS OF CALM

This might have been the most challenging activity I tried during my stay at Neilson's Retreat Beachclub, [➔](#)



➔ but it was far from the only one. The resort is set up to encourage clients to get active and try new things, and they certainly make the most of it with a plethora of activities on the weekly schedule.

Handily, Sivota is sheltered from the wind, which makes open-water swimming significantly easier. It also makes the likes of kayaking and stand-up paddleboarding an enjoyable pleasure rather than a help-I'm-drowning drama, and the host of little islands and caves dotted around the bay add something special too. Kayaks and paddleboards are available for hire any time at no extra charge.

The stand-up boarding is especially peaceful – think glorious mountain scenery everywhere you look and turquoise water so clear you can see right to the bottom, even though it's several metres deep (that's until I hit a wave and fell off, but we don't need to dwell on that).

It was second only to the group afternoon kayaking trip to a beautiful, golden-sand beach nearby that was deserted but for a few locals who'd



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popped over on dinghies.

Even waterskiing is a whole lot easier when you don't have 10ft waves to contend with; I managed to stand up for a good few minutes, which gave me a newfound love for the sport and wiped away any previous humiliation I'd suffered in other attempts. Clients here get two free waterskiing or wakeboarding tows per week, and if they're really keen they can pay €39 for an extra go, or invest in one of the bronze, silver or gold packages.

The only drawback of these calm conditions is that windsurfing and dinghy sailing aren't quite as extreme



### Neilson Retreat Beachclub in numbers

- 151 rooms
- 114 activities available
- 10 activities with tuition
- 4 tennis courts
- 2 swimming pools
- 18 degrees Celsius on average

LEFT: Sivota

BELOW: Mountain biking in Sivota

OPPOSITE: Neilson Retreat Beachclub



A week at Neilson Retreat Beachclub, Sivota, costs from £879 per person, based on a June 2017 departure. The price includes flights from Manchester, transfers, club board accommodation (breakfast and lunch daily plus four evening meals a week), most activities and kids' clubs for ages two to 17. A 14-night stay starts at £1,175. [neilson.co.uk](http://neilson.co.uk)



as pros might like. For beginners it's ideal, however, and the resort offers free courses in both to teach newbies the basics in a week (minimum age of 13). Even on a brief introduction to windsurfing, I learnt how to turn the board on the water without toppling over, which is a decent achievement if you ask me.

#### ON YOUR BIKE

It's not only water-based activities that give the Ionian coast its appeal, of course; northern Greece is full of mountainous scenery, remote villages and one-off coves that make mountain biking in the region a pretty big deal.

We experienced a slice of it on a six-mile guided bike tour to Sivota's Mega Ammos beach. The ride was strenuous, to say the least, with some of the steep uphill parts causing me to question my fitness levels, but the exhilarating downhill slopes made it all worth it (as did the cold beer at a local taverna half-way through).

It was an adventurous way of seeing Sivota, whose cobbled streets and silent afternoon ambience made it clear this was Greece at its most

quintessential – just in case the sweeping mountain scenery and blinding blue stretch of sea around us hadn't quite done the trick.

Most of the other mountain biking routes are fairly challenging too (ours was one of the easiest) so it's worth noting that clients need to have a basic level of fitness. Routes change each week, with both road and mountain



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biking tours available, and distances span the whole spectrum, from three miles to 25 miles-plus.

#### BALANCING ACT

There was plenty more in the way of fitness too; at one point I found myself partaking in an outdoor Zumba class, arms and legs flailing all over the place in a vague attempt to embrace my inner Latino (conclusion: I'm not sure there is one there).

I even tried a morning yoga class, and despite the ungainly positions, I felt as fresh as a daisy afterwards.

There's also a new tennis programme designed by Mark Petchey (former coach to world number one Andy

Murray), which I didn't get to sample, but it features daily group coaching sessions that are included in the price.

On the cultural side, this region has its gems, including the port town of Parga: about a 40-minute drive away, it's home to a majestic castle and looks especially enchanting at night, when the harbour twinkles with lights and tavernas liven up with local music.

There are weekly evening excursions alongside boat trips to the nearby islands of Paxos and Anti-Paxos, which is a worthy sell to those less interested in the active side and more seduced by kicking back with a moussaka and a glass of local wine. Given that multi-generational and family trips are especially popular here, that might well appeal to the slightly older crowd.

Those who manage to do the active part and take in some culture deserve a medal, or at least a certificate, which they'll get if they complete one of the courses or that gruelling swim. I didn't stay for the whole week so I'm still waiting for mine, but I'm determined to get my hands on it – even if that means doing it all over again, which, for the record, I would.