

Land of plenty

Escape to the country
in Greece and Cyprus,
says Katie McGonagle

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The sun-kissed shores of Greece and Cyprus have been drawing British holidaymakers for decades, and for good reason – sandy beaches, lapping waves and guaranteed sunshine are the building blocks for any good holiday.

But why stick to the fringes when there's so much going on inland? Drag yourself away from those golden sands and you might be surprised by how much there is to discover, from biking trails around the Troodos Mountains to stomping the grapes on the Greek mainland.

We find out what's on offer in the rural heartlands of Greece and Cyprus, so you've got extra reasons to sell the shoulder seasons, and a good alternative for clients who'd rather swap busy beaches for quiet countryside.

► BE A FARMER

Many resorts have tapped in to the trend of growing their own produce or shouting about zero-miles menus, but few actually let guests get their hands dirty – until you get to the Grecotel collection, whose 'Be a farmer for the day' experience encourages visitors to do just that.

Agreco Farm, owned by the hotel group, is a 40-hectare

estate growing organic ingredients for use in its resorts. Families can spend a day on the working farm to try baking in a wood-burning oven, milking goats, picking vegetables or shearing sheep. It's not all hard work, though: they can make lunch using ingredients grown on-site, taste wine and sit down to a six-course evening meal complete with Cretan music and dancing. **Book it:** A guided tour, lunch and activities at the farm starts at €55 per adult and €28 per child aged six to 12, free for under-sixes. Rates at Grecotel's White Palace Resort, close to Agreco Farm, start at £223 per night. agrecofarms.gr

► VILLAGE LIFE

Wind the clock back 50 years and Cypriot villages were the very heart of island life, until job and education opportunities began to lure the younger generation towards bigger towns, leaving traditional buildings to fall into disrepair.

Yet the past decade has seen the tide start to turn, with a resurgence of interest in preserving that way of life – and creating a unique tourism product along the way – injecting fresh enthusiasm (and cash) into some of those smaller villages.

One of the best examples

→ is Tochni, halfway between Larnaca and Limassol, and home to Danae Traditional Houses. These rustic Cypriot houses might lack the facilities of a big hotel but more than make up for that with bags of character, built from local Tochni stone and close to several walking and cycling routes.

Book it: Olympic Holidays offers a week at Danae Traditional Houses from £590, based on two sharing a one-bedroom apartment with breakfast, shared pool and flights from Gatwick, departing October 9. olympicholidays.com

► MOUNTAIN WALKS

Nothing gets you closer to nature than exploring on foot, and that's exactly where a walking tour comes in, particularly if you've got a guide to identify and explain the local flora.

Headwater has a walking holiday around Evia, the second-largest Greek island after Crete. Walkers will trace the old stone paths between tiny mountain villages and stop at Roman quarries, aqueducts and Byzantine churches – approaching all on foot for a unique perspective on the island.

That still leaves time for the occasional swim at a deserted beach or stop for lunch at a traditional taverna, returning each night to the family-run two-star Galaxy Hotel.

Book it: Headwater's Mountains and Villages of Evia walking tour starts at £1,079 including seven nights' hotel accommodation, most meals, four and a half days' guided walking, sightseeing in Athens, and British Airways flights from Heathrow. headwater.com

► SCENIC SELF-DRIVE

If a quiet escape appeals, do what the Cypriots do when they have a free weekend and make for the Troodos Mountains, where the Cyprus Sustainable Tourism project has created a network of self-drive routes.

Sunvil was one of the first UK operators to support the project and encourages guests to get out and explore the area on anything from a birdwatching or botanist-led walk through the forest to sampling the wares of artisan producers.

Chairman Noel Josephides says: "Sunvil's long-time rep Angela can organise many ways of immersing yourself in local events. Choose from halloumi-making, olive oil manufacturing in November and December, tours and tastings at the wineries, lace-making and more. There's even a rose festival in the summer months."

Book it: Sunvil offers a week in the self-catering, three-bedroom Stella Maris Villa with private pool near

Pomos from £1,268 based on two sharing, including flights from Gatwick, car hire, weekly maid service and welcome pack with wine. sunvil.co.uk

► VINE TIME

While some luxury resorts can feel rather cut off from their surroundings, the development at Costa Navarino in Messinia, in the southwest Peloponnese region of mainland Greece, does quite the opposite.

The resort's activities programme, Messinian Authenticity, is dedicated to getting guests out to explore. They can go to a traditional stone house to cook a Messinian menu under the watchful eye of two village women, go on a nature tour to discover the region's trees, flowers and herbs, or combine the two with a Messinian picnic.

For visitors there between August and October, the vineyard and wine-tasting tour is a must, giving them the chance to go to Costa Navarino's vineyards at Mouzaki and take part in the foot-pressing of grapes.

Book it: Cyphon offers a week at The Westin Resort Costa Navarino from £3,870 in total, for a family of three sharing a Deluxe Sea View Room, with breakfast, easyJet flights and private transfers, departing August 7. cyphon.co.uk TW

CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW: Evia; Danae Traditional House; and Costa Navarino



PICTURES: HEADWATER; AGRECO FARMS