

Riviera rising

The Athenian Riviera was once a hotspot for the rich and famous, so why not rediscover the glamour, asks **Ella Buchan**

The lake didn't look especially scary. It looked quite inviting, in fact, its sheer, shimmering emerald water encased by near-vertical limestone cliffs. The temperature hovered around a balmy 25C, according to a thermometer attached to the stone, and those bathing in it – giggling couples and groups of chattering friends – seemed happy enough, contentedly bobbing about or floating on their backs.

But there was something – or rather, lots of little things – swirling beneath the surface that made dipping a toe into the shallow, salty, mineral-rich water seem like a dangerous mission.

The creatures that live here are mottled grey garra rufa or 'doctor fish', prized in spa treatments and pedicures because they nibble on dry, dead skin. That they're native to Lake Vouliagmeni, on the Athens coast, is simultaneously terrific and terrifying.

After a while, though, I actually began to enjoy their soft, sandpapery smooches and relax into my surroundings. Lake Vouliagmeni was an underground cavern until, in around 320BC, its roof collapsed due to erosion by hot springs and saltwater. The resulting lake, fed by the same brackish waters, has drawn

people here ever since. It's also one of the reasons that, during the so-called 'golden age' of travel of the 1950s and 1960s, celebrities and elite business owners flocked to this 40-mile stretch of coastline, around half an hour's drive from Athens' city centre.

Its other attractions – honey-sand beaches, forested peninsulas, dramatic peach-hued cliffs and bluffs topped with olive trees – are myriad and undeniable.

GOLDEN MOMENTS

The Athens Riviera – whose beauty and glamour have been compared to the Côte d'Azur – became a playground for the Athenian elite and the world's most famous faces. Frank Sinatra and Brigitte Bardot bronzed on the beaches and dined in tavernas. Former US first lady Jackie O regularly holidayed here with her second husband, shipping magnate Aristotle Onassis.

Back then, there was only one place to stay: Astir Palace, a luxurious collection of bungalows and suites on the pine-clad Vouliagmeni Peninsula, a couple of miles from the lake. Nearby Astir Beach is still a popular place to spend lazy days lounging ➤

DESTINATIONS

GREECE & CYPRUS | ATHENIAN RIVIERA



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP:

Lake Vouliagmeni; pool at Four Seasons Astir Palace; the Temple of Poseidon, Attica, Greece

PICTURES: Shutterstock; Ken Seet



on sunbeds, dipping in the Aegean and sipping cocktails on the sand. The area lost a little of its lustre over time. But now the glamour is trickling back in, with familiar brand Four Seasons taking over Astir Palace – its debut property in Greece – last June. The new resort combines retro glamour and original structures with thoroughly modern touches, like a computerised booth that mists bodies with sunscreen.

TIMELESS BEAUTY

Four Seasons' opening has drawn the spotlight back to the Athens coast, whose glorious beauty has never really gone away. This was a place of deities long before the Hollywood gods and goddesses caught on. Ancient Greeks built the Temple of Poseidon 30 miles south of the Four Seasons; its buttery marble pillars, perched dramatically over brilliantly blue Cape Sounion, enchanted the poet Lord

Byron when he visited in 1810, and tour guides take great pains to point out the spot where he carved his name into one of the columns.

For clients truly looking to recreate the golden glamour of the 1950s, suggest a private sailing with Triton Odyssey. Cruises depart from Lavrion port to Makronisos island, where guests can swim and snorkel before heading to Cape Sounion and hiking up to the Temple of Poseidon – though trips can be tailored to each group, making it a great choice for families, groups of friends or colleagues, and couples celebrating a special occasion.

Days aboard its wooden yacht are days where the hardest decisions are whether to dive in the pale teal waters or climb down the ladder, whether to lounge on the seats at the stern or sunbathe on the lounge cushions by the bow.

Either way, between sips of mineral-rich regional wines and forkfuls of traditional dishes such as shrimp *saganak* (simmered in a rich tomato and feta sauce), it's impossible not to feel a little of that Jackie Onassis glamour. **TW**

BOOK IT

A night at boutique hotel **Divani Apollon Suites** starts at €197 per room for a B&B rate in low season.

divaniapollonhotel.com

Triton Odyssey offers private day sailings for up to eight from £1,200, including lunch, wine and soft drinks.

tritonodyssey.com

Aegean Air flies to Athens from Heathrow, Edinburgh and Manchester from £188 return including taxes and charges.

en.aegeanair.com

For more information, trip ideas and destination guides, go to discovergreece.com

DINING DELIGHTS

Nice n' easy Seaside

This chic seaside spot is on Astir Beach, where Frank Sinatra, Jackie O and Marilyn Monroe once lounged. Elegant, surprising concoctions include mushrooms with miso and blue cheese and fish with crispy seaweed.

Aperanto Galazio

This open-sided taverna, on a locals' favourite beach in Varkiza, is just the place for fresh Greek salad and well-priced wine, best enjoyed with tender octopus and perfectly crisped sardines.

Krabo Beach

Well-dressed party crowds gather for cocktails and bites at this exclusive restaurant and beach club. Tables are arranged over several levels by a secluded bay, so everyone enjoys uninterrupted views of the water while dining on soft-shell crab burgers or grilled aubergine.



DIVANI APOLLON PALACE & THALASSO

This stylish property knows about the joys and benefits of the water, whether that's soaking in the mineral-rich waters of the thalassotherapy centre, paddling in the Aegean Sea from the burnished-gold beach or staring at the shimmering bay from the balcony of its sea view rooms.

Divani Apollon Palace & Thalasso, a member of Leading Hotels of the World, regularly hosts conferences and is well-located for business travellers. The restaurant is a highlight, with tables on a deck jutting over the bay and fresh, zingy dishes packed with local seafood, herbs and vegetables.

divani-apollonsuites.com

