

# TRAVEL + LEISURE


WHY HAPPINESS IS A  
THE HOTELS ISSUE  
WONDERFUL PLACE TO STAY

NEW YORK  
ONLINE UNTIL MARCH 2008

\$7.99 US \$5.99 CAN



88326 36076



*The horseshoe-shaped  
Voidokilia Beach, in the  
Greek Peloponnese.*  
**OPPOSITE** Columns at the  
site of Ancient Messene.

# OF SEA & STONE



In a quiet corner of mainland Greece, a glamorous new resort offers access to extraordinary treasures, both natural and archaeological.

*By Rachel Howard. Photographs by Margarita Nikitaki*

# W

When Petros Themelis first visited the ruins of Ancient Messene in 1986, there wasn't much to see: only a few broken columns, strewn around the vineyards and olive groves, and some of the colossal foundations of the city's fourth-century B.C. fortifications. Over the intervening millennia, whole sections of the city walls had been carted away for use in other buildings. Farmers had wrenched the metal from monuments to make tools and used broken statues and epigraphs to build walls to protect their flocks and crops. Gradually, a city that had flourished for 800 years was turned into a de facto quarry, then covered with earth and used as farmland.

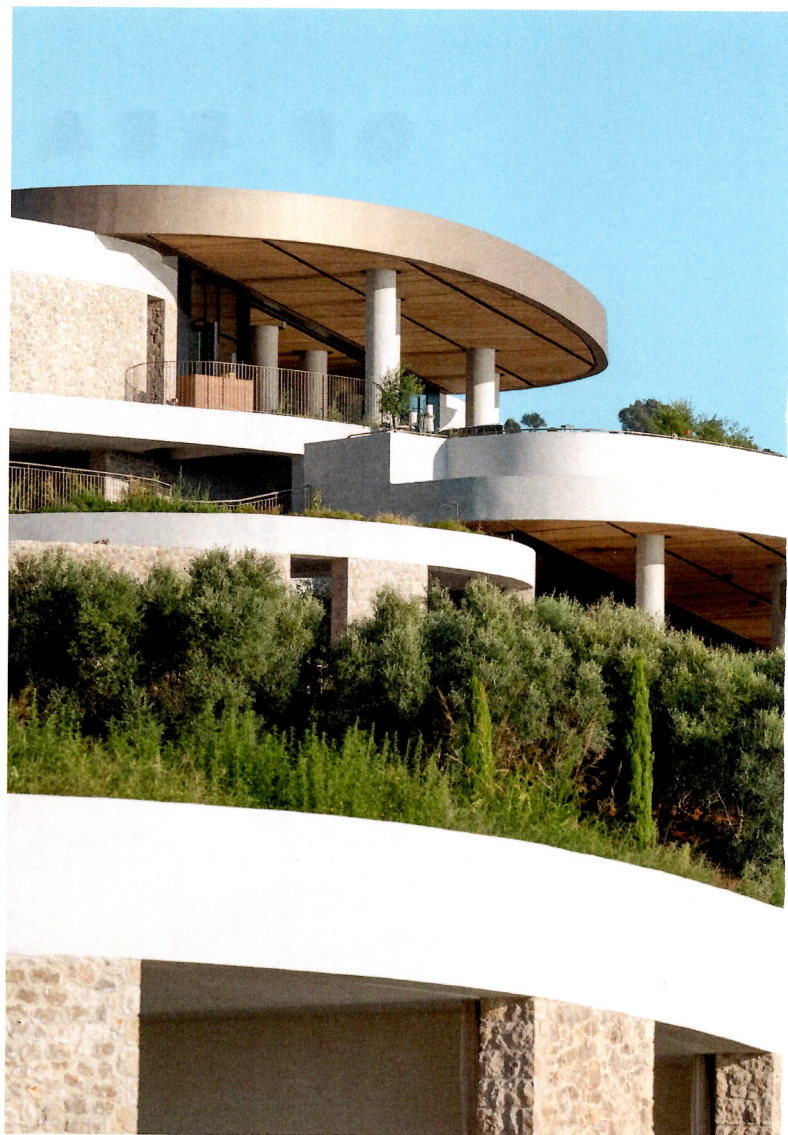
Widely acknowledged as a leading archaeologist of his generation, Themelis had already worked on some of Greece's most famous ruins: the palace of Vergina, the sanctuary at Delphi, the stadium of ancient Olympia. Ancient Messene must have seemed like a backwater in comparison—a waterlogged valley in the southwestern Peloponnese, huddled against the slopes of Mount Ithomi. But as Themelis dug deeper, an incredibly sophisticated settlement came to light, just as the second-century A.D. travel writer Pausanias had described it.

Right around the time Themelis was beginning his dig, 40 miles to the south a very different type of project was breaking ground—one that would also alter the fate of this often overlooked region. There, a local shipowner was quietly laying the foundations for the most ambitious luxury tourism development in Greece. He gradually bought up huge parcels of coastal land in Messinia, with a master plan to create a modern landmark of a very different kind.

Though I grew up in Greece, I had never been to Messene. So I was totally blown away by the scale, splendor, and masterful reconstruction of the 2,500-year-old city that stretched before me as I stood on the veranda of the only taverna in Ithomi, a sweet village shaped like an amphitheater overlooking the monuments.

Over the course of four decades, I learned, Themelis revealed and restored a city that was said to be larger than ancient Athens. The egalitarian urban plan included an amphitheater, a stadium, a gymnasium, a wrestling ring, a marketplace with colonnaded galleries, bathhouses, fountains, temples and sanctuaries, and an assembly hall where the city council deliberated. Today, the sheer ambition of the place is heightened by the remoteness of the setting—a landscape of hills in every conceivable shade of green, receding to the horizon.

You can almost hear the roar of the crowds in the marble bleachers, smell the olive oil that wrestlers rubbed

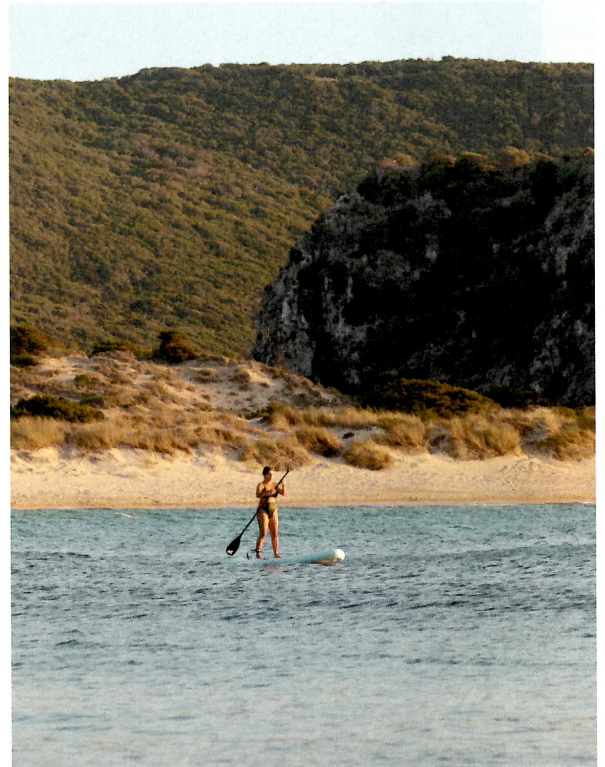


over their bodies until they glistened, picture the mosaic artists laying the intricate floors stone by stone, imagine the incense smoke from pyres where Pausanias witnessed “burnt offerings of every kind of living creature, thrusting into the flames not only cattle and goats but finally birds as well.” (Occasionally, when site-specific performances take place, visitors really can see artists at work and hear live music reverberating off the columns.)

When I visited last September, only a handful of people were rambling among the ruins. That week, the Greek government had limited the number of visitors at the Acropolis in Athens to 20,000 per day. It is extraordinary that Ancient Messene is so little known—just as it is hard to conceive that 40 years ago, it was nothing but muddy fields. Countless archaeological digs in Greece progress in slow fits and starts because of funding and staffing issues. Themelis, who died in October, was undaunted by such obstacles. First, he



**CLOCKWISE  
FROM LEFT**  
*Olive and cypress  
trees shade the  
terraces of the  
Mandarin Oriental,  
Costa Navarino;  
paddleboarding off  
Voidokilia Beach;  
Pizza Sapienza, one  
of the restaurants at  
the Mandarin  
Oriental.*



persuaded the state and other entities to buy land on and around the archaeological site from private owners. Then he secured European Union funding and recruited local farmers and craftsmen to supplement his small team of archaeologists and conservators.

Themelis also reached out to benefactors to sponsor the excavations. One of those supporters was Vassilis Constantakopoulos, a self-made tycoon who went to sea at the age of 18 on an unpaid internship and ended up founding the largest private cargo-shipping company in the world. “Captain Vassilis,” as he is affectionately known, remained deeply committed to his homeland of Messinia, an agricultural region of the Peloponnese that’s known for its kalamata olives.

A lifelong environmental activist, Constantakopoulos formulated a plan to transform the region into a model for sustainable tourism. Starting in the mid 1980s, he slowly bought up almost 2,500 acres of land. His dream





**CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE** An olive-oil tasting at the Mandarin Oriental; lounging on the resort's beach; café culture in the nearby town of Pylos.



## THE CLACK OF BACKGAMMON STILL BEATS TIME IN SHADY VILLAGE SQUARES.

was not simply to create a beach resort or a playground for his other passion, golf; it was to regenerate the whole of Messinia through investment, vocational training, and a philanthropic foundation. The name of this new coastal development was Costa Navarino.

The first phase of this \$1 billion project, Navarino Dunes, launched in 2010 with two large but low-slung hotels, a spa that uses olive oil in its treatments, and an 18-hole golf course. When I stayed there during the opening season, I was struck by how cleverly the construction blended into the shoreline, even though the highly polished atmosphere within the complex at times felt at odds with the rural, rough-around-the-edges surroundings. (At that time, tourism had barely made a dent in the silvery olive groves and golden dunes of the wider region.) “This is *Avatar* in Greece—paradise not yet found,” the golf architect Robert Trent Jones Jr. told me on that visit. “My golf course will be like walking into a Monet painting.”

**FAST-FORWARD 13 YEARS** and surprisingly little has changed. Campers and pickup trucks still outnumber bus tours on the roads, and the clack of backgammon still beats time in shady village squares. Plenty of beaches are still blissfully lounge-free, and many locals still depend, at least partly, on Messinia’s 15 million olive trees for their livelihoods.

However, a lot has happened at Costa Navarino. New hotels, golf courses, and recreational facilities have sprouted along the coastline, including the impetus for my return visit: Greece’s first Mandarin Oriental, the newest star in the constellation. As I alighted at the Mandarin’s curvaceous entrance, a handsome trio in straw hats and linens ushered me into a lobby with a profusion of plants, art books, and plump cocktail chairs. Floor-to-ceiling windows drew my eye toward a terrace poised above the glassy disk of Navarino Bay, one of Greece’s largest natural harbors. The world’s last naval battle fought with sailing ships took place there in 1827—a turning point in the Greek War of Independence—but today, only a pair of paddleboarders rippled the water.

All 99 suites and villas at the Mandarin Oriental, Costa Navarino, have head-on views of the bay. Slotted into the hillside in rippling rows, the stone-and-cement buildings have rounded edges and “green roofs” covered with plants. Electric bikes and buggies purred up and down the lavender-scented paths to Ormos Beach Club, where futuristic floats were aligned in two sinuous pools and ranks of loungers were lined up in perfect symmetry



on the raked sand. The international staff seemed to be everywhere all at once—refilling my dispenser of complimentary sunscreen, mixing me a peach daiquiri slushy, proffering a towel after I emerged from a dip off the jetty.

From the water, it looked like a fleet of small spaceships had landed, but inside, the rooms felt like warm, silky cocoons. Rugs inspired by folk costumes, vintage engravings and textiles, and books related to the history and culture of the Peloponnese gave my villa a sense of place. But the true flavor of Messinia came from the kitchen. “I try to source products from within a thirty-mile radius,” said Bertrand Valegeas, the burly, smiley executive chef, as he talked me through all 10 dishes on the breakfast *paramana*—an upscale take on the meze tray brought to the table in traditional tavernas that lets diners pick whatever tickles their fancy.

It required enormous restraint not to take everything: cold cuts with pickled okra, sheep-milk yogurt that tasted like whipped cream, warm pies, and irresistible petit fours. This sweet-and-savory smorgasbord appeared before I’d even glanced at the à la carte options, which included a sensational Greek spin on eggs Florentine with spanakopita stuffing and a feta-dill hollandaise.

After an afternoon of guided meditation and a meridian alignment in the spa, dinner at the flagship restaurant, Oliviera, was an elevated riff on Greek cuisine. Stuffed tomatoes had been transformed into a

**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP**

**LEFT** Golden hour in a Mandarin Oriental guest room; tuna tartare at Barbouni restaurant, in Costa Navarino’s Romanos hotel; on the road from Koroni to Pylos.

**OPPOSITE** Neo Kastro, a castle in Pylos that overlooks Navarino Bay.

risotto swirled with smoked *sfela*, a local cheese made of sheep and goat milk cured in brine, and sardines swaddled in vine leaves and dotted with ouzo jelly. Even the cocktails, mixed tableside, had a Greek twist—a dash of *tsipouro* (Greece’s answer to grappa) in the martini or a feta emulsion in the Bloody Mary.

Guests at the Mandarin Oriental can make use of a dizzying range of facilities and activities across Costa Navarino’s properties—they can eat Peruvian or Japanese, hit up an escape room or open-air cinema, try yoga or yachting, wing foiling or wakeboarding. But the truly authentic side of Greece will only come into focus when they venture beyond the rarefied bubble of the resort.

For those excited by history, Messinia is a thrill a minute: Neolithic settlements, (Continued on page 123)



## COSTA NAVARINO: THE LAY OF THE LAND

With four branded resorts, four golf courses, dozens of bars, shops, and restaurants, and activities for all ages, Costa Navarino is one of the most ambitious tourism developments in the Mediterranean. It's an easy 3½-hour drive from Athens or a 45-minute drive from Kalamata's scrappy international airport—named after none other than Captain Vassilis Constantakopoulos.

The two adjacent resorts at Navarino Dunes are primarily tailored toward families and golfers. The **Romanos, a Luxury Collection Resort** (doubles from \$396) is a little more sedate than the **Westin Resort, Costa Navarino** (doubles from \$332), which features a water park, bowling alley, NBA basketball school, and a soccer camp.

About six miles south, on the Navarino Waterfront, the Agora, a mall and street-food hub, is popular with both hotel guests and locals. The Agora is sandwiched between the **W Costa Navarino** (doubles from \$385) and the **Mandarin Oriental, Costa Navarino** (doubles from \$1,660). A fifth cluster of resorts, Navarino Blue, is also in development, located on a sandy beach a 10-minute drive from Kalamata airport.—R.H.

ILLUSTRATION BY BASHSEL LUBARSKY