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# The Great Escape – In search of Euphoria in Greece

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“Pretend you’re back in your mother’s womb,” Mary whispers to the class, “safe, warm, protected.” A heap of unfamiliar bodies, mine included, are currently curled up in a foetal position on the floor of **the Euphoria Retreat in Mystras, Greece** ([https://www.euphoriaretreat.com/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwhLKUBhDiARIsAMaTLnGyl4cEDVtMnv8kotRzuFLWzrD\\_moYzgasruumiyyIfMjzp6eSXCJOaAvgbEALw\\_wcB](https://www.euphoriaretreat.com/?gclid=Cj0KCQjwhLKUBhDiARIsAMaTLnGyl4cEDVtMnv8kotRzuFLWzrD_moYzgasruumiyyIfMjzp6eSXCJOaAvgbEALw_wcB)). Heeding Mary’s next instructions, the class begins to unfurl and grow into trees, gesticulating our branch-like arms about the place, rooting ourselves in the ground of the wood-panelled floor.

This, as it happens, is the overture of the “Five Element Dance” — a Tai Ji sequence of movements designed to harmonise your body with the five elements — wood, fire, earth, metal and water. The dance is a crucial component of day two of the Euphoria Retreat’s **“Feel Alive Again” programme** (<https://www.euphoriaretreat.com/programmes/feel-alive-again/>) which promises to process and purge the effects of the pandemic. It is hosted by the retreat’s founder, Marina Efraimoglou and her accomplice Mary Vandaorou — the two golden-haired oracles vow to take you on a three-day journey designed to “restore and reignite.”

Located in the UNESCO-protected town of Mystras in the southern Peloponnese, the Euphoria Retreat is focused on the “Euphoria Methodos” — which blends Hellenic, Chinese and Western philosophies and healing practices. The approach quickly established itself as one of the best wellness retreats for its emphasis on balance. So if you think Euphoria is yet another retreat that serves up branch carpaccio and algae-looking smoothies to help shed a few pounds before summer, you would be sorely mistaken.



Euphoria was a decade-long project for Efraimoglou who finally flung open its doors in 2018, only to go through a traffic-light series of fully opening, part-opening, to full-closure due to the pandemic. Coming from a family of straight-laced entrepreneurs, lawyers and doctors, the path of holistic medicine and spiritual transformation was unsurprisingly not a feature of dinner table conversation in the Efraimoglou household.



Marina Efraimoglou (R) and Mary Vandaorou (L)

After studying at the **University of Athens** (<https://en.uoa.gr/>) and completing a master's degree at LSE, Efraimoglou stormed the finance world and went into investment banking, spending some time on Wall Street before receiving life-changing news at age 29. "I was told I had a really bad case of lymphoma," she tells me over a coffee in the retreat's restaurant, "they gave me a 25 per cent survival rate."

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It was a climactic moment for Efraimoglou, who was inspired by receiving the "gift of life" and began to think about how she could give back. She quit her job, set up her own bank, and began to visit wellness retreats worldwide to improve her immune system. From munching on raw food at the Hippocrates Health Institute to yoga retreats at Golden Door in California and submerging herself in darkness for weeks in Asia, she soon realised something was missing from all of these retreats: that life is to be celebrated.

**"Ancient Greek philosophers (<https://reaction.life/an-ancient-greek-approach-to-risk-and-the-lessons-it-can-offer-the-modern-world/>)** spoke a lot about balance, that we have an obligation toward ourselves but also to share that with society," she explains. "Don't deny the pleasures of life through extremes but find a balance.

That's when I had the realisation, I didn't want to do another spa or retreat focused on weight loss, medicine or botox, I wanted a healing place rooted in the culture of the land and of my ancestors; combining Chinese and western medicine, and all that science can offer. Those were the seeds of Euphoria."

Hearing Marina's story, you can't help but draw comparisons with the Amazon Prime series ***Nine Perfect Strangers*** (<https://www.amazon.co.uk/Nine-Perfect-Strangers-Season-1/dp/B09C2MBJQ2>), where the mystical Masha Dmitrichenko (played by Nicole Kidman) trades in a job as a high-flying executive to run her own wellness retreat after a near-death experience. However, aside from a mutual desire to "transform" their guests' lives, this is where the similarities between the two blondes end; there's certainly no **LSD being snuck into the smoothies** (<https://reaction.life/hallucinogenic-retreats/>) at Euphoria.

When arriving at the retreat — a mere 2 ½ hour drive from Athens — you pass through the fortified town of Mystras, which sits quietly at its heel. Perhaps it was a symptom of the low season, but you almost expect to see tumbleweeds somersault on the streets to the hum of a cowboy western as you drive through.

The retreat and the village are eclipsed by the **Byzantine castle of Mystras** (<https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/511/>), which stands tall like Mount Olympus, rendering everything ant-like in comparison. The UNESCO heritage site feels shrouded in ancient history and folklore and some of Euphoria's rooms even boast views of the castle ruins and the valley below where luminescent citrus trees add flames of colour in-between the olive groves.



*The Byzantine castle of Mystras*

At Euphoria, nothing is compulsory (unless you have booked onto a retreat — more on that later). You have the luxury of choice when it comes to choosing between a range of retreats, therapies and activities. You can spend your days hiking through their pine-scented private forest, meditating on their outdoor deck, immersing yourself in their 13-ft hydrotherapy pool, treating yourself to a Byzantine hammam, or heading for the outdoor wooden jacuzzi that bubbles up to the backdrop of the retreat's mystical forest.

The **spa is as seductive** (<https://www.euphoriaretreat.com/our-spa/>). On the ground floor, there is a gym equipped with a Kinesis machine to encourage stress-free bodyweight exercise, a training studio for Pilates, TRX, aerial yoga and various other fitness activities. The spa's heart is a 25m water well, which links all four floors with a theatrically-spiralled staircase. The iconic sphere pool — which is inspired by the dome of Hagia Sophia — is 4m deep, and if you dive deep enough, you can hear the sounds of dolphins and whales ricocheting in the water.





*Euphoria's Spa*

There is also the Tepidarium – heated between 37-39C – which includes a Finnish sauna and steam room, a cold plunge pool, ice fountain, salt room and the Byzantine hammam. The top floor of the spa is where all “the spiritual work is carried out” – where workshops and yoga classes take place. Throughout the spa, the walls shift from dark to grey to white to represent layers we must shed like onions to “transform.”

You can enjoy all of the above as a hotel guest in need of some R&R, or in-between Euphoria’s programmes which range from one curated for couples to those wanting to lose weight, boost their energy or those looking to evoke the “Spartan spirit of adventure”. But for those wanting to “Feel Alive Again”, prepare yourself for a three-hour workshop over three days where meditation, manifestation, and even the occasional tree dance, are mandatory.

Marina tells me that many who have suffered from Covid, lost their jobs or lost a family member, have found solace in the Feel Alive Again retreat. “A lot of people don’t want to start living life to the full again and that’s because they refuse to address their feelings and we help them do that here,” she continues. “We can’t wait to live, and our life is now, so the Feel Alive Again retreat encourages people to embrace the fact they feel afraid, scared, and have doubt — so what? We get hurt — so what?”



*The Feel Alive Again retreat*

During my stay in the midst of March, there was a veritable potpourri of characters; from a woman whose family had been uprooted by **the Lebanese war** (<https://reaction.life/the-great-escape-locked-up-in-lebanon/>), another who had a recent cancer diagnosis to another who battled a **severe case of Covid** (<https://reaction.life/coronavirus-does-the-amount-of-virus-you-are-exposed-to-determine-how-sick-youll-get/>) in the ICU. As you can imagine, a lot of tears were shed over the three days. It took a lot of strength for these women to open up, so fearlessly, about the woes and anxieties of the past few years but there is something about Euphoria itself that makes you feel open-minded enough to offload.

Although aspects of the retreat, such as the Five Element Dance, may not be to everyone's taste or agility, there is something life-affirming about uniting with a gaggle of strangers to talk about things you have consciously and unconsciously weighed yourself down with. Against the backdrop of a place that seamlessly incorporates five-star luxury with relaxed wellness — who would resist the chance to feel alive again?

“People can come to the Euphoria Retreat and feel safe,” concludes Marina. “Whether they want to partake in a program or come to the hotel, they will get the benefit as everything — from the food to the activities and treatments — is synchronised according to our philosophy.”

“Come here, and when you do, I promise, we will give you the tools to feel like a different person.”



**Book your stay at The Euphoria Retreat now. (<https://www.euphoriaretreat.com/?>**

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