Bric-a-Brac 34

A magic mountain wellness retreat in Greece, the guy to call to see jaguars in Brazil and polar bears in the Arctic, and a little secret well-dressed salad from Bordeaux

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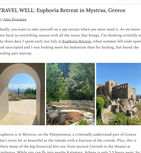
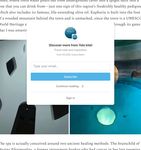
TRAVEL WELL: Euphoria Retreat in Mystras, Greece

By Lana Zaslavskaia

Ideally, you want to take yourself on a spa retreat when you most need it. As we move into lack-on-everything season with all the stress that brings, I'm thinking wistfully of the three days I spent early last July in Euphoria Retreat, where summer felt wide open and unscripted and I was looking more for hedonism than for healing, but found the healing part anyway.



Euphoria is in Mystras, on the Peloponnese, a centrally undiscovered part of Greece that's lovely, you want to be beautiful at the islands with a fraction of the crowds. Plus, this is where many of the big historical hits are, from ancient Corinth to the theater at Epidaurus. While you can fly into nearby Kalamata, Athens is only 2.5 hours away. So I was picked up at our Athens hotel by Euphoria's Tesla Model Y and welcomed by wholesale across the canal connecting the Ionian and Aegean seas (two should stop to see this, it's spectacular) and then driven through the Peloponnese's rolling green hills and gorgeous backlit mountain peaks to the village of Mystras, near Sparta. The town is a half-square surrounded by cafes and charming houses sagging with vines and flower boxes, where both water pieces out from underground (one into a stream that runs a rise that you can drink from—just one sign of this region's fruitfully healthy pedigree, which also includes the famous, life-extending olive oil). Euphoria is built into the foot of a wooded mountain behind the town and is stretched, since the town is a UNESCO site, horizontally through it.



The spa is actually conceived around two ancient healing methods. The beautiful of Greek mythology, Asclepius, was worshipped for his healing powers, and his daughters and turned to Traditional Chinese Medicine and Greek herbal medicine for healing, the retreat is shaped around an ancient site of the temple, which converge in the concept of the Five Elements. The spa is a physical homage to this idea, starting with the central "water well"—a black stone four-bath that you're encouraged to walk meditatively around before entering a 4-story white tower like some kind of the Chrisis Tower drawn towards a skylight. Each circular floor leads to a salon of treatments rooms with a specialty in one of the Five Elements, and the top floor is a lounge, with a big chandelier in the Sphere Pool, which is completely covered within holes of a sphere that resembles a spiky bowling ball—on top, a dome pocked with light filled crack (stay with me) and below is a 10-meter deep curved hexagon that's just a silly amount of time trying to dive down and touch. (The sounds of whales and dolphins are piped in.) On the practical side, guests rate in one inventory ("Do you feel anxious?" "Do you feel hungry?") which answers questions with each of the five elements (fire, earth, water, metal, wood) and then a personalized treatment plan is created. The treatments, in go-deeper, Greek-inconspicuous doctor and nutritionist on staff and various modern day massages. Our intuitive blood work and all that, including a dozen regimen, which most people around me seemed to be on.

Each morning I went for a group hike—one day it was the Tryge springs, a lush waterfall and pool that's a popular local swimming hole, and another day we followed the River of the gold Fox another 2 miles a little through a steep wooded gorge along a ridge that was so narrow and shellingly unpermeated, two of my companions took to clutching the side of the rock. Back at Euphoria, I alternated between lying in the spa's many lovingly empty spaces (sculptures, soft tones and hands-on treatments. Most memorable: the "Sanctuary for Busy Minds," a massage designed to quiet the four-based hyperkinetics that involved much pitching of the toes to open the energy channels, which I felt, and then a long, meditative massage that felt like being rocked and cradled, and classes like "Four Seas Tea," in which a Greek drama teacher taught us to breathe from parts of the body I never imagined could respire. Because the building backs onto a wooded mountain, it was also pleasant to sit in the terrace of my room with a book and let the raucous chirp of the cicadas and the warm herbacious breeze lull me into a nap.

I loved that every meal began with herbal water infusions energizing (thyme in the morning, oregano, which helps digestion, for lunch, and relaxing rosemary with dinner. The chef, Ioanniss Rapanos, is a local from Sparta who did a stint at Noma and his recipes were simple but pretty, of mostly from local ingredients and hints of the Mediterranean Diet. In summer, this means lots of salads and soups for those who don't want to overeat before a long afternoon of activity. I ate the salad on the first dinner who moved—lentil, chard, and cross with sunbreak—and stole the dressing had for from Spartan that perfumes. There was lots of Greek wines for an hedonistic, too.

Most of the guests were British, with a couple of Americans and internationals, and I felt like I was hanging out with a bunch of friends. The staff was lovely and attentive, there, a convivial tourism designer who lives in the South of France, had cooked for his third visit. He had spent several weeks at Euphoria during Covid, which he described as a sort of magic mountain of people who had escaped to this seven-smelling, colonel paradise on the virus marched around the world, and I tripped him to my guide of the menu ("No surprise is the vegan stuffed cabbage—delicious!"), of which treatment was in store tomorrow. While most of the modern, blonde-wood guest rooms have a view of the valley, I had a room with a view of the ancient mansion from the 1800s that the hotel now built around—more rustic and vernacular in style. My only bone to pick with the place in the decor is blandly modern in some public spaces and more a little too Arabian Nights in others.

I was especially glad that Mark had convinced me to stop before leaving at the nearby Kastraki Monastery, which dates back to the 1300s and was one of the last places Byzantine during to the Ottoman rule. Mark was fluent/had in the administration was of the Byzantine Empire in the Peloponnese, attracting writers, artisans, and philosophers. You can drive a little far to accepts and make your way down to the lonely city, dacking into small stone churches covered in brightly colored frescoes, a palace and a small mosaic. I wished I had spent more time in Mystras, which is a ruin of a city, as the choice of gold-leafed angels, in their arches and terracotta pieces, leaders of a long-ago battle from another space and time. I wish I could go back one day I could stand it! The good thing is it's open year round, since the script's not yet written on winter.

Alex Freeman is Vote Intel's design editor

THE RECIPE

Lana Zaslavskaia *Lana Zaslavskaia is a lovely beetl/spa/winter/restaurant near the Bordeaux airport and our far from our home in the Medoc, so we will occasionally spend the night there if we have an early morning flight. Recently we were lit lucky before picking up a friend, and they served this incredible salad. You could definitely swap in whatever you have on hand—the thing that was so great about it was the way that dressed the lettuce. They must have used a good deal of it because it was an every leaf—which is impossible with romaingredients—normally I end up continuously dressing it as I go.—Ed*

Summer Romaine Lettuce
Serves four

2 little gem lettuces (or 1 full lengthlove
8 quail eggs cooked in boiling water for 3 minutes, then peeled and cut in half
40g/1½ cups Kalamata olives
40g/½ cups sun-dried tomatoes
1 tablespoon/15g/½ ounce/½ tablespoon chaux (see a manolito)
100g/½ cups green beans cooked briefly in boiling salted water, then cooled (it is to water to fix the chlorophyll)
Shavings of 4 radishes (use a mandoline)
4 anchovy fillets cut into pieces

Dressing:
Olive oil and balsamic vinegar
Salt and pepper to taste

Preparation:
Place a half lettuce in the center of the plate
Arrange the ingredients harmoniously on it
Serve immediately

THE NAVIGATOR

Will Balassor, CEO & Founder, Natural World Safaris

I originally met Will Balassor through the travel writer Sophie Roberts, when we both were living in Mexico City and I was looking for a photographer for a story, for which the logistics, or the the source edge of Burma, were the reclaim I have ever experienced as an editor. Since then, I have come to know Will as a super rigorous, conscientious and creative planner of nature-focused vacation around the globe, which isn't an easy feat, given that you can't just arrange for a Siberian tiger or Bikochard gorilla to match actress your goals. I was eager to hear more about his WO—AF

Photo by Sophie Roberts

Tell us about you and your company.

Starting up the company 17 years ago off the back of my degree in French and African Studies, I specialised in Francophone Africa. Over the years, I've set up World Primate Safaris, then bought out World Big Cat Safaris, then been, and then realized this is too complicated, so moved it all under Natural World Safaris! We utilize the safari concept in over 40 destinations worldwide, pairing our clients in the right place at the right time in order to maximize their travel experience.

What's the story bowl to talk to you?

Our trips are based at around USD $20-25,000 per trip or around USD$10,000 per person. In general, they are approximately 12 days in length with the majority of our trips being bespoke but with a niche selection of small group and specialist bird trips.

What is the most spot of your experience?

As a travel outfitter, we fill the gap between a tour operator and a DMC. We excel in the stringer contents of the globe, whether that be Madagascar, Svalbard where we run our own small ships catering to only 12 clients on each departure, tigers in India or pumas or jaguars in Chile and Brazil (amongst many others). Our seven year is truly unrivalled in our ability to create tailor-made experiences for our clients, and then providing access to this niche in a small intimate format for the benefits of clients and all involved.

A favorite experience/trip you've planned that best represents your travel philosophy.

Svalbard – this is where we run our own small ship(s), taking only 12 clients at any time. This promotes minimal impact on the environment and is truly unique experience for our clients being able to access hidden corners of the polar north that no other tours offer, but people think small ships are for 30-clients, we take 12. It is perhaps our most exclusive and exciting destination, pairing to your every need and we our specialist bird departure, a dedicated global photographer leader as well.

Exploring the high Arctic north aboard our 12 passenger expedition ships is a trip like no other. What they discard the cozy Kerlitzit pass you to the Ny-Ålesund, the world's most polar town to experience our icy wilderness with glaciers calving. Arctic has bouncing with life, from polar bears to walrus, to seabirds and whales, and the opportunity to finish off each day. Twenty-four hours of normal Arctic sunlight make for a truly unique trip, as days blur into night and you can be called out to see the non-selfish adventure for at any time of day or night. For those needing to hot-off a bit more energy, with the tundra scapes for comparison of your expedition leader of course), wake up with a polar plunge, or climb the harbour tower for the ultimate icy view.

A favorite bowl you love and go back to again and again.

Mountain Trail Lodge – the only property standing in the Sao remaining primary rainforest in Madagascar affords a true sense of adventure. Huge ebony and rosewood trees disappearing into the forest canopy, tall ruffled lemurs, half-tailed geckos on the nearby Nosy Mangabe, or humpback whales in the season branching through the bay. Explore the wild coastline, with the lemurs, or soak up the forest views from your bench side bar. I also love Tawala Camp in Botswana and Ellerman House in Cape Town.

The most memorable meal you've had while traveling...

Crickets on the side of the road in Kenya as night with the stars out and fights beating into the night sky to collect unexpecting crickets escape flight!

A non-to-be missed favorite experience (or two) in your region of expertise...

Tracking mountain gorillas in either Uganda or Rwanda, or Svalbard polar bears in the Republic of Congo.

Standing on the front deck of our polar ship in the midnight sun. Quiet and surrend with the chance of a polar bear appearing from your white surroundi...

Underrated location, overrated location, personal favorite, recent discovery?

Underrated location – Madagascar! Never on the front cover of those glossy magazines, people are scared of Madagascar and what it represents, when in fact it is exactly the opposite. The beach lagoon island in the north (wednesday) like no other, a warm and welcoming people, wildlife, beaches, cultural consultants and more. If you want something to educate and inspire, then look no further.

Overrated location – I struggle to think of an overrated destination as I would like to think that when it comes to travel I can find something of interest in most places I visit.

Personal favorite – Congo and Central Africa Republic (CAR). Lowland gorillas, forest bais, leading conservation efforts and some truly pristine villiainess northeast in the heart of Africa. Heads-down the best lowland gorilla tracking project. Then moving north into CAR you come across the retail bitoing Dzanga Bai, where forest elephants congregate—up to a hundred at any one time—to excavate the mineral rich soils.

Recent discovery – Partying with recent pirates, it has to be the far reaches of Russia. Whether it be the volcanic heartland of Kamchatka or tracking the largest feline predator left in our planet—the Siberian tiger—in the tundra of the East, this brand land has a lot to offer.

The one thing you always pack...

Camera, on phone so that incorporates a more than suitable camera (these days! And a Leatherman.

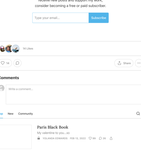
What is something you wished we all knew or were better at as travelers?

I wish we all knew how to structure an industry with less impact on the environment. Bulbuls leaves here pos, but we need to keep trying.

How do you want people to reach out to you?

Instagram @will@natour or @petersonbotswanaby and through the Natural World Safaris website.

MOODBOARD



One of our favorite photographers to follow on Instagram.

Here you can help them in Puerto Rico affected by Hurricane Fiona.

We always have something new about Italian food and culture from Elizabeth Mitchell's Substack, Bonjolana from Italy.

Japan is expected to announce their reopening to tourists from travel any day now.

We highlighted surf from our friend James in plus the perfect fall road trip through Vermont.

Sound Air Conditioner Family Vineyard in Pope Valley, CA, Rum, 9/21/22

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