

LIFE & ARTS

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From Mystras to Mykonos, two grand Greek resorts

At Euphoria Retreat, arrive with an open mind for intensive wellness programs and Greece's largest spa

CATHERINE DAWSON MARCH

‘Are you more aggressive or passive-aggressive?’ Hmm, what do the kids always tell me? Right. I ticked the appropriate box.

‘Are you more congested and phlegmy or dry and constipated?’ Well, I was a bit stuffed up after the long haul flight. I ticked another box.

I kept on ticking boxes as the questionnaire for my Five Element Balancing treatment probed further into my physical and mental state. I wasn't sure what I was getting into, but I was already under the spell of the seductively serene holistic wellness spa at the heart of Euphoria Retreat in Mystras, Greece.

The spa and hotel are found in the southern end of the Peloponnese peninsula – home to many Greek myths and legends – and right beside the Byzantine Mystras city ruins, now a UNESCO heritage site. It's a heady location for one of Europe's biggest (at more than 30,000 square feet) and most serious spas.

At Euphoria, staff sincerely and tenderly ferret out unhealthy habits to lead guests on a healthier path. Founder Marina Efraimoglou has combined her favourite healing philosophies from Eastern and Western approaches – and a hefty dose of optimism – into what she calls the “Euphoria Methodos.” I'd never heard of such a thing, but I was curious and game for anything.

WHY YOU SHOULD VISIT

Efraimoglou hopes all guests arrive with an open mind. “We do manual and emotional work. We are planting seeds of spiritual growth with our programs,” she said one day over lunch on the hotel's expansive restaurant patio.

But even forgoing any of Euphoria's intensive programs – some include an examination of blood and urine samples to create spa and exercise plans and customized meals – this is an impressive destination resort spa. It has just about every type of wellness treatment out there: hammam, tepidarium, watsu pool, sensory deprivation pool, water massage pool, cold plunge pool, ice bath and showers, Kneipp waterwell therapy, outdoor infinity pool, sauna, steam room, salt room, outdoor cedar hot tub, not to mention a large gym and Pilates reformer equipment.

Incredibly, almost all of it is included with your stay. (The soapy hammam scrub on heated marble, however, is an extra



The genius of Euphoria's approach is that you can go as hard or as gentle on your wellness journey as you like. The resort is located in Mystras, near the southern end of the Peloponnese peninsula and by the Byzantine Mystras city ruins. PHOTOS BY STAVROS HABAKIS



The 30,000-square-foot spa includes a hammam, tepidarium, watsu pool, sensory deprivation pool, infinity and water massage pools and grand views of the the Evrotas Valley.

€200.) Still, it's tempting to simply lay by the infinity pool, watching bumblebees lumber between delicate wildflowers and breathing in heady scents of rosemary and thyme as breezes blow through enormous herb bushes. But it's worth getting off the chaise longue for the weekly schedule of complimentary activities such as yoga, meditation and fitness classes – if only to work up an appetite for Gaia, the hotel restaurant.

There, every meal begins with herb-infused water (rosemary, thyme or oregano). This can take some getting used to but, we're told, it helps with digestion, and pretty quickly I actually started looking forward to it. There are always two menus, the healthy one (sign up for a focused health program and this is your culinary road map) and the seasonal me-

nu that focuses on Laconian Greek and Mediterranean dishes. (At breakfast I ordered the yummy cheese-filled Laconian pastry every morning.)

In fine weather eat on the stone patio, as views of the Evrotas Valley and surrounding mountains make every meal one you'll want to linger over, maybe sharing any scraps with the hotel cats that wander by.

The genius of Euphoria's approach is that you can go as hard or as gentle on your wellness journey as you'd like. Cocktails and wines are served, just not necessarily encouraged.

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

One morning, I signed up for a hike through the forest of the Taygetus mountains above the resort. An uncommunicative

guide turned what could have been a fun learning opportunity – about the region, the view, even the benefits of hiking in an area I was later told had healing energy – into an exercise in frustration.

It was only when someone asked why we weren't following the marked trails that we learned the intention was to hike laps to boost our heart rate. Great idea, bad execution. It was the only off note in an otherwise incredible stay.

SINCE YOU'RE IN THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

Euphoria overlooks the village of Mystras; it's only a two-minute walk downhill to family-run restaurants and shops (handy when you just want a bag of Greece's outstanding oregano-flavoured chips).

It's also a five-minute drive to the UNESCO archeological site of Mystras. Have the resort drop you at the lower gate and walk up through the Byzantine ruins – it's an unforgettable, if hot and strenuous, climb through history. Mid-mountain, black-robed nuns still live and worship at the 15th-century Pantanassa Monastery, so stop and admire the church's fresco ceilings, fill up your water bottle at the village tap and meet the sisters, who sell iconography, local olive oil and handmade goods. At the top, an ancient cedar tree offers the only blessed shade you'll find, beside the Church of Hagia Sophia.

THE TAKEAWAY

Euphoria's five-star wellness fa-

cility pampers as much as it pushes you. Rooms are described as “luxuriously monastic,” which is as humorous as it is accurate. Design is simple and uncluttered with all the usual bells and whistles of a hotel that charges about €400 a night: fine fabrics and sheets, robes, slippers, marble bathroom furnishings and grand views from a shaded patio.

And my Five Element Balancing treatment? It was a massage like no other. The pushing of pressure points miraculously cleared up sinus congestion, but when the therapist spent too long pinching my toes (and to what end I could not figure out) I was more irked than content. And yet, I left the Five Elements session more relaxed than I'd been in a long time.

Whether you commit to the resort's intensive, pricey treatments or simply learn to appreciate your privilege poolside, Euphoria may be the best spot in the country to thoughtfully live your best life. The resort is a 2.5-hour drive from Athens, far enough into the Peloponnese peninsula to explore the countryside and admire the many kalamata olive groves.

Euphoria Retreat is open year-round. Rooms include breakfast, with full and half board also available. Children older than 14 are welcome. Tesla transfers can be arranged from Kalamata or Athens airports. www.euphoriaretreat.com

The writer was a guest of Euphoria Retreat. It did not review or approve the story before publication.

Kalesma's quiet luxury comes with a cost (and an infinity pool)

ELIO IANNACCI

The first thing I notice when approaching Kalesma, a hotel perched on one of the few southwestern peninsulas in Mykonos, is its hillside locale is surrounded by palm, lemon, olive and bananas trees. The plants do a number on my senses as their leaves and buds release a salve-like perfume and frame the glittering blues of the Aegean Sea.

In the lobby, a heavy wood-chiseled sofa faces me. As I give it a curious eye, the doorman informs me that it was designed by fashion czar Rick Owens. The sofa's unusual form – a cross between a canoe and a giant Advil capsule – sets the tone.

Each step I take toward the concierge desk feels like I'm entering an installation at Art Basel or the Venice Biennale. Furnishings and floor coverings present themselves as intensely curated pieces that require double takes. While furniture and art are displayed in ways that seamlessly blend industrial and natural



Kalesma's hillside suits overlook Ornos Bay to the east, pictured, and west-facing villas capture sunset views.

VANGELIS PATERAKIS/KALESMA MYKONOS

tones, whimsical accents break up the minimalism – I see a horse saddle strewn on reclaimed timber, and intricately patterned room dividers.

As I pass the property's gift shop – whose chic aesthetic rivals high-end boutiques on New York's 5th avenue – I notice Greek-made couture displayed

on racks as if it was part of an exhibition.

Throughout the indoor-outdoor layout of the entire property, ceramics by Serbian artist Aleksandar Vac reinforce a geometrically acute grey, white and tan Cycladic décor scheme.

The hotel's infinity pool, located at the hillside centre of the

property, is Kalesma's jewel-in-crown, giving swimmers a vantage point of the dazzling Ornos Bay. This serene vista contrasts with every single party-centric cliché I've come to associate with Mykonos.

WHY YOU SHOULD VISIT

Located 30 minutes away from over-the-top tourist centres like Paradise Beach and Kalo Livadi, Kalesma is both a hidden gem and a hot spot for those who love to travel in tranquillity.

The price of peace, however, is by no means economical. Given Greece's tourist upsurge (more than 20 million visitors in 2023 alone) this is not a surprise. For those taking Kalesma's premium-priced route in order to recharge, a booking ensures a stunning, spacious bamboo and marble-clad suite or villa, each blessed with a private dipping pool and a set of hemp loungers. Kendall Jenner, Paris Hilton and *Selling Sunset*'s real estate impresario Mary Vitinaros have all stayed here under-the-radar but the energy is more sanctuary

than celebrity (even though room rates that can soar above \$1,300 a night require celebrity bank accounts).

The property's award-winning restaurant, Pere Ubu (named after the main character in *Ubu Roi*, a play by French writer Alfred Jarry) has become one of the most coveted in Mykonos. Top lunch choices consist of Mykonian sausage dishes, fava spreads (think Greek hummus made with split pea) with shrimp and scallop and a sublime seafood salad tossed with branzino fillet, shrimp, lobster, infused with a spirulina vinaigrette. Best bets for dinner are a pea and artichoke dish cooked in clay pots and fresh line-caught fish, served with fennel and Mykonian cheese (a distant cousin to feta – its flavour profile is less salty and spicier).

ROOM FOR IMPROVEMENT

The winds coming off the Aegean Sea can be brisk. This means the outdoor umbrellas located beside your private pool commonly fly into windows or take dives.

■ MYKONOS, A13