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Travel: There's nothing like being pampered in a spa while visiting historic Greece

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Amid serene olive groves, I meandered through Greece's ghostly ruins of ancient Sparta, its archeological rubble evidence of a militant society where school-aged boys were whipped bloody to toughen them as future fierce warriors. Spartan mothers, not the most cuddly, sent sons to battle with a brutal warning — be victorious or die fighting but dare not come home a loser.

This oddly got me to thinking — besides their worship of goddess Athena, combat-weary Spartans probably could've benefited from the full-body electromagnetic Human Regenerator machine, available at my nearby holistic lodgings, the wellness destination med-spa Euphoria Retreat.



The 45-room Euphoria Retreat is a wellness destination med-spa close to the Greek historical sites of medieval Mystras and ancient Sparta. (Photo by Norma Meyer)

As for myself, after hearing about Spartan enemies hurled alive into a deep cavern of corpses, I needed to return to countryside Euphoria for a Quartz Power Nap on a cot of heated sandy crystals equipped with a rolling back massager. While I zoned out, history also emanated from the UNESCO Byzantine fortress town of medieval Mystras, perched on a revered mountain slope a stone's throw away. I could see the summit's fairytale castle from my own room and would soon visit the UNESCO site's frescoed churches and two of its four inhabitants, all nuns.

In Greece's epic Peloponnese region, I exulted in being an Euphorian (that's what resort guests are called). Among indulgences, I experienced a signature 5 Elements massage to balance my "water element;" a sound healing meditation; a breathing class that ended with me deliberately manically shrieking; a Salt Room respite; hydrotherapy; and a brain-defogging toe-pulling. Billed as "The Path to Euphoria," the four-story Byzantine-motif spa offers more than 120 distinctive treatments touting to help physical, emotional and spiritual

health; the newest ones involve the medical field.



The non-invasive Human Regenerator uses electromagnetic pulses intended to improve a person's health. (Photo by Norma Meyer)

For instance, that Human Regenerator. It looks like a twin bed with a big white headboard embellished with the double-snake-entwined staff held by Hermes, messenger of gods. The prone patient receives electromagnetic pulses that generate cold atmospheric plasma that supposedly rejuvenates cells. There's also Pressotherapy Boots Therapy, which uses air pressure to inflate and deflate knee-high compression boots on a person's legs to aid with circulation, NanoVi inhalation therapy that has you sniffing antioxidants geared at boosting immunity, Colorpuncture featuring a "beamer light pen" attached to liquid colored vials from plants and flowers and applied to one's skin, and more novel remedies.



Just like ancient Roman bathhouses, Euphoria's warm tepidarium is an acclimating room between blazing hot and frigid cold experiences. (Photo by Norma Meyer)

"Euphoria is part of my journey of transformation," the hotel's ebullient founder Marina Efraimoglou told me, after we toasted with glasses of warm nettle-infused water at Euphoria's restaurant, Gaia (goddess of Earth). Once a prominent Greek bank owner, Marina beat non-Hodgkin lymphoma in her 20s and breast cancer about two decades later before deciding, "I wanted to put more meaning in my life" and dove into how to improve mind, body and soul with Hellenic, Chinese and other practices.



The outdoor pool at Euphoria Retreat emerges from the indoor one and faces tranquil gardens. (Photo by Norma Meyer)

Joining us at dinner was Euphoria's calming spiritual mentor, Mary Vandorou, a Greek former ballerina. "From an early age, I could see auras and colors around people," she said, noting mine was blue.

Nestled on a forested hillside, the 45-room Euphoria is located in New Mystras, a quaint village established about 200 years ago below the UNESCO site and near the foot of Mount Taygetus, where the mythological nymph Taygete resides. The tiny town square consists of several tavernas, a guesthouse, mini-mart and souvenir shop run by a friendly woman who handcrafts Jesus icons and sells traditional kimpoloi worry beads that Greeks twirl or crunch to relieve stress. Modest stone homes were surrounded by fruit-packed orange trees, silvery-green olive orchards, and umpteenth wandering cats; most chimneys sported protective caps that looked like fake crows.

On my first morning, following a village stroll, I attended Euphoria's complimentary "Free Your Voice!" workshop which in addition to me had one other participant, an Israeli woman living in Berlin. Our teacher, Chrys, concentrated for much of the hour on how to always breathe from our guts.

"Are you familiar with the toilets with the hole on the ground? OK, let's imagine we're in one and we want to go," she strongly said, instructing us to squat. "Think about what your body is doing because we want to do this all day to have a relaxed belly."



Euphoria Retreat looks out over a calming valley, about a 2.5-hour drive from bustling Athens. (Photo by Norma Meyer)

At the session's end, Chrys explained we all have an immensely shrill child's voice in us but it's bottled up and needs to be released. She led us in an exercise where we somehow opened our throats and eventually let out earsplitting screeches a thousand times worse than any howling banshee. "Higher!" Chrys shouted.



The Waterwell, offering hot and cold foot baths to improve circulation and overall health, is seen from the four-level spiral staircase at Euphoria Retreat. (Photo by Norma Meyer)

It was, however, church mouse quiet at the spa's inner sanctum. Repeating a 170-year-old German technique, I alternated between hot and cold foot baths in the ground level Waterwell, strikingly set at the bottom of an 82-foot ivory-toned tower. Up a spiral staircase, I flopped on a mosaic chaise inside the 102-degree tepidarium outfitted with a steam room, sauna, cold plunge, "ice fountain" to slather your baking body and an aromatherapy "experiential shower."



Swimmers who plunge into 13 feet of water at Euphoria's Sphere Pool's half-dome can hear recorded dolphin sounds. (Photos by Norma Meyer)

Elsewhere, in the large indoor-outdoor Sphere Pool, a swimmer submerged in a semi-circle structure to hear recorded dolphin sounds. Next door, in the domed relaxation room, bathrobe-bundled guests sipped glasses of water infused with quartz crystals and rare mineral nuggets, such as the blue gemstone sodalite representing balance and reflection. (Spa facilities and daily activities are included with room rates from about \$360; treatments cost extra.)



Euphoria Retreat's main spa relaxation room is where bathrobes and quartz-infused water are on the agenda. (Photo by Norma Meyer)

Pampering aside, I soon found myself in the modern city of Sparta, just a 10-minute drive from Euphoria; there I stared at excavated funeral urns, statues of deities, a marble armless torso attached to a helmeted head possibly of famed King Leonidas, and other artifacts inside the Archeological Museum of Sparta.

Although the museum spans millennia, my Euphoria-arranged guide Dimitrios discussed the legendary, formidable Spartans at their height from the 7th to 4th centuries B.C. "They were not exactly like in the movies with Gerard Butler," he scoffed, referring to "300," the film version of how Butler as Sparta's King Leonidas and his heroic 300 soldiers got annihilated by Persia's army. Dimitrios emphasized that even though boys at age 7 were sent to harsh military camps where training might kill them, the Spartans enjoyed poetry, singing and performing, "much like 'Dancing with the Stars.'" Spartan women, he added, were "thigh flashers" wearing the world's first mini-skirts, short tunics with slits so they could do athletics too.

North of the city, we later ambled through ancient Sparta's hillside Acropolis, treading in the sandal-clad footsteps of soldiers who fixated on bronze shields and swords and consumed pig blood soup. Hauntingly, Dimitrios and I were the only visitors among boulders that once were buildings, such as the marketplace, theater and Sanctuary of Athena Chalkioikos. In the 5th century B.C., the Spartan general Pausanias was accused of treason and barricaded inside the sanctuary until he starved to death.

Back at Euphoria, I ironically opted for a Sanctuary of Busy Minds treatment, hoping to decompress from America's turbulent times. "We must minimize the traffic in your mind," my therapist urged. Fully clothed, I laid on a massage table while she vigorously kneaded my bare feet and pulled each toe to pop the joints (ouch!) and then applied pressure to my scalp, clutched my cheeks and pinched over my eyebrows, as my stomach growled from earlier devouring phyllo pastries. "You need to relax," she quietly advised post-treatment.



Amazingly intact, the Sophia Hagia church was built in the mid-14th century and believed to have been the royal palace church in Mystras. (Photo by Norma Meyer)

Another morning, with Dimitrios and three Athens couples from Euphoria, I explored the well-preserved UNESCO fortified town of Mystras, established in 1249 by a Frankish prince who erected the mountaintop castle. After being seized by the Byzantines, Mystras flourished from the 14th to 16th centuries, becoming a wealthy city of scholars, artists, philosophers, and powerful regional rulers occupying the Palace of the Despot's complex. "At one time, more than 25,000 people lived here," Dimitrios said. "There were up to 1,500 homes."

Mystras is especially notable for the painted religious frescoes still visible inside the Hagia Sophia chapel and other churches. At one point, after climbing steep rocky paths, we reached the stone archway of the beautiful Byzantine-Gothic style Pantanassa Monastery, dedicated in 1428. Two nuns draped in black Greek Orthodox habits greeted us, one offering

a dish of jelly loukoumi candies; the other, 90-year-old Mother Superior, sat on a wall beside her walker and warmly smiled. Along with two other nuns, the sisters are the only permanent residents of the entire archeological site. Dimitrios said they care for about 20 cats.



Euphoria's adopted cats, Seraphina, left, and son P.P., often join guests eating on the outside terrace. Cats are plentiful in both the new and UNESCO areas of Mystras and are considered good-luck charms. (Photo by Norma Meyer)

Moving on, we viewed more of UNESCO Mystras, including the closed palace's grandiose exterior, a decayed mansion that had a rare luxury — an archaic indoor toilet — and a cathedral denoting the spot where a bishop was decapitated in 1764 for allegedly plotting against the then-reigning Ottoman Turks.



Aristos Yiatras leads a group class called Sound Healing Meditation at Euphoria Retreat in Greece. (Photo by Norma Meyer)

Speaking of head space. One evening, the musical leader of Euphoria's group Sound Healing Meditation clanged huge Venus, Saturn and other planetary gongs, and tinkled Himalayan and crystal singing bowls. Covered with a blanket, face-up on a yoga mat, I felt engulfed by a wondrous cosmic orchestra (although a guest fell asleep and his loud snoring imitated a bassoon).



Colorful Himalayan salt bricks look like a wall of stained glass in Euphoria's healing Salt Room. (Photo by Norma Meyer)

I also spent 25 minutes alone in the 104-degree Salt Room next to a solid wall of luminescent bricks of orange, yellow and brown Himalayan salt, while micro-crystals of salt pumped through air from a valve. And another afternoon, a 5 Elements masseuse balanced my water element with my wood element through my heart meridians.

My final day, I harmoniously hiked solo in Euphoria's private pine forest on the slopes of Mount Taygetus, which several villagers, along with the hotel's sous chef, swore exuded potent spiritual energy. "It is an enchanted forest," founder Marina affirmed. "You really feel the presence of when there were ancient women therapists there. It was a healing place and the energy is still there."

With my chakras cleared, I firmly agreed. Then, to double down, I thanked Pasithea, the Greek goddess of R&R.