



Splash *of the* Titans

The unspoiled Costa Navarino invites visitors
back to a time when the gods ruled Greece. By Andrew Myers

TO CONTINUE

On the west coast of the Peloponnese lies the great fortress of Methoni. The protected harbor it guards was coveted by warring nations in antiquity.



The Anax Lounge, above, is the main gathering place at The Romanos, featuring a pianist and tea, tapas and signature cocktails. The lounge's terrace affords panoramic views of sunset over the Ionian Sea. At right, a pool and pavilion at The Romanos, where guests can swim up for a cool drink under the warm sun. Many suites feature individual infinity pools.

I gaze out at the Ionian Sea, beyond the stretches of pure white sand, past olive and fig trees, citrus groves, fragrant gardens and low stone buildings that embody classical proportion and reflect the glory of me—mighty Zeus. I am king of the gods, ruler of Olympus, master of humankind ... But wait! Where are my attributes: my golden eagle and libidinous bull, my oak and my thunderbolt? Oh, Hera!

With that the reverie ends. Fortunately I'm not recovering from a psychotic break; I'm simply enjoying a very realistic fantasy inspired by The Romanos. Situated in the region of Messinia in the unspoiled southwest corner of the Peloponnese peninsula, the 321-room hotel opened last year, a temple of R&R as well as the headliner of Costa Navarino, a 2,500-acre resort that is Olympian in ambition and scope. The resort seeks to transform an eye-poppingly picturesque but very quiet corner of Greece into a new, sophisticated European Riviera—and to do so sustainably, harmoniously and with sensitivity (it was, after all, Aristotle who advocated the golden mean).

Nor is "temple" too strong an evocation. After driving into Navarino Dunes—321 acres of landscaped grounds that decline gently to a 1-kilometer stretch of sand along the clear Ionian Sea—you arrive at the open-air lobby. Its dramatic height is emphasized by low modern furniture (much of it inspired by ancient Greek design, such as the klismos chair).



Gazing at the lobby's simple but grand wood-beamed pediment, and its series of limestone columns framing a view of the brilliant sky, few would not feel as if they've been transported to a higher state of being.

Transporting oneself to different planes and places is easy in the Peloponnese (which, since the digging of the Corinth Canal in 1893, isn't technically a peninsula but an island). The area offers an all-terrain cata-



Polylimnio, in the heart of Messinia, is a small gorge with abundant waterfalls and natural pools. Diving is allowed, but be warned: The water is chilly, even on hot summer days.



Above, a secluded beach cove along the immaculate Costa Navarino. At right, chefs at The Romanos provide creative dishes made from fresh local food. Opposite, the Eleon restaurant emphasizes traditional fare inspired by Greek’s rich culinary heritage, including an impressive selection of wines from all over the country.

log of topographies—sun-drenched valleys to snowy mountain ranges to miles of beaches, and a distinctive coastline with four small south-pointing peninsulas that give the island the appearance of a hand (or a maple leaf). All told, the Peloponnese measures 8,320 square miles—which might sound big until you realize all major destinations are within 125 miles or several hours on new, well-marked highways and major byways.

The place is also replete with history. Just to read a map of the island and see the names “Sparta” and “Corinth” conjure history and Western Civilization classes, mythology and legend. Among the can’t-miss archaeological destinations are Mycenae, a UNESCO World Heritage site with its famous Lion Gate; Olympia, where the ancient Olympic Games were held in honor of Zeus; the healing center of Epidaurus with its huge theater (also a UNESCO World Heritage site); and, of course, the ruins found in contemporary Sparta and Corinth. Should one wish to fast-forward a millennium to the glories of the Byzantine, fortress towns such as Monemvasia and Mystras—an astounding complex of fortifications and frescoes named a UNESCO World Heritage site in 1989—are certain to inspire. And they are but the tip of the proverbial iceberg.

Regardless of where these daytrips take you, make sure to seize the opportunity to enjoy a simple lunch in any of the small towns and villages that takes your fancy. Directions are easy because they’re always the same: Travel to the main square, select a shady taverna (there’s usually more than one, and all are usually good), and order from favorites



such as *avgolemono* soup, the catch of the day or lamb fricassee. (If you’re in the mountains near Tripoli, add *stifado*, beef with pearl onions, and *arni psito*, lamb on the spit, to your watch list; and in Sparta and its environs, *bardouniotiko*, chicken stuffed with cheese, olives and walnuts, is a specialty.)

Of course, there’s also much to see and do in Messinia itself. An ancient land, it’s mentioned by name in the Iliad, the epic poem that ranks as among the oldest extant works of Western literature. No surprise, then, that the region boasts several antique showstoppers of its own, such as those found at Messene, with its *stadion*, for running events and *odeon* for performances. Travel 16 miles southeast of that ancient Hellenic city-state,



and you arrive in Kalamata, the region’s seaside capital famous for its signature olives but boasting a notable medieval hilltop castle as well. Or if the roughly 56-mile trip from Costa Navarino Dunes to Messene seems too much on a sunny day, an easy alternative is nearby Pylos—famous for two naval battles separated by over 2,200 years.

Close to Pylos along the coast are several gorgeous beaches, including Voidokoilia (a mile-long beach that is just short of a perfect circle), as well as the Gialova wetlands, one of the finest birding areas in Europe with no fewer than 225 migrating species, including the flamingo and imperial eagle.

Not that it’s ever easy leaving Costa Navarino, which consists of The Romanos and another five-star hotel (The Westin Resort, which sits further inland), two golf courses (The Dunes and the Bay Courses, the first signature golf courses in Greece), and the Anazoe Spa measuring over 13,000 square feet (with several treatments based on antique practices inscribed on clay tablets found in nearby ruins. There’s even an *agora* or “village center” with shops (international brands as well as curated local products), a library, cafes and restaurants. Among these is Omega, which

offers a menu based on the fatty acid-rich Omega diet made popular by Dr. Artemis Simopoulos, an American of Greek descent. Costa Navarino was the dream of “Captain” Vassilis Constantakopoulos. A self-made Messinia native who built the largest fleet of container ships in the world before expanding into a host of other industries, he died last year at age 76—but not before the resort’s inauguration.

What must it be like to imagine a project on such a scale—and what must be the satisfaction at seeing it completed? Striding through my room at The Romanos, moving past the solid woods, marbles and limestone that provide a sublime shell for modern furniture with ancient design elements, I move onto the deck. Stepping past the fireplace and open-air lounge, I submerge myself in my private infinity plunge pool. Nestling my head atop my hands at the edge of the water, I look out at the timeless Ionian Sea and, listening to the quiet, begin to dream.

■ **Andrew Myers** writes frequently about culture and travel. He admits that he is never mistaken for a Greek god.