

## Luxury travel

# Why Porto Heli is Greece's chic new bolt hole

This quiet resort on the Peloponnese is where the in-crowd come to unwind — and there are some fabulous places to stay, says **Amanda Dardanis**

**E**arly afternoon at Amanzoe, high up in the Peloponnese hills, above the seaside resort of Porto Heli, about 170km south of Athens. I look down from the main pool pavilion — which like the rest of Amanzoe is designed like a 21st-century acropolis — over swathes of cypress trees, lavender fields and olive groves towards a cobalt blue bay... and listen to the sound of silence.

The resort may be full, but the stillness is almost physical. Sometimes guests only emerge from their €2,000-a-night (£1,760) private pool pavilions to visit the 1,000-book library. Or to watch the Olympic flame-inspired ceremony at sunset. (That price is just the starting rate in summer — options go all the way up to nine-bedroom villas set on nearly five acres of land that come with their own spas, gyms and staff.)

Today, with the sun shining forcefully after a few rainy days, many have shuttled down to the chic Amanzoe Beach Club. Here they snorkel and go stand-up paddleboarding in the wide bay (there are no motorised water sports to disturb the peace). Then it's time for lunch at the relaxed restaurant, which serves such fare as sea urchin bottarga with seaweed from nearby Mani with lemon caviar and herb oil, and then settling into the small clutch of air-conditioned beach cabanas with private gardens and 10m pools.

Back at the resort others are cooling off in the ozone pool at the Hippocratic-inspired spa. Or they simply can't muster sufficient energy to leave their impeccably appointed and landscaped villas, which really are like self-contained hotels when you consider that it is as easy for chefs, butlers, masseurs and yoga instructors to come to you as it is for you to go to them.

This zen-like citadel, one of the country's most expensive hotels, is where the world's super-wealthy come when they're in

need of a serious lifedeto. Everyone from Wall Street bankers and chief executives to Indian princesses and Arab millionaires (and the Beckhams, who were “unofficial” guests last summer) seems to holiday at this discreet Mediterranean outpost of the ultra-sophisticated Aman resort tribe.

About 6km away, at the Nikki Beach Resort & Spa down on the Porto Heli seafloor, a group of Greece's most influential fashion bloggers have arrived to promote a high-end retailer. They're presented with a magnum of gold Bottega prosecco carried in on a wooden-boat “ice bucket” illuminated by sparklers. At Nikki Beach, the famously hedonistic and aspirational summer playground franchise that began in Miami in the late 1990s, it's a signature manoeuvre, along with ambient energy zones and the ability to order a DJ from room service to enliven your private room party.

In this resort, Café del Mar-style chill-out music plays throughout the day and evening, champagne is served with breakfast (which is available until noon) and my hip Luux Sea View suite has a white double divan suspended over a lagoon-like pool that I share with five adjoining suites (all the rooms have uninterrupted views across the harbour).

Nikki Beach alone, now in its third summer, has brought a slice of Mykonos to this otherwise relaxed and modest place that resembles so many other Greek coastal towns, with elderly men playing backgammon in the *kafenia*, and family-run tavernas lining the port.

“Porto Heli has the space that Mykonos doesn't,” says Nikki Beach's Eleni Skafida, who is busy troubleshooting for the famed White Party, for which a high-octane brew of Greek celebrities and designers come together annually with an international set (Julien Macdonald came last year) to drink cocktails around the ultra-louche infinity pool or retreat to “opium beds” built on stilts in the sand. “A lot of opinion influencers from Europe, the Middle East and America are starting to put Porto Heli on their summer circuit, alongside established places like Mykonos and Ibiza.”

It has been barely five years, in the heat of the Greek financial crisis, since Dolphin Capital (the developer behind Nikki Beach and Amanzoe) launched these two ambitious and wildly diverse luxury hotel projects here in Porto Heli, a place you've almost certainly never heard of.

The gamble must be paying off. Dolphin now has plans to add another sizeable tourism development with an Aman-style aesthetic to its Porto Heli luxury stable, further consolidating the region's growing reputation as a world-class destination. This one, called Kilada Hills, will host the first Chedi resort in the eastern



Amanzoe hotel near Porto Heli, main picture and below

### Need to know

**The best package**  
Abercrombie & Kent (01242 547760, [abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://abercrombiekent.co.uk)) has six nights' B&B at Amanzoe in a Pool Pavilion and four nights' B&B at the Poseidonion Grand Hotel from £5,795pp in peak summer, with flights to Athens, private transfers and ferries included. Prices in October are from £3,195pp

Amanda Dardanis was a guest of Nikki Beach Resort & Spa, Porto Heli ([nikki-beach-hotels.com](http://nikki-beach-hotels.com))

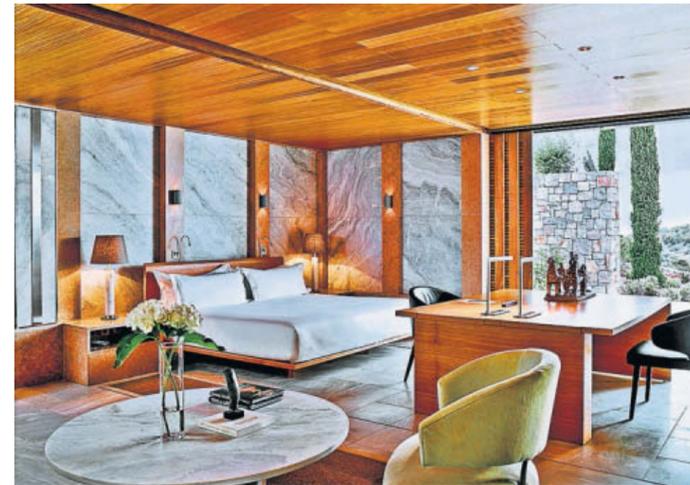


Mediterranean and will consist of a five-star hotel, 18-hole Jack Nicklaus championship golf course, spa, marina, tennis and equestrian academies, as well as a beach club and a clubhouse situated on prime Lapitsa Bay, alongside a range of high-end residential offerings.

The reason is Spetses, a gentle and sophisticated island gem that lies just ten minutes across the Argo-Saronic Gulf from Porto Heli in the region known as the Greek Riviera. This pine-covered, cosmopolitan beauty has the looks of

California's Catalina Island and, thanks to a proud maritime history, the social pedigree of Portofino or Cape Cod. Happily it's not that well known outside Greece. Together, Porto Heli and Spetses make up a glamorous but refreshingly low-key double act, where wealthy Greeks and the European yachting crowd head to unwind and stay off-grid.

At just 27 sq km, Spetses has neither the space nor inclination for too many hotels. Adding to its boutique charms, the island bans private cars and there is no package



tourism. It's a word-of-mouth kind of place. For Athenians, Spetses has always been an ideal weekend break because it's only a two-and-a-half-hour ferry ride from the port of Piraeus. During summer, or when Spetses hosts one of its upwardly mobile sporting events — such as the Tweed Run bicycle race, the Classic Yacht Regatta, the Spring Classic Car Rally or the Spetsathlon (Greece's biggest triathlon) — the entire island is usually booked out well in advance.

Traditionally demand has spilt across into Porto Heli, where a who's who of

shipping tycoons and old-money aristocrats (including the king and queen of the Netherlands) have built luxury villas with helipads and private jetties so that they can dart over to Spetses — and each other's pool parties — at will. Many also prefer the mainland location for the ease of getting to neighbouring attractions such as romantic Nafplio, ancient Epidavros, the charming traditional fishing village of Koilada with its excellent fish tavernas, and beautiful, bohemian Hydra.

The next morning I pay €23 and hail a



Spetses town promenade

water taxi to get to Spetses. A visual splendour of bougainvillea, climbing jasmine and rotund palms, it enchants at first sight. Chi-chi horse buggies trawl tourists across pretty Dapia harbour. Sea taxis bob about next to luxury craft, Victorian lampposts and wartime cannons. The air is fragrant with the local wild herb throubi. Neo-classical mansions that once belonged to sea captains have been converted into chic hotels, galleries and museums as the island has prospered.

There's a strong Italianate architectural influence — an aesthetic remnant of the days when Spetses was the “Spice Island”, a main stop on the Venetians' trade route. Spetses grew richer still under the Ottomans, plying them with ships, until opting to join the revolution against the Turks in the War of Independence in 1821.

On this Thursday morning the island is going about its business quietly in the lull before a busy long weekend. An elegant blonde woman sweeps pine needles from the doorway of her flowery fisherman's cottage. Clean-shaven men of a certain age ride past on motorbikes, plastic bags with bottled water hanging from the handlebars (water, like just about everything else, has to be shipped in). On a jetty a laughing teenage boy is being dangled headfirst down a ladder by his friends, protesting loudly in Greek that the water is too cold to swim in.

Presiding over all of this is the island's most historic landmark, and the beating heart of the Spetses social whirl, the Poseidonion Grand Hotel. Built by the local tobacco tycoon Sotirios Anargyros in 1914 as his gift to the island, and modelled on the Negresco in Nice, the Poseidonion was immortalised by writer John Fowles in *The Magus*. In the guestbook the faded signatures of Ingrid Bergman, Bobby Kennedy and Elizabeth Taylor appear among the list of visitors. It's here that you may encounter Ralph Fiennes, who comes to Spetses every year to stay at a friend's villa, admiring local art in the lobby. Or perhaps the designer Valentino, who has been known to pop in for high tea.

Rooms at the Poseidonion are split between two wings. In the original building there's an audible Côte d'Azur pitch, with high ceilings and French doors giving way to wrought-iron balustrades and sea views. The hero room is the €2,100-a-night, three-bedroom Royal Suite, which has its own lift. Arguably more charismatic — and half the price — is the Cupola Suite nestled beneath the Poseidonion's distinctive dome and sporting a spacious private terrace with arresting views over the sea and the island's Italianate hinterland.

In the newer low-rise wing behind the elegant pool and spa complex the rooms

share the same handsome white decor with muted sea green and grey accents, and they have private garden courtyards (one with its own pool) to offer a more secluded stay.

This summer the Poseidonion has also reawakened a much-loved local landmark, the Tatiana outdoor cinema. Instead of popcorn and mediocre wine, you can now indulge in quality cocktails and Greek gourmet meze created by the hotel's chef while watching the latest Hollywood release in English.

Perhaps it's no surprise to hear that Spetses is often dubbed the Monaco of Greece. The island certainly has abundant connections with shipping and royalty. The former king of Greece, Constantine, has a house here. In 1962 Stavros Niarchos (shadowed only by Onassis in the magnate stakes) bought the small adjoining island of Spetsopoula, where the Prince and Princess of Wales reportedly spent a portion of their honeymoon. These days Niarchos's children are often accompanied in the summer by Prince Albert and by Charlene, Princess of Monaco.

However, the “Monaco of Greece” moniker is misleading. Spetses, at heart, is not a flashy place. You can still find the island's famous specialties, such as the €120 lobster spaghetti at the classic Tarsanas restaurant in the Old Harbour, but it's also easy to source less expensive food. Kaiki, in buzzy Clock Square, serves the island's best pizzas, and there are plenty of rustic beach tavernas, such as the one that has been serving the same delicious *souzoukakia* meatballs in red sauce for the past 40 years on Zogeria, a stunning run of unspoiled sandy bays accessible only by water (or by braving a 1km trek down a loose dirt road). Spend the day with umbrellas and loungers at idyllic pebble and sand coves, such as Vrelos, Agia Paraskevi or Agii Anargyi, and it will set you back only about €8, as opposed to €80 on Mykonos.

Best of all, some of the most memorable Spetses experiences are free. Take the wonderful scenic walk from Dapia to Panagia Armata Church in the old harbour to admire the winsome sculptures of the renowned Athenian artist Natalia Mela. Or there are 25km of connected panoramic trails on which you can cycle round the island, stopping in at any number of no-named bays along the way. At mesmerising Bekiri's Cave you can snorkel in the spot where local women and children once took refuge from Ottoman raiders.

And, of course, there's always the main square in front of the Poseidonion where you can simply sit back and people-watch for hours. Who knows who you'll see.

**Amanda Dardanis is the editor of Athens Insider**

