

30 Travel

THE TIMES Saturday June 17 2017

Europe

Why Greece is the word for luxury family holidays

Whether you've got tots or teens, the new hotels in Halkidiki, in northern Greece, are the place to go, says **Jane Knight**

Here's why my son loves holidays in Greece: he says there's no sightseeing. I know, I know... but his point is that the hotels in one part of the country, where rugged olive and pine-covered hills roll down to sandy coves, are now so good that even parents will find it hard to tear themselves away to go and look at — God forbid — a ruin. We're not talking about the Greek islands here either; it's the trident-shaped peninsula of Halkidiki in the north that is raising the stakes in the luxury family holiday game.

The birthplace of Aristotle and home to the autonomous area of Mount Athos, with its 20 monasteries, Halkidiki this summer gains two new upmarket family hotels, while a third is getting a serious facelift.

On Kassandra, the first finger of Halkidiki, the ever popular Sani Resort is targeting the teenage market with a fifth hotel, as well as a special teens' club with age-relevant activities. Just round the

bay, its sister property Ikos Oceania has also upped its game after a serious refurbishment and is introducing more all-inclusive deals. Meanwhile, on the Athos Peninsula — the third finger of Halkidiki — an all-villas hotel has just opened as a sister property to Eagles Palace Hotel.

Whether you have tots or teens, Halkidiki is the place to go this summer — and it is only just over a three-hour flight from London to Thessaloniki.

Sani Resort

New offerings for teenagers

They're a tough bunch to please on holiday, the over-12s: too old for kids' clubs (not that my son ever liked them) and too young to appreciate the pleasures of lounging by the pool with a cocktail.

Even the joys of football or sailing academies fade at this age. "I don't want to

be doing them with seven-year-olds," was my pre-teen's response. "Can't I just hang out in the pool with you?" Don't get me wrong, I like a bit of pool time as much as the next mum, but I also want the guilty pleasure of some uninterrupted chick lit.

Cue Ozone, aka the Teen House, which opened this month in the central marina area of the massive Sani Resort, 45 minutes from Thessaloniki, along with the new hotel Sani Dunes, on which there is more later in this article. This small but funky club goes far beyond its three swings by the doorway, mocktail bar and games from Xbox to air hockey. The idea is that it's a hub that brings together teenagers staying in Sani's five disparate hotels (which are strung out along the beach with their own facilities), allowing like-minded children to sign up for age-specific activities.

From a list that includes DJ lessons, stargazing and cookery classes, my son tries his hand at archery, previously limited to the over-17s. When a flurry of arrows hits the target and his grin widens, it's obvious that it's a Sani bull's-eye, as is the over-12s football academy that he tries.

The resort, with its crèches, kids' clubs and "babewatch" service — which allows parents to swim while their tots are looked after — is already a firm family favourite, and the teens' club is part of a concerted effort to provide more for older children.

As is Sani Dunes, the resort's swish two-storey, 136-room hotel, which is bang on the beach and just the other side of the marina from the luxury boutique hotel Sani Asterias. Its seriously grown-up rooms are minimalist and modern, with a coarse marble floor, plenty of wood, muted tones, and something my son spots straightaway — a strategically placed bank of plugs



Sani Dunes Hotel



Eagles Villas

under the flat-screen TV that include USB ports and British sockets. Bathrooms are so sleek you could wallow in them for hours. The junior suite we're in opens on to the garden and the beach, with views of the massive pool. I can't say if this is the biggest pool in Greece, as I'm told, but it sure is big.

Although Dunes was designed exclusively for over-12s, repeat bookers have been clamouring so much for younger siblings to be allowed through its doors that the Sani chief executive, Dr Andreas Andreadis, is changing the policy. "Next year we will let under-12s in," he says. "People do want a separate place for the over-12s, but not a separate hotel."

It's fitting that he divulges this over a



The Sailing Academy at Sani Resort



Ikos Oceania

The all-inclusive option

A bottle of Taittinger champagne sits chilling in an ice bucket. However, this is no welcome drink — if (when) I finish it, there's plenty more. And the best bit? It won't cost me a thing, and neither will the rest of the impressively stocked minibar, nor all the ice cream my son can eat (a lot).

It is the latest in a long list of extras that guests can expect at Ikos, a pair of hotels in Kassandra that take the all-inclusive concept to new levels, making family holidays as chilled as the champagne.

Forget all those images you have of wristbands, queues for cheap alcohol and awful buffets; at Ikos there's a 300-strong wine list and a handful of speciality restaurants with kitchen staff trained by Michelin-starred chefs. I can't get enough of the prawn ravioli at Fusco, which is overseen by Andrea Fusco, and my son is a fan of the Greek restaurant under Leteris Lazarou. There are French and Asian restaurants too, or you can head to the local taverna, where you will find that the bill comes to a big fat zero. Room service is also complimentary.

When my son and I discovered Ikos Oceania in Nea Moudania and Ikos Olivia, about 20 minutes round the bay at Gerakini last year, we loved the attentive staff, but found the rooms at Olivia far superior. Oceania's €27 million (£23.8 million) refurbishment has changed that, decking the rooms out in marine blues and whites, with modern lamps and suede sofas. Pristine bathrooms that scream luxury come with power showers as well as baths and Anne Semonin products. Our room, one of the deluxe collection, also has a child's bedroom off the main room.

These more spacious rooms come with the use of a separate section of the beach, the aforementioned complimentary champagne (although you still get a free minibar in the standard rooms), a free treatment in the Anne Semonin spa and an exclusive pool.

Not that you'll have a problem finding space poolside as the exclusive pool is one of six at this 300-room hotel. As you'd expect, there's a kids' club, as well as menus for children and a toddler-watching service on the beach.

There are more complimentary activities for all ages than you can shake your useless credit card at, from water sports to Zumba, with evening shows in the indoor theatre. My son tries a scuba-diving taster session before we head out on the pedalos and later play squash, all punctuated by lounging on the beach and by the pool, where staff ply us with ice creams and slushies (him) and cocktails and wine (me). And what's more, there's always more champagne in the ice bucket.

Need to know

meal at the new Over Water restaurant in the uber luxe Sani Astorias, one of a handful of Sani eateries reserved for over-12s (including Fresco in Sani Dunes). The menu was created by the two-Michelin-starred Jacques Chibois and is exquisite: foie gras, lobster risotto with truffle, an amazing cheese trolley with produce flown in from Paris, and a chocolate forest dessert to die for. The same menu — minus the cheese trolley — is on offer downstairs in the Water Restaurant, in a more relaxed setting with young children allowed.

And so the days pass, with plenty of swimming, activities and eating, interspersed with bike rides across this massive resort of 900 rooms, when we notice a number of adults-only pools and beach areas.

And the best bit, according to my son? The freedom. The freedom to jump on his bike and head off to the mini-market to stock up on cola, to meet me later for dinner and to head off to the teens' club. All of which gives me the freedom to catch up on that chick lit. Job done.

Eagles Villas

For families wanting their own space

There's a serious problem with the new Eagles Villas resort on Halkidiki's Athos Peninsula: once you're installed in one, you really won't want to go out. Why would you when you have your own 5m heated pool with adjoining decked area, perfect for lying back and gazing at one of Greece's most mesmerising views, across sparkling seas to the island of Ammouliani?

And then there's the space — 90 sq m of it in our one-bedroom villa, which has a spacious walk-through bathroom, large bedroom and a sitting room with a massive sofaed, all in calming contemporary tones with plenty of pale wood and natural stone. It's beautifully arranged round three sides of a bamboo covered

courtyard with tables and chairs. Some of the villas even have gardens.

There's a kitchenette, or you can opt for private dining, but it would be a shame not to venture out. There are a handful of excellent restaurants at the resort, from the Greek taverna on the beach, with its crisp calamari and delicious meze, to the gourmet restaurant where the chef has created an olive-oil macaroon (which tastes nicer than it sounds).

And here we come to a second, more minor problem. Because the villas cling to the hillside above Eagles Palace Hotel, it will either be a steep walk up or down the hill, or a wait for a lift from a club car. So up the hill we traipse, to the main villas reception, a contemporary split-level wood-and-stone affair for breakfast, to play tennis on the hilltop courts and to swim in indoor and outdoor pools. Then down the hill we head to the beautiful beach, to the Elemis spa, and to those restaurants, where the food is so

Jane Knight was a guest of Sovereign (01293 765003, sovereign.com), which has a week's half-board in Eagles Villas (eaglesvillas.gr) from £3,999 for a family of four, a saving of up to £1,567. A week's half-board at Sani Dunes (sani-resort.com) costs from £3,996 for a family of four, based on two teenagers staying for free. A week's all-inclusive at Ikos Oceania (ikosresorts.com) costs from £3,899 for a family of four. All prices include flights. Holiday Extras (holidayextras.com) has airport parking from £52



Ikos Oceania