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Could a Spartan lifestyle turn me from zero to hero? I travelled to Greece to find out

Our writer takes up the challenge of a five-day fitness and conditioning programme in Greece (in the inspiring homeland of King Leonidas)

By Chris Leadbeater, TRAVEL WRITER

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I bet Polus of Aegina never had to do this. The foremost actor of ancient Greece played to packed houses in the 4th century BC, letting performances of rare emotion fall from his lips. The only thing threatening to fall from mine is a lengthening string of drool, as I continue to “plank” in what is otherwise a perfectly good amphitheatre – my forearms

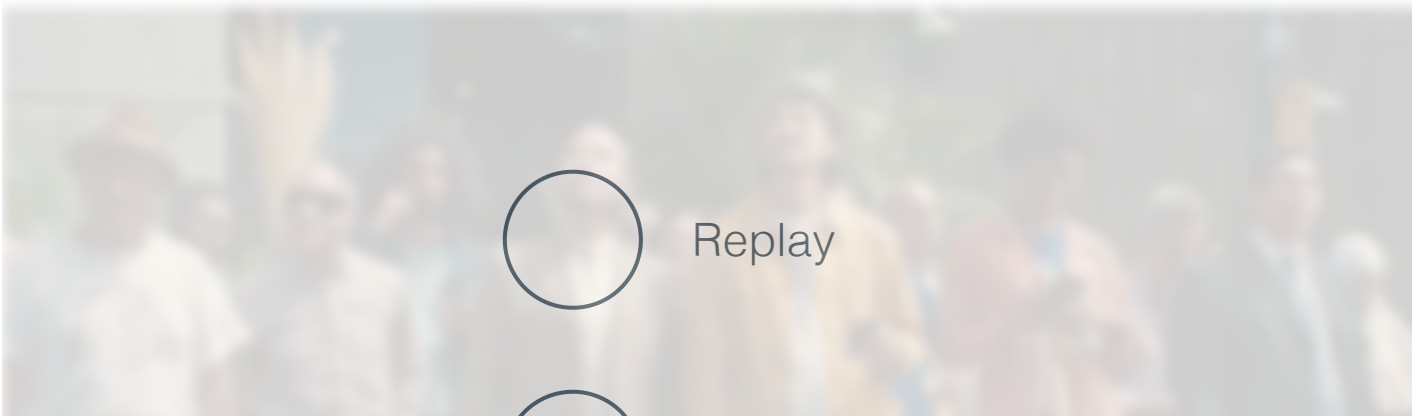
“resting” on the rear of the front row of seats, my back straight, my feet planted on the stage behind. “Come on,” Dimitra Karounou says, as she urges me to hold the pose for a few seconds further. “You’re training like a Spartan warrior. It’s meant to hurt a little bit.”

The history



A wounded Leonidas (Gerard Butler) roars his defiance at the Persian invaders in the film 300

She has a point; one Leonidas and I would probably agree with. The fabled 5th-century-BC warrior-king – a slayer of Persian invaders famously depicted by Gerard Butler in the 2006 movie 300 – still (supposedly) lies in his tomb, two miles away on the central square in the modern version of Sparta (Sparti). He would surely also approve of what personal trainer Dimitra has me do next – shuttle runs, 13 of them, up the steps of the Sainopouleio Theatre, until I can barely see for the sweat in my eyes. “Don’t do this next time you go see a play,” she laughs, apparently as encouragement. “You will really put off the actors.”



The amphitheatre is not strictly authentic. It is a contemporary construction, designed to make the most of warm evenings, Greece's love of the arts, and some truly gorgeous scenery. Its setting, 130 miles south-west of Athens, amid the mountainous folds of the Peloponnese peninsula, is shared by my refuge for the week. At least, I think it's a refuge. The people who run it are responsible for the "Spartan Spirit of Adventure" – a five-day fitness and conditioning programme which also makes excellent use of this fine location. By the end of my stay, I will have sprinted, jumped, hiked and squatted until my legs ached. Leonidas would be on board with this. Polus, I can only assume, would not.

The retreat

Euphoria Retreat is that refuge, built into the hill in Mystras, the next dot on the map west of Sparta. Built into it so subtly, in fact, that you might not know it is there. It has just 45 rooms, hewn from the same honied stone as the houses beneath them. It revolves around a spa, laid out on four levels, with a series of treatment areas, gym spaces and sauna zones – but even this main structure is hugely inconspicuous, set back into the rock-face, and accessed via a core staircase that spirals down within it. Seen from below, the whole complex is practically indistinguishable from the cluster of cafes, churches and carelessly parked mopeds – the classic, glorious Greek template – which shape the rest of the village.



Euphoria Retreat, the brainchild of Marina Efraimoglou

“One of the reasons I chose this location is its closeness to the village,” Euphoria’s owner Marina Efraimoglou says, emphasising that “we are part of the village; we are not cut off from it”. If the retreat is partly concealed, the reason for the sleight of architecture is not. Just up the hill, another slab of Greek heritage dozes in retirement – the Byzantine-citadel incarnation of Mystras, which has Unesco world heritage status. Dramatically beautiful, it presented Marina with a challenge when she sought to set her plan in motion. She bought the land in 2007, but Euphoria only opened in 2018. “Because Mystras is a Unesco site, it took a long time to secure the building permits,” she explains.

It was all worth it. Born in Athens, by the late 1990s, Marina found herself working as a banker in New York – and hideously stressed. “I was overworked, so tired,” she sighs. “I went to a spa retreat in the US – and realised it was something I wanted to do myself.”



A slice of heaven (amongst the pain): the outdoor pool at Euphoria Retreat

Her interest in relaxation and recovery means there is a gentler element to my Spartan programme. Over the course of my stay, my weary muscles are pressed and persuaded via a series of treatments. There is a deep tissue massage which locates sinews and ligaments I wasn't aware I possessed, and charms them into a better mood. There is a meditation session which almost sends me floating to another plane; a soft-soaping hammam ritual that has a near-identical effect. And at the end of every day, there is a return to a room whose bed, a cloud of pillows and duvet, is the type you might sink into, and keep falling.

The crowd



Retreat guests gathered, it's a smart, grown-up European crowd

All of this is far more in keeping with the key demographic at Euphoria. The majority of my fellow guests are aged 40 and up; smart, well-spoken travellers from various corners of Europe – a smattering of French conversation here, a dash of chatter in German there – all keen to shed their everyday concerns for a week. We gather every lunchtime and evening – at individual tables – at Gaia, the house restaurant, where the fare is healthy, but surprisingly filling. These are not diet rations. There are Greek cheeses, lightly grilled steaks, baskets of fresh-baked bread. Everyone tucks in. The only restraint is on booze. Alcohol is not strictly forbidden, but it is not offered with dinner, and I do not see anyone approach the little bar in the corner of the lobby. It would be some sort of walk of shame.

This abstinence feels for the best when, on my second morning, I am thrown into another high-intensity work-out. Today's ringmaster Ioannis Samothrakis does not look like a Spartan – at least, not like Butler's hirsute, bulging-bicep take on the role. He is wiry, clean-shaven, and, for the record, from Mytilene on Lesbos. But he is happy to be the sort of drill-sergeant Leonidas would have had marshalling his troops, leading me through staccato bursts of sprints and star-jumps, and a hike-cum-run on the forest trail that criss-crosses the hillside behind. There is scant respite when we return to the retreat's top-level terrace for further planking. "Enjoy the view," he grins. "It's lovely. I've already seen it."

It is indeed lovely; a snapshot of pastoral Greece so wonderful that Zeus might have used it as a backdrop for selfies. Directly ahead and to the east, the Parnon mountains raise their shoulders. Sparti sits resplendent underneath, on the valley floor, swaddled in mist or bathed in sunlight, according to the time of day. The Taygetus range picks up the thread immediately behind, its titular peak holding a sacred place in the Greek psyche, its top crowned by a chapel to the Orthodox Profitis Ilias (the Old Testament prophet Elijah).



Euphoria retreat, snuggled into the Greek mountains

The regime

It is so lovely, in fact, that Euphoria draws it into its daily exercise routines. There are guided hikes every morning before breakfast – on one day to the Mystras citadel, on another to the Lagadiotisa Cave. The latter involves a walk down into Mystras village, through the olive groves on its edge, then a sharp right turn into the Parori Gorge, which eats into the Taygetus massif. There are walls of limestone on each side, a gradient that rises quickly; then, after a section where the path switches back on itself, the cave. Inside, pushed deep into the cleft in the rock, is a tiny Orthodox chapel; icons on its walls, stubs of candles planted in trays of sand, a scent of incense that lingers, ingrained, in spite of the light wind that blows up the gorge. In the early light, nothing could look more Greek.

The retreat also provides bikes for those who want to explore further. On my third afternoon, I ignore the complaints from my calves to pedal to Sparti, and the vestiges of its

ancient kernel. As is often the case in a country which has so much archaeological heritage it scarcely knows what to do with it, the remnants of Sparta have a distinct air of being under-appreciated. The “road” to the site is potholed, the gate is open, and there is no admission charge to stroll with the ghosts of what was once a mighty European power. The structures it contains are fragmented and faded – as, perhaps, is only to be expected of a city whose heyday was between the 7th and 4th centuries BC. But it sings its song sweetly enough.

The Sanctuary of Athena Chalkioikos, which still adorns the top of the acropolis, was pivotal to the Spartan tale. It was here, in 477BC, that the citizens took revenge on the alleged traitor Pausanias, a general who was accused of being in league with the Persians. He was barricaded inside the sanctuary, and left to starve. Less bleak of history is the amphitheatre. Though now a piecemeal relic, partially buried in the grass of the hillside – and certainly no place for shuttle runs – it makes no attempt to disguise its size. In its pomp, it was one of the ancient world’s largest, able to hold 17,000 spectators.

Cycling back to Euphoria, I pass Leonidas’s tomb. Even as a ruin, it is an impressive affair; weighty blocks piled up to make what must once have been a vast mausoleum. I pause to take a few photos, then remount the bike, daydreaming of dinner. As I leave, I could swear I hear a gruff voice in my ear. “Give me 10 more reps, and lay off the bread.”

Magnificent Mystras, the ‘other’ Sparta

It is not difficult to understand the case of mistaken identity. So majestic is the medieval citadel of Mystras that, even as late as the 19th century, tourists who approached its gates -

on the hard flank of Mount Taygus - believed they had arrived at ancient Sparta. This towering mixture of battlements, churches and houses has the look and feel of a place which might have existed in the deepest annals of history.



The ruined city of Mystras | CREDIT: Alamy

In fact, it is much younger and far bigger than the home of Leonidas; founded in 1249 by a French-Greek prince who wanted a stronghold to reaffirm his recent conquest of the lower Peloponnese. William of Villehardouin was not around for long; he had lost his new possession by 1262. But the place he founded has proved rather more durable. Mystras rose to be the regional capital, remained significant in the Ottoman era, and was still inhabited as “recently” as 1831. It wears its story in three distinct levels – a “lower town” where the Pantanassa Convent still has a congregation of nuns; an “upper town” where the churches of St Nikolaos and St Sophia still boast colourful Byzantine frescoes; a fortified acropolis from which you can look across the peninsula. No invaders will stride menacingly over the horizon now – but it is almost impossible to pull your gaze from the view all the same.

How to get there

Euphoria Retreat’s (euphoriaretreat.com) “Spartan Spirit of Adventure” costs from £3,425 per person as a five-day programme, via Wellbeing Escapes (020 3735 7555;

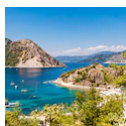
wellbeingescapes.com). This price includes return flights (from London Gatwick to Kalamata) with easyJet on April 12 - plus checked baggage and return airport transfers.

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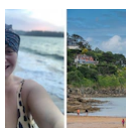
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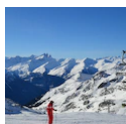
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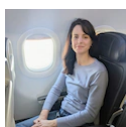
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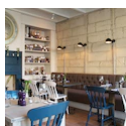
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