



Forget the crisis — a tour of the Peloponnese with mum is delightful and enriching, says **JENNY COAD**

THE small village of Levidi is set above a valley of prairie-like fields dotted with beehives, backed by a delicious-smelling pine forest and protected by the Mainalo mountain range.

Not much sign of Greece's perilous state here. Yes, there are derelict houses — but they are crumbling prettily, with peeling turquoise shutters and marauding greenery.

Levidi is around a two-hour drive (100 miles) from Athens in the heart of the Peloponnese. This region is known as Arcadia, and rightly so — it's beautiful, pastoral, sleepy.

At the hotel Villa Vager in Levidi, where I am staying with my mum, the owner Nicholas offers quadbike tours and you can roar around all day without seeing a soul. Mum opts for a book on the balcony while I zoom off in a cloud of dust.

Nicholas and his wife Marina have sensitively restored Villa Vager, which was originally a ruin. It's now a grown-up, luxurious country hotel. There's no restaurant, but down the road, the village square offers plenty of tavernas, noisy village gossip and doleful stray dogs begging for your souvlaki.

If quad biking doesn't appeal, there are several cultural sites in the area — including Mystras, with its Byzantine churches and extraordinary frescoes dating from the 13th century.

You could spend an entire



A bonding experience: The dramatic scenery of the Mani peninsular and, inset, Jenny and her mum

day here, but we are only dropping in en route to the once-inaccessible Mani peninsula.

As we travel south, the landscape becomes increasingly austere. Mani withheld the Turks and, unlike the rest of Greece, was not part of the Ottoman Empire.

Granite tower houses were built for defence and they puncture the skyline. This was a pirate coastline and life here was feudal. The Maniots remain a hardy bunch — they still shoot guns into the air when a son is born.

We are heading to Citta, which used to boast a population in the thousands, but now houses around 20 people and has an abandoned feel.

Our hotel, Citta Dei Nicliani, is an original tower house with some of the rooms dating from the 12th century — a fact which thrills my archaeologist mum.

There's an old oil press

in her room as well as archaeological finds from the building work. It's family-run, friendly, authentic. The boss, Ilias, cooks deliciously fragrant food and bakes bread, daily. His wife, Tania, is a kind host and their son, Panos, will advise on local beaches, walks, hilltop churches — plus he makes a mean gin and tonic.

CITTA Dei Nicliani has a loyal following — one couple come all the way from Australia most years to enjoy the marvellous hospitality.

It's a glorious spot and attracts honeymooners. In the evening, the smell of lavender, jasmine and thyme fills the air and, at sundown, packs of jackals howl the dark in. We never quite manage to have dinner elsewhere.

We do, though, explore a local lunch option at a harbour-side restaurant, Theodora's in the attractive fishing village of Limeni, a 15-minute drive away.

You can leap in, as I do, from

the harbour wall for a swim, or spend the day on a sandy beach at Marmari. It is worth making the journey to the southern tip, Cape Taenaron, where it is said you can talk to the dead.

The great travel writer, Patrick Leigh Fermor, adored the Mani and bought a house in Kardamyli, north-west of here. He called the region an 'Elysian confine' and that still rings true today.

TRAVEL FACTS

BRITISH Airways, (ba.com) flies to Athens from £50 each way. Steppes Travel (08437 789 926, steppetravel.com) offers an eight-day itinerary to Athens and the Peloponnese, including two nights at the St George Lycabettus in Athens, two at Villa Vager in Levidi and three at Citta dei Nicliani in the Mani Peninsula, from £945 pp B&B. Valid June to October 2015. Hertz offers car hire from £86 for seven days or from £12 per day. (holidayautos.co.uk).

Children of all ages will blow off steam in wild and mystically eccentric Iceland

AS I DEVOUR my burger, a piercing glare comes from across the table. My son points to the window, reminding me we have company: a dozen prized cows.

I feel a pang of guilt as I sink my teeth into Daisy's less fortunate friend, but I don't feel too bad — these are some of the luckiest cows alive.

Their home is the family-run Efsti-Dalur II farm in the wild Icelandic countryside, on the path of the famous Golden Circle and 90 minutes' drive from Reykjavik.

We stay in one of its ten log cabins overlooking sprawling farmland and mountains. My six-year old Magnus loves it.

Dining with farm animals is just the first of our unusual culinary experiences. Next day, we lunch at Friheimar, a colossal greenhouse in Reykholt, filled with row upon row of tomato vines. The sweet tomato soup with tangy cucumber salsa and sour cream is a far cry from a tin of Heinz.

Iceland is famous for its hot springs, geysers and volcanoes. Strokkur geyser erupts every five minutes or so, and even the most impatient of spectators is



Bursting with joy: The Strokkur geyser erupts in a column of hot spring water

rewarded. It certainly gets Magnus's seal of approval. The same cannot be said for whale-watching. For three sickly hours aboard a boat called Andrea we wait like expectant One Direction fans, yearning for a glimpse of Harry Styles, only to be told he's already left the building.

The mood is lifted when we chance upon

a pod of dancing white-beaked dolphins. We run from one side of the deck to the other to catch that all-elusive glimpse.

Multiple whale sightings are guaranteed, however, at Reykjavik's newly opened Whales of Iceland exhibition. In the comfort of a heated warehouse you can walk among full-scale models of 23 species. For

those more interested in people-watching, Iceland's hot pools are worth a visit. We jostle for space in the warm geothermal waters of the popular Blue Lagoon. Magnus says it's the best 'swimming pool' he's ever seen. But if you'd rather shun the crowds then the Secret Lagoon, near Fludir, is a shrewd option.

There are countless tour companies operating in Reykjavik, but hiring a car is easy and far more exciting.

Cruising down an empty route 37 in blazing sunshine, with volcanic rock to left and right, you can't help thinking you've fetched up on an alien planet, albeit one where the locals are forever welcoming and the menu of activities is perfect for adventure-seekers of all ages.

DIANA MCCORMICK

TRAVEL FACTS

SCANADVENTURES (020 7529 8759, scanadventures.co.uk) offers a seven-day itinerary, from £899 per adult and £329 per child, including return flights, B&B, arrival dinner, and car rental.