

TAKING THE PLUNGE

Buying a house in Greece might seem a romantic dream, but what's the reality?
HELEN TRUSZKOWSKI found out...

At some point, the humdrum of juggling fishfingers and dinging phones had me longing for the laidback holiday spot of my hard-spent youth: Greece. With some inheritance money to invest, I daydreamed about owning my own corner of Greece, spending lazy summers with the kids, forgoing bikini waxes, sipping ouzo and small-batch preserving my own fig jam. But buying a holiday home is a huge undertaking. Where to start? All I really had to go on was a need to reconnect with Greece, to show my family where the locals spend their vacations, to recreate the simple barefoot joy of summers past. Fingers crossed I wasn't 30 years too late.

My summer-home search began, well, from home. It turns out you can practically sign your life away direct from your laptop. While I wasn't considering buying 'sight unseen', I quickly gleaned a lot of useful information online. I was able to view and compare properties, scouting for the right investment. Within a few weeks, I had narrowed it down to three under-the-radar regions spread across the mainland Peloponnese: Messinia, Arcadia and Laconia. Each region, it seemed, was unashamedly, quintessentially Greek. The real deal.

So, one dreary November morning, I took the plunge and flew into Athens with my 10-year-old son, Jack. Ignoring the 'ere-we-go islands altogether, we picked up a hire car, took a sharp left, and headed into Greece's lesser-trampled interior. Our destination was Kalamata, tenth-largest city in Greece and the capital of Messinia, built at the foot of the Taygetos mountain range. The city is mostly known for its olives, still painstakingly harvested by hand, and unique because of their distinctive almond shape, meaty texture and dark aubergine colour. We were in luck: we arrived right in the midst of olive-picking season, and the smell of the plump, ripened fruits hung heavy in the air. Kalamata itself had a careless, unpolished glamour. It's the kind of spot where you can see a modern Greece developing without the distorting influence of tourism. Alongside the old Greece of labyrinthine stores and tavernas stood hip neon fashion stores and buzzy coffee bars. Of course, we weren't just there to eat and shop. The process of purchasing a property overseas can be extremely complicated, and it's easy to make a mistake if you don't have an expert advising you. I had pinpointed an independent, family-run estate



ALL ABOUT THE MANI

Clockwise from top left: Kardamyli, a town mentioned in *The Iliad*; typically Greek decor; Chris O'Connor is an old property hand on the Peloponnese; a basket of local olives; the terrace at Hotel Citta dei Nicliani



HELEN AND SON JACK, 10, ENJOYED A QUAD TOUR AT THE VILLA VAGER

agency to show me around and help me navigate the legalities of the buying process.

A SAFE PAIR OF HANDS

'Yassas,' (hello) Chris O' Connor greeted us with a deep smile, a robust handshake and a glaring British accent. I knew I was in safe hands. Chris spent the rest of the day showing us huge houses with deep verandas and ancient cool stone walls. As often as not, the owners were wizened old *yayas* and *papous* (grandmas and grandpas) whose children had long since flown the nest. With homes now too vast and hollow, they were hoping to downsize and move closer to their offspring. With no words of English, they welcomed us clutching freshly picked pomegranates and walnuts. 'Efharisto,' (thanks) Jack and I pitched back clumsily.

It was a humbling start to our search. That evening, Jack and I dined on our balcony at the Horizon Blu hotel, watching the sunset melt into the ocean like a scoop of orange sorbet. There was no doubt Kalamata ticked a lot of the boxes, but it still lacked the remoteness I hankered for.

So, next morning, we joined Chris and headed south down Mani's rugged western coastline. The Mani peninsula is the midpoint of the three-pronged southern Peloponnese, a 40-mile-long skeletal finger that – until recently – remained almost inaccessible by land. A patchwork of deep gorges, dizzying mountains, cypress forests and wild flower meadows loomed larger and more breathtaking round every bend. Just what I was looking for. As we zipped past fields dotted with beehives, olive

and walnut trees, Jack stuck out his hand and brushed the undergrowth. The scent of sage and thyme filled the car. Hugging the road tight, Chris suddenly curved up a steep dirt track. And stopped. 'Loo break?' I asked. 'No, this is where you're going to build your new home,' he announced. News to me. The idea of custom fitting my very own home on my very own plot of land hadn't occurred to me. But there it was. An acre of land for sale, on budget, and with a mesmerising view in every direction. Snuggled in, overlooking the bluest of water in the Messinian Bay with the Taygetos Mountains as its backbone, we were minutes from legendary Kardamyli. The same Kardamyli mentioned in Homer's *Iliad* as one of the seven towns that Agamemnon gave to Achilles. The same Kardamyli that seduced celebrated travel writer Sir Patrick Leigh Fermor. He lived here for half a century until his death in 2013, aged 96.

I was immediately smitten – ready to sign on the line. As my mind started to rejig and I remembered the important things in life (like pensions, school fees, the mortgage, car insurance), Chris pulled rank and suggested we mull it all over at lunch. We landed in the impossibly pretty village of Agios Nikolaos and Chris unfurled plans of the land. No question, I had fallen hard. Convinced this was the spot to

beat, we left Chris and continued scouting further south, zigzagging our way past a Peloponnese unchanged since the time of legend. Motoring here is not for the faint-hearted. To my right, the narrow road cleaved to the edge of the continent like few roads I've driven. To my left, olive groves, studded with gnarled thousand-year-old trees, stood atop stacked rock terraces. Grapevines clambered up rocky flanks, and vertiginous villages of white houses with orange-tiled roofs spilled over the ancient landscape.

THE PENINSULA IS A PATCHWORK OF DEEP GORGES, CYPRESS FORESTS AND DIZZING MOUNTAINS

No contest. What felt like an hour's slow-motion rollercoaster drive later, I enjoyed the best night's sleep I've ever had at Hotel Citta dei Nicliani. At the heart of a gorgeous Ottoman relic, the owners of this discreet seven-room boutique hotel have installed heavy wooden beams, antique furniture and beyond-sumptuous beds. There's



was honeyed and mellow. The food was fresh, unpretentious and obsessively local. I ate a fresh grilled skathari fish. Jack just ate. At home, he shies away from anything with a hint of Mediterranean flavour. I realise now that supermarket-bought tomatoes and olives just aren't tasty enough. In the Peloponnese, he ate them all, all of the time.

A LAND OF LEGEND

With time running out, and more to explore, we hit the road hard. The E961 sliced north, through the forests of Mainalon and past the now-not-so-far-flung snow-tipped Taygetos mountains. En route to Levidi, illustrious place names of myth and legend hurtled by: Sparta, Tripoli, Mystras. The landscape was no less striking, wild and dry, with hawks wheeling in the pale blue sky overhead. Our stop off for the night was Villa Vager. Since 2011, power couple Nikolaos and his wife Marina have transformed a crumbling stone ruin into an intimate home-from-home hotel. Ten guestrooms are individually decorated, many with exposed stone walls, some of them loft bedrooms, and all with jawdropping views. The atmosphere was intimate and welcoming; the freshly baked breakfast sublime.

What's more, the couple have outstanding knowledge of the local area. Nikolaos is the only operator in Greece (and one of just a handful in Europe) to specialise in Polaris ATV quad bike tours. He whirred us on a white-knuckle ride through the austere winter landscape and up into Christmassy fir-tree forests. Next morning, he directed us to Kapsia Cave. Ranked among the 10 most remarkable caves in Greece, Kapsia opened its doors to visitors just a few years ago. Few people have visited yet, or are even aware of its existence. Jack got all googly-eyed, pawing his way past grotesque and formidable subterranean stalactites and stalagmites, fragments of human bones and skulls and later-Hellenic-period lamps. A stroll down from the villa brought us to the hub of the village. Here, a handful of tavernas and cafes fringed a central square, serving traditional Greek country cuisine (roast

SAVE FOR THE OCCASIONAL COCK CROW OR DOG BARK, IT WAS PROFOUNDLY QUIET HERE

so much history here. And it has been restored by husband-and-wife team Ilias and Tania so sensitively. One room we peeped into once hosted a WWII prison, another the Greek Royal Gendarmerie. There's an old oil press in one room and archaeological finds unearthed during the renovation. Crossing the hotel courtyard to the village of Koita beyond, narrow paths meandered past fuchsia bougainvillea-clad buildings rescued from ruin. The village centre itself had

little to recommend it. One supermarket, a bus stop and a tiny Byzantine basilica, its rough whitewashed walls masking golden treasures within. Save for the occasional cock crow and dog bark, it was profoundly quiet here: the sort of quiet I could get used to. Small wonder savvy hikers and honeymooners that pass through conspire to keep the Citta a secret.

We were on the search for derelict houses for sale, crumbling elegantly with their peeling turquoise shutters, and we chanced upon the fishing village of Limeni just in time for dinner. The early evening light

THE PERFECT SPOT? Clockwise from top left: a typical town in Arcadia; the view from the town of Levidi; the beautiful fishing village of Limeni at dusk

THE LOWDOWN

GETTING THERE

EasyJet (easyjet.com) flies from London Gatwick to Athens. Prices start from £30.24 per person. London Gatwick to Kalamata from £32.24 per person one way.

Many flights to Greece from Gatwick take off very early in the morning. Consider spending the night at the terminal's own Bloc Hotel (blochotels.com): hi-tech Bloc Hotel Gatwick offers room only from £59, plus room and official Gatwick valet-parking packages from £79. Alternatively, BA flies direct to Kalamata from 30 April, departing at the family-friendly time of 11.20am from Heathrow. From £138 return.

WHERE TO STAY

St George Lycabettus (sglycabettus.gr): central Athens hotel with rooms from £76, including buffet breakfast.

Horizon Blu (horizonblu.gr): rooms from £99, including breakfast.

Citta dei Nicliani (cittadeinicliani.com): rooms from £76, including homemade local breakfast.

Villa Vager (hotelvager.gr): rooms from £91, including homestyle Greek buffet breakfast. Private cooking lessons from £53. Guided ATV rides in the forests of Mainalo cost from £27 per person. Nearby Kapsia Cave: entrance 8.30am-3pm, £5 Athens Airport Transfers: taxi service from £30 one way. Theodore Alexopoulos 0030 697 3545451.

MORE INFORMATION

Destino Tours, Tripoli (destinotours.gr) offers car hire from Kalamata Airport and private driver transfers from £114.

Fly Me to the Moon Travel (flymetothe moontravel.com) offers intimate knowledge of the area, with tailor-made tours to suit your particular needs.

Itineraries start from £212pp per day for adults and children over 15 years. O'Connor Properties (oconnorproperties.gr) is an independent, family-run estate agency, providing a personal and professional service, drawing on more than 14 years' experience. For properties in the Peloponnese, expect to pay around £55,000 for a renovated old stone house in Messinian County, with views of the harbour, or £100,000 for a four-bedroom house close to the ocean. Plots of land start at around £40,000.

PHOTOGRAPHY: ROBERT HARDING, ALAMY, 4 CORNERS



JACK TAKES IN THE VIEW OF LEVIDI FROM THE VILLA VAGER

chicken, pork and wild boar). We happened upon the weekend market, the bustling stalls vying for the attention of locals laden with wicker shopping baskets. Here was a rare glimpse into understated village life in an undisturbed part of Greece, beyond the grasp of impatient modernity. While the laissez-faire mindset took some getting used to, lounging in overstuffed sofas at the Villa Vager, sipping hot chocolate, playing a game of chess, was, Jack insisted, 'better than any trip to a theme park'. I had to agree. It was the refreshing lack of pretension here in the Peloponnese that made such

simplicity a virtue. Greek time was catching up with me. That same Greece I remembered and I loved. But did we both love it enough to keep coming back? To put in that call to Chris? To actually take the plunge? Resoundingly, *nai* (yes). So lulled were we by this idyllic escape from the manic 'ping' of our modern urban lives, here even Greece's crippling recession seemed a world away. Sure, Greece has had its setbacks, but the best way to help isn't with cursory charity donations - it's to take a trip here and put your cash into the pockets of the people who need it most. So, when people ask, 'Is it safe? Is there anything we can do?' Yes, there is: visit Greece. Heck, move to Greece. I know just the spot. ■

IS BUYING A HOUSE ABROAD FOR YOU?

Weigh it up. Choosing to either buy and renovate or to build your own home has clear pros and cons. Either involves considerable time, money, imagination, a complex legal framework and incredible patience. Invariably, there is risk involved with both cost and time over-runs. Different building materials and working practices - not to mention the language barrier - can be daunting. But on the plus side, you get precisely the look, style and facilities you want. And a good investment opportunity in terms of either seasonal rentals or long-term lets.

Open a foreign bank account. But be aware: while it's tempting to use your UK bank to make currency transfers to the bank on your behalf, it pays to shop around. Currency specialists such as fcexchange.com may offer better services and better rates. Right now, exchange rates are in your favour, with the pound up considerably against the euro, so your money should go that much further.

Learn the local language.

It will help when you are checking records of the property and land. You should be clear about boundaries, rights of way and access before you even make an offer.

Secure a bilingual property law specialist. And be sure to take legal advice on inheritance law.

The selling price is not what you'll end up paying. Hidden additional charges include estate agent fees, notary's fees, bank transfer fees, surveyor's fees, taxes, utility connection.

Don't expect rapid progress. Be prepared for considerable bureaucracy and delays.

There's no substitute for hearing about the experiences of those who have already made a move overseas. Online forums are a great place to start. **Get acquainted with a good read.** *My Family & Other Animals* by Gerald Durrell; *This is Greece* by Miroslav Sasek; *Mani: Travels in the Southern Peloponnese* by Patrick Leigh Fermor