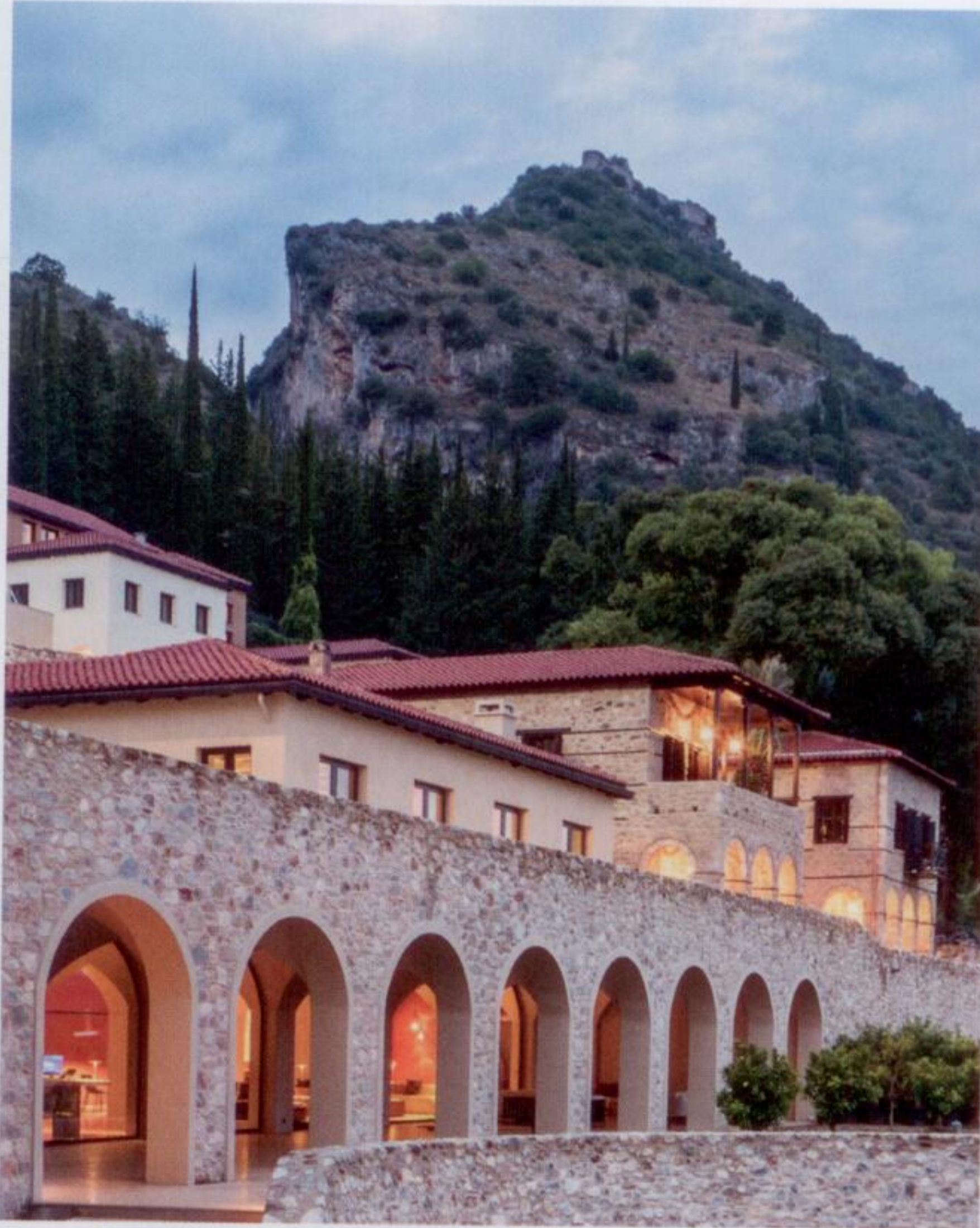


SPA OF THE MONTH

INSIDER UPDATE FOR WELLBEING SEEKERS

EDITED BY ISSY VON SIMSON



EXCLUSIVE FIRST LOOK

IT'S LONG OVERDUE: A RESULTS-DRIVEN DESTINATION SPA IN EUROPE WHICH ALSO HAS A HOLISTIC APPROACH TO RIVAL THE BEST THAI AND INDIAN RETREATS. IS EUPHORIA IN GREECE THE MOST EXCITING OPENING OF THE YEAR?

THE WELLNESS WORLD'S MAXIM has always been: if you want to find yourself, go to Asia; if you want to find a cure, go to Europe. It rings true for me. At the magical COMO Shambhala Estate in Bali and Thailand's delightful Kamalaya, I have effortlessly located my emotional inner portal. I wish the journey to self-awareness didn't have to involve a long-haul flight, but I've never discovered anywhere closer with that kind of spiritual resonance. So rumours that a new destination spa, Euphoria Retreat in the Greek Peloponnese, would be the Kamalaya of Europe made me raise an eyebrow. That was before I met its exuberant owner, Marina Efraimoglou.

In wellness, motivation matters. You can sense the superior integrity at places such as Spain's award-winning macrobiotic SHA Wellness Clinic, founded by the Bataller family after father Alfredo's severe stomach troubles disappeared while he was following the diet. His son Alejandro's unshakeable belief in its health benefits almost convinced me I liked adzuki beans.

Efraimoglou's backstory reads like a Hollywood script. She was the first female chairman of a bank in Greece when a cancer diagnosis forced her to rethink her life. She retrained in traditional Chinese medicine and started dreaming about opening her own holistic retreat 11 years ago – when the banking crisis brought Greece to its knees. But she persevered. 'Investors wanted me to build in Santorini or Mykonos,' she explained when we met. 'It made perfect business sense, but those islands are so commercial, they don't have the right atmosphere.'

I was already a fan of the wild Peloponnese peninsula and its smart hotels, Amanzoe and The Romanos. Both have gorgeous spas, but they've missed a trick by focusing simply on pampering. On Euphoria's sunny terrace, looking at the misty folds of the Parnonas mountains across a valley floor turned silver by olive groves, I appreciated how inherently healing a landscape can be. For added serenity, I could also gaze up at Mystras, a 13th-century town that is Greece's answer to Pompeii, clinging dramatically to the steep slopes of Mount Taygetus, mentioned in Homer's *Odyssey* and, at 2,400 metres, the region's highest mountain.

There's also the feel-good factor of Euphoria's design. Its three new buildings, set around cobbled courtyards, stay true to the elegant lines of the original honey-stoned mansion. The 45 bedrooms are designed with restraint; the contemporary four-storey spa is the most attention-grabbing, dusky pink and carved 25 metres into the private pine forest. Its exterior has the glamour of a super-villa while the inside is as lavish as a Byzantine cathedral, with lofty domes and archways in old gold and gunmetal grey.

I haven't seen such a masterful fusion of modern and traditional since Vana, which reinvented the Indian wellness scene with its 21st-century take on a maharajah's palace. Euphoria's style is even bolder. At the spa's heart is a striking Rapunzel spiral staircase – guests walk barefoot through a Kneipp bath before

ascending, the light shifting from eerie lunar blue to sunshine yellow as they climb. The vast, domed indoor hydrotherapy pool sent shivers down my spine. Ethereally lit, it is dominated by a show-stopping 'spaceship', where the water plummets to four metres. The idea is, you dive down as far as you dare to shed your stresses and experience a sensory rebirth. It is simply extraordinary. A swim-through leads to an outdoor infinity pool with a backdrop of majestic mountains and a fairytale forest. There are, of course, steam rooms, a sauna, a hammam so huge someone could be dancing a jig in a corner and you'd never notice; and from the rooftop yoga studios and deck, I could walk directly into emerald-green trees for some of-the-moment forest bathing.

Imaginative massages reflect the Chinese five elements of water, wood, fire, metal and earth; expect gentle flowing strokes for water, vigorous friction work for fire. The acupuncture is excellent, fixing my stiff ankle in two sessions. Efraimoglou runs regular transformational workshops, also thoughtfully constructed around the five elements, exploring the light and shade of personality types and how to bridge the gap between negative traits and more positive characteristics. Thankfully, she avoids oversharing.

Efraimoglou's yin is complemented by the scientific yang of Dr George Leon. He's the go-to health guru of Greek A-listers and an expert in metabolic medicine. What we eat determines our health and can cause a range of metabolic disorders, including type-2 diabetes, heart disease and 21 different cancers. Leon has developed the retreat's 3GL therapy, which measures the three most important biomarkers for metabolic health (glycogen, glucose and glutathione). Based on a pinprick blood test, every guest's food is customised to correct their specific metabolic balance. My meals were delicious and despite tucking into moussaka and

steak, I lost a kilo and three centimetres from my waist in a week. I've had my DNA analysed at Lanserhof and been prodded and poked at Bad Ragaz, but I suspect Dr Leon's practical nutritional advice will do me more good on a day-to-day basis.

There are niggles. The beach is a 40-minute drive away and there's only one restaurant, mostly for communal dining. I'm not keen on small talk at the best of times – at breakfast it makes me want to fall on my fork. But overall Euphoria is the most outstanding European newcomer in years, delivering emotional clarity and balance, as well as weight loss, but minus the jetlag. For the moment, it's also good value. Hurry and visit, because that might well change when word gets out there's somewhere in Europe where you can find yourself as well as a cure. JANE WALKER



BASED ON A PINPRICK BLOOD TEST, EVERY GUEST'S FOOD IS CUSTOMISED TO CORRECT THEIR SPECIFIC METABOLIC BALANCE

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