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STYLE

WHY TRAINING LIKE A SPARTAN IS A LOT MORE ENJOYABLE THAN YOU'D THINK

2 HOURS AGO | WORDS BY MR JIM MERRETT



The outdoor pool at Euphoria Retreat. All photographs courtesy of Euphoria

If you were told – ordered, even – to take a Spartan holiday, you might picture a week in a villa right after Ms Marie Kondo had checked out. Or, perhaps you'd imagine an excursion with a little more suffering, more glistening superimposition chroma key torsos, and not just objects but also elderly and infirm people thrown out. And while neither of which would be entirely inaccurate, both interpretations miss the point.

Euphoria is a luxury retreat in Mystras, a small town that served as the final outpost of the Byzantine imperial line, just outside Sparta, itself once a city state to rival Athens in stature. It's a part of the world where you have to try hard not to

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King Leonidas I's summerhouse for part of your TRX (total resistance exercise) training. (King Leonidas is perhaps best-known today as the double-hard monarch played by Mr Gerard Butler in 2006's 300: proof that you can never be too tough for a summerhouse.) Which is to say that for a thoroughly up-to-date wellness facility, Euphoria has a lot of history to play with – and this is its USP.

The resort is the vision of founder and owner Ms Marina Efraimoglou, a Greek entrepreneur who began her career as an investment banker, but after surviving a particularly aggressive bout of cancer took a decade-long trip around the world picking up healing techniques, only to come full circle and find what she was looking for in the ancient philosophies of her homeland. In our rush to turn to age-old Eastern practises as a means for remedying our social ailments, she argues we've overlooked the vast heritage on Europe's doorstep. And the Greeks, renowned for their thinking and reasoning, also knew a thing or two about wellness.



The Byzantine hammam at Euphoria Retreat

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the former of which includes the Sphere Pool, a “womb-like experience” in a darkened Byzantine dome structure, whereby whale song is audible under the water (so, probably unlike any womb you’ve been in, unless you’re a whale). Also: a sauna, steam room, cold plunge pool and hammam. And while Sparta was famous for (and arguably fell because of) its staunch approach to (or rather against) immigration, Euphoria happily borrows from other cultures. Hence you can recover from a pummelling Thai massage in the Californian hot tub on the spa’s top deck, looking out over the Eurotas valley.

In common with everything here, the facilities are formed around the five elements of classical thought – water, wood, fire, earth and metal (the fifth of these was added by Aristotle, not Ms Milla Jovovich). But also the dichotomies of yin and yang, sun and moon, and male and female are ever present. The emphasis is on balance across all of this, with health and nutritional assessments used to identify what will work for you.

In ancient times, the Greeks sought to improve themselves first, then pass on their skills, knowledge and wealth to the wider community; this idea is built into the very fabric of Euphoria (it’s no accident that the resort, designed by Ms Efraimoglou’s sister, resembles a sprawling medieval village and opens almost directly onto the town’s square).

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The Executive Junior Suite at Euphoria Retreat

It makes sense, then, that on top of the multiple activities on site – from qi gong and all branches of yoga (traditional vinyasa to something cheerily called “yoga dance”) to meditation and lectures on wellness – there is a push to get guests to embrace the outside world. The resort’s Spartan Spirit of Adventure programme includes circuit training at nearby historical sites, yes, but also beaches, and, through local outfit Experience Nature, rock climbing up the craggy rock faces of nearby Lagada. But you don’t even have to go that far – Euphoria backs onto a wood, which is said to sit on a ley line, and above that, Mystras’ Unesco-recognised “wonder of the Morea”, the citadel that once housed the aforementioned final despots of Byzantine. You can bet that Mr George RR Martin is paying attention. All of this is easily accessible, and punters are encouraged to explore the surroundings with daily hikes scheduled.

But perhaps the most notable landmark here, more so even than the scraps of fallen civilisations, is the peak of Taygetus, a 2,404m-tall mountain so perfectly pyramidal that there are those who speculate it was, in fact, crafted by human hand –

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me with a poker face. “And we are under the protection of this mountain.”

This isn't to say that you won't learn a lot about yourself from all the meditation and massages, nutritional assessments and yoga sessions – you will. But me, personally, I got a lot more from hiking to the summit of that mountain. After all, that's the point here – what you personally get out of it. And from the top, I could look down and say to myself, “Yeah, this is Sparta”.

Healing Holidays can arrange a seven-night Spartan Spirit of Adventure programme at Euphoria from £3,755 per person. This includes transfers, accommodation, full board, group activities and inclusions of the Spartan Spirit of Adventure programme.

healingholidays.com

IT'S ALL GREEK TO ME

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