



Zakynthos grows up

With boutique boltholes, secret seafront restaurants and remote villas decked in antiques, this island has hidden depths

ON THE plane, about five rows behind me, there is a sizeable group of young men in matching Hawaiian shirts. They're rather well behaved, but the nature of their holiday is clear — they're off to Greece to party.

Rising from the ice-blue surf of the Ionian Sea, the luminous, white-cliff island of Zakynthos — also known as Zante — is often thought of as a party spot, thanks in no small part to the buzzy nightlife hub around Laganas.

But there's a stylish and more mature side to this pretty isle. As soon as I leave the small airport, I won't see the group — or any other like it — again on my trip.

My first destination is the high-design Olea All Suite Hotel, a sanctuary of minimalist style and laid-back good taste a short drive from the airport on the eastern side of the island. It's the type of perfumed place where the staff come outfitted in the floaty, earth-toned garb of luxury spa therapists. Reflection pools of green ripples and silvery olive trees feature prominently, and morning yoga and sunset meditation sessions are offered daily.

Many of the suites come with private pools, overlooking the hillside netted in cypress, pine and fragrant jasmine. Everywhere you go, dreamy bossa nova beats lure you into a kind of relaxed trance that usually only sets in after a massage.

With three restaurants and an ethereal spa dressed in bamboo and swishy banana trees, there's no need to leave the property.

The ideal evening starts with a pisco-based tippie at Pacifico by Nikkei, a Peruvian-meets-Japanese offshoot of the popular Athenian restaurant Nikkei, before waltzing off to watch the evening sun tinge the island in hues of rose gold at the fine dining Flow Dine & Wine.

Serving an elegantly rendered, modern Greek tasting menu, dishes are intricate and thoughtful: Olive-crust lamb with bitter almonds; crispy croquettes crowned in caviar and oozing with local anthotyro cheese; and grilled mackerel slathered with smoky tarama (fish roe dip).

End the night counting shooting stars and watching the moonlight skip off of the wine-dark seas from your private terrace.

The wine selection at Olea is impressive, with plenty of Greek options available, as well as hyper-local picks from Zakynthos and surrounding Ionian Islands. At Flow Dine & Wine, the wine pairings include well-matched, hard-to-source picks, like a sparkling wine from the Peloponnese and an icy Muscat dessert wine from Samos.

For lounging about in the Instagram-worthy hammocks and sunbeds of the communal pool, which snakes around the property, try a glass or a bottle — no judgement — of the light and summery Sun Rose, made with local Avgoustiatis grapes by the family-run Grampsas Winery (ktimagrampsa.gr) in nearby Lagopodo. Nestled at the foot of Mount Vrachionas, the island's highest peak, Grampsas Winery is open for guided

tastings, as well as rustic-chic vineyard dinners.

Despite its pristine condition and zeitgeisty, earthy design notes, Olea has been around since 2018, and the experience shows. Guest relations manager Ioanna Siderokastriti is nothing short of a wish-granting genie, magicking up everything from last-minute rental cars to spot-on restaurant recommendations.

But there are also new additions to Zakynthos's high-end offering. The beachfront Domes Aulus Zante (domesresorts.com/domesauluszante) is slated to open soon, as a self-styled 'luxury all-inclusive', which will bring some chicness to Laganas; and the sprawling, white-washed Lesante Cape (lesantecape.gr), a short drive from Olea, is the island's newest five-star arrival, having just opened its doors in May.

A lunch at the pretty pool-side Novita restaurant of grilled sea bream — spritzed in fresh lemon and served with horta, bitter wild greens slicked in olive oil — makes for a nice way to while away a hot afternoon. The summer-ready, upscale beach club Cotton Club Zakynthos (cottonlifestyle.com), sister property of Ibiza Cotton Beach Club, is another new address for a leisurely — and vibey — lunch.

WHILE these spots are all situated centrally, a few kilometres from the airport, venturing off of the proverbial well-beaten track is a must for getting a taste of the island's older, rugged — and less mass-market — soul. Public transportation is virtually non-existent, so rent a car, ideally something with four-wheel drive to handle the island's many unpaved roads and dizzying hilltop bluffs. While there's reliable phone signal for online maps, there is also a delightful paper tourist map available at most hotels and restaurants.

After a blissful few days at Olea, floating in my plunge pool and feasting on breakfasts of flaky fennel pies and icy poolside frappés, I head northward through the island's mountainous interior. Despite sticking to the main roads, I pass through plenty of blink-and-you'll-miss-it villages, fields of goats and wildflowers, and tangles of vineyards and olive groves.

A knot of narrow cobbled streets and stone houses, the village of Loucha is especially enchanting, as is the timeless, butter-yellow church of Agia Marina, near Drakas. Stop for a bite to eat at the country-charming Ampelostrates (ampelostrates.gr), tucked down a dirt vineyard path in the town of Koiliomeno.

After about an hour of driving, I reach the minuscule village of Exo Chora on the island's western coast. It's home to Greece's oldest olive tree, said to be over 2,000 years old, as well as my next base, a private villa on the hilltop outside of town. Private rentals aren't hard to come by in Zakynthos, but Plum Guide has the best options with a varied luxury selection. The company's new campaign is based around the tagline 'no time for average stays', and there is absolutely nothing average about

BY
NICOLE TRILIVAS

Greek delights: Navagio Beach and, below, Treasures Untold villa and the Olea All Suite Hotel

the exquisite, two-bedroom villa Treasures Untold.

There is plenty to love, like the cool and contemporary interiors that look plucked from the pages of Architectural Digest, the massive, minty-blue infinity pool, and the onsite garden, teeming with plump tomatoes and curlicuing grape vines.

But what takes my breath from me — especially as a city dweller — is the villa's bewitching remoteness. There is nothing around except sinewy green hills and infinite sky and sea, still and glassy as a mirror. After a week of searching, I have found no better spot on the island to watch the sun slip down the sky; and when night falls, there is only black

— but for the mercury shimmer of starlight.

Owned by husband-and-wife team Stelios Rapsomanikis and Athena Xenou, the villa was constructed on Xenou's ancestral lands, which she inherited from her grandmother (and namesake) in 2004. Influenced by Zakynthian architecture, the clay-roofed, stone villa — made up of one main building and two adjacent buildings — was constructed using original materials and traditional methods. There's a real sense of heart and history on these four acres.

Cornerstones were sourced from original buildings, ravaged in the Ionian Islands' historic 1953 earthquake. A wine cellar is carved into

rock and filled with local wine made by Xenou's father, and interiors are ornamented in spellbinding antiques from Rapsomanikis' personal collection. Filled with pre-earthquake treasures, you can visit Rapsomanikis' shop Decor (decorshop.gr), the only antique shop on the island, in Zakynthos town.

Treasures Untold is located 20 minutes from the viewing point above Navagio Beach, also called Shipwreck Beach, Zakynthos's most famous attraction. While the beach can be viewed from above, it can also be accessed via boat with group trips or you can rent your own boat — no sailing licence required.

Boats are available at the nearby Porto Vromi beach,

but there are more options at the port of Agios Nikolaos, where you can book a private boat with the recommended Blue Escape Trips (facebook.com/blueasca.petripts). While Navagio Beach may not live up to the social media fantasy — it's overrun with tourists — having a private boat means accessing the island's many hidden coves and inlets. Just be sure to check the paper tourist map, which designates no-boating and no-mooring zones in the National Marine Park in the Laganas Gulf, home to loggerhead sea turtles.

Another perk of getting a boat from Agios Nikolaos is that you can go for lunch at Nobelos Bio Restaurant (nobelos.gr/restaurant).

Olea's superstar Ioanna insists that I go here and adds three stars when writing down the name for me, and she's completely correct, of course. Secreted away at the end of a tree-shaded pathway and perched on the white rocks a short uphill drive from the main port stretch, Nobelos is like something out of a dream.

Marbling blue-green water laps at the white rocks, while the smart set tan on the restaurant's seaside sunbeds. Tables teeter across several terraces shadowed by parasols and pine trees. Ingredients are organic, and seafood of scorpion fish, black bream and lobster is presented behind glass, piled high on pillows of crushed ice like crown jewels.

It's the kind of place you visit once and immediately make a vow to return to — which is the same vow you'll make about Zakynthos.

TRAVEL FACTS

How to get there: Fly with Ryanair to Zakynthos via Vienna from Dublin, from €130 (ryanair.com).
Where to stay: Olea All Suite Hotel (oleaallsuitehotel.com), rooms from €444 per night. Treasures Untold villa (plumguide.com), from €700 per night, sleeping up to six guests

