

TRAVEL

Travels with a toddler on the mother of all Greek holidays

Do luxury clifftop retreats and 13-month-old children make a good match? Claire Sawers finds out in Crete



At St Nicolas Bay you can book a yoga session next to your private pool and, most importantly, a childminder

Claire Sawers | Saturday August 20 2022, 12.01am, The Times

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Suddenly, I wondered if I'd made a terrible mistake. As a pastel sunset melted over Mirabello Bay and a live jazz trio softly noodled through *The Girl from Ipanema*, my wee boy casually

launched slivers of avocado in a ponzu dressing — and a sandal — across the tables of our fine-dining restaurant. Was it hubris to have travelled solo with a 13-month-old to a clifftop five-star resort in Crete?

I needn't have worried. Before I'd hit the eject button on the toddler's high chair and scuttled back to our villa in shame a waiter called Vasilis patiently settled him with bread, peekaboo and a dried-out carob pod that doubled as a rattle.

Such is life at St Nicolas Bay, a divine beach and spa resort an hour's drive east of Heraklion airport. There are carob trees all over the resort, and their sweet fruit makes a gluten-free flour for delicious black bread. While my son played with his new toy Vasilis topped up my wine with a conspiratorial smile, seamlessly helping me to choose between the crème brûlée with lavender and mastic, and a Greek cheese board with walnuts and peach chutney.

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St Nicolas Bay is one of many luxury holiday properties that have popped up on Crete's east coast since the Seventies, which is why it goes the extra kilometre with bend-over-backwards service. From the soft leather seats in the airport transfer car to the spontaneous gift boxes that kept appearing at our door the spoiling was extreme, with a warm “yassou” to the baby from passing staff.

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Crete managed to remain relatively self-sufficient during the pandemic. As Greece's largest island and the fifth largest in the Mediterranean, it grows most of its own produce. Tourism, however, took a huge hit, and St Nicolas Bay is now in a period of upgrade and expansion as the owners look to make up for lost time. More villas have been added, with private pools, and there's a new teen club with a PlayStation, music, billiards and table tennis; a new yoga pavilion, playground and 25m pool will open in April, cleverly out of earshot among the lemon and olive trees.

A friendly, unflashy Greek village vibe is achieved, albeit in an immaculately groomed, exclusive setting where a week's half-board averages about £1,500. A little maze of paths links a private sandy

averages about 25000. It has a maze of paths into a private sandy beach to a mini art gallery and stone-walled room of traditional Cretan embroidery and looms. A tiny chapel is covered in beautiful golden paintings of St Nicholas, the patron saint of children and sailors, among others. Outdoor taverna tables are set up next to the chapel for a night in which we listen to bouzouki and watch dancers as glasses of ouzo are passed around.



The Greek Kafenion, one of five restaurants at St Nicolas Bay

There are 119 rooms dotted about in low-slung units across the resort (plus eight private villas), as well as five restaurants, two pools, babysitting and a kids' club for children aged 4-11. Our cool, pleasingly minimalist room has a sliding glass door beside the bathroom Jacuzzi, opening on to olive trees and hibiscus plants in the garden. The shower room has a door to the outside, so I can stare straight out to sea while slathering myself in Elemis bubbles.

Cherry-picking the best activities for guests is all part of the package — the concierge talked me through various options with what seemed like a demure determination to help me achieve full nirvana. The baby and I turned down a trip to the neighbouring olive farm, a mountain hike and a visit to Knossos Palace and Heraklion Archaeological Museum, but did explore the nearby coastal town of Agios Nikolaos, and took in views from the villages near the famous Spinalonga island, a former leper colony. At the resort there is a water sports centre, fitness club and yacht hire, but I was keen to see how much relaxing I could achieve with a toddler in tow.

A lot, it turned out. While the wee man had his own childminder and playroom full of toys, I had a personal yoga session next to my private pool, under my private palm tree. The next day, while my son spent an hour reading Greek picture books, the massage therapist Hara

sculpted my shoulders, neck and back with Cretan beeswax and local rosemary, mint and dittany. Afterwards, stepping out on to the rooftop veranda, I found myself wrapped by deep-blue views to sea. The moment was gorgeous, the unwind complete. St Nicolas had pushed the boat – or, in my case, the pram – way out for me.

Claire Sawers was a guest of [St Nicolas Bay](#) and [Olympic Holidays](#), which offers seven nights at St Nicolas Bay from £1,562pp, including flights from Edinburgh or Glasgow with Jet2. You can also fly to Heraklion with easyJet.

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