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THE BIG TRIP

St Nicolas Bay Resort, Crete review: upscale sophistication at its finest

This enchanting boutique is more reminiscent of a traditional Greek village than a modern resort

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'A white-washed Mediterranean oasis' St Nicolas Bay Resort

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It is said that happiness is a journey, rather than a destination. After a stay at the enchanting St Nicolas Bay Resort Hotel & Villas in Crete, I'm inclined to believe that it can, in fact, be both. After a period of renovation, this boutique, eco-friendly haven reopened for summer 2022, and we were here for a first-look.

After arriving at Heraklion airport, the luxurious five-star hotel is located 60km away on the eastern side of the island, nestled between the town of Agios Nikolaos and the fishing village of Elounda. As we pulled up outside St Nicolas Bay, this white-washed Mediterranean oasis felt more reminiscent of a traditional Greek village than a modern resort. Forget the bling that can come with high-end hotels, this is upscale sophistication at its finest.



A classic junior suite with sea view St Nicolas Bay Resort

The rooms and villas

We were warmly greeted and ushered to our room along a cobbled path lined with fragrant lemon trees and olive groves. We stayed in a sea view room with a large king size bed, elegant marble bathroom and private veranda.

All rooms at [St Nicolas Bay Resort](#) have been updated for the summer season and new accommodation includes four classic studios and eight classic suites with panoramic sea views. Local architecture has been given a modern twist, resulting in striking interiors and private heated seawater pools for the ultimate in indulgence.



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After a deep sleep I awoke naturally and tip-toed onto the balcony as the sun rose over the glittering Mirabello Gulf. The only sounds were those of lapping waves and birds calling out as they ducked and dove across the horizon. There's no enforced "digital detox" here (in fact,

the Wi-Fi connection is fantastic), but an unspoken air of serenity pulled me into the present and away from my screen.



Labyrinthos restaurant St Nicolas Bay Resort

Eating and drinking

We strolled to the Club House for an alfresco breakfast overlooking the hotel’s private beach. Open daily from 7.30am-10.30am, it’s one of multiple restaurants, with an American-style buffet, Cretan dishes and an à la carte menu. The Cretan specialities are delicious but nothing beats the taste of the sun-drenched, fresh fruit here. All produce is grown organically in the hotel grounds (there’s a new on-site bio-farm), or sourced from nearby farmers who synchronise with seasonal harvesting.

Our waitress, Eleni, caught me gazing out at the breathtaking vista as she discreetly topped up my glass with fresh orange juice. “I’ve worked here for 25 years and every day the view is different,” she said. “You can never tell where the ocean begins and the sky ends.”

You’ll find five restaurants and two bars, each with live music on different nights. Every Wednesday there’s also a morning visit to the local food market, followed by a cooking class with recipes passed down through generations.

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At Labyrinthos, guests can enjoy a bespoke five-course meal, with a modern take on traditional Greek cuisine. Minotaure restaurant offers a more intimate experience in the form of a candle-lit, fine-dining style poolside supper and a twice-weekly live orchestra. Wine is taken seriously here – Crete is the oldest wine-producing area in continuous use in Europe and production dates back to the Bronze Age. Thanks to a well-stocked cellar (wine tasting evenings can be booked inside it), and skilled sommeliers, the selection is impressive.

Kafenion, the outdoor barbecue kitchen, comes to life on Wednesday evenings with talented Greek musicians and theatrical dancers providing first-class entertainment. You'll enjoy spirited conversations, shared platters of meze and fresh seafood from Mirabello Bay as the sun sinks into the ocean.



Blue Bay all-day beach restaurant and bar St Nicolas Bay Resort

Blue Bay is an all-day beach restaurant that transforms into a vibrant cocktail bar in the evening. We had pre-dinner drinks here at the water's edge one night with Alex Glynos, the general manager. It's here that we learned about the ancient Greek concept of "philoxenia", the sacred art of making a stranger feel at home. The literal translation is "friend to a stranger", but there's much more to it than hospitality – it's a complex moral code with deep roots. Glynos explained that for locals, philoxenia is about sharing their lives with new people, from setting another dinner place every Sunday should a stranger pass by, to actively inviting new acquaintances into their homes for a spitiko (home-cooked) meal.



Wellness

Another highlight is the state-of-the-art wellness centre, [Poseidon Spa](#), which features steam baths and saunas, indoor and outdoor heated pools and luxurious treatment rooms with seawater Thalassotherapy pools. I had a healing Poseidon massage with Cretan beeswax infused with fresh thyme, dittany and mint – a multi-sensorial treat (one hour; €105/£88.40).

The ancient Greek philosopher Hippocrates championed the curative benefits of a spa, saying, “the way to health is to have an aromatic bath and scented massage every day”. I’m inclined to agree, as I booked another the following day. There’s also a high-spec gym with Cybex and Technogym equipment as well as indoor and outdoor daily yoga classes. If you fancy getting out on the ocean, an array of water sports are available, including water skiing, windsurfing, canoeing, paddle boarding and jet skiing.



Take a short boat ride to Spinalonga island Meg Roberts

Excursions

You can of course simply lay back, recharge and relax in the sun for the entirety of your stay here. If getting out and about is on your agenda though, the destination is ideally situated to explore the island, with stunning nature trails, gorges, quaint villages and more nearby.

We took the short six-mile boat ride to Spinalonga island. Nicknamed “the island of the living dead”, Spinalonga was one of the last active leper colonies in Europe, with nearly 400 inhabitants isolated here from 1903 to 1957. Thanks to a knowledgeable local guide, we learned not only of the island’s tragic past, but a fascinating tale of human survival against

all odds.

Slowly but surely, a tightly knit community formed, determined to thrive rather than just survive. Residents developed strong bonds, falling in love, marrying and giving birth to healthy children. Perhaps the tangled secrets of the past have the power to change the future for the better, I mused, as I wandered along the abandoned streets, alive with history. Victoria Hislop's 2005 international bestselling novel *The Island* is set on Spinalonga, and well worth a read.



The island of Spinalonga Meg Roberts

Our favourite excursion was a breathtakingly beautiful hike through the nearby gorge of Kritsá. The entrance is via a canyon and the gorge itself cuts through a mountain with sheer rock faces either side as well as wild artichokes, almond trees, oleanders and other native plants. It took us around three hours to complete, although this was at a leisurely pace with plenty of time to stop and marvel at our surroundings. You'll need sturdy footwear as the trail is rough and rocky in parts – you'll be clambering over boulders and hoisting yourself up via a rope in one part. As long as you're relatively fit, the hike isn't difficult and absolutely worth it. Take water, go before 10am and the walls of the gorge will protect you from the sun. Book from €39pp (£32.80) at reception.

On our way back to the hotel, we stopped off at a [local women's cooperative](#) in Kritsá, an ancient village built into the foothills of the Lassithi mountains. We wandered through a traditional Cretan kitchen and watched as women deftly hand-rolled small squares of pasta dough on long, slim wooden sticks.

Known as *skioufichta* ("to turn"), the only ingredients are flour, water, salt and a little olive oil. After enough pieces are turned, they are left to dry naturally outside in the sun. We sat under the shade of cool olive groves and enjoyed a simple, intimate lunch together while learning about village traditions. It's an intoxicating conversation, filled with tales of pastoral life, recipes, secrets and local food, such as the tangy slices of *nerantzi* (sweet bitter orange) we shared alongside coffees.

The olive groves of Kritsá are some of the oldest in Crete and thanks to the warm, dry, semi-mountainous climate and ideal soil conditions, the olive oil produced here is second to none, with a peppery flavour and very low acidity.





Enjoy stunning views and facilities St Nicolas Bay Resort

How to book

There's no doubt that [St Nicolas Bay Resort](#) has nailed the art of laid-back luxury, but it also possesses a magnetic inclusiveness that instantly envelops you on arrival. The warm welcome, genuine attention to detail and philoxenia woven into the brand ethos elevate a stay here far beyond the realms of what one might expect from a luxury resort.

Sovereign has a seven-night stay at St Nicolas Bay Resort Hotel & Villas priced from £1,350 per person on a half-board basis, including flights from London Gatwick and private transfers; [sovereign.com](#)

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