

TRAVEL / HOTELS

JANUARY 25, 2024

Robb Recommends: Minos Beach Art Hotel, Crete

Art is just the start in this ultra-chilled Greek Island gem.

By NICK HENDRIX

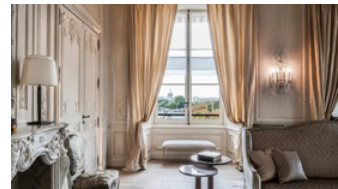


I love an origins story. There's nothing better than going back to the start of something and seeing how it all began. The how/why/when gives you authenticity and understanding. I'm aware this isn't a Batman Begins or Series 1 of The Office review (as fun as they would be to write) but when it comes to hotels it's hard to go back to the start and find intrigue.

Most modern hotels are part of large corporations and/or haven't been around that long. And as an actor, the origins story of the [Minos Beach Hotel](#) and Villas, just outside Agios Nikolaos on the island of Crete, is a particularly filmic one.



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Crete—an island with fabulous ancient history—was a small sleepy island until director Jules Dassin made a 1957 religious allegory movie called *He Who Must Die* on the island, instantly sparking interest in it. As that interest grew, Eleni Nakou, a film publicist in Athens, was encouraged to check out the area by a director she was working with. They were so taken by the natural beauty they found there that, in 1963, they built the first iteration of the Minos Beach Hotel—an iteration not dissimilar to the one I found myself in early October.

The original area was a rocky promontory with arid rough ground, a few simple dwellings and a police building. That barrack-like edifice formed the vague footprint of the (still-standing) main reception building, and the dwellings inspired the various small huts and villas that make up the hotel's grounds and architectural style. I've stayed in hotels before that claim to recreate authentic Cretan/Grecian/Tuscan villages (some even in Agios Nikolaos) but this isn't a re-creation: it's a continuation—one that oozes verisimilitude.



I arrive at Heraklion airport accompanied by my wife and two-year-old—the perfect accoutrements to test out any holiday property, as the three of us have starkly different needs (from my wife's clamouring for clear ocean waters and peaceful quiet to my need for a decent gym and the perfect Negroni and the little one's need for a highchair, low salt food and safe shallows in the 'big water'). Quite a shopping list. But here's how the hotel fared on this bespoke selection.

When it comes to sea views, sea access and beachside enjoyment, Minos Beach is a smorgasbord of opportunity, almost to the point of showing off. The unique benefit of the hotel being nestled on a peninsula is that there is coastline around the edge of the property: from formalised beaches (two of them) to rocky outcrops and man-made rock ledges (perfect for a dive and dip). What this means is that none of the coastal areas ever feel busy or bustling—there's no rushing down at 6am to baggy a lounger. Every villa has a nearby piece of coastline that is only close to them, so you're unlikely to have to arm-wrestle for the perfect spot. And each spot feels private and exclusive—I doubt that is by accident.



On top of that, there is also an enormous central swimming pool surrounded by large double bed loungers, a bar and small dining area. This serves the central, in-land villas best and the rooms that are situated in the main building—again, giving certain residences what feels like their own space within the resort, even though it's obviously free for everyone to use. We never failed to get a lounge by the pool, or on either of the beaches. Did my wife get her clean ocean waters? Absolutely. One reason we have come back to the Greek islands repeatedly is their unrelentingly beautiful waters—why fly nine hours to the Caribbean (or further to the Maldives/Seychelles) when we have similar right here in Europe?

Meanwhile, Minos Beach sits within a bay alongside the town of Agios Nikolaos so the coastline is gentle and protected from the choppy, more dramatic waters—so my little one could happily paddle in the shallows without suddenly being thrust straight into a Point Break sequel.



How did Minos Beach stand up to my more culinary and sporting requirements? Well, the gym isn't exactly Equinox off Sunset, Blvd but that's ok: that's not what this holiday was about. But could I manage to keep up with my cardio and throw a few weights around allowing me to indulge, guilt-free, at the multiple restaurants? Yes. A few simple machines, space to bust out your best downward dog and a rack of weights to keep sub-Schwarzenegger types happy. It was perfect holiday fodder, nestled romantically down a few steps from the main building and surrounded by plants.

As for the Negroni's? Well, the main bar made one of the best Negroni's I've had in some time—and I likes me a Negroni. I'm a tough crowd. The great bonus of this revelation is that all the restaurants in the hotel (other than the beach bar) are served by that main bar. So, wherever we dined I could still get my hands on that perfectly made cocktail. Which was nice.



Talking of culinary needs, the hotel has plenty of places to sit down and enjoy Cretan cuisine. The Bacchus Restaurant, at the centre of the hotel, is where we ate long and relaxed breakfasts each morning, but also where you could dine buffet or a la carte at night. Terpsis and La Bouillabaisse share a kitchen, but the latter is a fine dining, taster menu offering and the former is a smart/casual high-end gastronomic entity. Both have open sea views, attentive staff, delicious local and Cretan offerings (and of course access to the all-important cocktail barman).

For more relaxed options there is a beach bar/restaurant (Pure), a poolside al fresco bar/restaurant (Ibiscus) and, nestled in the centre of the property like a cute Cretan home you stumble upon on during a walk, is Kafeneion 'Adeste'. The selection, although offering at times a variation on the same food (I could moan about the classic Cretan salad being everywhere, but when it's this good I'll take it) was consistently delicious and fresh. A special mention goes to (no not the Negronis again) the tradition Cretan pasta, which was basically their take on a Carbonara and (given my Italian heritage this pains me to say) I think it's better. I could eat that all day. My mother's going to kill me.



Bluegr Hotels

Seemingly my wife and my needs were well met but how did Minos Beach stand up to a strong-willed and gumption-full two-year-old? I wouldn't say that the hotel is necessarily an openly 'kiddy-centric' place (like a Club Med or Butlins) but when you realise that all kids want to do is grab a handful of sand and throw it at daddy, or splash around in any kind of water for hours on end—then this hotel is perfect. The beaches, as previously mentioned, were ideal: quiet, safe and uncrowded. This also meant we didn't feel like we were bothering all the other holidaymakers with our noisy appendage (something one can fear at a five-star hotel.)

The babysitting service was extremely reliable and easy to use, and the hotel staff were extremely quick to remember our boy's food and drink order (warm milk before bed and in the early morning is quite a logistical challenge but all staff were happy to help out, whatever the last-minute time change there may have been). There's a quietly family friendly nature to the design, ethos and staff. Do they want to be overrun with millions of kids? No. But are kids very welcome? Yes.



Loukianos Arnaoutakis

The accommodation options at the hotel are as gently and sensitively varied as the restaurants. We had the joy of experiencing two room types whilst at the hotel and found both to be simply beautiful. We started in a Superior Beachfront Bungalow, which essentially meant we could walk out of our property and almost instantly feel sand between our toes. Which was as idyllic as it sounds. If travelling as a couple or alone, I'd highly recommend these rooms—stylishly appointed, lovingly curated but also retaining the design of the first bungalows on the island. Simple, whitewashed and unpretentious.

We then had a rather dramatic upgrade to a Two Bedroom Villa with Private Pool, split over two floors, which took the holiday to another level. Literally and figuratively. The villa sat above the beach and main body of the hotel, so you felt great elevation and the edge of the infinity pool looked out over the ocean. Filmic in a way Jules Dassin would have appreciated no doubt. The space for our boy and having yet another body of water to choose from brought the hotel into the five-star realm it so deservedly occupies.



Before wrapping up, it'd be remiss of me to not mention the 'Art Hotel' status of this property, which it attained back in the 70's. You can now find more than 55 art installations dotted around the property and it's certainly something to be enjoyed. I can't say I'm a huge art expert but what it brings is further uniqueness to the landscape and the style of the hotel—setting it apart of from the chains. Many of the items were far older than me and stood as a testament to how long this property has been here. There aren't many hotels you can simply take a walk around and enjoy a selection of sculptures—my boy was particularly taken by a giant windmill in the centre of the grounds.

The best way to round up an opinion of the Minos Beach Hotel and Villas is to say that it's dripping in authenticity, class and a quiet artistic charm. As you enter the floor-to-ceiling glass doors, you feel the warm Cretan air wrap you in a calming energy as the elegantly dressed staff usher you into a place designed for rest, relaxation and rustic romance. (Alliteration justifiably overused here.) The hotel has a long list of returning customers, which doesn't surprise me—and hopefully a new flock waiting to find their way there.



We hope to be back soon, if only for a bowl of Traditional Cretan pasta (and probably a Negroni).

Villas at Minos Beach Art Hotel start from €825 for a one-bedroom Villa with Private Pool and from €1,000 for a two-bedroom Seafront Villa with private pool

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