



GREECE



Villa Stouvega, below left, is full of character; the Peligoni Club offers numerous watersports, left

# Thanks, mum – this place is ‘super chilled’

A potential logistical nightmare turns into a heavenly holiday for eight, writes *Allison Pearson*



**T**he checklist of preferences and prejudices that must be ticked off before arriving at the perfect summer holiday can be long indeed.

Mine went like this: two families comprising eight people. Four (older) kids. Five sun-worshippers. Two shade-seekers. One gym bunny. Three watersports fanatics. Two nervous swimmers (one of whom won't enter the sea). One adventurous spirit who won't sit down. Four sun-loungers who prefer to remain horizontal, unless changing into a new bikini. Two dads serious about their wine, two mums happy to knock back anything so



long as it's cold. One nut allergy. One coeliac. Four serious foodies. Three kids who love the sociability and organised activities of a hotel. One grown male who has an existential crisis if he so much as sees the words "fancy dress night". Four adults who prefer the rural tranquillity offered by a villa. Two girls who want to go clubbing with other tireless 20-year-olds til sunrise. One fifty-something dad whose idea of bliss is watching the sunset-swallows dipping into the swimming pool while reading

*Birds of Greece.*

So, no pressure, then. It was a logistical nightmare, and seven people were counting on me to get it right. All I can say is, thank the Lord for the Peligoni Club.

From the moment we walked into the club reception, located on the untouristy north-eastern coast of the Greek island of Zakynthos,

I knew that Mum was not going to carry the can for choosing somewhere that was Not Cool. The clubhouse vibe lies somewhere between Caribbean beach-bar and bucolic literary festival with a whitewashed, bare-boarded splash of Cape Cod thrown in.

There is a spacious bar with plenty of rattan sofas, a lovely open-air restaurant festooned in greenery and sunbeds stepping down to the turquoise Ionian sea.

The place exudes serenity, but also a shimmering sense of pleasure and possibility. Our teenagers said they felt they had stumbled onto the film set of *Mamma Mia!* A favourable impression helped, no doubt, by the sun-kissed, super-fit young British waiters and waitresses and the Boat Boys, who teach you to windsurf, waterski or sail. Like most of the staff, they are young – many are gap-year students who holidayed at Peligoni themselves as children – and this adds to what I would call a happy, carefree atmosphere, and the kids call "super chilled".

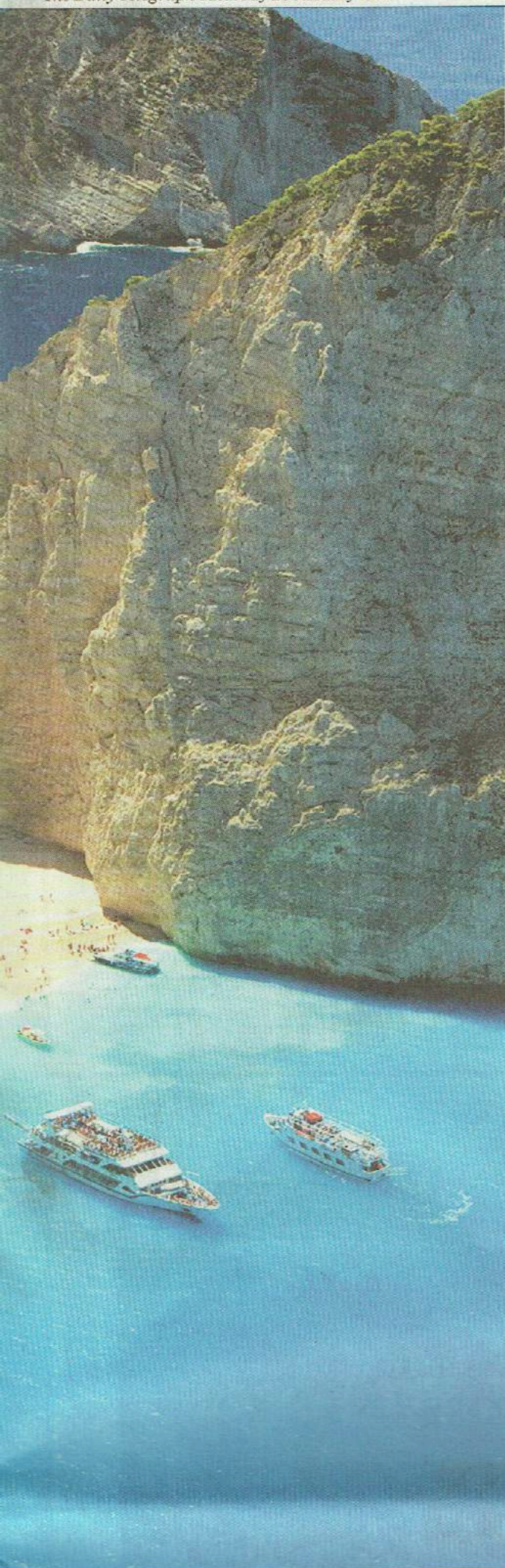
The clubhouse may feel like one of the nicest boutique hotels you've ever seen, but it has no rooms. Instead, guests stay in a choice of accommodation, some within easy walking distance, and others, like ours, a winding, 15-minute drive past olive groves, goats and a goatherd who looked like the god Pan himself.

It was quite a steep and bumpy ride, particularly in our two midget hire cars, but, oh, the delights that awaited us. It is hard to imagine a more heavenly place than Villa Stouvega. Tucked into the hillside, Stouvega has natural terraces affording glorious views across to the hump-backed island of Kefalonia, which rises from the ocean like the Loch Ness Monster. Built in honeyed stone, the rambling villa is full of "character", which is too often code for "lots of old, dusty stuff that gives you an electric shock", but this villa is phenomenally well equipped with more fridges than you could ever fill and herbs growing outside the back door.

My friend Jane, a keen cook, was in raptures and we both agreed on the almost orgasmic pleasure of two dishwashers. That might seem a small point but, when two families are sharing, being able to have one dishwasher on while you stack dirty stuff in the other, rather than leaving it to fester, avoids one of those minor



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irritations which can soon destroy the holiday mood.

I was worried that the sheer size of the villa (it can sleep up to 18 people) meant that we would be rattling around. In fact, it worked perfectly with the two girls bagging the annexe, which could accommodate their extensive swimwear and make-up collection without any "tidy your room" rows with their mothers. The boys went for the bijou cottage at the back, where they could sleep in late, play their music and generally be grumpy teens before joining everyone else for delicious meals on the terrace. The adults slept in beautiful en-suite bedrooms in the main house. Harmony reigned. Stouvega could be carved up in multiple ways to suit a large party celebrating a big birthday or anniversary. Giorgios, the house manager, came and went with invisible efficiency, but was always on hand to solve any problems.

The key to a Peligoni holiday is versatility. In the morning, an adult would drive the kids down to the club where they could take part in the excellent watersports classes and generally hang out with people less boring than their parents. Some of the adults might spend the morning reading by Stouvega's stupendous infinity pool. If we could tear ourselves away from the view, we had breakfast down at Agios Nikolaos, a small, slightly scruffy horseshoe bay with lots of friendly stores and cafés, which are so close to the sea that you can dip your toes in the water while enjoying your first espresso of the day.

Simple pleasures is what this holiday is all about; a huge relief after the tangled mesh of busy lives back home. After a morning packed with blissful nothings (adults) or flat-out fun (kids), we would all rendezvous for lunch at the club. There is a good selection of teen-nosh staples and some excellent, creative salads for Mum. After one lunch, I was playing backgammon with Jane, when I looked across the bar and thought that maybe I had overdone the rosé. I seriously thought that I was looking at Mary Berry. Turns out I wasn't sozzled. It was Mary Berry. She was staying at Pelgoni with her daughter, son-in-law and the grandchildren. Mary told me later that they all had a "simply wonderful time". It would be hard not to.

In the evening, the club runs a variety of entertainment. Mums, dads and offspring, including my daughter, sang at the open mic event. Our group preferred to turn up in the bar a bit later, after sampling the local restaurants. We ate superb Greek specialities at nearby Nobelos, which has an idyllic situation and its



Allison Pearson with family and friends, above; Navagio beach, on Zakynthos, left

own private beach. Another night, we drove to Ex Animo, the taverna down the hill, and they cooked us a banquet, at astonishingly low cost, which we then took back to the villa.

Peligoni also offers the option of "villa hosting": you choose a menu and they send someone to cook for you. The lovely Ellie turned up with a stack of groceries and dishes; while we enjoyed drinks and the sunset on the terrace, she cooked fillet of beef and a salad with feta and caramelised onions so good I will still be fantasising about it on my deathbed.

One difficulty with family holidays is that, later in the night, when parents want to crash or have a quiet nightcap, teenagers are just waking up. Our quartet of young revellers moved from Tony's bar near the club, to party at Regatta, a bar in the port. Both places are filled with young Peligoni staff members. Best of all you can book a driver service to transport your juvenile ravers back to the villa in the early hours.

What, I hear you cry, is there nothing wrong with this Peligoni paradise? Well, it's not cheap. The bar bill for milkshakes alone called for a stiff drink. If you want to keep costs down, you can self-cater and have your own barbecues some nights, as we did. One persistent criticism is that Peligoni is too pukka, staffed by and attracting a private-school crowd. Or, as one mother said to me wryly, "It's Sports Day on Sea."

Certainly, you don't see that many guests with Kiss Me Quick hats. If you're in your own group, as we were, your kids needn't worry about being part of an in-crowd. But the club could maybe do more to make teenagers who haven't come with ready-made friends feel involved.

Generally, though, it's hard to imagine a holiday that caters better to the needs of the whole family. Any regrets? Yes. That I didn't discover Peligoni when our kids were younger. We would have gone every year if the budget allowed.

#### Details

Villa Stouvega (sleeps 18), within a short drive of the club, costs from £5,900 at June half-term, £9,000 in the high season; club membership (ages 13+) is £210 per person (peligoni.com). Smaller villas, sleeping 4, are available from £1,715 in June. Prices are based on a one-week stay.



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The villa was described on the website as a "rural retreat" on the Portuguese-Spanish border. It was the unfashionable area which explained, we supposed, the villa's cheap price - despite the fact that it came with a private tennis court and a shared pool. So we booked.

Our first tinge of worry came upon entering the town of Sancti-Spiritus, which looked a bit like District 6 from *The Hunger Games*. Our concern grew as we advanced down the potholed street lined with breeze-block houses of which, GPS told us, the villa was situated. Some of these were boarded up, others falling down.

In fact, the most "rural" thing about the place was the smell; the street stank of blocked drains. Most peculiarly, right outside the villa was a woman who depended inside a wheelbin scavenging for, well, we weren't sure exactly what.

Inside, the situation worsened. The "perfect for kids" garden was a concrete yard the size of a tablecloth. It was June and 38C but there was no air-con or even a fan. The spiral staircase to the kids' bedroom wobbled alarmingly, the telly didn't work, there was no oven and the fridge-freezer wasn't plugged in, so a week's shopping thawed - and, worst of all, there was no corkscrew.

With a sense more of duty than hope, I turned to the housekeeper: "tennis court?" She looked confused until I mimed swinging a racquet, then she led us down the steps to a graffiti-daubed 4m-high wall in the middle of a roundabout. Our private tennis court was a white line painted along the