

A Greek Retreat: The Poetic Peloponnese



Santorini, Rhodes and Crete are famous for being glorious beach destinations, while the beautiful secluded coasts of mainland Greece are often foolishly overlooked. Globe Editor **Chloe Marshall** explores these hidden treasures on a unique retreat at Artisa, nestled in the mountainous Peloponnese region of southern Greece.

Admittedly I hadn't visited mainland Greece since the nineties when I lived for a year in Thessaloniki, the next biggest city after Athens. Reflecting on my time there, I was expecting to be overwhelmed with heat, dust, crowds and chaos upon returning to Greece. So I was pleasantly surprised to be presented with modern, clean and well organised public transport system that could easily put the British National Rail to shame. Somewhat amusingly, the train system seems to be set up with British travellers in mind; each destination is announced in Greek and then in English, along with a quaint reminder to: "mind the gap".

Landing at Athens and promptly heading west on the train to Kiato, I follow the journey that defeated Nero across the Corinth canal, taking in the towering mountains on one side and the deep blue

sea on the other. Breathing in the clean, citrus scented air and looking across the breathtaking landscape, I think about the mythical and historical background of this picturesque peninsula.

The Peloponnese is the mythical heart of Greece, with many towns and former city states named after the Greek gods and goddesses, such as the nearby Sparta. There's a cast of ancient characters including Agamemnon as he perilously returned from the Trojan War to Mycenae, and Nestor's Palace at Pylos, where Odysseus's son set off in search of his father. Thanks to being the birthplace of Apollo's healer son Asclepeios, Epidauros has the most celebrated healing centre of the Classical world; people travelled from far and wide to be cured at the sanctuary and mineral springs. In the 4th Century BC, the prosperity brought by the Asklepieion funded the making of a large theatre with astounding acoustics, which is still used for performances to this day.

I get off the train at Corinth, a once mighty city state of ancient Greece, and as I jump in a taxi for the short last leg of my journey, the winding roads become narrower and smaller, yet my sense of relaxation and isolation only gets bigger.

In between the mountains there's deep gorges, lush forests, green valleys and flowery meadows and as I scan across the coastline I joyfully note that there's not one single hotel chain in sight. Although there's some small guest houses dotted in between the residential housing and traditional tavernas, the whole place feels totally unspoilt and nature abounds – in short, this is the perfect place for a retreat.

The idea behind Artisa came in part from the co-founder Louise Thoonen (pictured below right) who, at the time she was a PhD student, sought to find the most suitable surroundings in which to write up her PhD research. Louise found herself returning to Greece and reaping the rewards of a quiet, peaceful yet inspirational environment. In her position as a coach to other PhD candidates, she wanted to pass on her experience and set up a dedicated space for students and academics to work in distraction-free serenity.

Fellow co-founder Celeste Neelen (pictured below centre) had already spent much of her life helping, guiding and nurturing people through her silent retreats

in Egypt and Greece, and for some years she had wanted to set up a retreat centre for professionals. Along with her work as an organisational psychologist in the Netherlands, she co-runs a consultancy company and an international network to support professional women. Celeste could see that their combined skills and expertise could come together harmoniously in the creation of Artisa, and with that they set up programmes for not only academics and scientists, but also for artists and writers, and anyone in need of an escape or a sabbatical in order to focus on a personal, educational or vocational project.

Celeste manages Artisa with the help of visiting tutors to run some of the weekly programmes, such as the leadership courses, art classes and the academic writing weeks. She starts each day of the retreat in the gardens or on the beach, with yoga and meditation to awaken the body and mind. Together with the natural environment, delicious food, and the company of the other attendees, participants are set up for a focussed day ahead that's hopefully filled with progression and reflection.



I first visited Artisa on an academic writing week, as after spending several years working as a freelance journalist, my comfort level was very squarely set in writing short articles. While I'd managed the usual assignments for my Masters course reasonably well, the thought of compiling a 10,000 – 20,000 word project was daunting to say the least. Trying to arrange meetings with my supervisor was nigh on impossible, and with such limited help from the university I knew that I'd made the right decision when I flew off to Greece with nothing but a laptop, a few holiday essentials and a big notebook that would soon be filled with useful feedback and tips.

A few months (and a lot of hard work) later, I proudly graduated with a Distinction, along with a big thumbs up to Louise and Celeste for all of their support and encouragement throughout that tough dissertation time.

As I get out of the taxi with last year's studies well and truly behind me, some fond memories of the glittering sea contrasted with the green forest, gardens and orchards come flooding back, as I step foot once again on that gorgeous beach. But this time, I'm not here to work on anything, or to even speak to anyone for that matter, and any interaction will be kept to a minimum. I'm here to spend a week in silence on a silent retreat, and to be taken on a journey of self discovery, emotional exploration and mindfulness.

Before we go quiet, together we discuss our reasons for seeking silence and there are some touching, intriguing and truly moving stories. From dealing with the loss of a loved one to facing some pivotal life choices, or for some, simply seeking a sense of inner calm, our group already seems to have a few unifying themes that link us all together despite our differences in age, background and nationality.





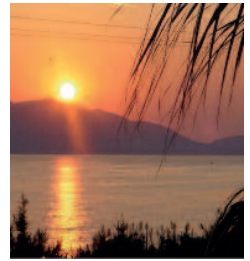
Throughout the week, we are taken on a wonderful journey despite staying in the same place, and through being quiet I find myself developing a deeper sense of self awareness. Free from the usual demands of the daily grind and the pressure to communicate, I become more observant of my surroundings and I begin to appreciate them on a whole new level, recognising how much I have to be grateful for.

Without being prompted, I stop to question myself in ways that I wouldn't normally dare to, including the biggies such as asking what I really want out of life, and whether my current set up is really making me happy. I begin to identify some changes that I'd like to make, and I realise that familiarity isn't an excuse for complacency. Not all of my fresh questions are easy to approach, but I definitely find some clarity and honesty in myself that will help to eventually find the answers.



Through exploring different meditative and physical activities, we are taken on an emotional roller-coaster of highs and lows that bring back the memories that triggered these feelings in the first place, then we face up to them and see how it might be possible to let them go.

While I'm pretty sure that I haven't found total enlightenment yet, and that I'd probably need to spend the rest of my days living in a cave to even get close, I definitely feel an inner peace that is only reachable through the absence of communication. And by the end of the week, I'm so elated that I don't want to speak – even when I am finally invited to do so! My smiling face (above left) is the best way I can find to express myself. For the first time ever, the words don't naturally come to me and even now, I'm struggling to find the vocabulary to describe something so profound.



As its on the mainland, getting to Artisa from the UK and most of the rest of Europe is cheap and easy. An advance booking could set you back at around £150 for Ryanair, or for slightly more comfort, go for BA, Aegean or Easyjet at around £250 for a London to Athens return flight. From there, you can take the train from Athens airport directly to Korinthos for a budget friendly 12 Euros. Korinthos is around 50 miles from Athens, which is around a one hour drive, or an hour and a half on the train, and then it's just a short drive or taxi ride on to the coast.

The Peloponnese is the southernmost part of mainland Greece, so the weather will be hot, hot, hot this summer and the best months to visit are either springtime with the abundance of fantastic flora and fauna in April and May, or the early summer in June, if you're more of a sun worshipper. Avoid July and August, when the temperature can rise to a blistering 40C, although even then the cooling sea breeze does provide some relief. If you miss the boat for April - June, then a September trip will bring the joy of a summer warmed sea along with a pleasantly warm climate. Costs range from around 700 to 900 Euros

per week including the course, tuition, coaching, private studio accommodation with a bathroom and kitchenette, full board including all meals, drinks and snacks, and full use of the on site facilities including the private gardens and beaches. Depending on the programme, some discounts might be available upon application - please see the website for further information.

Artisa retreats run every year from early April through to late June and from mid September to mid November, and a full programme of events is available on their website: www.artisagreece.org

Artisa is offering Globetrotters members an exclusive discount on any of their programmes. Simply quote 'Globetrotters' when booking to be eligible for a 5% discount off of all trips, along with a free day excursion to Nafplio, the historical seaport and capitol of Argolis.

To find out more, you can get in touch with Celeste and Louise via email: info@artisagreece.org or by phoning +30 6947570690 or +31 (0)611387147. Don't forget to check out their facebook page: www.facebook.com/Artisa.Retreat