



GREECE IS THE WORD

There can't be many places in the world where you can go on a forest hike and come across a wild tortoise wandering alongside you. But here we are climbing up towards Ancient Olinthos, in Halkidiki, Greece, when we spot two decidedly spritely tortoises meandering through the bushes.

It's a welcome distraction in the blistering midday heat as we make the walk to the foundations of Olinthos, a once great ancient city. The first city was destroyed by the Persians in 479 BC but later rebuilt to become a mini Greek empire until it was destroyed by the King of Macedonia, Philip II in 348 BC. Archaeologists began excavating the site in the late 1920s and since 1990, the Greek government has worked on restoring it to its former glory.

The view from the top is spectacular, allowing landscapes of olive groves and mountains on one side and the Aegean Sea on the other – the perfect spot from which to defend a city.

The view also seems to perfectly sum up this area of Greece. One of northern Greece's

most popular destinations, Halkidiki may be awash with beautiful beaches but it also retains much of its traditional and natural charm.

We're staying at the Sani Beach Hotel on the Sani Resort which is situated on the Kassandra Peninsula, the westernmost of Halkidiki's three peninsulas. Set off by the Stavronikitas Tower, a Byzantine fortress, the hotel borders a vast expanse of coastline, and is surrounded by a 1,000-acre eco-reserve which turns out to be a haven for wildlife including birds, butterflies and tortoises.



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Be sure to take a break from your hikes to sample the local wine

Justine Holman falls in love with beautiful, unspoilt Halkidiki

The resort also serves a good range of Greek wines. Travelling around Halkidiki you can spot the odd vineyard, some of which offer tours and sampling sessions.

Due to its proximity to the coast, the area serves up a whole host of seafood – prawns, squid and octopus were all in abundance on menus, as were favourites such as tzatziki, pitta and olives. You can't head all this way and not have a Greek salad with deliciously ripe tomatoes, cucumbers, olives and of course feta cheese marinated in herbs. Follow it with a sticky sweet pudding such as baklava, which includes filo pastry filled with honey and nuts and is deliciously gooey.

To sample how the locals live and to also find some hidden gems, hire a car and head away from the main roads, which link the area together. First stop for us were the Petralona Caves, which were about an hour's drive north of the hotel. As with many of the sights in the area, signposts are thin on the ground, but it seems if you keep driving in the general direction you will eventually arrive at your chosen destination. The ►



A cruise is the best way to explore

caves' main claim to fame is that it was here in 1960 that they discovered the remains of the earliest human European, whose fossilised skull dated from around 700,000 years ago. Even without this discovery, the fairy light lit caves are a vast, awe-inspiring sight and a short tour is unmissable.

An uninhabited beach is almost unheard of in Greece during the peak season but we carried on towards Kanistro on the southern-most tip of the Kassandra Peninsula and it was well worth the drive as there was no one else on the small shingle beach.

Livelier resorts are not difficult to find, however, and nearby Nea Skioni is a busier village, with a working harbour and sandy beach. It's here that we sampled our first Greek coffee in one of the many restaurants that adorned the shoreline. Our waiter suggested we add a little sugar to our strong and bitter-tasting coffees, and warned us not to drink the dregs, which he said can be used to read fortunes. Sitting here, shaded from the warm sun, I think I can read my own fortune – how lucky I am to have discovered this area of Greece.

WAY TO GO

Sovereign Luxury Travel (0844 415 1936; www.sovereign.com) is offering seven nights from £489 per person on a half-board basis at the five-star Sani Beach Hotel. Price includes flights from London Gatwick and private transfers.

Ten things you must do in Halkidiki

1 Visit the markets at Thessaloniki, Greece's second-largest city.

2 Cruise around the monasteries on the Mount Athos Peninsula – situated on Halkidiki's most eastern peninsula. Boat trips run regularly throughout the summer.

3 Make sure you sample a classic Greek salad, which includes feta cheese, black olives, tomatoes and cucumbers.



4 Treat yourself to a Mediterranean Skin Food Face Treatment at My Spa in the Sani Beach Hotel. It's great for sun-weary skin.

5 For a change of scenery, take a look at the Potidea Canal which dates from around the 5th century BC and is situated on the northern top of the Kassandra Peninsula.

6 Sani Beach Hotel can easily arrange tours to the capital of Halkidiki, Poligiros, and from there you can continue to the picturesque Arnea.

7 Spot wild tortoise by heading up to the ancient city of Olinthos. The view from the top is spectacular.

8 Drive into the village of Afitos.



Park the car on the outskirts and stroll in before supper. It's great for people watching.

9 Hire a car and search out your very own beach. Kanistro is a good bet if you crave solitude.

10 Treat yourself to some delicious baklava for pudding – honey and filo pastry never tasted so good.