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# The quiet side of Greece

*Spring brings out the best in child-friendly and utterly unspoilt Halkidiki, says Fiona Hardcastle*

## THE PERFECT BREAK

### Why go?

For its heart-stopping beauty and famed hospitality, Halkidiki's trident of forested peninsulas – Cassandra, Sithonia and Athos – form more than 300 miles of white-sand coastline that dip into a crystalline Aegean, so it was only a matter of time before the birthplace of Aristotle attracted more than toothbrush-wielding archaeologists, or monastic types en route to Mount Athos.

However, unlike the Greek islands, relatively restrained development has left Halkidiki largely unspoilt. It is also at its best during spring. Temperatures are already nudging 20C, the sea is warm enough to swim in, and the hills are covered in a glorious display of wild flowers.

### Get there by...

Plane to Thessaloniki in a little over three hours. British Airways ([www.ba.com](http://www.ba.com)) is offering direct flights from £122.80 return. For no-frills flights, compare prices from several major airlines on websites such as [www.skyscanner.com](http://www.skyscanner.com), [www.travelsupermarket.com](http://www.travelsupermarket.com) or [www.cheapflights.co.uk](http://www.cheapflights.co.uk). From the airport, it is a 90-minute drive to most of the resorts on the Cassandra peninsula.

### Stay at...

The Sani Asterias Suites, Sani Resort (0030 23740 99500; [www.sani-resort.com](http://www.sani-resort.com)), on the Cassandra peninsula in the shadow of Mount Olympus. A family-owned boutique hotel set in an ecological reserve of more than 1,000 acres of pine

forests and olive groves, this is a sublime spot.

The location is superb: on one side of the hotel, rooms open out via immaculate individual gardens directly on to pristine sands and the shallows of the Aegean; on the other, the pretty Sani yacht marina, its boats and boutiques beautifully lit by night. Prices are £1,720 per person b&b (£720 for children under 12; the sitting room can accommodate two fold-out beds) for one week from May, based on two sharing a Marina Front suite.

Alternatively, do barefoot luxury for slightly less at the Porto Sani Village, which is part of the same resort and is a larger, livelier complex, popular with young families. It costs £1,400 per person, based on two sharing a Marina Junior Suite. Both prices include BA flights, and private transfers booked through Abercrombie & Kent (0845 618 2200; [www.abercrombiekent.co.uk](http://www.abercrombiekent.co.uk)).

### Spend the morning...

Congratulating yourselves on finding one of the most child-friendly private beaches in Europe. You have to wade for a good 100 metres before the sea comes up to your middle, making it perfect for young children. Leave behind buckets and spades and all the familiar detritus each child needs to be happy for 10 minutes at home – an oversized trunk of beach toys provides sufficient novelty to absorb the smallest of attention spans. Even without taking advantage of the complimentary Babe Watch service, where for up to half an hour childminders will ensure your little ones neither disgrace themselves nor drown, parents of young children may want to digest the following

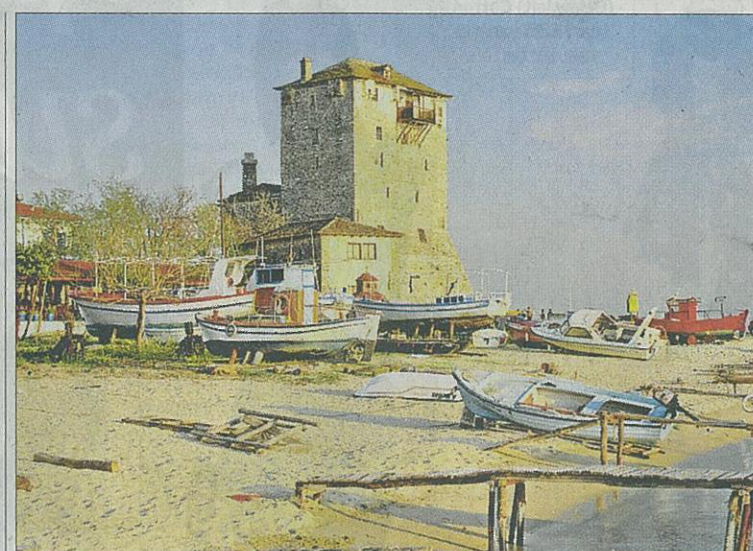


information: this beach may enable you to lie down. You may even want to bring a book.

### Have lunch at...

The Ouzerie (Sani Beach Club, 0030 23740 31 221), a partly open-air, cliff-top taverna serving simple, deeply satisfying food against a backdrop of heavenly views. A surprisingly quaffable local wine list, coupled with the friendliest of kitchen staff, who are more than happy to knock up fish fingers in addition to cuttlefish and calamari, create the perfect

**Heaven and Halkidiki:** Mount Athos soars above the Aegean Sea (top); above left, an alfresco lunch in store at Afitos; above right, sunset at Athos



conditions for a relaxed family lunch. A meal for two including wine costs approximately 50 euros; free minibus service back to the Asterias Suites.

### Spend the afternoon...

In Athitos or Afitos, one of the most picturesque villages in Halkidiki, just 15 km from Sani and dating from 3,000 BC. The village's old stone houses give a glimpse of another age. Dawdle down cobblestone alleys, drop in on the tavernas, and admire the dazzling views to the Toroneos Gulf.

### Dine out at...

The Sani marina, which offers an impressive selection of bars and restaurants. The cuisine on offer ranges from Italian and modern Mediterranean to Japanese and traditional Greek. Start the evening with cocktails on the terrace of the Sea You Up bar at the northernmost point of the harbour, and then amble back around for dinner.

Tomata (0030 23740 99465), an award-winning, modern Greek restaurant, is packed most nights, despite steep prices and occasionally

surly service. For a truly memorable meal of Michelin star quality – the chefs there have a clutch of five between them – put your best foot forward and book a table at the Water Restaurant (0030 23740 99500) overlooking the marina. Lobster roasted with chorizo, red peppers, calamari and basil gives a general idea of the menu – and that's just a starter. Expensive but exquisite: dinner for two with wine costs north of 100 euros.

### Spend the second day...

Hiring a car and exploring the Sithonia peninsula, which is more rugged than Cassandra and much less populated. Alternatively, take a boat trip from Ormos Panagias, on the top eastern corner of the Sithonia peninsula, towards Mount Athos. This peninsula is the only monastic republic in Europe, and although tourist entry is forbidden – men must apply for a permit to visit six months in advance, and women are banned outright – the spectacular sight of some of the 20 monasteries that cling to the coastline is well worth the boat trip. And if younger sightseers fail to be impressed by the architecture, or vaguely amused by conjecture as to why the Prince of Wales is so frequently drawn there, you can restore a sense of wonder by pointing out the glisteningly clear sealife below.