

JUST THE TWO OF US



For a single parent with a 15-month-old in tow, Thessaloniki, in Greece, proves the ideal spot for a week relaxing by the beach — despite the odd hiccup

WORDS: Jo Gardner



I used to travel to the Amazon, the Maldives, the Alps. In fact, most of my 30s were spent travelling: clocking up 60 countries, filling my passport with pretty stamps and generally throwing a disproportionate amount of time and money at my wanderlust. In between jumping out of planes, whitewater rafting and mounting horses, I'd be planning to get to more unusual, less touristy spots. Travel was about the experience, the people, the unknown. If I could take on this type of challenge by choice, hopping to a sunny resort to lie on a beach — even with a toddler in tow — would be a piece of cake. Right?

The culture shock of taking a baby on a plane doesn't hit home until... I'm trying to collapse a buggy with one hand while holding a frustrated, wriggling thing with the other — my love of airports ruined by frustrated screams at each and every queue. The actual flight is no easier. Strapped to my lap, Lily-Jane wants to climb the furniture, jump out the window to touch the clouds and generally be a nuisance. In one short flight, she dislodges the toupee from the head of the guy in front of us who — unbeknown to him — sits with it askew for

the rest of the flight, throws a bread roll at my sleeping neighbour and blows a raspberry at the only person paid to be nice to her, the stewardess. When a hot meal is handed to me, I shake my head in horror and promptly order wine. Two hours feel like a 12.

I picked Greece because of the short flight, the guaranteed September sun, the negligible time difference, the lack of jabs and the low risk of food poisoning. We get picked up at the airport, welcomed at the resort like royalty and personally shown around. Still, just four hours into our trip and Lily-Jane has thrown up in the hotel's best restaurant — the excitement of the day clearly too much. Mortified and without dinner, I hide under the covers and pray for a better day.

Somewhere different. New flights into Thessaloniki are attracting more couples and families to this relatively unknown holiday spot; Greece's second-largest city, it's a welcoming place where children are adored and cafes and restaurants run by the same family for generations. Add a sprinkling of designer shops, a large winery, a wetland centre for ➤

bird-watching, plenty of architecture to marvel at and several beautiful beaches, and it's well worth a visit. We take an evening walk around the wetlands centre; the guide hoisting Lily-Jane up onto his shoulders so she can say something unrecognisable to the flamingos while I enjoy two hours of adult conversation.

The Sani Resort is ideal because they've thought of everything... Playgrounds, creches, babysitting, highchairs, homemade baby food, plastic cutlery, even a beach 'Babe Watch' service where you hand your child over for 30 minutes at a time while you swim in the sea. Genius!

It's great being half-board. We can eat when the mood takes us and not worry about the cost. If she doesn't want to eat her breakfast, we can try again at lunch, with a range of homemade baby food on offer. If that's not a hit, there's always the poolside bar for a snack (and a beer for mum) or one of several restaurants for dinner. If Lily-Jane's willing, we can enjoy an a la carte meal overlooking the pool while she plays in her high chair; if she were teething (when aren't babies teething, frankly?), I could whizz through the buffet and take it to our room.

The best thing about going on my own is the opportunity for 'me' time. "Take advantage of the last few months of pregnancy," a colleague told me when I had two months left to go. "Go to the cinema, read a book, take long baths — you won't get the chance when she comes." I remember dismissing this at the time but he was right. While €35 (£29) for a day's creche session may seem expensive, when you pay £65 a day at home for nursery, it's actually pretty reasonable. And half a day of uninterrupted sun bathing, reading, swimming and listening to music is utterly priceless.

The hardest thing about going on my own is the lack of help. Contrary to popular belief, I'm not an octopus and can't carry a buggy, a child and a suitcase down a flight of stairs without assistance. But there are only so many 'please be a gentleman and take pity on me' faces I can pull before I start wondering if a holiday right here on the stairs would be less hassle. On the flip side, the kindness of strangers has never been more apparent — one man lifting the buggy (complete with child) over his head and down the stairs before I even have the chance to pull said face. Well, everyone needs a modern-day Superman.

Next time, I plan to do a weekend city break. While I'm sure such a different holiday will create its own set of challenges — swapping the perils of a pool for the hell of hills and roads — I look forward to an equally different set of rewards.

*Jo and Lily-Jane stayed at the Sani Resort. Flights with Aegean Airlines.
sani-resort.com aegeanair.com*



Tips for travelling solo, baby in tow

1. Shrug it off

Ear piercing squeals, flying food, horrified looks from other travellers... you'll experience it all. Take comfort in the fact that you won't be the first — or the last — and try to let it wash over you.

2. Get some 'me' time

Try to plan naps around trips to the pool or the beach so you can truly relax. Don't waste those precious hours packing or grabbing essentials at the supermarket.

3. Write lists

Gone are the days when you can leave for the airport with just your passport and

a couple of bikinis — babies need stuff, and lots of it. Make sure you don't forget anything by updating a list the week before you go. Every time you think of something else, jot it down.

4. Leave valuables at home

Your precious iPad may be your new best friend but if you think there's a chance it might go for an impromptu swim, leave it at home.

5. Drink

Relieve some of the stress of the day with an evening tipple, but don't overdo it — gin and tonic mixes wonderfully; hangovers and babies don't. ☐