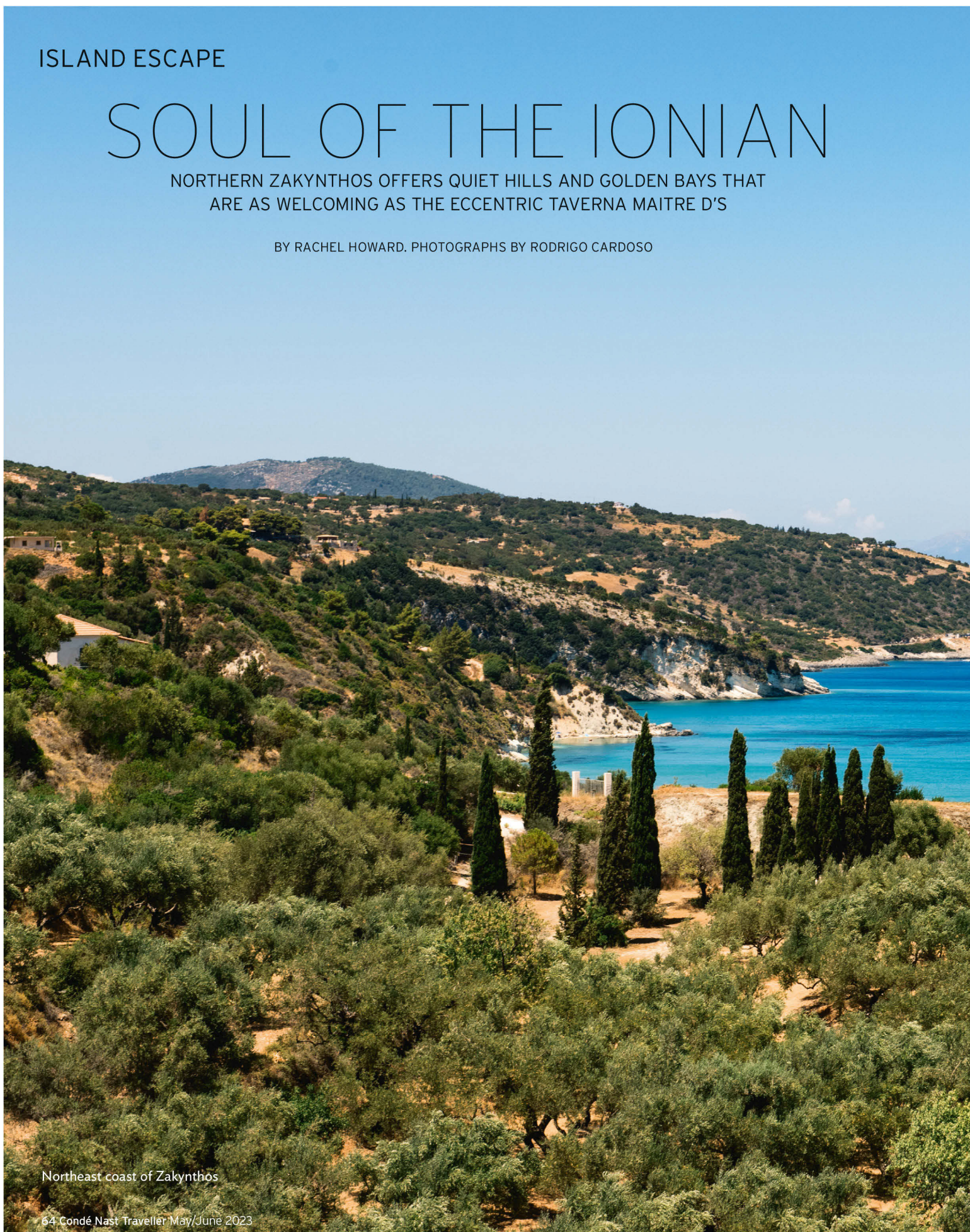


ISLAND ESCAPE

SOUL OF THE IONIAN

NORTHERN ZAKYNTHOS OFFERS QUIET HILLS AND GOLDEN BAYS THAT
ARE AS WELCOMING AS THE ECCENTRIC TAVERNA MAITRE D'S

BY RACHEL HOWARD. PHOTOGRAPHS BY RODRIGO CARDOSO



Northeast coast of Zakynthos

AT THE END OF A TAVERNA MEAL, as guests linger over the last carafe, the owner will often bring over a platter of watermelon or a dollop of yoghurt with quince preserve as a complimentary dessert. But I've never been presented with a five-litre demijohn of olive oil before. That's what arrives with the bill at Kaminaki in Ano Volimes, a scrappy village in the unscathed hills of northern Zakynthos. The deep green oil has been liberally drizzled over tomato salad, briam (vegetables roasted over olive branches) and kondosouvli (skewered pork, peppers and onions twirled slowly over charcoal). Oregano-flecked bread is perfect for mopping up the peppery juices.

With its stone walls and wood panelling, Kaminaki is very homespun. It has the roughest house wine I've ever struggled to drink, and the most assiduous and eccentric chef patron there is. Dressed in camo khakis and a jockey cap, he darts between the grill, kitchen and tables, dousing

the pork, barking ingredients and doling out anoraks when the evening chill kicks in. The British diners who have discovered this dozy corner of the Ionian islands know him as Dennis. Locals call him Nionios, short for Dionysius, the patron saint of Zakynthos.

Dionysius's mummified remains are entombed in a silver reliquary in the grandiose church in Zakynthos town that bears his name, one of only a few buildings to have survived the 1953 earthquake that ravaged this evergreen island. Locals claim that the saint's embroidered slippers are frequently threadbare and full of sand, as Dionysius likes to wander around dispensing miracles. Zakynthians continue to be exceptionally kind and welcoming, despite the steady increase in tourism.

It may not have the Venetian grandeur of Corfu, the mountainous drama of Cephalonia or the sun-bleached sex appeal of the Cyclades, but Zakynthos finds silver linings even in natural disaster. In 1980 ►



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Clockwise from top left: view from Keri Lighthouse; Tasi Restaurant at The Peligoni Club; Peligoni's swimming platform; lamb tacos with tzatziki and pomegranate at Tasi; Votsalo Taverna

the fateful grounding of the Panagiotis, a freighter loaded with contraband cigarettes, became a tourist attraction: the ship that launched a thousand faces in holiday selfies. Hemmed in by plunging cliffs, milky blue Navagio, or "Shipwreck Beach", has been the main reason for Zakynthos pulling in 1.9 million visitors every year, with nearly 700,000 from the UK, although it is currently closed due to a danger of landslides. Those who do not gravitate towards the cheap, all-inclusive resorts (on and around the golden bay of Laganas) congregate at the smart villas that have sprung up around The Peligoni Club, a private beach club in the raw, rough-edged north.

I decide to bypass the tourist honeypots of Turtle Island, the Blue Caves and neon-bright Laganas and instead follow the advice of Yiannis Komis, a lion-haired chef who served me some exquisite seafood from a kitsch shack near the ferry dock. "Just go and get lost," he suggested.

It's surprisingly easy to experience this place differently at every turn, and I quickly realise that there is another island to discover beyond the well-trodden one. Hidden among the bumper-to-bumper beach bars along the Vasilikos peninsula is Porto Roma, a skinny bay with no music

and no crowds. The tantalising wafts of lobster and aubergine grilling on the barbecue come from Nikos Beach Bar Restaurant, where the food is as quietly delicious as the seaside setting. On the Keri headland, petering roads lead through olive groves to glinting pebble bays, such as Marathia. I follow a leathery fellow on a beach buggy, with his floppy-eared dog gripping the handlebars, to Arba Kantina, a peaceful perch for a cold beer. A few blue sunbeds are scattered on the chalky rocks below, and the distant blur of hotel-encrusted Laganas looks like a mirage.

At Votsalo Taverna nearby, every surface is inlaid with driftwood and pebbles collected from the surrounding shores. The kitchen serves

BLUE SUNBEDS ARE SCATTERED ON THE CHALKY ROCKS BELOW, AND THE DISTANT BLUR OF LAGANAS LOOKS LIKE A MIRAGE

unpretentious shepherd's food: riganada, a local bruschetta piled with grated tomato, oregano and creamy prentza cheese, or sweet-and-sour sea bass garnished with glistening black raisins. A major export for Zakynthos, these tiny fruits are dried in the sun, scenting the plains with their sweet aroma in high summer. The bill comes in a pebble-lined box with a list of local secrets, neatly handwritten by the chef.

Unexpected favours appear wherever I go. At Fioro tou Levante, a café and restaurant in Ano Gerakari, flame-haired Martha Kosti delivers excellent Greek coffee, local gossip and hand-crocheted cushions alongside stunning wraparound views of southern Zakynthos. At Ampelostrates, an 18th-century farmhouse where chickens potter among the tables and musicians perform under the walnut trees, Andonis Maroudas insists on dancing the bolero when I wander into the kitchen, and his wife Mika's landscape paintings are as gorgeous as her fennel pie.

If you want to see the real Zakynthos, go inland, the locals tell me. There are no karaoke bars or tattoo parlours in the softly rolling hills, only gnarled olive groves, tumbledown farms and patchy hamlets ➤

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From left: villa pool at Porto Zante; suite there; radicchio, orange and pine nut salad at The Peligoni Club's Tasi Restaurant

where nothing much happens. Built on solid rock, the mountain villages of Gyri and Loucha offer a glimpse of what Zakynthos was like before the earthquake. The stone houses are 400 years old, and the few residents are not much younger. In Gyri, an elegant grandmother waits outside a manor house. A honking van screeches around the corner and a young man leaps out with her groceries.

Kalomira Therianos and her three siblings have an organic farm in the heartland of Zakynthos. They welcome me in the dappled shade of a vine-covered gazebo, with apricots still warm from the tree and sticky

Porto Roxa. Porto Limnionas, with its lively beach bar and a dive centre housed in an old boat garage, is no longer a secret, but swimming there is like floating in the sky. Other beaches, such as Mizithres – flanked by two conical towers of limestone and named after the white local cheese – are only accessible from the sea.

The most exclusive nook on the east coast is Porto Zante, a sanctuary for publicity-shy pop stars and plutocrats, created and refined over years by a detail-obsessive owner. This is a highly edited version of Zakynthos: a place of virgin beaches, where tempura oysters are eaten with silver-

LIMESTONE CLIFFS PLUMMET DOWN TO SURREALLY BLUE WATER, AND IRIDESCENT INLETS OFFER INCREDIBLE SNORKELLING

glaounes: raisin-and-cinnamon pastries traditionally cooked to celebrate the end of the olive harvest. The Therianos family produce some of the world's finest olive oil, from perennial trees that have yielded their "liquid gold" – Homer's epithet, not mine – for hundreds of years. "Locals are becoming much more aware of the environmental value of the island," says Dimitris Therianos. "We're going through a transition period. As the younger generation take over family businesses, they want to offer something more authentic and sustainable."

It's good news for the island that it is a crucial nesting ground and habitat for vulnerable sea turtles. From mid-May to late-August, the sandy beaches of southern Zakynthos are breeding grounds for the loggerhead species. At night, while the neon-bright clubs of Laganas rage, females use their flippers to bury their eggs in the sand. The tiny hatchlings emerge in darkness, navigating their way to the sea by the stars and the moonlight.

Pollution, overfishing and tourism are taking their toll, but there are still plenty of hard-to-reach pockets where the landscape has barely changed for centuries. The photogenic west coast of Zakynthos has been spared overdevelopment by geography: limestone cliffs plummet down to surreally blue water. Iridescent inlets offer incredible snorkelling for those prepared to scramble down the cliff face at Plakaki, clamber over jagged rocks at Korakonisi or jackknife off the rickety diving board at

tipped Christofle chopsticks at superlative Asian restaurant Maya, and gin palaces are laid on to whizz guests up to naked coves tucked into the craggy northeast coastline.

With a modestly sized boat, it's possible to cast anchor right outside Madrakia, a sleepy taverna run by a fisherman's family, or Nobelos Seaside Lodge, a more upmarket affair where all the ingredients are organic. When the three Nobelos brothers took over running the restaurant 10 years ago, it was a traditional family place. "This was my grandparents' house," says Stamatis Nobelos, the dashing maitre d'. "There was no electricity. They cooked in a wood-fired oven and grew all their own food. In winter, life isn't that different to back then. We forage for mushrooms, rock salt and samphire, and look after our chickens and rabbits."

Electricity didn't reach this part of Zakynthos until 1992. A few years later, Ben Shearer and his parents rocked up for a holiday at The Peligoni Club, a sailing and social club founded by a freewheeling British couple who moved here with three young kids in the late '80s. "Family holidays were usually horrendous, but by the end of that week we hadn't had a single fight," recalls Shearer. "The windsurfing equipment was broken; the beds were lumpy; the food was terrible; the wine was very organic but completely undrinkable – but none of it mattered." ➤


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Clockwise from this picture: Madrakia Beach; L'été Sunset Bar; lounge bar and restaurant at Olea All Suite Hotel; entrance to Fioro tou Levante restaurant



The Shearers returned summer after summer and, like many other repeat guests, eventually built a house nearby. In 2005, when Peligoni's hippie days seemed numbered, the family bought the place. "We built a pool, hired a chef and sourced more palatable wine," says Shearer, who was 22 at the time. "Now it's more of a lifestyle club, but we want to keep the original bohemian spirit alive."

Still a family business that miraculously appeals to all ages, Peligoni has smartened up its act without losing its soul. Apart from the unsightly port of Agios Nikolaos, where touts leap into the road selling day cruises to Shipwreck Beach, northern Zakynthos has a quiet beauty and gentle warmth that remains unaffected. But property developers are moving in, and glitzy villas are beginning to sprout in the sparsely populated hills. There's the glass-fronted Suolo, for example, where swallows join guests for a sunrise dip in the infinity pool and owner Yannis Tavoularis shows up with fresh eggs, plums and a huge tray of his mum's frigania, the local take on cheesecake. The views stretch to the neighbouring island of Kefalonia, which might as well be the other end of the world. "Not long ago, there were only gravel roads around here," says Shearer. "Development is picking up quite rapidly. It's like trying to rein in a runaway horse, but this part of the island still feels like the ideal of how Greece should be: innocent, old-fashioned and free."

That's exactly the atmosphere at Mahogani Art Café, a local institution where artist Sofia Michou creates a surprise menu of meze and punchy mojitos. With a pile of black hair cascading over big brown eyes and a smile that lights up the island, Michou is optimistic about the future. "Most people in our community have the same principles. The landscape here is protecting us. We don't have sandy beaches; we have rocks and mountains. It's not easy to spoil this place." 

WHERE TO STAY

PORTO ZANTE

This bijou hideaway is the picture of airbrushed perfection, with a combed sliver of beach and decadent dining options.

With 65 staff for nine villas, the hyper-private resort has pin-sharp service. It feels more Maldives than Mediterranean, from the extravagant decor to the hard-to-believe colour of the sea. *Doubles from about £1,800; portozante.com*

OLEA ALL SUITE HOTEL

At this hillside resort of concrete minimalism, boxy rooms surround a lagoon-like pool where guests flirt over frozen margaritas. The low-key buzz attracts couples and a younger crowd (kids under 12 aren't allowed). *Doubles from about £265; oleaallsuitehotel.com*

INDIGO ROCK

This Greek island specialist has access to some of Zakynthos's most beautiful villas, with concierge services and childcare.

Some can also be booked through sister company The Peligoni Club – including Taygeta (from £4,250 per week, sleeps 10), a whitewashed modernist-maritime beauty with a hillside infinity pool. *Prices vary; indigo-rock.com*

THE THINKING TRAVELLER

The upmarket rental company has added Zakynthos to its Ionian portfolio, with a handful of modern villas, such as Katalania (from £3,984 per week, sleeps eight), and insider experiences on demand. *Prices vary; thethinkingtraveller.com*