The Elivi Skiathos review: five-star simplicity

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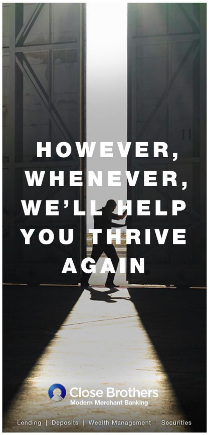
TRAVEL

An unspoilt landscape is the ultimate luxury at this Aegean gem

The plan seemed so simple: touch down on the Aegean island of Skiathos, and a quick lunch on arrival at the five-star Elivi hotel, followed by a swim. What we haven't factored in is Greek hospitality. There are plates of black focaccia, studded with sweet tomatoes, and bowls of silky smoked aubergine and cool, creamy tsatsiki. Every few minutes, the waitress brings another dish to try; grilled manouri cheese, fava-bean dip, and crunchy calamari. “This is how we eat,” shrugs our host, Nikolas, the hotel's marketing manager. “Well, perhaps just a little less,” he concedes, as another dish appears; bouyiourdi, oven-baked feta with tomatoes, and a languorous kick of chilli heat.

Rolling up in time for lunch involved an early start from the UK, but it's worth it from the moment we arrive. Getting through the island's one-room airport is a breeze, although be prepared for its bracingly short runway - hanging out by its fence as jets whoosh overhead is, we're told, a popular pastime, even if the blasts occasionally sweep plane-spotters off their feet.

Our destination is the Elivi hotel, at the southwestern tip of the island – half an hour along the coast, on Skiathos' only main road. It's an easy, meandering drive, past olive groves and white-painted villas; once or twice the driver stops for a resident cat, crossing at its own unhurried pace.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The Elivi is set on an unspoilt headland between the pine forest, protected wetlands and a string of beautiful beaches. Walking in, it feels like a summer villa owned by an imaginary millionaire friend – one possessed of impeccable taste, as well as stacks of money. At its heart is a glass-walled lobby which segues into a sculpture-dotted terrace, planted with olive trees and framed by the blue of the Aegean. Inland, the vistas are equally lovely, over the wooded hills. Don't be surprised if you've shot a zillion pictures before you've even finished checking in.

The resort was built in the 1960s as the Xenia hotel, part of an ambitious government scheme to reboot post-war tourism. Leading architects built modernist hotels in beauty spots across the country, but by the turn of the century most had slid into disrepair. The Xenia Skiathos was abandoned for over a decade, before being rescued by new owners in 2013. After a five-year restoration it reopened as the Elivi, with some smart new additions; a low-lit Elemis spa and six restaurants, running from laidback beachfront eateries to upscale fine dining. Two new residential areas, meanwhile, are a chauffeured golf-buggy ride away; Grace (romantic sea-view suites) and Nest (expansive, family-friendly villas).

We're staying in the original building, downstairs from the lobby, in a row of rooms used as stables during the hotel's lost years. Now, they're luxurious, pared-back hideaways, with neutral palettes, enormous beds and sleekly modern bathrooms (extra points for the stash of Elemis and sexy but cocooning black-slate showers). The views, meanwhile, are dreamy. A floor-to-ceiling sliding door opens onto a sheltered terrace, bordered by a pine-fringed, semi-private pool. It's backdropped by the gentle curve of the famous Koukounariés beach – accessed via a secret set of steps, heading down through the trees.

The days soon fall into their own lazy rhythm, starting with breakfast on the terrace. The buffet runs from waffles to creamy local yoghurt, via cheeses, hams, honey-soaked sweets, and all manner of cakes. Fluffy, super-sized omelettes are whisked up to order, along with pillowy pancakes, drizzled with maple syrup and triple-stacked with layers of fruit.

After breakfast, we pad down to Ambelakia beach, past a tangle of wild honeysuckle. Dotted with cushioned sun-loungers, it feels like a private cove, with hotel staff on hand with towels and cool drinks from the bar. An easy stroll across the peninsula, Big Banana beach is the place to catch the sunset, while the aptly-named Little Banana is a nudist beach. From here, it's a short scramble up wildflower-lined paths to Aghia Eléni bay. Its perfect, pine-backed sands shelve gently into the Aegean, and tiny fish leap out of the water as we swim across the bay.

For a change of pace, Skiathos Town is 20 minutes' drive along the coast. With the season just getting underway, it's touristy but sweet, with small boutiques touting home-made jewellery and ceramics, and locals repainting restaurant signs before the summer rush. Above the port are the narrow, cobbled streets of the old town, where bougainvillea trails from the balconies and cats peer down from sunny windowsills. Boat trips leave from the café-lined harbour, and we sail to neighbouring Skopelos aboard the Diamanti, anchoring in a wooded inlet and swimming in its cold, clear waters. The affable skipper, Babis, cooks lunch in the galley: wild caper leaves, roasted peppers, and copious local mussels; pasta with tuna and his signature potato salad ("Just add a little vinegar," he shrugs, modestly. "It always does the trick.").

On the final morning we drive deep into the hills, to the Evangelistria monastery. It's still early, and we're alone in its quiet, sun-dappled courtyard, bar a trio of excitable puppies and an ancient, purring cat. There's a dimly-lit chapel with hand-painted tiles and a museum filled with treasures, from gilded icons of sad-faced saints to an ancient, gem-inlaid gospel. In the 19th century, the monastery was a hideout for freedom fighters; the first Greek flag was woven here, on the rickety loom in the kitchens. The shop, meanwhile, stocks beeswax ointments and comestibles made by the monks, from jars of preserved quinces and pears to the monastery's own-label ketchup. We linger in the thyme-scented courtyard, reluctant to leave. 'Even the driver was moved – he had a little cry,' our guide confides afterwards.

Back at the Elivi that evening, we're introduced to its managing director, Vivi Nathanailidou, over drinks on the terrace. Her family bought the hotel back in 2013, and she vividly remembers the first time they came here. "Everything was broken and abandoned! There were bushes growing in the lobby, and the whole place was covered in graffiti." From the start, though, she had a vision for the hotel, and what it could become. "Luxury doesn't come from gold and marble," she says, gesturing around us. "The colours of the sea, the mountains and the pine trees are enough; the view should have the last word."

Rates at the Elivi start from €194 per night, based on two people sharing a room. To book, visit www.elivihotels.com

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