

VANITY FAIR PROMOTION

# CHIC MYTHOLOGY

*The Bronze Age just got broadband at the new Nafplia Palace – the sexiest hotel in the Peloponnese. Deeply groovy, says Steve King*

Original stained-glass panels at the Nafplia Palace

Like your hotels historically rich and culturally multilayered? Even by Greek standards, this one's richer and more multilayered than a great big chunk of baklava. From top to bottom, the Nafplia Palace goes something like this. On a promontory high above the Argolic Gulf you've got a nest of totally 21st-century villas (plasma screens, Alessi tubs, private hammams and B&B Italia as far as the eye can see). These are built inside the stony walls of a masterpiece of 1960s modernism. Which was built on the site of a political prison. Which was built within a Bronze Age acropolis. Which looks out past a Venetian castle – apparently floating in the middle of the bay – towards Argos, the oldest continuously inhabited town in Greece. Mycenae, Tiryns, Nemea and the unbelievable third-century-BC theatre of Epidavros are all within striking distance... Think *Dr No* as told by Homer and styled for *Architectural Digest*. Gorgeous.

The fact that the Palace is there at all is a little miracle of bureaucratic bloody-mindedness. In the late 1950s the Greek government had the bright idea of kick-starting the tourist trade by throwing up dozens of state-run hotels, slap-bang in the middle of some of the most amazing historical sites in Western Europe. The Nafplia Palace was one of these. Today, of course, you could no sooner plonk a 70-room hotel on the site of an ancient acropolis than you could turn the Parthenon into a car park. In fact, as the Palace's general manager, Christos Coimas, explains, you can't so much as rake the leaves on the site without permission from the national archaeological authorities. "This is not just a hotel," he says with a shrug. "It is also a monument."

The new generation of Greek heritage-police made the recent renovation of the Palace's outlying villas a delicate business.



The villas and acropolis walls

Corbusier-style chaise longue or tasseled-leather cushion covers. And there are hidden pools everywhere: long ones, short ones, fat ones, thin ones. You can't even see most of them from outside, but they all have jaw-dropping views of the Old Town's terracotta rooftops and the wine-dark sea.

Somehow, all the hi-tech wingdings and gizmos combine brilliantly with the dictator-chic of the original hotel: the massive stained-glass panels, the acres of gleaming marble and polished limestone, the shaggy tapestries and abstract murals. (Those bits aren't going to change either; they've become heritage too.) There's even a gleaming stainless-steel lift that takes you down, down, down through the hillside and into a wood-paneled tunnel that leads out to the Old Town.

Nafplion (named after one of Poseidon's sons) has been a working port for more than 1,000 years. It appears to have changed little for the past 500 or so. Its harmonious grab-bag of architectural styles – Roman, Byzantine, Venetian, Ottoman – is typical of this cosmopolitan corner of the southern Peloponnese and makes it one of the prettiest towns in Greece. The crumbling mansions and faded townhouses might well be held together by the web of bougainvillea that seems to have been cast over the town like a gigantic fisherman's net.

For a few years in the 1820s Nafplion was the first capital of independent Greece. The locals, though, were unimpressed by their new king – a snooty import from Bavaria, of all places – so they threw a garrison of his men off a cliff. The king promptly decamped for Athens, which has been the capital ever since. But decisions of national importance, such as whether to order another ouzo while watching kids play football in the main square, are still made in Nafplion. Locals can hardly forget the strategic importance of their town through the ages, surrounded as they are by three

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The villas went up at the same time and in the same hard-edged modernist style as the main hotel but fell into disuse in the 1990s. The government handed over the lease to a privately owned company, Helios, in 2001. Renovation of the villas was only allowed to go ahead on the condition that no changes would be made to their existing footprint or exteriors. The result, against all odds, is a spectacular success. The interiors are endlessly imaginative and varied, but with a strong sense of overall consistency: every suite is unique, with its own particular style and vibe, yet remains recognisably part of the same hotel. The attention to materials, textures and details (the lights! the shiny tiles!) is exquisite. Clean, straight lines of stone, wood and steel intersect with suprising curves and squishy bits, like a

magnificent fortresses: the ancient acropolis, with the Palace perched on top; the Bourtzi, a mini-Alcatraz in the middle of the bay; and the sprawling 18th-century Venetian fortress of Palamidi, which looms over the town like a stony helter-skelter clinging to the sheer hillside. (Don't believe the guidebooks that tell you there are 999 steps from the Old Town to the top: it feels like at least five times that many.)

So wake up and smell the bougainvillea. Roll out of your bed at the Palace and into an ocean of history. Whether you realise it or not, you're already swimming in it.

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