

Windy week at the palace



A trip to Greece invariably conjures thoughts of mythological stories, and when **Dawn Hinsley** spent a week on the island of Lemnos at Neilson's Portomyrina Palace, she had no doubt she was in the company of the wind gods...

There is one ingredient that anyone planning a sailing holiday will need... and that's wind. Unfortunately it's the only thing when arranging your trip that you have absolutely no control over.

So exactly what do you do when huge winds and waves even prevent access to the beach, let alone any sailing? When I spent a week at Neilson's newest resort on the island of Lemnos, I found out...

Blown away

The plan was a simple one. I'd just passed my Level 1 dinghy sailing certificate and now I wanted warm waters to practise (and capsize) in, with a little more tuition to boot. The reality was somewhat different: gale force winds and damaging gusts that closed the beach to all except professional windsurfers at times. Fortunately, a resort such as the Portomyrina Palace, one of Neilson's Beachplus Clubs, caters for a wide range of activities, and some that are not dependant on the weather.

The island of Lemnos (sometimes called Limnos) is in the north-west Aegean. The intriguingly-named Portomyrina Palace is situated along the edge of the long stretch of sandy beach in the bay of Avlonas, with views over Mount Athos. Within the grounds there are even impressive archaeological remains of the pre-Hellenistic Temple of Artemis, which were discovered when the hotel was being excavated.

One thing the Greek destination did offer, even in the high winds, was plenty of hot sunshine. And,



PHOTOS: DAWN HINSLEY/NSP*

Above (top to bottom) The large saltwater pool, perfect for relaxing; while the island's capital Mirina, and the friendly deer, are only a 10 minute walk from the resort.

despite the disappointment the gales brought, I was still determined to make the most of my holiday. After a briefing session detailing all the other activities available, I decided that some tennis lessons wouldn't go amiss.

Tennis is one sport I've always wanted to play better and the resort offers personal one-to-one tuition (at extra cost) and also week-long group sessions culminating in a competition. I made the most of both.

The first task in the group sessions was to determine our abilities so that we could be put in to groups according to our skill level. I wasn't exactly surprised to be positioned in the beginners' group, and enjoyed a week of expert tennis coaching which saw my skills improve vastly even in such a short space of time. The only setback to my burgeoning tennis career was a strained muscle that ruled me out of the tournament at the end of the week.

Last man standing

I had also enrolled on some windsurfing sessions,

but even they were cancelled or spent in the water doing balancing exercises with no sails at the beginning of the week.

However, I'm not one to be put off easily and by the end of the week the winds were beginning to ease a little. I continued to persevere even though I was sometimes the only person to turn up due to the choppy state of the sea. I spent so many hours standing up, falling over, and climbing back on board after being hit by a huge wave that the instructors even had to bandage my bruised shins. My perseverance paid off though, when finally on the last full day of the holiday, the sea calmed, the powerful gusts blew away and the wind relaxed to a steady Force 3-4.

Without the big waves I was up and away in no time. Flying along with a big grin on my face, the perfect reward for all my efforts, even if at times a little nervous that I might not be seen again after windsurfing over the horizon.

The tuition and equipment were inexhaustible, with plenty of boards and sails for all levels. And my patient instructor, although like the rest of the



Above (top to bottom) Dinghies were always rigged and ready to use; the equipment shed on the beach was the hub of activity for watersports; joy rides on a Dart 16 were very popular; instructors prepare for a busy final day on the water.

PHOTOS DAWN HINSELEY/MSY*



beach team very disappointed by the weather conditions, remained enthusiastic throughout.

Sailing at last

The conditions on the last few days did make some dinghy sailing possible. I had joined the theory classes on the very windy days so that I was armed with head knowledge if and when the time came for an actual sail.

When that opportunity arose, I initially went out doublehanded and then nervously had a go on my own for the first time since I was a teenager. It wasn't long before I capsized! But there were always plenty of instructors out in safety RIBs patrolling the secluded bay, and I was up and away in no time. Buoyancy aids had to be worn at all times on the water and were available from the equipment shed on the beach – the centre of all watersports activity.

I decided to throw caution to the wind (no pun intended!) and entered the regatta on the last day, which was also the best wind-wise. Still in a Pico, I think I came last in nearly every race, but enjoyed myself immensely: the perfect way to round off the week.

I even managed to fit in my first ever go on a catamaran and went for a joy ride on a Dart 16. I was very impressed with the rollercoaster blast, and came back onto dry land with the biggest smile.

The sailing boats available – including Funboats, Picos, Lasers, Laser Vagos and Dart 16s – when the weather permitted, were always rigged and ready to go. The same beach staff and instructors would also be immediately on hand to guide you back in when the time came. Although this doesn't necessarily promise a faultless landing, as I found out when I parked my dinghy up the beach on one occasion, much to the fright of some innocent sunbathers enjoying a quiet afternoon on the beach!

Out and about

A 10-minute walk away is Mirina, the island's capital. Be warned however, the walk into Mirina is all downhill, whereas the walk back is all uphill. Taxis can be found in the central square and are not expensive.

Mirina has two personalities: one during the day and one at night. A daytime trip usually involves a stroll around the shops – be aware that many shut during the afternoon – and a walk up some hills to the old castle walls where friendly deer graze.

The evening experience is somewhat livelier, and a traditional Greek atmosphere surrounds the many restaurants and tavernas, with fresh fish the main dish on most menus. The shops open again in the evening, with bright lights and bustle filling the meandering streets. On one occasion I walked into Mirina on my own during the day and felt quite safe, venturing back with other holidaymakers for a meal in the evening.

All in all...

I can't deny that I was disappointed by the weather, or should I say the excess of it. However, there really were plenty of activities to choose from. Others I met had enjoyed some of the other sports on offer during the windy days, including mountain biking and kayaking.

And if all that sounded a little too energetic, there was a very large saltwater pool around 1.6m



PHOTOS DAWN HINSLEY/YSY*

I managed to fit in my first ever go on a catamaran: a joy ride on a Dart 16

Above The magnificent sunset over the pool was best enjoyed cocktail in hand.

Below The resort of Portomyrina Palace and the sailing waters beyond.

deep, separated from the main beach area by a row of trees that offered shelter from the winds, surrounded by beach loungers and an ideal place to lay back and read. I even managed a few visits to the spa, which includes a small freshwater indoor pool, to relax and revitalise myself. I also tone and stretched with a few yoga sessions.

A large bar area adjacent to the outdoor pool offered a variety of alcoholic and soft beverages all day and most of the night. This was a perfect vantage point to watch the sun set over the swimming pool each night, preferably with a nice cocktail in hand. On several evenings the restaurant closed and a barbeque was on offer here instead.

The restaurant itself served breakfast, lunch and dinner on four evenings, all included, with an abundance and variety available at each meal, although the restaurant, full of children, does get rather noisy on occasion. There is a choice of accommodation: in the main building or in small two-storey villas within the gardens. My room, in the main building, was spacious and cleaned every day, with a balcony that overlooked the bay.

This resort would appeal to anyone wanting to try different sports or even brush up on various skills. Most tuition is aimed at beginners however, and is not especially intensive. It is more about having a go and relaxing in beautiful surroundings.

Also, I had decided to go alone but on reflection I wouldn't necessarily recommend this for a Beachplus Club. Most visitors were families or couples, and there was very little in the way of

organised socialising, unlike some of the other types of holidays Neilson offer.

Overall though, I may have been quite literally blown away for most of the holiday, but I was never short of activities and came away having made some big improvements in sports that I hadn't even thought about trying before the trip. ■



Further information

Prices for a Neilson holiday at a Beachplus Club resort in Greece start at £429. Saturday flights to Lemnos from London Gatwick, with Thomas Cook (returning on a Saturday also), with a 30-minute transfer by coach to the resort (organised by Neilson). Visit www.neilson.co.uk for more information or telephone 0870 333 3356.