

# Wellbeing Escapes Saturday Times Online 25 January 2025



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## Workout, eat, sleep, repeat: I've found the perfect place for fitness and fun

With the help of a wellness matchmaker, our writer finds a winter sun escape where she can combine sport, chips and martinis



The Blue Lagoon near the Village of Latchi is a bay with sapphire blue water  
GETTY IMAGES

Sidonie Wilson | Saturday January 25 2025, 12.01am, The Times

“So, what makes you relax?” the holiday planner asks. Aside from a spot of competitive sport with my partner, it would be trying something adventurous, I reply, and — crucially — finding time to work out every day. I realise this doesn't sound relaxing at all, so I add that I don't want to feel guilty about spending hours reading in the sun or having a post-bloody mary nap by the pool. Oh, and chips — I'm healthy but I still want chips with my salads.

The way I see it is that I work hard throughout the year to maintain my fitness. Why would I throw it all away on holiday?

“Exactly,” Stella Photi says over Zoom. She owns Wellbeing Escapes, a personalised wellbeing holiday company based in London that offers trips all over the world. She recommends an initial Zoom consultation with her customers to see what they're looking for — the digital-age equivalent to popping into a Lunn Poly on the high street in the 1980s. We get right down to it: winter sun? Tick. Good local food? Tick. A challenging workout every day? Tick.



Sidonie wanted a trip that was more workout and less woo-woo

Photi is to plan a fitness holiday for me and my partner, a variety of trip that might sound like an oxymoron to some but to me would be ideal. "Some are goal-focused: detox or weight loss. Others involve life coaches, treatments or just a break from burnout," she says. She's less travel agent, more wellness matchmaker.

To her offer of including something "holistic" I respond that I want more workout and less woo-woo, but I concede that I would be open to yoga or stretching, and Photi goes off to plan my trip. We land on a five-night flexible programme suitable for a slightly frazzled thirtysomething fitness and food fanatic. The location will be Cyprus, for its guaranteed winter sun and cheap flights.

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After a second Zoom call, in which Photi tells me what to expect and what to pack, she sends me the itinerary and I'm just as excited to see a daily 9am workout listed as I am to see her winery and restaurant recommendations.



The Anassa hotel feels exclusive but not showy  
ALICIA TAYLOR

We're staying at the Anassa hotel on the northwest coast of Cyprus, an hour's drive north from Paphos airport and on the quieter side of the island, where it is surrounded by beautiful places to explore such as the Akamas National Park, home to gorges and beaches.

The hotel's whitewashed buildings, terracotta tiles and cerulean blue shutters are tucked between giant cypress trees, which also surround the pool area and the lawns that tumble down onto the beach at Chrysochou Bay. It feels exclusive and grand but not showy.

The Anassa, which is part of the family-owned and run Thanos hotel group, is often described as one of the best family hotels in Europe but it turns out to be an ideal romantic getaway too. We arrive after the October half-term school holidays, so while the staff look like they are ready to finish for the season (the hotel is closed from mid-November to April), the labyrinthine marble hallways are mostly devoid of kids and indeed other people.



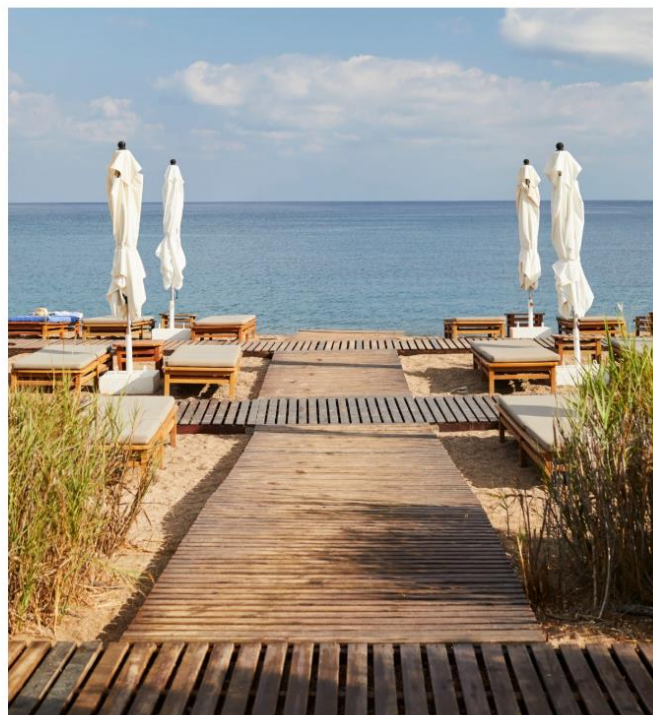


Out of school holidays, the family-friendly Anassa Hotel makes a perfect romantic retreat

We have almost free run of the beautifully designed Thalassa Spa, occupying its own grand outbuilding. It's November so the sun sets early — luckily for us burnt-out Londoners, there's little else to do but relax and indulge in a pre-dinner swim in the Romanesque pool.

I'm not sure many wellness holidays squeeze in an hour's cocktail making between the sauna and supper but I like how seriously Photi has taken my request for a martini or two among all the activity. After a quick freshen-up in the room we head down to the hotel's Armonia bar, where we are welcomed by an open fire, chilled live music and Stefan Petre, the life and soul of the hotel. He ushers us to the high stools before teaching us how to shake, flip and smoke a whisky sour, a rose petal margarita and the house special negroni.

Dinner is a formal affair — because the hotel is winding down for the season the fine dining restaurant, Helios, is our only option other than staying in the bar for a bite. Usually, though, there are three more restaurants: a poolside taverna, Asian fusion and casual dining.



From the hotel you can head down onto the beach at Chrysochou Bay

ALICIA TAYLOR

Helios is grand, with high ceilings, ornate decor and service to match. But the real star of the show is the majestic stairwell leading down to it. It's like something from the Titanic. We feast on refined French-Mediterranean dishes, wild sea bass and Sicilian red prawns as we look out onto the twinkling lights and an olive tree-filled courtyard. Hordes of cats are the only diners beneath the stars but in warmer months the terrace would be full of guests.

We have a different workout planned every morning at 9am, which allows for what feels like a holiday-worthy lie in and a quick espresso out on our private terrace. Every one of the 166 rooms is elegantly designed with nautical Hamptons-esque style and mesmerising sea views. Ours, which is a junior suite, has its own infinity plunge pool looking out to the turquoise waters that stretch from the Akamas forest round to Latchi harbour.

We meet the hotel's personal trainer, Elena Filippou, for our first private session and she whisks us off to the yoga room, where she usually hosts full classes in the busy season. After an hour's dynamic stretching, which turns out to be torture for my abs, we leave sweaty, with a sense of achievement and visions of grandeur that by the end of the week, despite the cocktails, we might have physiques resembling those of Aphrodite and Adonis.

That doesn't last long as, faced with the impressive breakfast buffet in the Amphora courtyard, we can't help but feast like Dionysus. We then relax for a few hours in the sun, reading in the poolside cabanas, with the only sound the wind blowing through the bougainvillea branches and brushing up over the lawn from the beach below. When it gets a little cooler we head off by carto explore the neighbouring Akamas National Park.



Sidonie found plenty of trails with brilliant views in Cyprus

Some will know the area for the Aphrodite Baths — really just a rocky pool — and the Blue Lagoon, a bay with sapphire blue water for swimming and snorkelling. The latter is popular with those hiring a self-drive motorboat, or as a stop on one of the bigger boat trips departing daily from Latchi harbour. The northwest tip of Cyprus has about 17,000 hectares of rich biodiversity, pristine coastline and almost empty beaches — perfect for off-roading, biking and hiking.



We end up racing against the diminishing daylight so our leisurely stroll becomes an 8km run along the peninsula's rocky terrain, following the Aprodite-Adonis nature trail. To soothe our aching muscles later we hit the Thalassotherapy spa which, true to its name, has dedicated hydrotherapy saltwater baths and treatments, such as my 75-minute thalasso jet shower and deep tissue massage, which feels like all my worries being washed away with a gigantic hose.

The next morning we blow more cobwebs away by rising early and hitting the pristine squash court for a spot of healthy competition. When my partner Jonny thwacks the ball into my backside, it brings a swift end to the game — just in time for our 9am strength session with Filippou.

Whispers of a storm coming in scupper our plans to try out the hotel's huge array of water sports, so we take ourselves off after breakfast for a drive around the local towns. Latchi harbour is lined with inviting fish restaurants, shops and bars overlooking bobbing boats. Petre's recommendation? "In Cyprus when a place looks like it's falling down, that's when you know it will have the best food." So we pootle around the charming next door town of Polis until we find such a place. We make several pit stops at Cypriot tavernas, forgetting the humongous portion sizes they serve. But the vats of delicious, creamy tahini dip and taramasalata are very welcome, as are gyros and a village salad (which would indeed feed a village) of tomatoes, cucumber, olives and feta. It never costs more than £33 for a feast for two — a perfect excuse to pick at a long lunch, along with a couple of local Keo lagers.

Almost too relaxed, we rush back to Anassa for our next activity, a quick game of tennis, before a session with the Thanos hotel group's chief wine sommelier, George Kassianos, in one of the beautiful marble atriums. We sink into plush cushions as Kassianos shares his local Cypriot wine knowledge with us during an hour of tasting.

The rest of the week continues in this form: work out, eat, sleep, repeat. On our penultimate day we take a scenic 25-minute drive through the hills back towards Paphos to the family-owned Vasilikon, one of the hotly recommended wineries on Photi and Kassianos's lists. The views are spectacular and the £7.50 wine tasting suggests a lazy afternoon.



The Anassa has a Romanesque pool  
CHRISTOS DRAZOS PHOTOGRAPHY

Our final day wake-up call comes at 5am when Roman, the hotel porter, knocks on our door with packed breakfasts and we set off for a 20km hike in the Akamas before going home. Outrageous orange skies creep up over us, the shimmery sea and sleepy towns below, and hours of undulating scenery pass by with only the odd mountain goat for company, making the wake-up time well worth it. We beat the crowds to the dazzling Blue Lagoon and take a dip in the shallower bay next door with the Ronseal name of Deserted Beach — a rewarding end to our wellness adventure.

As I lift my suitcase up onto the airport baggage belt, I'm feeling refreshed and have that pleasant warm and fuzzy "ready to get back to busy life" feeling, but with one noticeable difference: aching abs.

**Sidonie Wilson was a guest of Wellbeing Escapes, which has five nights' half-board from £1,860pp, including flights, transfers and a flexible fitness programme of six activities ([wellbeingescapes.com](https://www.wellbeingescapes.com))**