

COUNTRY LIFE

EVERY WEEK

JANUARY 1, 2025

The British Wildlife Awards

Meet the funniest, cleverest and clumsiest creatures

Carla Carlisle's final column

The taste of Britain: celebrating regional food

Wild skating, night walking and welcoming the New Year

New year, new you

To feel better, you often have to journey backwards, finds Mark Hedges on a reviving break to the Greek mainland



The ruins of the medieval old town at Mystras perched on a mountainside overlooking the Laconia plain in the Peloponnese, Greece

STEP back 2,500 years and the dominant civilisation on earth was Sparta on the Laconia plain beneath the great Taygetus mountain range. The military-based society never lost a land battle until its ultimate defeat by Thebes at Leuctra and remains famous for its austerity and spartan lifestyle. There is little to see of Ancient Greece in modern-day Sparta—the stonework was recycled into a later part of this area's extraordinary story.

The Spartan society didn't feel the need to build walls around the city, but the way of life did give us the laconic phrase. When Alexander the Great's father, Philip II, had conquered much of southern Greece, his attention turned to attacking Sparta, sending the message: 'If I invade Laconia, I shall turn you out', to which the Spartans replied with a single word: 'If.'

I have visited Greece on many occasions to stay on the islands that dot the Aegean

Sea, but I found the mainland, and the Peloponnese in particular, is less visited, much to my joy. It has a truly authentic feel to it: lives are still lived around the rhythms of Nature, olives, wine and figs. There are still echoes of the Bronze Age (what is believed to be the city of Menelaus and his wife, Helen, is being carefully excavated close to Sparta) and much more of the Byzantium Empire, to where the local Spartan stone was recycled.



woman to run a major bank in Greece, who, having beaten cancer on two occasions, was inspired by her final treatment to found a retreat that combined scientific innovation and healing modalities, where people could live a more holistic life.

‘Incredibly, it is next to the Palace of Mystras, a World Heritage Site. Imagine a hotel being built beside Stonehenge’

The spectacular architecture of the site includes a sphere pool reminiscent of Hagia Sophia church and a salt room, as well as the latest technology, including a human regenerator that did for me exactly what it says on the tin. For 40 minutes, I lay on a special bed with my wrists and ankles attached to the machine. For a while, it felt as if nothing was happening, but then parts of my body began to gently fizz. It was like lying on a cloud of bubbles, the ones that appear when a can of Coca-Cola is first poured out. The science is that it harnesses the power of cold atmospheric plasma to promote wellness.

Byzantium beauty

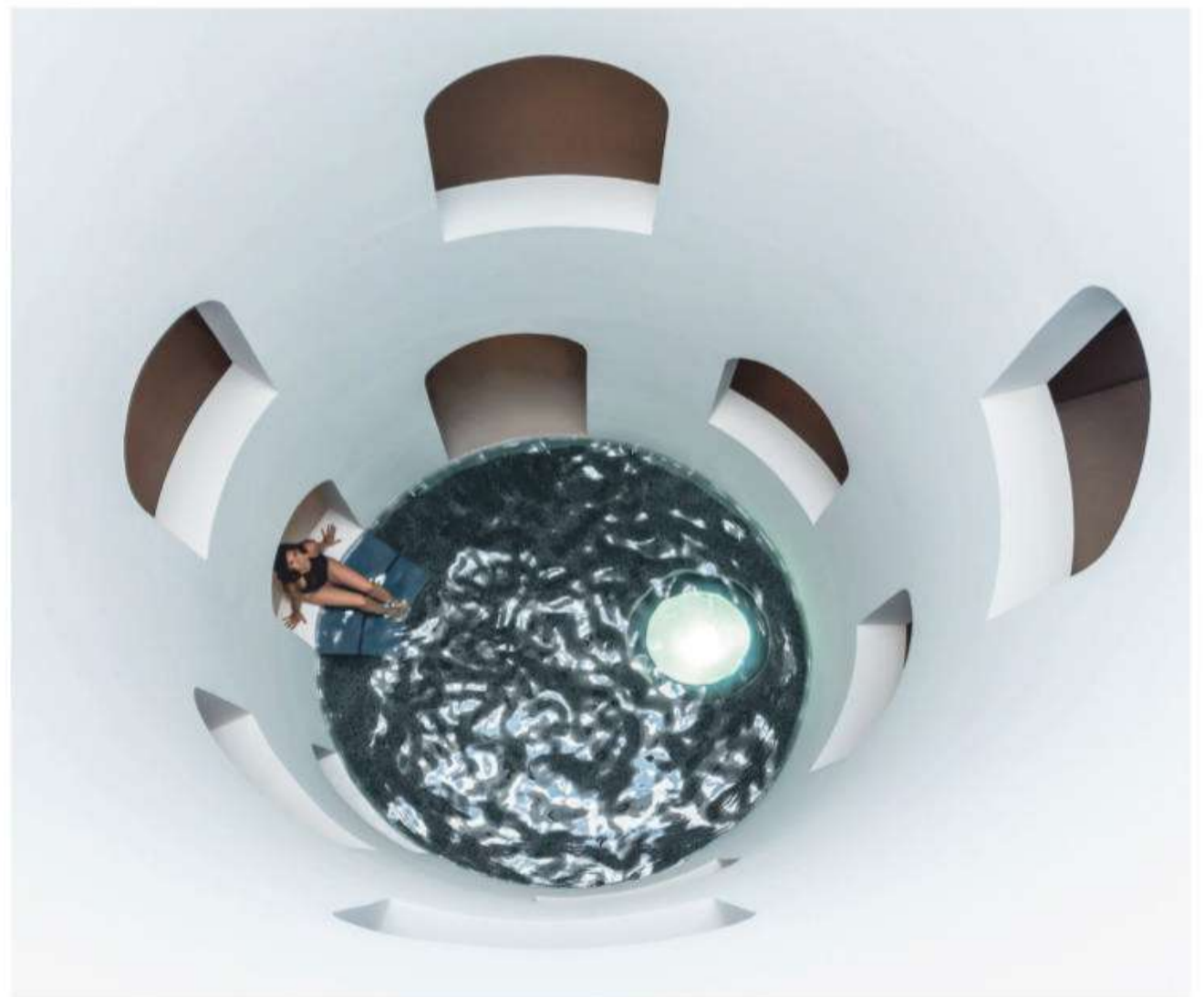
Mystras, the ‘wonder of the Morea’, was built as an amphitheatre around the Frank fortress (the Franks at one time fought for the Romans, which is how we get the word ‘franchise’), erected in 1249 by the Prince of Achaia, William of Villehardouin. Reconquered by the Byzantines, then occupied by the Turks and the Venetians, the city was abandoned in 1832, leaving only the breathtaking medieval ruins, in which you can see everything from extraordinary art in the churches and loots in the ruined houses to fauna, including wild asparagus and giant fennel. The latter is used for walking sticks and offered the means for Prometheus to steal the gods’ fire and the Venetians to take the silk worm from the Chinese, by hiding the bounty inside the hollow stems.

There is a lot on offer besides the excellent treatments and I particularly enjoyed wandering around the village, where persimmons, figs and lemons grew in every garden, before stopping for a glass of thick yellow wine at the wonderful Mystras Inn, a tavern for the ages. To be laconic: go. 🍷

Rooms from £281 a night, including breakfast; a two-day Euphoria Escape for couples costs from £599 (www.euphoriaretreat.com)

We were staying at Euphoria, which is best described as a superb spa and accompanying hotel carefully built to echo the ancient glories around it. The space sits beneath the edge of the pine-clad mountain and above the delightful town of Mystras; Sparta just down the road. Incredibly, it is next to the L-shaped Palace of Mystras, a World Heritage Site with its surrounding village set beneath a Frankish castle. Imagine a hotel being built beside Stonehenge.

The Euphoria spa is world class. It is the brainchild of Marina Efraimoglou, the first



All's well: an 80ft therapy waterwell lies at the heart of the Euphoria Retreat spa complex