

A change and a rest

NICK HENDRIX embarked upon his first family holiday as a father with some trepidation. Fortunately, in Crete's St Nicolas Bay Resort Hotel, he found the perfect training ground

THERE ARE MANY 'firsts' when you take the plunge and become a parent. First word, first step, first 'when can I have an iPhone?' – but for me and my wife, 'first family holiday' was a big one. A 'first' that, to be honest, filled us with a little dread. We *love* to holiday, always have and always will – but has our decision to expand the family tree come at a cost to our leisurely summer sojourns, our delight in a sundowner, a sun lounger and a frozen Margarita? How would the flight work? What about the naps? Baby sun cream, baby bug spray, baby speedos? It all seems a little stressful and the antithesis of what holidays should be about.

Determined to not let life stop just because we were now 'Mum&Dad' we set about finding the perfect hotel for our first outing. After many-a-Google, I came across the St Nicolas Bay Resort Hotel & Villas in Crete – it ticked all our regular boxes like white-washed Grecian style, proximity to a cute town, good food and drink and access to a beach – as well as our new boxes like child-friendliness, crawl space, babysitting service and (ideally) a private pool.

I won't bore you with the logistical machinations of getting a child up at 5am and onto a plane but long story short, we arrived at St Nicolas Bay in surprisingly good spirits and keen to get the lay of the land. The hotel purports to be designed in the style of a classic Cretan village, with exposed stonework, cobbled streets, white walls and stunning ocean views as often as possible. I have to say, the architect deserves a few cases of Cretan Rosé (which I became slightly obsessed with) for his work here. We were there for ten days and even in the last few hours I was discovering paths I hadn't walked down yet.

After a very gracious welcome by Ariadne (who hailed from both Greece and Yorkshire), we were taken to our room. I say 'room' – we were supplied with a rather generous two-bedroom suite, complete with courtyard at the front and private pool at the back. It was, give or take a plant pot, bigger than our flat. Space is everything with a small human crawling around and these two-bedroom suites are very well apportioned, giving the little one an entire room, ensuite and minibar to himself. (Seems he snaffled a few lagers when



▲ ABOUT A BAY: St Nicolas Bay Resort Hotel & Villas is set up like a traditional Cretan village with the beach at its heart.

I wasn't looking – naughty boy). They've cleverly designed all the room-types to have a slightly different character, like you are in a little enclave of your own, meaning that when you leave to visit the beach or the bar, you feel like you are going out, off into the little Cretan village that surrounds you.

On our first few days, we always like to get a feel for a place and try out the all-important holiday triumvirate: eating, drinking and swimming. (If those are John, Paul and Ringo – 'gymming' is our George; we'd survive without it, but it's worth considering.) Once we get a good gauge on these things, we then know what to repeat ad infinitum and what to gently avoid.

Eating: St. Nicolas Bay has five restaurants to cover your breakfast, lunch and dinner needs. Breakfast is by the pool, under the canopy of a tree that dresses the

place so well it looks like a set. A large and varied buffet is at your fingertips and a good selection of a la carte offerings too. All importantly for any new parent, the coffee is good – they also happily accommodated this pair of fussy, oat-milk-drinking, millennials.

Lunch can be enjoyed at the beachfront restaurant the Blue Bird – a wonderfully picturesque spot overlooking the private bay with tables out in the sun but also tucked away in the shade. This is the perfect spot to dive headfirst into your inaugural Greek Salad, with the sun beating down and perhaps a cold glass of their Cretan Rosé – which really is very good.

Finally, for dinner there are three offerings, each intentionally different in style, cuisine and location. The Minotaur is the fine dining restaurant set so far from the beach that it feels like a different part of town – expect atmospheric music, candlelight and smartly dressed waiters. Kafenion is their Grecian offering, a little more informal and traditional, set very dramatically on a cliff edge, overlooking the stunning coastline. There is a beautiful little church at the centre of the hotel, that this restaurant neatly wraps around, giving the place almost cartoon Mediterranean charm; you'd be forgiven for expecting Meryl Streep to pop-up singing Fernando. ►

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► The final dining establishment is Labyrinthos, which is a more relaxed buffet-style restaurant – it serves a selection of options but to be honest with the standard of the others on offer we only went there once. In terms of eating, there's lots to love and lots to eat.

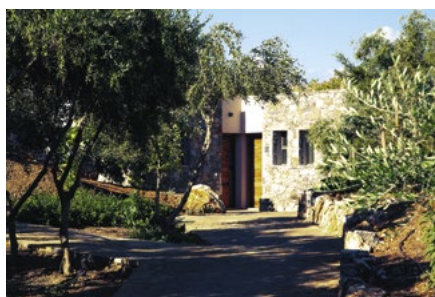
Drinking: As keen imbibers of a Negroni or three, my wife and I were very happy with the hotel's cocktail bar Astra, and it seems it must have supplied all the restaurants as the quality of the drinks never dipped below 'Yes please – I'll have another' standard. The Greeks aren't known for their wine, but I recommend the Cretan Rosé. It really is very good. Have I mentioned that? (Hiccup.)

Swimming: The various ways in which one can enjoy water at this hotel was a triumph for us – particularly as we wanted our little one to be as *au fait* with it as Michael Phelps. I love to swim but my wife grew up on a beach and is essentially a mermaid, so our child has to have water in his veins – figuratively speaking.

The private beach at St Nicolas Bay is a real gem for a family as it gives really clear, clean, unfettered access to crystal waters without the threat of a beachball to the head or Ibiza DJ set. There were plenty of umbrellas and sun loungers and even when busy, the charming Charis was on hand to rearrange them and squeeze in another. The three of us were down there every day, me and little man splashing around in the shallows whilst Mum was off snorkelling with Ariel. It was a lovely place to be.

Should one wish to avoid sand in the toes or the push and pull of a tide, our private pool had everything you'd need for an entire holiday. Salt water for the tousled hair, cold enough to wake you up but warmer as the day went on, and big enough to have good little pootle around in. Plus it was perfect for little swimmers: once a suitably garish Watermelon-design inflatable had been purchased from a nearby shop, we had the little fella doing lengths on a daily basis. The pool, loungers and rear terrace of our suite gave us everything one might need and use when at a larger hotel pool – which is also why we never actually went to ours.

(As for the metaphorical George, well the gym here is moderate in size and fairly



▲ THE BAY WONDER: 70% of the bookings at St Nicolas Bay Resort Hotel are return customers.

simple but it has all one needs. I always feel that if a gym is too good at a beach hotel, I worry I'll spend all my time in there so it's probably for the best.)

I think it's fair to say that there are many great attributes of this genuinely charming hotel: the practical benefits of the private beach, the vast array of culinary options and a certain tasty Rosé. But the real gem

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here, the real five-star element that isn't directly quoted on their website, described in their brochure or quantified in their prices – is the staff.

I asked Alexandros, the omni-present manager, how he trained his staff to be so attentive, so kind, so positively charming. He simply said, “I don't train them, I choose them.” And I believe that. From Irini and Maria at breakfast, to Manos and Nikos at lunch or George and Manos (he's a hard worker) at dinner. Not to mention Costas on room service, oh and of course Charis at the beach and Ariadne on reception. I don't think I've ever remembered as many staff names at a hotel before. They knew our drink order after a day, our room number, what our baby ate for lunch and would even take his bowl and spoon at breakfast, wash it and bring it back. At checkout, they said that 70% of their bookings are return customers – it didn't surprise me. We met at least one couple who had already booked for 2023.

Travel is something millions of people love to do and I'm talking about *real* travel – going places, experiencing things, meeting people. It's easy with a good hotel to arrive, sunbathe and leave. You'd be rested, for sure, but you could have been anywhere. And that's fine, don't get me wrong. But for us as a family we like to *be* somewhere. To see it and experience it. Explore the town. Stumble on a good restaurant. (While of course maintaining a few home comforts.)

What the team (and pertinently the designers) at St Nicolas Bay have managed is to create an experience that does both. It gives you the escape of a multi-faceted holiday – where you see sights, swim in the ocean, discover restaurants, find a nice beach and also relax in your own home from home. All this is achieved within the grounds of a single hotel. Without it feeling like you are in the grounds of a single hotel.

So, to the original question; has expanding the clan thrown a spanner in our holiday-making aspirations? Well, if our time at St Nicolas Bay is anything to go by, no. Not in the slightest. A place where big kids and little kids are well catered for, and every personal touch thought of in advance – I wouldn't be surprised if they had changed the name just to make me feel at home. **H**
For more information, see stnicolasbay.gr