

This Greek

Try an all-inclusive family resort that puts children in the driving seat

by Sebastian Shakespeare

MY FIVE-YEAR-OLD daughter Saskia has a question. 'Are we going to meet Zeus?' she asks. This is after I've explained a little about Mount Olympus being the home of the gods.

We never meet Zeus, but we do get a taste of celestial living at Ikos Olivia, set in 22 acres in Halkidiki.

This part of mainland Northern Greece has been overlooked for years, but Halkidiki, the three-fingered claw reaching into the Aegean, has a beautiful coastline of rugged mountains leading to sandy coves, fabulous beaches and is steeped in history and culture (it was Aristotle's birthplace).

Ikos Olivia is on the relatively underdeveloped Sithonia peninsula, Halkidiki's middle finger. Surrounded by lawns, fragrant firs and olive trees, it's ideal for young children.

We are a family of four, billeted in a two-bedroom suite right on the beach front.

At dawn each day a bulldozer clears the shoreline of unsightly kelp. My three-year-old son Rafael is overcome with excitement ('Look, Daddy, a bulldozer on the beach!') while I marvel at the effort involved to keep everything pristine.

It takes no time for us to settle into an indolent routine. Liveried waiters parade the beach gangway bringing us slices of water melon and chocolate milkshakes as we recline on sun loungers.

Even the sea is suffused with



Plain sailing: The pool at

lethargy so that I can fitfully snooze as the children paddle in the shallows. The 300-room hotel bills itself as an all-inclusive resort. However, we soon discover there are exclusive zones within the hotel.

On arrival, we are given a Deluxe Collection pass resembling a black credit card that gives us access to a magnificent infinity pool and a specially designated area of the beach.

And, like the proverbial Russian doll, within the exclusive zone we find another exclusive zone.

Some guests tell us we cannot sit on their beach loungers. They must be Gold Collection pass-holders — and good luck to them.

The scope for people-watching is endless with a diverse array of social stereotypes.

A gaggle of children criss-cross the hotel grounds on hover boards. One night at dinner I do a double-take when I see a two-year-old boy in a high chair dressed in black tie.

The next night we are seated next to a Russian family who eat in sullen

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retreat's a treat!



Ikos Olivia and, right, Rafael at the helm on the high seas

silence and then I see why. Each of their three children is plugged into headphones with their eyes glued to their respective iPads.

A luxury, all-inclusive holiday might sound like a contradiction in terms and I initially share Alan Bennett's visions of greedy guests at breakfast buffets piling high their plates with food.

BUT Ikos has cracked the formula. You can eat all through the day if you feel so inclined, which mitigates the temptation to stockpile. The produce is all local, fresh (sea bass, sea bream) and bountiful. One night we dine on the beach under the stars, which the children love.

The warmth and generosity of the waiters can border on the psychotic, though. One of them insists on bringing us more and more food as if fattening us for slaughter.

Happily, there are endless activities to compensate for overindulgence. While I head off for a massage, Rafael merrily

joins a grass aerobics class with a group of Lycra-clad ladies. After a few days, we venture out, hiring a car and exploring the east coast of Sithonia where we find two fantastic beach bars just by chance.

Las Bandidas, with its ambient music, swaying pine trees and beautiful, remote location, is pretty much perfect, while the Bahia beach bar attracts a younger, cooler crowd.

Our most memorable excursion is hiring a motorboat at Vourvourou (€80 for a day) to explore the island of Galini.

The only cause for alarm is that the pilot is my son, who wants to reach Mount Athos across the Gulf of Agion Oros.

I thwart his insurrectionary impulses, regain control of the throttle and we spend the day visiting empty beaches and coves. We drop anchor, swim in clear

water, then move on. 'Why is the sea so sensible?' asks Saskia.

I could tell her that, in fact, the sea often behaves badly, violently even. But here in this tranquil slice of loveliness, it seems best to just say 'because it is' and leave it at that.

TRAVEL FACTS

Sovereign (01293 765 003, sovereign.com) offers seven nights at Ikos Olivia, from £2,875 per family of four, with easyJet flights from Gatwick and private transfers.