

Creating a Golf Destination in the Hills of Greece

By Pavlos Zafiropoulos

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PYLOS, Greece — On the southwestern Peloponnese coast of Greece, in walking distance from the beach, Thodoris Poulis, a construction foreman, pointed up recently at half a dozen newly built homes on the hillside, each with a sweeping view of the Bay of Navarino.

“The older sort of development with a few small houses is going away,” he said, “and we’re getting more large stand-alone homes — expensive builds, in the style of villas.”

As he spoke, he was overseeing work on what will become just such a villa; dubbed the Lemon Project, this home near the town of Pylos will have a pool, a sea view and landscaped gardens, complete with citrus orchard.

The developer of that property, Iliopoulos Real Estate and Constructions, is a small family business run by two brothers, Minas and Vasilis Iliopoulos. Until recently, their business usually involved building or renovating modest homes on plots owned by others here in the Messenia region.

But with the Lemon Project, they have become developers, buying the land themselves and building a luxury home that they will put on the market for about 800,000 euros, or about \$900,000.



A view from the Bay Course, which opened in 2011 near Pylos, Greece. Myrto Papadopoulos for The New York Times

Part of the reason they can do this can be found in a very different construction site only a short distance away.

In the hills above Pylos, large machines crack and pulverize boulders clawed from the ground.

Dwarfed by rising slopes on either side, they are carving out what will become an artificial lake — an irrigation reservoir for two new 18-hole golf courses. When completed in 2021, the courses will unfold over 370 acres across the hilltops and provide golfers with sweeping views of the olive groves and the sea below.

These courses, designed by the two-time Masters champion José María Olazábal and christened Navarino Hills by the developer, Temes, are a major undertaking by any standard. Yet they are only the latest project on which the company has broken ground in a multifaceted effort to remake this onetime sleepy region into a world-renowned golf and holiday destination under the brand Costa Navarino.

Alongside its flagship Navarino Dunes resort, with its two five-star hotels, extensive spa and myriad other amenities, Temes has already built two other 18-hole signature golf courses in the area: The Dunes Course, which opened with the resort in 2010, and The Bay Course, opened in 2011 and just below Navarino Hills.

They are responding to what has become a truism in the golf course business. “With golf courses there is the following issue: One equals almost none,” said Achilles Constantakopoulos, the chairman of Temes. He cited a survey by the International Association of Golf Tour Operators that found that only 15 percent of dedicated golfers would consider visiting a new destination with just one golf course. That figure rises to 75 percent with three golf courses and to 100 percent with five.



A rendering of the facilities at Navarino Residences near Pylos, Greece, which has 50 luxury villas with a starting price of about \$2.7 million. Myrto Papadopoulos for The New York Times

“What’s important is not just to have a golf course, but to be considered a golf destination,” Mr. Constantakopoulos said, “then it becomes a decision-making factor.”

Ambitious as it may be, turning Messenia into a place that lures high-spending golfers away from other more established destinations is just one aspect of the company’s multipronged strategy. It is one that seeks to not only increase tourism to Messenia, but to do so year-round — an almost unheard-of goal in a country where the overwhelming majority of visitors arrive between June and September. Golf serves that purpose, by providing a reason to visit outside the summer months.

Another key aim is for some of the newly acquired visitors to purchase homes, becoming regular contributors to the local economy for years to come.

That strategy appears to be bearing fruit beyond the carefully manicured grounds of Costa Navarino.

In the Iliopoulos brothers’ office in Pylos, lined with images of properties for sale, a cluster of golf clubs stands in a corner. On the shelf above it sits a glass container half

filled with golf balls printed with the company's logo. Neither of the brothers plays golf.

Putting up a development like the Lemon Project would have been unthinkable only a few years ago; in 2013, thanks to the uncertainty swirling around Greece's fiscal crisis and with domestic bank lending effectively nonexistent, the construction business in the Messenia area had ground almost to a halt. But things soon turned around.



Achilles Constantakopoulos, the chairman of Temes. Myrto Papadopoulos for The New York Times

“Since 2016 we have been on an upward trajectory,” said Minas Iliopoulos. “We have been growing every year. And tourism is on the rise. Quality tourism.”

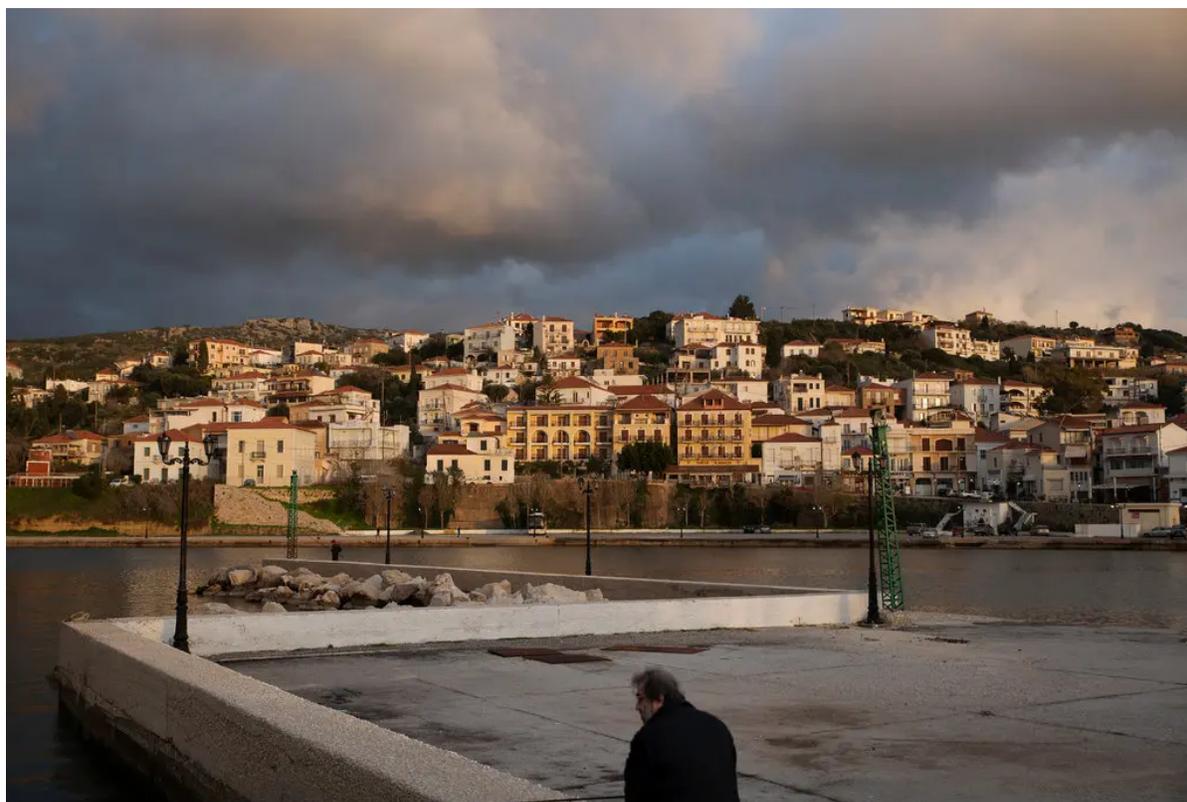
The brothers' optimism does not appear to be unfounded. Savills Greece, a real estate

agency, said in a statement that “the second home market in Messenia has changed drastically in the last 10 years.”

“Interest for a second home in the area has significantly risen,” the agency said, “and thus prices have also gone up, since owners see continued demand.”

According to Savills Greece, average prices for second homes in Messenia are generally between €230 and €325 per square foot, with prices exceeding €465 per square foot for “very special properties.” While Savills notes that in many cases sellers’ initial asking prices are overly optimistic, “above average prices have shown significant growth in the last decade.”

Temes’s grand plan to remake the region is one that has been decades in the making, essentially the vision of Vassilis Constantakopoulos, Achilles Constantakopoulos’s father and the founder of Temes. He died in 2011, but is still referred to as the Captain by many Temes employees and Messenians alike.



The main harbor in Pylos is on the Bay of Navarino. Myrto Papadopoulos for The New York Times

Born to a poor family in the Messenian village of Diavolitsi, Vassilis Constantakopoulos left his homeland for Athens during the 1946-49 Greek Civil War at around 13 years of age.

By the mid-1970s he had founded the shipping company Costamare, through which he amassed a great fortune. In the 1980s he began regularly visiting his homeland and

buying land piecemeal, laying the groundwork for what would become today's Costa Navarino.

“His vision was to create a new tourism destination in the Mediterranean and in parallel to give work to the people, so they wouldn't need to leave as he had left at 12, 13 years old,” Achilles Constantakopoulos said. “He had a very strong feeling for the people of the area. And he saw that Messenia as an area had great potential for tourism which was not being realized.”

In the meantime, one of the most significant obstacles to tourism in the region — its historically poor transportation links — has been largely overcome.

Once a five-hour journey along winding country roads, the completion of a major infrastructure project has turned the drive from Athens into a two-and-a-half hour trip along a highway that slices through the mountainous landscape via tunnels and bridges.



George Elliott lives in the region about six months a year. Myrto Papadopoulou for The New York Times

And the airport of the city Kalamata, 45 minutes from Pylos, now receives more than 1,300 international flights a year — up 450 percent from a decade ago — in part because Temes has spent millions to woo international carriers. In 2012 the airport was renamed the Captain Vassilis Constantakopoulos Kalamata International Airport.

“Messenia is one of the few destinations in Europe which is at once easily accessible but unspoiled,” Achilles Constantakopoulos said. “This combination is very rare.”

With Messenia now on the international tourism map, in 2017 Temes rolled out another key stage of its plan: offering upscale holiday homes for purchase.

The Navarino Residences were the first to go on the market. The luxury villas, located at Navarino Dunes, are fully customizable, have a minimum floor space of 4,300 square feet and a starting price of €2.4 million. Of the 30 initially offered, 18 have been purchased. Another 20 will be offered at a later date.

Their architectural design is based in part on a 19th-century building preserved on the Costa Navarino grounds, which was recently renovated to become a luxury villa.



A renovated 19th-century house at the community was used as an inspiration for the villas. Myrto Papadopoulou for The New York Times

Navarino Residences were followed in 2018 by Navarino Apartments. At the lower end of the company’s planned real estate offerings, these 1,300-square-foot units have a starting price just under €500,000.

In both cases, buyers get multiple benefits from owning a property integrated into the resort, including free access to the complex’s amenities and rent-sharing programs that will generate profit when they are away.

Yet even with the interest that Costa Navarino has generated, second-home prices in the immediate vicinity of the resort remain significantly below those in more established Greek holiday destinations such as the Cyclades or Corfu. In these areas, according to Savills, average prices for holiday homes are about €370 per square foot; luxury homes go for above €740 per square foot.

And further afield, around Kalamata and toward the eastern boundary of Messenia near the Mani Peninsula, many properties remain accessible to buyers of even modest means.

“There are excellent opportunities anywhere in the Messenian Peloponnese,” said Mary O’Connor, who for 20 years has run a real estate business in Kalamata with her husband, specializing in the second-home market. “Except for around Pylos,” she added, where properties have become scarce. But even there, she said, “there are a few good plots left.”

In other areas and villages, Ms. O’Connor said, plots and fixer-upper houses can still be bought for prices below €50,000.

George Elliott, 67, bought a fixer-upper in Messenia in 2001 and now lives there about six months a year. His house was once the village’s olive press. (The basement still has lots of the original machinery.) He is grateful that the Costa Navarino development has helped bring decent transportation to the area.

He would happily play golf, too. But he plays only in London, where he said it costs about \$17. The Costa Navarino golf courses are just too expensive for him. “I don’t have that kind of pension,” he said.

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